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Tunisia must drop charges against TV boss over ‘Persepolis’ screening

Criminal proceedings against the owner of a Tunisian TV station that screened the film Persepolis are an affront to freedom of expression, Amnesty International said ahead of his trial on Monday.

Nabil Karoui, the owner of Nessma TV, faces trial in Tunis on 23 January on charges of “violating sacred values” and “disturbing the public order” after his station broadcast the animated French film Persepolis, which has been criticized for being blasphemous because of a scene showing a representation of God.

If convicted, Nabil Karoui faces up to three years in prison.

“Putting Nabil Karoui on trial simply for screening a film which shows fantasy scenes of God is a very troubling development,” said Philip Luther, Amnesty International’s interim Director for Middle East and North Africa.

“The Tunisian authorities must uphold Nabil Karoui’s right to freedom of expression and drop these charges immediately,” he said.

Persepolis, an award-winning film on Iran’s 1979 revolution told from the perspective of a young girl, provoked angry reactions when Nessma TV aired it in October.

The home of Nabil Karoui was firebombed on 14 October following a protest outside the Nessma TV offices in central Tunis. Salafist activists are believed to have carried out the attack.

A complaint by 144 lawyers and others was filed against the TV boss and two other Nessma TV employees.

Tunisian journalists have faced numerous attacks in recent months, reportedly carried out by both security officers and others.

Mohamed Ali Ltifi from the Al Oula newspaper was beaten by police and forced off a train after he displayed his press card while travelling on public transport in Tunis on Wednesday. They gave no reason for doing so.

Nessma TV reporter Sofiene Bin Hamida was physically assaulted on 11 January while covering a protest in front of the Ministry of Interior.

The demonstration was organized by police over the suspension of a police officer believed to be involved in the death of protesters during the uprising.

Sofiene Ben Hamida has told Amnesty International that he believed the attackers belonged to an

extremist group from a simultaneous counter-protest.

Earlier this month, two female journalists - Sanaa Farhat from the French-language daily *Le Temps* and Maha Ouelhezi, a writer for the news website *Web Manager Center* - were assaulted by plain-clothes police officers while covering a demonstration outside the Ministry of Higher Education.

Sanaa Farhat was dragged by her hair and beaten by security officers.

“While Tunisia is making progress in some human rights areas, clearly there is still a great deal of work to be done when it comes to respecting the right to freedom of expression,” said Philip Luther.

Amnesty International's recent report [*Year of Rebellion: The state of human rights in the Middle East and North Africa*](#) documents how Tunisia's interim government is yet to deliver the comprehensive human rights reform that protesters were calling for a year ago.

A year after former President Zine al Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, the authorities have taken some positive initial steps, including signing up to key human rights treaties and, in general, allowing greater freedom for media and human rights organizations.

But the country's security forces remain largely unaccountable and victims of human rights violations are still waiting for justice, the report said.

In March 2011 the feared Department of State Security (DSS), responsible for years of abuse under Ben Ali, was abolished. But there are fears DSS members have simply been integrated into other security forces, which remain opaque and unaccountable.

Amnesty International has documented a number of incidents since Ben Ali stepped down where peaceful protests and sit-ins have been forcibly dispersed and protesters beaten up.