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# THE MEDIA FREEDOM REPORTS

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UNIVERSITY OF SHEFFIELD



Centre for Freedom of the Media  
(CFOM)

*Tunisia:  
Old and new problems*

by Ángela Martínez Avellana

July 2012

*Tunisia:*

*Old and new problems*

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## Abstract

Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution of 2010 sowed the seed for the Arab Spring, which has been described as the world's biggest popular revolt since 1848. Yet real improvements, both in terms of living standards and of progress towards open and accountable government, have been slow in coming. Tunisia's population clearly demands genuine democracy, but in many ways the present government has shown the same intolerance of opposition and lack of transparency as the former regime of President Ben Ali. This paper examines the role of the media in the revolution; and it assesses the extent to which independent and inquiring journalism has developed since the beginning of the revolts, while identifying the main barriers still standing in the way of a free and vibrant media landscape.

*When people decide to live, destiny shall obey, and one day, darkness will disappear and the slavery chains must be broken.*

Tunisian proverb

This is a legendary verse that has been chanted for decades throughout Tunisia and has been a part of the country's national anthem since 1955.

It is a verse that millions of Tunisian youngsters from the beginning of the Jasmine Revolution, who were tired of witnessing the unfair and corrupted Zine El Abidine Ben Ali government, shouted whilst protesting against the regime. Those Tunisian youngsters, previously cowed and drugged by the state's powerful mechanisms of control (repression, propaganda, silence...), sparked a revolution, which has been compared to the one that took place in Europe in 1848.

Their fight has been rewarded: Ben Ali fled the country in January 2011; free elections were held in the following October and the former dictatorship's mechanisms, such as repression and propaganda, are slowly disappearing. In contrast to the revolutionaries of 1848, who lacked modern technology, their present day counterparts from Tunisia found the use of new media in general, and social networks in particular, a powerful ally. They used Facebook, Twitter and other forums to spread their message to other Arab countries, which shared their willingness to be rid of their own dictators. A whole series of uprisings broke out across the Arab region: first Egypt; then Libya; Syria; Bahrain; Sudan... The Arab World had finally woken up.

The Arab Spring had begun.

This paper studies the role of the Tunisian mass media in the revolution and how it has changed since November 2010. It examines the way Ben Ali controlled the media through a number of strategies, using media as an extremely powerful tool to keep the Tunisian population suppressed. It also examines how the Tunisian media reacted to the turmoil and how they covered the uprising, going on to discuss the conflict between the media previous role as the main propaganda tool of the Ben Ali regime and the desire for change felt by millions of Tunisians. This paper explains the current media landscape of Tunisia and, finally, it examines how the country is coping with its apparent newly discovered media freedom.

Before studying closely the role of the media in Tunisia, it is worth exploring how former President Ben Ali managed to govern Tunisia for so long –he came to power in 1987- and how media fitted into his program of control.

In a May 2011 *Foreign Affairs* article, *Understanding the Revolutions of 2011*, Jack A. Goldstone pointed out four general mechanisms used by the so called “sultanistic dictators” –Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Muamar al-Qaddafi in Libya, Bashar al-Assad in Syria and Omar al-Bashir in Sudan- to govern their citizens. First of all, they may rule over an oppressive state but they nonetheless created the illusion of democracy by allowing political parties to operate, for elections to take place, as well as other democratic processes which were in reality tightly controlled by those in power. In exchange for social and political stability, they would usually receive foreign aid and funding from international allies,

which reinforced the illusion of a powerful country. To control the military and avoid an insurrection, the power elite kept it divided: for example, the chiefs of the army, the air force and the intelligence services were kept in constant competition for resources and influence and the monarch was the sole person in charge of coordinating the different units. The sultans were portrayed as essential figures in keeping their countries working. Finally, to depoliticize people and to avoid insurrections, the sultans gave their citizens a semblance of economic benefits and social aids. These key strategies, combined with political surveillance, repression and control of the media kept the population passive for years.

### **Control and censorship**

The organization IFEX-TMG (International Freedom of Expression Exchange-Tunisian Monitoring Group) carried out annual field missions during the final years of Ben Ali's regime to assess the ways in which the former President used the media as a tool to repress the country. According to IFEX-TMG reports, he had established total control through government supervision of the whole process of creating each piece of news from the content of the publications, the ownership of the outlets and even to the way print publications and radio and television stations financed their business. IFEX-TMG found that the state exclusively reserved the right to offer licenses for the creation of private broadcasters and it controlled the registration of print media. Creating a legal media outlet was impossible without first acquiring state permission, which was obviously denied outright if the government considered that a new publication could act against

its interests.

The media that were approved were strictly controlled and their content remained closely checked. Under the legal framework, 'crimes' such as offending the President, disturbing public order. In other words, calling for action against the government, or publishing any content which went even slightly against regime's interests would lead to the media source being banned.

In order to ensure that only approved information was disseminated to the Tunisian public, Ben Ali used a combination of censorship, the closure and confiscation of disallowed media and the harassment of critical voices. The internet was particularly targeted for censorship with many websites being blocked, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

IFEX-TMG repeatedly denounced the fact that independent journalists as well as human rights defenders, whose activities overlap in many cases, had their telephone lines cut, received anonymous threats, were verbally and physically assaulted and even imprisoned for questioning the regime's practices. The regime would then create a smoke screen around such cases: journalists and activists were charged with new, completely made-up offences, such as attacks on security agents, using drugs, etc., to prevent the international community from questioning their heavy handed practices. These practices occurred in the cases of well-known writers such as Slim Boukhdhir, Mohammed Abbou, Christophe Boltanski and Riad Ben Fadhel.

Even within the financial component of media organisations, state threads could be found. The state distributed the system of subsidies and controlled public sector advertisement. In practice, independent voices struggled to fund themselves as government and public aids

were inaccessible to them, as was the possibility of securing regular advertisements.

These various measures were extremely-useful over many decades. But in 2010, a series of factors combined to bring about the collapse of the regime. Although the economy was growing, the resultant wealth was being distributed unfairly: Ben Ali's family and his immediate circle enjoyed fabulous holidays and built splendiferous new mansions, while increasing young people found themselves well-educated but unemployed. For this reason, when Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire on 17 December 2010, the military did not act to defend the obviously corrupt regime refusing to fire on their fellow countrymen.

Alongside these problematic issues, the impact of the internet grew throughout the last decade. The United Nations estimates that in 2000, the internet was used by only 2.8% of the population. By 2009, the percentage was 34.1%. This growth in use allowed an increasing number of people to express themselves in forums and blogs, which eventually created a virtual but fierce opposition. According to Belhassem Handous of Tunisia's Reporters Without Borders, these platforms of relative free speech were essential for the subsequent revolts to take place.

### **Revolution: old and new problems**

Despite all these signs, the Jasmine Revolution took everybody by surprise. Even when it had already started, only a few foresaw the great impact it would have on the country, on the region and on the international order in general. German freelance journalist Sarah Mersch, based in Tunis and working for *ARD* and *DW*, said there was no outlet in Germany

asking for news from Tunisia, as it was thought to be something irrelevant and temporary. The first days of the revolution were characterized by confusion, agitation and fear. As radio, television and newspaper outlets were still beholden to Ben Ali, photographers and reporters used blogs, social networks and other internet outlets to publish what was happening in the streets.

Progressively, censorship started to disappear and outlets which had traditionally been loyal to Ben Ali changed their editorial lines and pushed for freedom. Dozens of new radio stations and newspapers sprung up, in response to a genuine desire to spread the new message of freedom all over the country.

However, as Mersch points out, there was a lack of coordination amongst the new and old media and a sense of mistrust from the population: "Media freedom didn't bring immediate stability. There was too much information out, sometimes contradictory, and people didn't know if they could trust in those [journalists] who had been supporting Ben Ali for so long". Although Tunisian journalists now try to produce proper journalism rather than propaganda, the population has lost the faith in the profession, a situation that as many reporters regret. In fact, one of the main problems that the country needs to face, as highlighted by the media centre Deutsche Welle Akademie during the UNESCO World Press Freedom Day, held in Tunis in May, is the fact that its media workers lack professional training. Tunisian journalists went through three processes very quickly for which they were not well prepared: they worked in a dictatorship; they covered a revolution; at present, they see the necessity to inform in a democracy, but this is still something beyond their limited experience

and education.

In order to tackle the difficulty in reaching a newly democratic society through nascent democratic media, organizations such as IFEX-TMG, ANHRI (Arabic Network for Human Rights Information) and the SNJT (National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists) offered a number of workshops, classes and seminars throughout 2012 to train journalists and to provide them with basic skills and abilities.

Virginie Jouan, IFEX-TMG chair, stresses that “in the country, the mainstream of the journalists have not developed a critical thought or political background. Education in this point is vital to create independent but solid media”. Nevertheless, Jouan admits that the major problem in the country in terms of media freedom is related to the lack of regulation. Two draft laws to regulate the media, to set the norms within the profession, and to decriminalise former offences, law 115 and law 116, have been drawn up, but they have not yet been implemented. Charges against journalists are still being tried under the old Press Law, which dates back to 1975.

Reporters Without Borders Tunisia also considers that developing a legal framework is essential to the creation of free media in the country. The organization strongly believes that the reasons behind the unwillingness to properly implement democratic laws lie in the fact that there are still many political and economic interests trying to shape the process. Influential people within the media and business circles linked to the former regime, are still lobbying for the implementation of measures that would allow them to retain their power. The current government, the Islamist party Enhad, has learnt from Ben Ali's regime and seems reluctant to relinquish control over the

press as they look ahead to the next elections. Another essential point curtailing the path towards democracy is the lack of authority to regulate media freedom. Finally, there are some concerns about having Islamists in power. Old practices such as censorship, which seemed forgotten after the revolution, have returned. Close to the elections in October 2011, *Nessma TV* was attacked after it broadcasted the film *Persepolis*, a critical story about the ascension of Islam in Iran. Reporters Without Borders Tunisia also advises that the current government is censoring content of a sexual nature on the internet. Journalists admit that the situation is better than it used to be, but they also acknowledge that the Islamist factor could be stalling progress. Although all the journalists imprisoned have now been released, some media workers still have a sense of fear. Jlali Ali, who works in *Radio Kalima*, admits that he and his partners received attacks from many sectors: the police, the citizens, and staunch Enhad supporters. He says he doesn't fear for his life but he does worry about his physical integrity. Due to the increasing number of attacks on journalists and writers in the last few months, IFEX-TMG held a protest on 22 August to condemn a series of arrests and the intimidation of journalists. The protest also demanded that the government must become more transparent. The transition towards a state of democracy in Tunisia has been difficult and slow. Some problems have been solved and liberty is greater than before, but there is still a lot of work to do. The key is working with patience, effort and willingness- otherwise Tunisia could revert back to an authoritarian dictatorship. As an advertisement from Reporters Without Borders Tunisia reads: “Now free. But until when?”

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