

URGENT ACTION

MASS TRIAL OF POLITICAL DISSIDENTS OPENS

On 4 March 2025, the trial of 40 individuals, including political opposition figures, lawyers and human rights defenders facing bogus “conspiracy” charges, started. Six of the defendants have now spent over two years in arbitrary pre-trial detention. Politicians Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Khayyam Turki, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj and Abdelhamid Jelassi have been arbitrarily detained since February 2023 in this case. Tunisia’s anti-terrorism court has been investigating all of them for trying to “change the nature of the state” under Article 72 of the Penal Code which carries the death penalty. Following the first trial hearing, the judge decided to adjourn it to 11 April without responding to the defence requests, which included the provisional release of detainees as well as their presence in court which was held through remote court proceedings. We call on the Tunisian authorities to immediately and unconditionally release those detained as they are held for peacefully exercising of their human rights. Authorities must drop all the charges against them.

TAKE ACTION: WRITE AN APPEAL IN YOUR OWN WORDS OR USE THIS MODEL LETTER

President of the Republic Kais Saied

Email: contact@carthage.tn

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn>

Twitter/X: @TnPresidency

Your Excellency,

I write to you to express my grave concern over the prolonged arbitrary detention of opposition figures Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Khayyam Turki, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj and Abdelhamid Jelassi on unfounded “conspiracy” accusations. Over two years have passed since their arrest exceeding the legal limit permitted for pre-trial detention under Tunisian law.

On 2 May 2024, the Indictment Chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance referred 40 individuals, including the six mentioned above, to the Criminal Chamber of the Tunis Court of First Instance for trial and rejected the release request submitted on behalf of the six detainees. Judicial authorities had previously turned down at least eight requests for provisional release of the six detainees, including in [August 2023](#) and [January 2024](#), despite the absence of any reliable evidence that implicates them in any wrongdoing. Since February 2023, additional defendants were added to the case by the investigative judge, including political opposition activists from different opposition groups such as Nouredine Bhiri, Sahbi Atig, Said Ferjani, Riadh Chaibi from the Nahdha party, president of the opposition coalition The Salvation Front Nejib Chebbi, independent opposition activist Mohamed Hamdi, human rights defenders Kamel Jendoubi, Ayachi Hammami and Bochra Bel Haj Hmida, in addition to businessmen and private media shareholders.

On 26 February 2025 the Tunisian Bar Association received a [memo](#) from Tunis Court of First Instance informing them that terrorism trials scheduled for the month of March will be held without the physical presence of detainees and that they will be attending online from prison invoking “the existence of a real danger”. The detainees and their defense team challenged this decision, including in court by submitting an appeal to the administrative court. The detainees announced that they will refuse to participate in their trial online and will not take part until they are brought to the court room. Their next trial hearing scheduled for 11 April will also be held [online](#) following a decision of the President of the Court of First Instance of Tunis.

I therefore urge you to ensure that Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Khayyam Turki, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj and Abdelhamid Jelassi, are immediately released as they are detained solely for the peaceful exercise of their human rights. I also urge you to ensure that all the unfounded charges against all defendants in the case are immediately dropped, and arbitrary travel bans and restrictions on their rights are lifted.

Yours sincerely,

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

On 4 March, the trial in the “conspiracy case” opened against at least 40 people including political oppositions activists, businessman, lawyers and human rights defenders from across the political spectrum. These conspiracy accusations are unfounded. The investigation which had started in February 2023 concluded in April 2024 with a decision to confirm the charges against them, and the trial opened on 4 March 2025. The list of defendants includes political opposition activists from different opposition groups such as Noureddine Bhiri, Sahbi Atig, Said Ferjani, Riadh Chaibi from the Nahdha party, president of the opposition coalition The Salvation Front Nejib Chebbi, independent opposition activist Mohamed Hamdi, human rights defenders Kamel Jendoubi, Ayachi Hammami and Bochra Bel Haj Hmida, in addition to businessmen, including private media shareholders.

Six of the defendants have been arbitrarily held in pre-trial detention since their arrest in February 2023: politician Khayyam Turki arrested on 11 February; dissident and politician Abdelhamid Jelassi arrested on 12 February; opposition activist Issam Chebbi arrested on 22 February; opposition activist Jaouhar Ben Mbarek arrested on 24 February; and finally, lawyers Ghazi Chaouachi and Ridha Belhaj arrested on 25 February. Prominent opposition figure Chaima Issa and dissident Lazhar Akremi were both also arrested in February 2023, but they were provisionally released on 13 July 2023 after nearly five months in arbitrary detention but banned them from travelling abroad and “appearing in public spaces.”

The defendants were investigated for trumped up charges of conspiracy under 10 provisions of the Tunisian Penal Code including Article 72, which mandates the death penalty for trying to “change the nature of the state.” They also face several charges under 17 articles of the 2015 counterterrorism law including Article 32, which mandates up to 20 years of imprisonment for “forming a terrorist organization”. The judge and the Tunis Court of Appeals initially rebuffed requests by lawyers to release the eight suspects from pre-trial detention. The Court extended pretrial detention for the six, citing the need to “ensure the sound course of the investigation”.

In October 2023, human rights lawyer Ayachi Hammami, who was [investigated](#) in the same case for similar accusations as his detained clients under the “conspiracy” case, was summoned to attend interrogation by the investigative judge. He is also now on trial facing the same charges as his clients under the same case. In October 2023, authorities also opened separate judicial proceedings against lawyers Dalila Msaddek Ben Mbarek and Islam Hamza, both members of the Defence Committee of Political Detainees for public comments they had made about the case on radio shows. They are under investigation for spreading false news” under repressive cybercrimes [Decree-Law 54](#). Since the investigation [started](#) in February 2023, judicial authorities have summoned at least 42 additional political activists, members of the opposition, businessmen, former members of parliament, lawyers, human rights defenders and former security officials for investigation in the same case.

On 14 February 2023, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Volker Turk [expressed](#) concern over the recent wave of arrests against civil society figures and perceived opponents as well as the Tunisian authorities’ sustained attacks on the judiciary. A spokesperson for the commissioner mentioned criminal proceedings against “perceived political opponents” charged with “conspiracy against State security” and called on Tunisian authorities to respect due process, fair trial standards and release all arbitrarily detained, including those detained for exercising their rights to freedom of opinion or expression. On 22 February 2023, President Saied [declared](#) that anyone who “dared to exonerate” what he described as “criminal networks” was, in essence, an “accomplice.” This statement, coupled with the president’s [arbitrary dismissal](#) of 57 judges in 2022, has contributed to a growing climate of intimidation of the judiciary. On 8 October 2024, the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary detention issued a [statement](#) concluding that “the violations of the eight individuals’ right to due process and a fair trial are of such gravity as to render their detention arbitrary”.

PREFERRED LANGUAGE TO ADDRESS TARGET: Arabic, French and English.

You can also write in your own language.

PLEASE TAKE ACTION AS SOON AS POSSIBLE UNTIL: 10 July 2025.

Please check with the Amnesty International office in your country if you wish to send appeals after the deadline.

NAME AND PRONOUN: Chaima Issa (she/her), Lazhar Akremi, Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Khayyam Turki, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj and Abdelhamid Jelassi (he/him).

LINK TO PREVIOUS UA: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde30/7808/2024/en/>.