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TUNISIA URGED TO END SUBVERSION OF GROUPS CRITICAL OF THE AUTHORITIES

The Tunisian authorities should end their subversion of human rights organizations and dissenting groups by infiltrating them and provoking turmoil, Amnesty International said in a new report released today.

Independent Voices Stifled in Tunisia documents the daily struggle faced by Tunisians who dare to criticize the authorities including the infiltration of human rights groups and the harassment of individual activists.

“The disruption of human rights organisations by the Tunisian authorities and the fact that so many independent organizations have now fallen victim to coups staged by government supporters is a pattern that we cannot afford to ignore.” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director at Amnesty International’s Middle East and North Africa programme. “This cynical manoeuvring by the Tunisian authorities should be roundly condemned.”

The Tunisian League for Human Rights has faced continued internal pressure since it was legally forced to open up its membership to anyone in 1992, allowing government supporters to join and undermine the organization’s vital human rights work.

Legal disputes between the membership close to the authorities and the ruling party and the executive board over issues including the closing of regional offices broke out, leading to stalemate and an effective suspension of the League’s activities.

In another example, the Association of Tunisian Judges (Association des Magistrates Tunisiens, AMT) is now effectively run by government supporters following its takeover by them having experiencing a number of run-ins with the authorities over judicial independence.

In August 2009, the independent leadership of the National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists (Syndicat national des journalistes tunisiens, SNJT) was toppled by government supporters after refusing to endorse the candidacy of President Ben ‘Ali in run-up to the October 2009 presidential and legislative elections.

A new board was elected by special congress and wasted no time in endorsing the candidacy of the Tunisian president.

“These sabotage tactics appear to be sanctioned at the highest levels in Tunisia. Human rights activists and those who dissent are accused of being unpatriotic and relinquishing the honour of belonging to Tunisia, before being harassed and intimidated” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui.

The Tunisian authorities have also blocked official registration of opposition and human rights organizations, leaving them in legal limbo for long periods unable to meet or operate legally under Tunisian law.

The country's Penal Code was amended in June 2010, to stifle criticism of Tunisia's human rights record from abroad by criminalizing the actions of people who contact foreign bodies pursuing objectives that are considered harmful to Tunisia's 'economic security'.

This move was seen as an attempt to quash Tunisian activists working to bring Tunisia's human rights record to the attention of international partners when considering trade relations.

"Relying on the shameful silence of their international partners, the Tunisian authorities are now aiming at silencing criticism abroad as well", said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui

The harassment of individual human rights activists in Tunisia also continues with little or no investigation of complaints.

Human rights activists are monitored by security officers at home and at work, followed to doctor's appointments and even to funerals. Amnesty International has documented a catalogue of incidents ranging from physical assault to prosecution of activists based on trumped-up charges.

Ali Ben Salem, 78, has been continually harassed and intimidated by the Tunisian authorities because he is a long-standing critic of Tunisia's human rights record. He is a founding member of both the Association for the Fight against Torture in Tunisia (Association de lutte contre la torture en Tunisie) and the National Council for Liberties in Tunisia (Conseil national pour les libertés en Tunisie), and successfully lodged a complaint against the Tunisian authorities before the UN in November 2007.

He is in poor health, with heart problems and continues to suffer the effects of the torture he endured in 2000, when he was arrested, beaten, sprayed with tear gas and left for dead at a construction site near Tunis.

He is now unable to pay for medical treatment as the authorities have blocked his civil service pension.

The Tunisian government has recently hired a US PR firm and launched a public relations campaign to counter their image as human rights abusers and portray the country as foreign investment friendly.

"Instead of spending so much time, money and effort on massaging their image, the Tunisian authorities should be using these resources to effectively address the many human rights abuses in the country" said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. "Tunisia's international partners must wake up to the fact that the space for human rights in Tunisia is shrinking fast."

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