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Webinar Report

Tunisia: Political Detention, Judicial Erosion, and Socio-Economic Breakdown

Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK (AOHR UK) held a webinar on 3 April 2025 titled "[Tunisia: Political Detention, Judicial Erosion, and Socio-Economic Breakdown](#)" to address the alarming regression of rights and freedoms in Tunisia. The event shed light on the deepening authoritarianism under President Kais Saied's rule, marked by widespread political repression, the dismantling of judicial independence, and the worsening economic and social crisis affecting millions. Speakers examined the use of the judiciary as a tool of persecution, the erosion of democratic institutions, and the government's deliberate targeting of political opponents, journalists, civil society figures, and ordinary citizens who voice dissent. The discussion also highlighted international silence and complicity, and the urgent need for accountability, national dialogue, and genuine reform in Tunisia.

The webinar featured a distinguished panel of speakers including Dr Moncef Marzouki, former President of Tunisia; Professor Andrew F. March, political scientist; Professor David Miller, British academic and sociologist; Michael Ayari, Senior Analyst at Crisis Group for Tunisia; Kaouther Ferjani, Tunisian activist and daughter of imprisoned political figure and former MP Elsayed Ferjani; and Dr Yusra Ghannouchi, Tunisian activist and daughter of Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi, the imprisoned co-founder of the Ennahda party and former President of the Tunisian Parliament.



Michael Ayari began his contribution by examining the economic and social backdrop of Tunisia since the 2021 self-coup. He stated that most macroeconomic indicators have been in decline, with the exception of the TINAR and international currency valuation, for which there is insufficient data. Although Tunisia has so far avoided defaulting on its external obligations, this has come at a high internal cost — including widespread shortages, a halt in public investment, soaring inflation, mounting domestic debt, unpaid suppliers, and the financial collapse of many government institutions. Surprisingly, these deteriorations have not triggered widespread public uprisings.

Commenting on this turning point, Ayari focused on the introduction of a new law regarding cheques, which invalidated old ones and imposed restrictions on new ones — especially as many businesses no longer accept them for instalment payments. This legal change, he said, has sharply affected middle-class consumption, with many shopkeepers noting a decline in customer activity. He also noted a collapse in everyday commercial transactions between retailers, wholesalers, and consumers.

Professor David Miller's contribution focused on the critical issue of normalisation with the Zionist entity, describing it as a central and defining concern not only for Tunisia but for the entire region. He referred to a previous attempt by the Tunisian parliament to pass a law that would criminalise normalisation, treating it as an act of treason.

This legislative initiative, he noted, highlighted the deep-rooted popular opposition to Israel among Tunisians. However, despite the political momentum, civil society in



Tunisia has faced numerous challenges in recent years, particularly in sustaining activism related to this issue.

Kaouther Ferjani began her contribution by highlighting the deteriorating condition of the judiciary in Tunisia since President Kais Saied seized executive powers in 2021. As the daughter of political prisoner and Ennahda leader Elsayed Ferjani, she spoke from personal experience, noting that the erosion of rights through the judicial system has been severe and deliberate. She explained how Saied initially dismissed judges who refused to cooperate with his repressive agenda, and even imprisoned some, such as Judge Bashir Akrami. Others, unwilling to be complicit, opted for sick leave, sabbaticals, or fled the country — leaving behind those either coerced into compliance or already corrupted.

Ferjani underlined that such levels of judicial abuse were unprecedented, even under the dictatorship of Ben Ali. The seriousness of the charges levelled against her father, and against figures like Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi, highlighted the regime's use of the judiciary as a tool of repression. Her father received a 13-year sentence and Ghannouchi was sentenced to 22 years — both of which she described as “death sentences” considering their age and health. She noted the disturbing trend of piling multiple charges onto key opposition figures, primarily targeting leaders from Ennahda. Her father, for instance, was added at the last minute to the “conspiracy against the state” case, a charge carrying the death penalty, again with no evidence presented. She emphasised that Saied has consistently denied any involvement in these judicial cases, shielding himself from accountability by ensuring that most hearings are held remotely and behind closed doors, preventing the public from witnessing the political nature of these trials.



She further explained that the persecution of political prisoners extends far beyond their imprisonment. Her father has been kept in extreme isolation for over a year, with anyone who attempts to speak to him facing immediate punishment. Even an act as simple as sharing a date with him during Ramadan led to disciplinary action. She described his transport conditions to court — handcuffed and forced to stand without support for a two-and-a-half-hour journey — as a form of physical torture, especially given his age and injuries sustained during earlier periods of torture under past regimes. She stated that this level of cruelty is not unique to her father, but is faced by many political detainees, both in court transfers and within prison conditions.

In response to a question about her last contact with her father, Ferjani revealed that she had not seen him since before the 2021 coup and had not spoken to him since the day before his arrest in February 2023. No phone calls or communication have been permitted. Although he has limited access to a lawyer, she explained that legal defence is essentially symbolic, as no evidence has been provided and lawyers are unable to effectively challenge the charges. Their role, she said, has been reduced to merely recording proceedings, as the judiciary no longer functions independently or fairly.

Addressing a follow-up question about international legal efforts, Ferjani confirmed that legal action is being taken outside Tunisia. She explained that targeted sanctions have been pursued in the UK, Europe, and the US against key figures in the regime, including the president, the minister of the interior, the minister of justice, and the minister of defence. Additionally, a case was launched at the African Court nearly two years ago, which initially produced a favourable response through provisional measures. She noted that Tunisia's recent withdrawal from the African Court's jurisdiction for individual cases may be linked to this legal action. Furthermore, she confirmed that her team has opened a case before the International Criminal Court (ICC), combining evidence related to political prisoners and the treatment of African migrants. The deputy director of the ICC has reviewed their submission, and



discussions have already taken place, offering a rare glimmer of hope for accountability on the international stage.

Professor Andrew March opened his contribution by responding to earlier comments made by Kaouther Ferjani and Professor David Miller regarding the Palestinian cause. While acknowledging the importance of the issue, he cautioned against using symbolic gestures as a means to legitimise authoritarian regimes. He explained that in highly polarised or repressive contexts, regimes often exploit popular causes to mask their internal abuses. Drawing from historical patterns in Tunisia, he cited the example of so-called “state feminism,” where authoritarian governments embrace seemingly progressive causes not to advance rights, but to bolster their own image. In the same vein, he warned that support for the Palestinian cause should not be seen as redeeming a regime that actively suppresses domestic freedoms.

Commenting directly on President Kais Saied’s inconsistent stance on Palestine, March noted that while Saied has publicly expressed support for the Palestinian people, his actions have not always aligned with these statements. He recalled a key moment in November when the Tunisian Assembly was debating an anti-normalisation bill, only for the president to intervene by sending a letter instructing its postponement, citing vague concerns about Tunisia’s external interests. The bill was never revived. This, March argued, reinforces Kaouther Ferjani’s point that Saied’s regime should not be mistakenly credited for championing Palestine, particularly when it uses such rhetoric to distract from its repressive domestic agenda.

Professor March then turned to the core of his intervention: the legal architecture of Kais Saied’s authoritarian power grab. He outlined how, prior to 2021, Tunisia had made considerable progress in judicial independence, even ranking 56th globally in terms of rule of law. However, this progress was reversed following Saied’s July 2021



coup. In September of that year, Saied issued Decree Law 117, which dissolved parliament and granted himself unchecked executive authority without judicial oversight. This was followed in February 2022 by Decree Law 11, which dismantled the Supreme Judicial Council and replaced it with a Provisional Judiciary Council. Saied gave himself the power to appoint nearly half of its members and the right to veto nominations, effectively bringing the judiciary under direct executive control.

He detailed how this concentration of power escalated in June 2022 with Decree Law 35, which granted the president sole authority to summarily dismiss judges based on broad and ambiguous charges, such as endangering public security. On the same day, Saied dismissed 57 judges without due process, shielding these actions from judicial review and stripping the dismissed judges of the right to appeal. Attempts by the administrative court to reverse these dismissals were effectively blocked. March explained how this legal framework was further cemented through the 2022 constitution, which replaced the more democratic 2014 constitution. The new constitution entrenched a hyper-presidential system, removed mechanisms such as the no-confidence vote, and divided the judiciary into three councils that are more easily controlled. It also gave the president exclusive authority to appoint members of the constitutional court, thereby ensuring executive dominance.

In conclusion, Professor March returned to the broader implications of these authoritarian measures. He noted that sham political trials like the Instalingo case have become tools to punish dissent, and that it took the regime nearly two years to subdue the judiciary, as many independent judges initially resisted these abuses by delaying or dismissing cases. He argued that the dismantling of judicial independence was essential to Kais Saied's constitutional coup, and that restoring the judiciary must be a central priority for any future transition back to democracy. Without independent courts and a functioning rule of law, he warned, no real political reform in Tunisia will be possible.



Dr Yusra Ghannouchi began her contribution by emphasising the interconnected nature of struggles for freedom and justice across the region. She reminded attendees that the Tunisian revolution, which began 14 years ago, had inspired uprisings well beyond the country's borders, demonstrating how deeply linked the political trajectories of neighbouring states can be. She acknowledged that setbacks have occurred since those early days of optimism, but stressed the importance of recognising patterns and changes throughout the region. Reflecting on Tunisia's current state, she described it as a clear descent into authoritarianism following the 25 July 2021 coup. While there were initially differing interpretations of the events, she argued that a consensus has since formed: Kais Saied carried out a coup aimed at dismantling Tunisia's democracy and reinstating the repressive practices of the pre-revolutionary era.

She detailed the return of systematic human rights violations, the rise in political imprisonment, and the targeted dismantling of democratic institutions. Central to this reversal, she explained, is the case of her father, Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi, former Speaker of Parliament and co-founder of the Ennahda party. At the age of 83, he has been imprisoned for two years after being arrested on 17 April 2023 — during the sacred night of Ramadan — over remarks made in a political meeting where he called for national unity and warned against the exclusion of ideological groups from public life. These comments were distorted by the authorities and used to charge him with incitement to violence. While no trial has been held for this specific charge, he has been sentenced in other cases to 15 months, three years, and most recently, 22 years in prison, with more cases still pending. Dr Yusra stressed that these sentences are not isolated, but part of a larger campaign targeting political leaders, judges, journalists, and everyday Tunisians who dare to speak out — all made possible through draconian laws issued by Saied since the coup.



She criticised the international community for turning a blind eye to these developments, noting that states which profess commitment to democracy and human rights continue to engage with the Tunisian regime. Dr Yusra warned that Kais Saied's justification for the coup — that democracy had failed to deliver economic prosperity — has collapsed under scrutiny, as the economic situation has only worsened under his rule. She pointed to soaring unemployment, unprecedented inflation, and shortages of basic goods, all of which have deepened despair, especially among youth. The rising sense of hopelessness, she argued, is fuelling a brain drain and increased migration — ironically, the very issues Europe claims to be concerned about. Yet, European states continue to legitimise Saied's regime by signing border control agreements that reward the source of instability.

In response to a question about her last contact with her father, Dr Yusra stated that she had not spoken to him since his arrest two years ago. Prisoners are denied phone access, and her mother has only been permitted a single direct visit during this time, despite regularly delivering food and clothes during weekly visits. She expressed concern for her father's health, given his age and the poor conditions of detention. Asked about the number of political prisoners in Tunisia and the state of press freedom, she said accurate figures are difficult to obtain. However, she strongly disputed the commonly cited numbers of 60 to 80 detainees, stating that these figures represent only high-profile cases. She noted that over 1,500 individuals have reportedly been prosecuted under cybercrime decrees targeting online criticism of the president, and hundreds more remain unheard of due to a climate of fear.

Dr Yusra agreed that repression has had a chilling effect on public and political participation. She explained that while fear has returned to Tunisia, it has not yet reached the levels seen before the revolution. Kais Saied's strategy, she said, is to intimidate the broader population by targeting prominent critics — yet many Tunisians continue to protest and speak out, showing that the spirit of the revolution remains alive. Addressing the fragmented state of the opposition, she observed that some



political actors had initially supported Saied's actions, misinterpreting them as a corrective measure against Ennahda. But Saied has proven unwilling to engage with any side, including his former supporters. Efforts to build a unified opposition have been criminalised, with many activists jailed for merely participating in dialogue aimed at reconciliation. Despite this, she noted, most opposition groups now agree that the country must return to the 2014 constitution and engage in a genuine national dialogue to address Tunisia's real challenges, particularly the economic crisis.

Concluding her intervention, Dr Yusra discussed ongoing international legal efforts. She affirmed that legal action is underway to hold the regime accountable, particularly as Tunisia's judiciary is no longer independent. Cases have been filed for sanctions in the UK, the US, and Brussels against Kais Saied and other top officials. Additionally, she highlighted a case submitted to the African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights, which has already issued favourable provisional measures and is expected to rule soon on the release of political prisoners. She pointed out that Tunisia's recent attempt to withdraw from the court's jurisdiction does not take effect for a year, meaning it remains legally bound by its decisions. A related submission has also been made to the International Criminal Court, combining evidence from the treatment of political prisoners and abuses against African migrants. Despite the grim situation, Dr Yusra expressed hope that these efforts will bring justice, and reiterated that the Tunisian people's struggle for democracy is far from over.

Dr Moncef Marzouki began his contribution with a sombre reflection on Tunisia's trajectory since the revolution, recalling that the country had once been the cradle of the Arab Spring. He lamented the tragic reversal of those gains, declaring that Tunisia is now "stoned" — a nation that has returned to dictatorship. Drawing a parallel with the political landscape of the 1990s, he described a climate in which elections are rigged, presidents are declared winners by overwhelming majorities, political prisoners fill jails, and basic political freedoms have been extinguished. This regression, he stressed, represents a grave and alarming return to authoritarian rule.



He spoke passionately about the scale of human rights violations currently taking place in Tunisia. According to Dr Marzouki, more than 40 political leaders are presently imprisoned and facing trials devoid of any semblance of fairness. He warned that these individuals are likely to receive severe sentences, not because of crimes committed, but as a result of politically motivated persecution. Among the detainees, he singled out Sheikh Rached Ghannouchi — an 83-year-old leader he described as one of the finest people he has ever known. Marzouki emphasised the injustice of seeing long-time patriots and defenders of freedom being punished for their lifelong commitment to democratic values.

In addition to the political repression, Dr Marzouki highlighted another pressing human rights crisis: the mistreatment of African migrants in Tunisia. He detailed incidents of racial harassment, police violence, and even cases of rape and murder — particularly against women. These abuses, he argued, are happening in a context where the state has abdicated its responsibility to protect vulnerable populations, and where the rule of law has collapsed. He made it clear that these violations are not isolated incidents, but part of a broader pattern that reflects the breakdown of state institutions and the erosion of fundamental protections.

Dr Marzouki concluded his intervention with a call to action. He urged all those listening to stand in solidarity with the Tunisian people and to offer both moral and vocal support to the political prisoners currently languishing in jail. Restoring democracy in Tunisia, he said, is not only a national necessity but a regional obligation for all those who value justice and freedom. While expressing his firm belief that Tunisia will eventually return to the path of democracy, he made it clear that achieving this goal requires persistent struggle. “It’s up to us,” he declared, “to fight, and to fight, and to fight again.”



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