

Chapter 8

Press Freedom in Tunisia

The Post-Revolution Challenges

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As a developing country, Tunisia was living under a dictatorship until 14 January 2011, a date that marked a political and social turning point. Denouncing corruption, a lack of freedoms and the absence of control over the country's resources, people took to the streets and put an end to the 23-year-long rule of the president Ben Ali. As Tunisians were long denied both freedom of expression and freedom of the press, the core questions this chapter tries to answer revolve around the new press freedom status in Tunisia – what has changed since the revolution? What are the main dangers threatening press freedom? And what reforms were enacted in the media to counter those threats?

Press freedom limitations of three different kinds are being discussed: economic limitations, legal limitations, and political limitations. This classification is based on indicators for media independence, the quality of the legislative framework, and journalists' safety.

Background

Closely linked to democracy, freedom of expression and freedom of the press form an indivisible whole. Most of the established democracies tend to benefit from functioning public spheres; spaces for equal, inclusive, rational, and free deliberation. For Habermas, the press is the public sphere's most prominent institution (Calhoun 1992). According to him, deliberation finds its material space in media where engaging in public and critical debate becomes possible. For over 23 years Tunisians could not do this.

Suppressing personal freedoms, Ben Ali's regime had a complete grip over the traditional media and, in more recent years, the Internet. During those years of dictatorship several NGOs, such as Reporters sans Frontières (RSF), Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, repeatedly condemned the multiple human rights violations committed by the Tunisian regime. According to the RSF's Press Freedom Index,

Tunisia's rank kept dropping from 2002 onwards, until in 2010 it reached its lowest ever position: 164th place. The NGO also rated Tunisia an 'Enemy of the Internet' for over five consecutive years (RSF 2010). Many observers were convinced that what lay behind these restrictions was the belief of the regime in the importance of a free media for democracy.

By 2011, the uprising had put an end to Ben Ali's harassment of journalists and finally stopped the massive and systematic Internet filtering. The revolution thus enabled the emergence of a real pluralism of opinion in the media. Those factors helped the country's ranking in RSF's worldwide index to jump by almost 30 places. But due to several reasons, and underscoring the danger of a return to the past, it has been stagnating ever since. It is important then to identify the challenges facing press freedom in Tunisia after the establishment of this new political, economic and social order.

To identify the Tunisian press freedom challenges and categorize them, RSF's indicators were used. It mainly examined pluralism, media independence, the media environment and self-censorship, the legislative framework, transparency, and the quality of the infrastructure that supports the production of news and information.

Methodology

Based on a qualitative methodology, the paper combines a descriptive approach and semi-structured interviews with major actors in media-related fields. The interviewees were selected, not only because of their current positions in governmental and non-governmental media entities, but also because of their status as journalists under the previous regime and their record as strong press freedom proponents. The interview guides were set according to each individual's specialization and essentially aimed to reveal that person's own retrospective evaluation and, most importantly, their future perspectives concerning press freedom.

The document analysed are mainly the current and the recently abandoned laws governing media – the 1975 Press Code, Decree-law 115 and Decree-law 116. The publications of several NGOs (Reporters sans Frontières, Article 19, the Tunis Centre for Press Freedom as well as UNESCO) were utilised and national reports, media releases and press articles were also studied.

The article is based on four semi-structured interviews that I conducted in November 2015. The first two interviews were with Abdelkrim Hizaoui, media regulation professor and former Director of the African Centre for Training of Journalists and Communicators (CAPJC) and Nouri Lajmi, media professor and head of the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA). The third interviewee was the current head of the National Tunisian Journalists' Union (SNJT), Neji Bghouri, and the last one was Kamel Laabidi, human rights advocate and former head of the National Authority to Reform Information and Communication (INRIC).

Legal framework

As a guarantee to freedoms in general, laws in the journalistic field, in particular, are essential to press freedom and its fulfilment. The press code that was adopted in 1975, and repealed in 2011, protected the ruling regime against journalists. The code mandated heavy fines and prison sentences for press offences such as attempting to jeopardize State security and public order or causing offence to the head of the state, foreign diplomatic officers, and public figures. As it included many sentences involving loss of liberty and lacked any guarantees for the protection of journalists and their sources, the Press Code of 1975 was considered itself by law specialists to be a repressive piece of legislation, quite apart from its implementation by the dictatorial regime (Chouikha 2015).

After the revolution, reviewing the entire legal framework became a necessity. Talks at the time between government officials and a number of journalists and human rights advocates led to the establishment, in February 2011, of a national authority to reform information and communication – the Instance Nationale pour la Réforme de l'Information et de la Communication (INRIC). The body was granted the power to submit legal proposals about media and communication reform. The INRIC's consultative role, in combination with other joint efforts, led to the drafting of two new laws: The Decree-law 115 (on the Press, Printing and Publishing), and the Decree-law 116 (on the Freedom of Audio-visual Communication and the Creation of a Supreme Independent Body of Audio-visual Communication). Both laws were adopted in November 2011 but implemented only after protracted government dithering and the Tunisian journalists' general strike in October 2012 (see chapter 11).

Whereas the adoption of the decree-law 115 was an important step forward – as it is pluralist, liberal and democratic – some technical errors were made due to the short time frame for preparing the draft.

Most of these shortcomings relate to the regulation of defamation, electronic media, and public advertising. The Decree-law 115 applies to all print media actors and includes electronic media as well. But only two articles of the decree specifically mention electronic media – among the general definition of journalistic work (article 2), 'digitalised work' is included whereas the term electronic media is not mentioned. The seventh article of the decree also states that a person is considered to be a journalist if he or she works for an electronic media outlet. Aside from those two articles, the text does not take into consideration the specificities of electronic media work that operates in a different way than traditional media.

Legal shortcomings

The lack of specified regulations has generated an uncertain state of blurring and numerous professional and ethical abuses in the midst of a significant expansion of the

sector following the post-revolution. The abuses are intended to be overcome through the creation of a Press Council, mentioned in the new press code, and adopted by Parliament (Bghouri 2015). The creation of this independent self-regulation body was set in motion in 2012 and officially launched in 20 April 2017 (SNJT 2017a).

Under the previous regime, defamation was a legislative tool which helped accuse and imprison political dissidents and independent journalists. Within the new legislation defamation is no longer punished by imprisonment, but despite this, journalists, as well as regular citizens, are still facing prison charges in cases of defamation or slander since those provisions are still present in the Penal Code, which is yet to be reviewed (Penal Code 2005, articles 246-248).

Monitoring the aggressions and law suits faced by journalists in Tunisia, the Tunis Centre for Press Freedom CTLP¹ compiled monthly reports from November 2012 until June 2015 (CTLP 2016). Analysis of those 30 reports shows that almost three-quarters of the law suits monitored by the centre concerned journalists accused of defamation and sued in court according to the Penal Code instead of the specific law, decree-law 115. Not making the court refer exclusively to the specific media law in cases of press-related offences is a shortcoming of the law-decree that threatens press freedom. Intimidating journalists with heavy legal actions, and selective use of the law to serve narrow political interests, are old regime practices that might revive if the decree-law is not revised.

Among the numerous ways the previous regime kept control over print media, was the 1975 Press Code articles relating to a 'legal deposit'. This article legally obliged all media owners and publishers to submit every issue of their publication before making it available to the public. This measure was aimed originally at preserving the collective memory and securing the archiving of all national publications. However, having access to the publications before their general release helped censure any unwanted content by denying the publisher the distribution authorization normally granted after the deposit. The same article, obliging media owners to submit their publication prior to publishing, appears in the decree-law 115/2011. Even if, until now, the successive governments that have led Tunisia have not used this power, the very existence of such legal possibility represents a step backwards in the eyes of many observers (Tekiano 2012). For any publication to be subject to prior authorization is against freedom of opinion, expression and thought, although legal deposit is nevertheless important and should be kept as a declarative formality.

In view of these shortcomings, reviewing decree-law 115 became a necessity. The SNJT, with the help of civil society organisations, have been working for over a year on a draft law to replace it, and launched national consultation sessions in different cities. When the consultation is complete, the draft will be submitted to the Assembly of People's Representatives. This phase is important since adopting the law can take over a year, not to mention delays over its effective implementation such as shown by decree-laws 115 and 116 (Bghouri 2015).

Broadcasting regulation

The audio-visual media in Tunisia were an important propaganda tool for the previous regime. Ben Ali did not only use public service media to convey his ideas but controlled the private sector as well. TV and radio broadcasting licences were granted solely to his family members or those who pledged allegiance to his regime.

Broadcasting regulation has been an imperative step forward in guaranteeing expression and the creation of freedom, diversity and plurality in what the media produces, as well as securing access to the means to audio-visual production. The guarantees of broadcasting freedoms in decree-law 116 relate to the nature, definition and composition of an Independent Broadcasting Authority (HAICA), the competence and powers granted to this institution, and its functioning and financial basis. The law decree itself is considered generally acceptable and attains international standards in the nomination of the board members. Members reflect a balanced representation of media scene protagonists and, more importantly, they have political and financial independence (The Civil Coalition for the Defence of Freedom of Expression 2015).

The regulatory body has the power to establish the standards, grant the licences and monitor the programmes but for most protagonists, ‘The real shortcoming lands elsewhere: the HAICA lacks working tools since the Tunisian legal landscape is still in need of a general law on audio-visual media services that relates to the content and broadcasting’ (Hizaoui 2015).

With 50 radio channels and more than ten television stations, including those broadcasting without a licence, the broadcast media landscape has become very competitive at the expense of ethical principles. Interested in high ratings and attracting advertisers, some media owners neglect ethical rules. Often when sanctions are imposed by the HAICA and court appeals fail, anti-regulation campaigns take place – the regulation body is questioned, its sanction is censored in live TV broadcasts and, moreover, its members are verbally abused. One interviewee states:

Regulation is not only about imposing sanctions. The real change must come from journalists and media owners themselves. Thanks to effective consciousness-raising campaigns, they will gain awareness of the dangers of such actions on media content quality and press freedom in general. For journalists to respect ethics is essential, and the day will come when those who won't stick to it will discredit themselves and risk being abandoned by the public (Lajmi 2015).

In order to secure regulation continuity, the newly adopted constitution of January 2014 included an article that relates to the creation of a constitutional Broadcast Communication Commission (ACC) – the first for the country. According to article 127 of the Constitution, ‘The Commission shall oversee the modulation and development of the audio-visual communication sector and seek to guarantee freedoms of expression and the existence of pluralistic and fair media’ (The Constitution 2014).

Aside from this constitutional measure, several stakeholders, including HAICA members, legal experts and representatives of media professionals, have been working on the drafting of a new law to replace decree-law 116/2011. The HAICA and the prime minister's office have produced two different drafts that have yet to be presented to Parliament (La Presse News 2016). Both promise that all the shortcomings have been ironed out and the new law will support a more pluralist media environment, in harmony with the text of the Constitution that guarantees press freedom.

When politics control media

Through the Ministry of Information and the External Communication Agency ATCE, Ben Ali had during his 23 years in power institutionalised media control. The overthrow of the regime brought a flow of freedoms across the Tunisian media and permitted journalists to gain press freedom. Despite these changes, some of the regime's old practices kept going in disguised forms.

The Tunisian media public service, two television stations, nine radio channels and the national news agency, TAP, have always been a governmental service ruled by the government, and most of the time by the President himself. During Ben Ali's rule, the appointment of the directors, chief editors and even some journalists needed presidential approval, and in order to put an end to such undemocratic practices, new legislation introduced measures to ensure an independent, functioning public service media. According to decree-law 116/2011, the Independent High Authority for Audio-visual Communication (HAICA) has a consultative role in the appointment of audio-visual public service media chief executives. For each nomination the executive, which used to have the absolute power to choose names, now needs to get the HAICA's approval.

The two decrees-laws, 115 and 116, were passed by the government before it lost power in the 2011 elections, and when the new, post-election government took over, the legislation remained to be implemented². This legal void in the media field was intentionally maintained, as it permitted the prime minister to make a series of appointments at the top levels of public service media: involving the national radio agency, the national television network, and the chairman of the board of directors for the state-run media institution, Dar Assabah. The Islamist party, Ennahdha, which was now running the country, was also accused of taking advantage of the uncertain legal situation to secretly insert its members and supporters into public media newsrooms and administrations. At first, the INRIC pleaded for the implementation of the two decree-laws, but faced with the unwillingness of the government to consider its recommendations, it stopped all its activities, 'refusing to serve as a front for the government wrongdoings' (INRIC 2012).

With 84 aggressions against journalists reported by the end of the 2012, the Troika-led government³ is considered the worst of all the post revolution periods for press freedom.

Cases of journalists verbally and physically abused reached its highest level between 2012 and 2013 and the country lost several places in the 2013 RSF ranking (RSF 2013).

The three parties leading the country were accused of controlling public media and leading defamatory campaigns against the media to diminish the role of the media and discredit journalists. This tense climate created by the political power harmed journalists who worked in fear of verbal and physical aggression from citizens (Bghouri 2015).

One of the most visible examples of this atmosphere was a sit-in which took place in front of a local public television channel, Wataniya Television. For over 50 days, protestors called for the 'disinfection' of the media, and the results were heinous allegations and threats against journalists, not to mention physical and verbal altercations (Directinfo 2012).

The political turmoil behind the press freedom regression lasted for over two years and partially ended when the Islamic party Ennahdha stepped down in 2013. With the new technocratic government, fears for public media, as well as the pressure-level on journalists and physical aggression against them, progressively decreased. However, intervention in the private media sphere has reached a more dangerous level. The correlation between media and power goes beyond any editorial policies. With no respect for impartial and neutral content, private media owners choose to support one political side rather than the other in order to serve their own interests. Or in the worst-case scenarios, they themselves are members of a political party and use their media organization to convey its ideas (Laabidi 2015).

Nessma TV, a channel launched in 2007, is the perfect example of the correlation between media and power indicated by the number of sanctions imposed on it by the HAICA, mainly for political advertising (HuffPost Tunisie 2014). Its founder Nabil Karoui, originally a businessman in the advertising sector, used the channel's programmes to consolidate Nidaa Tounes as a party and support the serving president, Beji Caid Essebsi, during the 2014 presidential campaign. He officially joined the ruling party, Nidaa Tounes, after its election victory on January 2016.

The Nessma TV case is considered by media observers as an important issue but not the worst. In the words of one commentator: 'A state of blurring has taken over media ownership and needs to be cleared' (Laabidi 2015). Legislation actually obliges every media owner who has obtained a licence to create a website in which detailed information about the company's capital and owners is listed. However, none of the television and radio stations receiving a licence has made this crucial information public (HAICA 2014). Furthermore, investigative work has revealed that this opacity has allowed suspicious media funding and secret cross-media ownership concentration to go on (Mtibaa 2016).

Economic power as a threat to press freedom

Threats to press freedom in Tunisia do not come only from political power, as a lot of journalists suffer from an unstable social and economic situation, also structural

issues within the profession itself are worrisome. For example, from June 2015 until May 2016, there were 300 cases of journalists and media workers not receiving their salary (Mosaique fm 2016a). In the same period, another 65 cases of abusive dismissal were discovered by the SNJT (ibid). This relatively new phenomenon became commonly known as ‘arbitrary dismissal’.

‘Starving journalists into submission’ read a banner raised by 22 journalists working for the Attounissia newspaper who went on strike on May 2016⁴ (Mosaique fm 2016b). Another owner – the owner of the Aldhamir newspaper – also practiced arbitrary dismissal⁵ (Kapitalis 2016). To help overcome the crisis the Tunisian Federation of Newspaper Directors (FTDJ) is calling for the creation of a press council. Whereas the main role of this self-regulation body will be to promote respect for journalistic ethics, media owners want the same independent body to govern the whole field of journalism.

The print media sector is facing an important crisis but journalists working in both audio-visual and electronic media are also facing a precarious situation. During the last two years, journalists working for two major private television stations, Hannibal TV and Elhiwar Ettounsi, as well as the third-ranked radio station Shems fm (Directinfo 2017), went on multiple strikes for social and economic demands. A case of arbitrary dismissal was also witnessed at the radio station Kelma fm (Directinfo 2016). After an investigation revealing the undercover funding of the channel by the president of a political party, the regulatory body HAICA authorized the National Broadcasting Authority, ONT, to stop providing transmission services (HAICA 2016).

The example of Kelma fm confirms the complexity of the issue. It simultaneously involves misrepresentation by journalists of themselves and their rights, and exploitation and abuse by media owners. The latter are mostly businessmen who lack any journalistic background and are taking advantage of an unclear economic and legal framework in the media to pursue their own agendas. The interviewee Lajmi states:

A private media outlet is an economic institution which aims to make profits, journalists are contract workers who should defend their interests and stand for their rights as employees. The journalists who accept to work without regular contracts and social assurances are ultimately subject to exploitation and misleading (Lajmi 2015).

This precarious situation for journalists has been a growing issue and represents, to observers, one of the many obstacles to the fulfilment of press freedom in Tunisia. One remarks: ‘Media lobbying is a prominent danger; a lot of efforts have been made and others are still yet to come, but facing the complex combination of media with financial and political power won’t be easy’ (Laabidi 2015).

Access to information for a free press

Until recently, the only existing legislation relating to access to information in Tunisia was the decree-law 2011-41, enacted in March 2011 by interim President Foued Me-

bazaâ, and the decree-law 2011-54 of June 2011, which amended and supplemented it. Back in 2011, the enacting of this decree-law represented a big step towards the achievement of government transparency. However, its essential deficiencies, such as a limited definition of information, procedures requiring improvement, and a need for bodies to provide important information, have subsequently been highlighted by civil society on both the national and international stage (Article 19, 2011).

As the new constitution promulgated in January 2014 guaranteed access to information (in its second chapter ‘rights and freedoms’), a new law had to follow. The government, led by Habib Essid from February 2015 to August 2016, proposed a draft to Parliament but, after almost a year of discussions and amendments, the same government withdrew the draft law without explanation. Local and international civil society organisations, such as the local bureau of RSF, Article 19 and Al Bawsla⁶, led a campaign against the controversial law review entitled ‘freedom of press and information hanging by a thread’ (RSF 2015). The law was finally adopted in March 2016 – law 2016-22, dated 24 March 2016 – but free information is still under threat. While efforts to establish the Access to Information Commission responsible for the enforcement of the Access to Information law are on the verge of completion, executive power is putting this right at risk once again (SNJT 2017b).

As an example, the head of the new coalition government, in office since August 2016, Youssef Chahed, issued a circular that obliges civil servants to refrain from

... making statements or interventions, or disclosing official information or documents in the press or by any other means, related to their functions or to the public structures they work for without the preliminary and explicit authorization of their hierarchy or the managers of structures employing them (Circular 2017).

Once again, civil society mobilized and called for the immediate withdrawal of the circular. Set under pressure, the government is likely to review the circular (Hakae-konline 2017). As Bghouri states,

The vigilance of civil society, its free actions and campaigns is the first guarantee to press freedom, the negotiations over law drafts its adoption and implementations as well as the executive decisions became close to a democratic tradition and this makes me hopeful about the future of press freedom in Tunisia (Bghouri 2015).

Conclusion

To identify specific press freedom limitations in Tunisia, this study took a closer look at certain important factors. The factors discussed were the economic, legal, and political situation in Tunisia.

To some extent, the different factors intermingle. Some of the laws – shortcomings aside – could have helped to clear the situation if they had been implemented, but the political will was missing. Thus, to distinguish between legal and political shortcomings

is quite hard; suffice it to say that theory is one thing, practice another. In addition to this, the economic threats are not restricted to the exploitative treatment of journalists but also include the problem of businessmen controlling the media in order to exert leverage on the political scene. ‘Follow the money’, is an old advice. Media is business and therefore closely entangled with the political sphere – in Tunisia as in the rest of the world.

Nevertheless, compared to the blackout imposed by the dictatorship regime, Tunisia has made important strides forward. But the mere acceptance of democratic rules does not guarantee a positive evolution, and a vigilant eye needs to be kept in order not to risk the progresses that have been made. This is a role undertaken by civil society in the form of NGOs, associations and various professional bodies, because as long as democracy is not firmly established, freedom of the press is still in the balance.

Notes

1. The CTLP Tunis Centre for Press Freedom is a non-governmental organization established in 2011 by a group of individual journalists which aims to observe the violations of press freedom, participate in the legislative reform of the media sector as well as strengthen young journalists' ethical abilities.
2. The Islamic party, Ennahdha, won the first democratic elections in Tunisia that took place on 23 October 2011.
3. The Troika government was composed of the three victorious parties in the 2011 elections: Ennahdha, the Congress for the Republic (CPR) and the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (FDTL).
4. The newspaper owner did not pay the employees for four months, then simply closed the paper without any advance notice.
5. Eighteen journalists were dismissed from the newspaper Aldhamir.
6. Al Bawsla is a non-profit NGO established under Tunisian law whose objectives are to offer Tunisian citizens updates on the elected representatives and build relationships with elected representatives and decision-makers in order to work towards the establishment of good governance practices and political ethics.

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