

Tunisia must end crackdown on media

NEW YORK: Tunisian authorities must end their weeks-long crackdown on bloggers and reporters covering street protests, the Committee to Protect Journalists said mid last week. Scores of journalists have been detained in the past four weeks, three of whom remain in custody.



Local and international reporters have faced continued harassment, including detention, restrictions on movement, and denial of entry into the country. CPJ has called on Tunis to release the imprisoned journalists immediately, grant access to the international press, and allow local reporters to cover the unrest without interference.

Journalists arrested

Blogger Azyz Amamy was arrested on 7 January, according to local journalists. Another Tunisian blogger, whose family requested that international organisations not publicise his name and other identifying information, was arrested the same day, according to news reports. A local journalist told CPJ that they are both being held in Mornaguia Prison, near Tunis. Nizar Ben Hasan, a correspondent for Radio Kalima in the coastal town of Chebba, was detained on Tuesday afternoon, 11 January. He was taken from his house by presidential security forces, according to Radio Kalima. Ben Hasan was extensively covering street protests in Chebba for the station, his colleague Mouldi Zouabi told CPJ.

On Monday, Soufiane Chourabi, a reporter working for the opposition weekly *Al-Tariq al-Jadid*, had security agents confiscate his camera while he was covering a demonstration in downtown Tunis.

Isabelle Mandraud, a journalist working for the French daily *Le Monde*, was denied entry to Tunisia, the paper reported on 7 January.

"We call on the Tunisian authorities to immediately release all detained reporters and bloggers," said Mohamed Abdel Dayem, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa program coordinator. "We also urge Tunis to grant foreign reporters access and to end its routine harassment of journalists who are trying to cover unrest."

Online media repression

According to CPJ's analysis, the country's state-owned internet bandwidth provider, the Tunisian Internet Agency has been spying on and interfering with its customers' access to private email and social networking sites, including Facebook, Gmail, and Yahoo. Individuals have reported that these sites' pages have either been blocked entirely, or been manipulated to include malicious code that collects private usernames and passwords and then relays them to the agency. The accounts of bloggers and journalists have subsequently been broken into using these stolen credentials, and content and accounts deleted, including Facebook pages administrated by local journalists as well as the account of local online video journalist Haythem El Mekki.

"Tunisia, which always had a poor online press freedom record, has now become the undisputed leader of online repression in the region," said CPJ internet advocacy coordinator Danny O'Brien.

Protests against unemployment

Tunisia has witnessed spreading street protests against unemployment and corruption since mid-December. The protests were triggered when an unemployed university graduate, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire after police dismantled his illegal fruit-vending stand, the only source of income for his family. On 11 January, Tunisian authorities announced the closure of schools and universities amid deadly clashes between police, military, and protesters, according to news reports. Tunisian Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi announced last week that the authorities will release all those who were arrested during demonstrations at an unspecified date.

On Monday, 10 January, members of the Tunisian Journalists Syndicate held a demonstration in Tunis in which journalists criticised both public and private media's coverage of the unrest. Tunisian journalists released a statement protesting the "continuation of using national media, both public and private, as a mouthpiece for propaganda, falsification, blackouts, and justification for the repression, oppression, and killings against our people."

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