



## Tunisia's Media Landscape

International Media Support • Report • June 2002

## CONTENTS

1. The political context.....	3
2. Official Print media .....	5
3. The opposition press .....	6
4. The samizdat media.....	7
5. The audiovisual media.....	8
6. The Internet .....	9
7. The Legal Framework.....	10
8. Attacks against the media .....	12
9. Journalism training .....	13
10. Journalists Associations .....	14
11. Support to media in Tunisia .....	14
12. Conclusion .....	15

*"Independent newspapers in Tunisia are not killed; they are forced to commit suicide."*

*"We have no journalistic tradition in Tunisia because the media has never been able to exercise its profession freely."*

*"It is hard to imagine the existence of an independent press today because of the state's control over all aspects of public life in Tunisia."*

## 1. The political context

There has never been a period in independent Tunisian history where freedom of expression and the press were respected or honored. Though many today describe President Bourguiba's thirty year reign as one where there were greater freedoms than today, reality is that media have always been subjected to a conundrum of legal restrictions, government interference, physical threats, arrest and many other types of abuse. While Bourguiba was clearly opposed to the development of a democratic state, President Ben Ali, nicknamed by his supporters as the "artisan of change," speaks a language of democracy while ruling with an iron fist.

Ben Ali and other members of his government often encourage the Tunisian press to be more critical. "I will say to you once more loud and clear: Do write on any subject you choose... There are no taboos except what is prohibited by law and press ethics," he said last year during an interview published in several Arabic dailies.<sup>1</sup> According to one Tunisian analyst however, "Ben Ali gives the impression that he tolerates free expression but only in a space he intends to control and under political and social terms that he claims as acceptable."<sup>2</sup> In fact, Ben Ali has gone to great lengths to appear "democratic" through sophisticated public relations overseas and the creation of an array of official national human rights bodies including a human rights minister and human rights departments in at least four ministries.

Ben Ali, who came to power in a "medical coup" in November 1987 (he arranged for Habib Bourguiba to be declared senile and incapacitated), has created a highly personalized political system that is managed through authoritarian rules and principles. An estimated 145,000 strong police force with reportedly an additional 200,000 plainclothes security personnel, 2 million ruling party supports with tens of thousands of party structures throughout the country as well as 7,000 associations labeled "Organisations Veritablement Gouvernementales (OVG)" (or truly governmental organizations) make up Ben Ali's most feared and effective weapon in a country no larger than the U.S. state of Georgia and with a population of about 9.5 million people. Torture is routinely used in prisons.

Against this backdrop is the strongest and most stable economy in the sub-region. National statistics (which are impossible to verify) indicate that per capita income

---

<sup>1</sup> [Attacks on the Press 2001](#), Committee to Protect Journalists, , Tunisia Chapter.

<sup>2</sup> In Larbi Chouikha, " Situation de la Liberte d'Informatin en Tunisie, » [l'Information au Maghreb](#) (1992), p.78.

was estimated at USD2000 (in 2000), economic growth at 5% annually for the last 5 years and only 3.5% of the population lives below the poverty line since 1975. More than 80% of Tunisians own their own home and illiteracy is pegged at 5% for the section of the population under 16 years of age.

The international community is evidently encouraging continued economic growth in Tunisia all the while keeping virtually silent on Tunisia's human rights abuses while even they fall victim to official harassment and threats. Tunisia is the first Arab nation to have a substantial trade partnership with the European Union through the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement. As long as President Ben Ali manages to maintain social, political and economic stability in his country Tunisia will continue to be "spoiled and treated like the West's only child in the Arab world," admitted one diplomat. Consequently Article 2 of the Agreement, which pegs EU support and cooperation to respect for human rights, remains an unenforced requirement. Many fear that the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington D.C. will only bolster Ben Ali's position with Western powers. The "war against terror" will give him free reign to repress political dissent in the name of suppressing terrorism or "the Islamic threat." Thousands of known political prisoners and prisoners of conscience accused of being collaborators of the En-Nahda (Renaissance) Islamic party or other associations deemed illegal by the State continue to languish in prison, some for more than 10 years. Once freed, they are often deliberately prevented from working or resuming a normal life.

Some predict however that this "false" stability cannot last long. Conditionalities under the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement will have to be met in the course of the next few years and will undoubtedly create unemployment and reduce state revenues. Living conditions for many Tunisians are expected to deteriorate and as a result discontent with the system may rise.

Unfortunately it is very likely that the Tunisian mirage will stay alive for still some time. The proposed constitutional amendments to be voted on in Tunisia's first national referendum expected to take place in late May will most certainly result in Ben Ali running for an unprecedented fourth presidential term in 2003. His ability to raise loans and other funds from the international community will help cushion economic decline and the lack of a popular local civil society will help maintain the status quo. Through the years, the distance between government and civil society actors has become greater and greater and as a result positions on each side have become more radicalized.

Imprisonment, torture and other physical threats and continuous harassment make it difficult for the handful of truly independent civil society organizations to operate. The few who are officially recognized such as the Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme (LTDH, the country's oldest human rights organization) and the Association Tunisienne des Femmes Democratiques (ATFD) manage to survive despite the government's attempts to force them into submission. The Vice President of the LTDH was condemned to three years in prison and has been subject to continuous forms of harassment. Today, the ATFD is unable to rent a meeting room in a hotel in Tunis to hold its conferences. In addition to arrests, threats and harassment, the NGOs that operate unofficially, such as the Conseil National pour les Libertés en Tunisie (CNLT or The National Council for Liberties in Tunisia) and the Rassemblement pour une Alternative Internationale de

Developpement (RAID or the Assembly for an international alternative for development) among others, are unable to rent office space, to hold meetings, or publish printed materials. "They are merely a drop in the ocean," said one diplomat.

## 2. Official Print media<sup>3</sup>

Officially there are over a hundred publications available on Tunisia's newsstands, which is not surprising for such a highly literate, urbanized and middle-income country. Arabic is by far the media's dominant language though many publishers produce sister Arabic and French publications or divides a publication into an Arabic and French section. There are at least 8 daily newspapers and at the very least fifteen weeklies being published at this time.

Due to the sheer number of publications available on any given day, there seems to be a very diverse print media. However, once one digs deeper one understands that these publications rarely provide information that diverges from the official line. Factual information is hard to come by and a diversity of analysis or views on daily events is rare. These publications are either directly or indirectly controlled by the government. While there may be short periods of more openness, these have not proven to be part of a process towards substantive change with regards to freedom of the press and expression but rather is part of the government's ploy to appear more democratic and perhaps even to gage who is loyal to the system or not.

In 1979, during one of these short periods of openness, a number of privately owned newspapers critical of the government began operating. During the 1980s, many shut down having become bankrupt due to suspensions and other forms of state-sponsored harassment and interference.

Many foreign publications are also subject to censorship. Libération, La Croix, Le Canard Enchaîné and l'Humanité as well as some Algerian and Moroccan newspapers are banned from local distribution. Others such as Le Monde, Le Monde Diplomatique and Jeune Afrique – l'Intelligent, are authorized to enter the country but specific issues are banned when they contain any critical information about Tunisia.

The private "official" Tunisian press survives essentially from advertising revenues. Newspapers get advertising through two means: the Agence Tunisienne pour l'Information Exterieur (ATIE or the Tunisian Agency for External Communication) and through direct contracts with private companies.

ATIE was created in 1990 and is said to be under the control of the President's office. It is responsible for dividing the state advertising budgets between different media institutions and accrediting local and foreign journalists. It also serves as the Tunisian government's public relations wing. Private companies can also ask ATIE

---

<sup>3</sup> The term "official" refers to publications whose registration has been recognized by the Ministry of the Interior according to the Tunisian Press Code.

to manage their advertising budgets and some do so ostensibly to avoid complications with the government should they inadvertently advertise in an issue or a publication that offends the government.

Readership has reportedly been in decline over the last few years. Several people I interviewed attribute this to the fact that Tunisian publications do not respond to the needs of its readership, have lost credibility with the public and mostly repeat the information that state television and radio broadcast. One of the oldest and more popular Arabic language dailies, As-Sabah, has reportedly declined in circulation from 50,000 during the Bourguiba years to less than 15,000 today. Most dailies have a circulation of about 3,000 I am told though these figures are nearly impossible to verify.

### 3. The opposition press

Currently there are two critical newspapers operating officially though with great difficulty and inconsistency: al-Mawfiq (The Stance) which is linked to the Partie Démocratique Progressiste (Progressive Democratic Party, formerly the Rassemblement Socialiste Progressiste) and Attariq Aljadid (Renewal) which is run by the "Mouvement Attajdid," also a political party. There are about five legal opposition parties and each have a newspaper though most tow the government line.

These opposition party newspapers began to appear when the government introduced a system of subsidies of up to 50,000 DT a year (or about €38,000) for opposition party newspapers that have elected representation in Parliament. Despite this legal provision, al-Mawfiq did not receive its subsidy this year probably because it has taken a more critical editorial stance than most others. The newspaper has experienced much harassment and interference and since the start of the year it has not been sold on newsstands due to confiscations.

Attariq Aljadid 's February 2002 issue was seized. It is the first time that the government has interfered with a newspaper from a political party with representation in Parliament. Though the government has provided no explanation for the seizure, many believe that the issue was banned from distribution because of an article critical of the May national referendum. Those responsible for the newspaper were able to hold a press conference about the seizure in late March in their offices without interference.

These two opposition newspapers are supported by their respective political parties and receive no advertising whatsoever.

#### 4. The samizdat media

There are several unauthorized media initiatives that are critical of the government and working in an extremely repressive environment:

- Kalima (Word) is a private initiative initiated in 1999 by Sihem Bensedrine, a well-known journalist, publisher and human rights activist.

Kalima's first issue appeared online ([www.kalimatunisie.com](http://www.kalimatunisie.com)) in 2000. Six issues have been published online since then and the last issue dated January 2002 (issue #6) was the first to be available in paper format. The government has allegedly interfered with access to the sight from Tunisia. It is now impossible to access it within the country except via proxies, which have also been consistently blocked.

Though Bensedrine followed the legal procedures to register a newspaper as outlined in the 1998 Press Code (see Section 6. for more information about the legal framework for media), the government never gave her a *récepissé* or receipt acknowledging the registration. The newspaper has therefore not been officially recognized by the Tunisian government and as a consequence is being published illegally.

Bensedrine has suffered much persecution since she began publishing Kalima. She was briefly arrested and reportedly beaten in 2000 by police after attempting to visit Taoufik Ben Brik, a journalist who had gone on a hunger strike. Later that year, even though her house was under constant police surveillance, her car was broken into and a knife was left on the back seat with a threatening note. Last year she was arrested and held in prison for "defamation" and "spreading false news intending to disrupt public order" for almost seven weeks after returning from two-week tour of Europe in which she gave many interviews about the deteriorating situation of human rights in Tunisia, including to Al Mustakilla's "Le Grand Maghreb" which is broadcast from London to Tunis. The charges are still pending against her.

Omar Mestiri, Bensedrine's husband and Kalima's Director, was briefly detained in 1999 and for about two years was under a form of city arrest in Tunis which made it impossible for him to continue his farming activities which have been his and his family's only form of income.

- Alternatives Citoyennes (Citizen's Alternative) is also a private online publication ([www.alternatives-citoyennes.sgdg.org](http://www.alternatives-citoyennes.sgdg.org)) initiated by Nadia Omrane, a Tunisian writer based in Tunis and her sister Meryem Marzouki based in Paris. Access to the site from Tunisia has been blocked and is only available via proxies.
- Kaws al Karama (The Arch of Dignity) is managed and edited by Jallel Zoghalmi, the brother of journalist Taoufik Ben Brik who staged a 24-day hunger strike in 2000 for having had his passport confiscated by the authorities. According to one of its collaborators, the newspaper is intended to provide a forum for debate for Tunisian leftists. Zoghalmi was physically attacked by plainclothes police last year. The publication has put out five issues to date which appear irregularly and print runs vary from 16 to 500 issues. The newspaper is distributed informally in Tunisia.

- TUNeZINE (<http://site.voila.fr.tunezine>) is an online forum on democracy and human rights issues that was launched by Zouhair Yahyaoui in July 2001. Access to the site from Tunisia has been blocked and it is only accessible via proxies. On June 4, Yahyaoui was arrested at a cyber cafe and has been charged with "knowingly putting out false news" and "stealing Internet connection time."

The initiatives listed above are unique in such a repressive context. In the words of a journalist working for an official magazine, "(these) initiatives are an absolute necessity so that Tunisian media in general can begin to evolve." One Tunisian media analyst cites that one of the key elements for creating a more independent press in Tunisia is for "journalists to assert themselves and become a more dynamic force driven essentially by professional aims and making the ideal of freedom of the press the foundation for their battles. Solidarity should cement their actions above all other considerations, material or political."<sup>4</sup>

These initiatives receive no advertising and are entirely financed by their initiators and writers contribute their time and articles almost entirely on a volunteer basis. There was at least one other on line initiative called Takriz e-mag ([www.takriz.org](http://www.takriz.org)), which was initiated by, and targeting Tunisian youth. It reportedly stopped operating after its initiator left the country. Outdated issues of the e-magazine are still available on the web.

## 5. The audiovisual media

Though this report is intended to focus on Tunisia's print media, it is important to mention the audiovisual sector due to the impact many say it has had on Tunisian society. Many I spoke with believe that satellite television is the medium that can most influence public opinion in Tunisia. Programs are broadcast from outside the country, transmissions are almost impossible to block, and they are watched in the privacy of one's home.

At the moment, the local audiovisual media is entirely owned and controlled by the government. Private channels and programs are only available via satellite transmission. In 1988, the government passed legislation allowing for the licensing of satellite dishes. Given its popularity, the government tried to make satellite TV more difficult to access and in 1995 Parliament voted in a law making it obligatory for individuals to get municipal authorization before installing a satellite dish. Fortunately these laws have not been vigorously enforced. According to national statistics 45% to 55% of Tunisian families in both urban and rural areas own a satellite dish.

Until recently the most important satellite program was "al\_Mustakilla" (The Independent) transmitted from London every Sunday afternoon and owned and operated by Tunisian businessman Mohammed el Hachmi Hamdi. It was called "Le Grand Maghreb" (The Big Maghreb) and for the first time it provided the average Tunisian access to individuals (opposition party leaders or human rights activists)

---

<sup>4</sup> Larbi Chouikha, "Situation de la Liberte d'Information en Tunisie », in [L'Information au Maghreb](#), Ceres Productions, 1992.



and political perspectives that had been privileged to only a small intellectual circle. Unfortunately the Sunday program has stopped broadcasting this year and many suspect that the owner retracted the program under pressure from the Tunisian government.

Today I am told that the most influential satellite television programs in Tunisia are of the En-Nahda Islamic party and the Qatar-based Al Jazeera station. Many are concerned that due to the media situation in the country that Tunisians only have access to government or Islamic views. Some argue that this could have a detrimental effect on the evolution of the political situation in the country and that in effect Ben Ali's control over the local media is inadvertently enhancing the Islamic position rather than stifling it.

When asked whether radio could play a significant role in Tunisia many noted that radio is not an important source of information for Tunisians. This may be due to the fact that radio has lost credibility with its listeners due to the fact that it is entirely under state control.

## 6. The Internet<sup>5</sup>

According to Human Rights Watch, Tunisia has the most detailed Internet legislation in the region. The government's attempts to improve bandwidth, reduce access and hardware costs and to promote the government on the worldwide web seem to contradict its attempts to also restrict the medium.

In 1991, Tunisia was the first Arab and African country to be connected to the Internet through the Regional Institute of Computer Sciences and Telecommunication. The use of the Internet was authorized in 1996 and soon after the Agence Tunisienne d'Internet (ATI or the Tunisian Internet Agency) was established.

The ATI coordinates Internet policies and services and leases Internet access to the seven or so Internet service providers (ISPs) in the country. Therefore the ISPs only retail Internet access to its customers. Furthermore all domestic and international communication flows through the ATI. The ATI maintains control over all the protocols and is the country's only international gateway. For many years two providers dominated the market, GlobalNet and Planet Net. The latter is owned by the President's daughter and for some years controlled one third of the market.

In 1998, the government authorized the establishment of "Publinets" or internet cafés and to stimulate start-ups subsidized 50% of the investments needed to the first 100 cafés. As of last year, there were about 600 Publinets throughout the country. It is estimated that at least 30,000 individuals are connected to the Internet in their homes or work place though the numbers are expected to be on the rise due to the drop in subscription prices and the increase in internet service providers throughout the country.

---

<sup>5</sup> Most of the information in this section comes from three sources: Human Rights Watch, "The Internet in the MidEast and North Africa: Free Expression and Censorship"; "Tunisie-Internet" in [Kalima](#) by SihemBensedrine; and Reporters Sans Frontieres, "The Twenty Enemies of the Internet".

The Internet decree of 1997 governs the Internet and states that the press code shall apply to the “production, provision, distribution and storing of information through telecommunications means, including the Internet.” The Internet decree also bars encryption without prior approval from the Ministry of Communication and requires the applicant to provide the keys needed to encrypt the data.

Legal requirements for users and ISPs are restrictive. The contract that institutional subscribers must sign impose government controls such as a declaration that the user will only use the Internet for scientific, technological or commercial purposes that are strictly related to the activity of the client. ISPs are required to disclose all accounts that have been opened for users and the ATI reserves the right to suspend Internet service without notice if the subscriber engages in any use that is believed to be “improper or contrary” to the conditions laid out in the contracts. The owner of an ISP has legal responsibility for the information that flows through its enterprise. This poses a regulatory burden on providers even though they cannot realistically police the email traffic or the web sites they host.

In addition to these restrictive laws, there are various forms of state interference with the Internet including:

- Not being able to get an account;
- Termination of an account without explanation;
- Government monitoring of email. Though there is little proof, this assumption is based on the level of known police surveillance of telephone conversations and other aspects of Tunisian life.
- The occasional delay of receiving email messages en route;
- The blocking of web sites. The web sites of human rights organizations such as Amnesty International, the Committee to Protect Journalists, Reporters Sans Frontieres, as well as those of Tunisian independent publications and NGOs are blocked.

In one unique incident, the Euromed Group, a Paris-based firm that does business in Tunisia, registered an URL very similar to Amnesty International's that appeared likely to fool persons trying to access Amnesty International's site. It publishes governmental information on the state of human rights in Tunisia.

## 7. The Legal Framework<sup>6</sup>

The 1988 Press Code provides the legal framework under which the media and journalists operate. Though Article 1 of the code states that “freedom of the press, publishing, printing, distribution and sale of books and publications is guaranteed, “ the requirements in place under the code are extremely restrictive. The press code has been amended twice but most of the changes have been largely cosmetic.

The procedures for obtaining a license allow the Ministry of the Interior to determine who may or may not be authorized to publish. Under these provisions, applications for authorization must be submitted to the Ministry of the Interior

---

<sup>6</sup> Most of the information in this section comes from the ARTICLE 19 report, “The press in Tunisia: Plus Ca Change,” 7 November 1993.

which then delivers a *récipissé* (or receipt) good for one year constituting the official permit to publish. Furthermore Article 142 of the code requires that the printer request the *récipissé* before printing, effectively prohibiting the printing of any unlicensed publications. The code also requires the publisher to inform the Ministry of the Interior of any change of printer.

Article 8 of the Code stipulates that several copies of each periodical must be deposited prior to distribution with the Ministries of the Interior, Justice and Information as well as the National Library and Documentation Center. This required procedure can be time consuming, is labor intensive and effectively facilitates control and censorship by the Ministry of Interior. The non-execution of the deposit is an offence punishable by a fine and a possible seizure of the publication.

The Minister of the Interior, on the advice of the Secretary of State for Information, may order the seizure of any issue of a periodical whose publication would lead to a "disturbance of public order." The Minister of the Interior may refer the publication to the courts which may order its suspension for up to 6 months.

Tunisian defamation law provides absolute protection from criticism for the President, regardless of its truth, with exception for public institutions, public officials and public bodies. Defamation is defined as "any public allegation or imputation concerning a fact which impugns the honor and reputation of a person or an official body." Any infringement on the law is punishable by a prison sentence and/or a fine.

Attacks on the President's dignity may be punished by up to 5 years imprisonment and a fine; one to 3 years imprisonment for anyone who defames public order, the courts, the armies, official entities and public administrations"; 16 days to six months imprisonment for defamation of an individual.

Charges for "inciting hatred between races, religions, populations" or "propagating opinions based on racial segregation or on religious extremism" or "instigating people to attack the dignity of the President," or "inciting people to disobey the law of the country and spreading or reproducing false information which may disturb public order" may lead to a suspension of a publication punishable by 2 months to 3 years imprisonment and a fine. If anyone continues to publish or collaborate with a periodical that has been suspended, s/he is liable to 6 months to five years in prison.

The Press Code also imposes on civil servants the obligation of discretion and one year of imprisonment for those who break the regulation by unduly "communicating to a 3<sup>rd</sup> party or publishing any document of which s/he is a depository or has knowledge of because of her or his functions and which may prejudice the state or private person."

In addition to these repressive laws, the lack of independence of the judiciary is another obstacle to freedom of expression, information and the media. One startling example of this is the case of Hamma Hammami, the leader of the unauthorized Tunisian Worker's Communist Party (POCT) and editor of the now defunct El Badil newspaper. This February Hammami appeared in court after four years in hiding and was sentenced to nine years imprisonment in a hearing where

neither he nor his lawyers were able to present a defense. Many of his lawyers and witnesses were beaten by police in the courtroom. Hammami was accused of “being a member of an illegal association, distributing leaflets, publishing false information, holding illegal meetings and inciting rebellion” among other charges. Though Hammami was able to present his own defense (for over 3 hours) at his March trial and two hundred lawyers courageously defended their client’s case, Hammami was sentenced to three years and two months in prison on March 30.

## 8. Attacks against the media

The media is subject to an array of abuses, which include:

- *Legal attacks.*  
As outlined above in the section on the legal framework for media, journalists are vulnerable to an array of repressive laws which can lead to imprisonment, seizures and banning of publications as well as substantial fines. Many if not all of these laws have been used against journalists.
- *Physical attacks and other threats.*  
The Tunisian government has set into motion a sophisticated security apparatus which creates an environment of fear among journalists, leads to self censorship and a sense of deep humiliation. Journalists have been physically assaulted and their property stolen or damaged (equipment, vehicles, etc.). Some journalists’ homes are under constant surveillance by plainclothes police, land line and cellular telephones are monitored and/or cut, postal delivery is interfered with, family members and staff are threatened etc.
- *State influence and control over advertising revenues.*  
As mentioned above in the section on the print media, the ATIE, an agency operating under the President’s office, controls all state and advertising and some private advertising. Furthermore, local and foreign businesses with local representation have been harassed and threatened into suspending their advertising in publications that are deemed critical by the government. This state control and influence over advertising in publications has led many newspapers to financial ruin.
- *State influence over a publication’s internal operations.*  
State officials may infiltrate publications. I am told that a former government official, who is an employee of Realités magazine, makes most of the editorial decisions at the magazine though he is not an editor himself. Certain articles are reportedly sent directly to the Presidential Palace for prior review and often articles are subjected to four levels of review or censorship. The magazine publishes articles that have been washed of any substance and often heavily and poorly edited without the author having any say in the matter.
- *Fear and self-censorship.*  
One should not underestimate the level of fear that permeates journalists which in turn leads to self-censorship. One diplomat I interviewed compared the situation in Tunisia to that of East Germany where “one can never be sure who is an informant, not even one’s family member.”

It is important to understand that even innocuous issues and publications can disturb the government. Taboo subjects do not only include corruption and

mismanagement or other typically sensitive issues but also information that sheds any sort of negative light on the country such as a train accident, a student's attempt at committing suicide, the miserable life of a shoe shiner, etc.

Perhaps the most startling example is that of Sept sur Sept (or Seven days and Seven nights), a weekly television guide which was forced to shut down after less than a year in operation due to government harassment and interference.

It took its owner Souheyr Belhassen, who is now Vice President of the LTDH (at the time of the publication she was not involved with a human rights organization), four years to get official approval to publish the magazine. While it was being published, she was called in many times by the Ministry of the Interior who complained about content: why had the magazine published a photograph of a naked African man (who was naked due to his traditional dress)? Why did she publish a commentary on a televised documentary about former President Bourguiba? An interview with opposition leaders who were appearing on a local television program later that week is what ostensibly "killed" the magazine. Following that issue all advertisers pulled out and Belhassen was forced to shut the magazine down for lack of funds. Since that time, the government has pressured her employers to have her fired.

## 9. Journalism training

There are two local institutions that prepare individuals to assume journalism as a profession. The first is the Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l'Information (IPSI or the Press and Information Sciences Institute) that offers a journalism degree program. The IPSI is headed by an important member of the ruling party and as a result there is little to no opportunity for professors or students to discuss fundamental issues concerning media developments.

Professors are no longer able to use Le Monde or Libération newspapers in their courses. Though the IPSI boasts of having introduced a human rights course, I am told that the materials used are government propaganda such as Ben Ali's speeches and other documents available from government entities. According to one professor there "has been no debate in the institution for seven or eight years now and students come out of the institution with little to no ability to analyze information or to think critically." IPSI graduates about 50 students a year and only about 10% of these can find employment in the journalism field.

The other training institution is the Centre Africain de Perfectionnement des Journalistes et des Communicateurs (The African Center for Journalism Training and Communications) which receives a large part of the European Union's MEDA Democracy Program's budget for local training of Tunisian journalists<sup>7</sup>. The Director has been heading the Center for about 20 years and was the founder and President of the Conseil National pour la Communication (National Council for Communication). Many I interviewed believe that the Center does not contribute to the development of a more independent and professional press in Tunisia.

---

<sup>7</sup> For more information of the MEDA programme, see section 2.10.

Lastly, the MEDA program is also funding the Maastricht-based Center for European Journalism to conduct training both inside and outside the country. Unfortunately the beneficiaries of this support are exclusively journalists working for the official press.

In addition to the lack of availability of quality training, it appears that Tunisian journalists are fairly isolated from their counterparts in neighboring countries or elsewhere. They have not been privy to many exchange programs and many independent minded journalists were banned from traveling and so could not benefit from such programs. In general there has been little support for those who are not "in the system."

## 10. Journalists Associations

The Association des Journalistes Tunisiens (Association of Tunisian Journalists) is the only journalist's organization that currently exists. Though it is labeled an "independent" organization it receives subsidies from the government and many of its executive members tow the government line. In 1999 for example eight of the nine individuals elected to the executive were members of the ruling party. Most of its activities center on improving journalists' working conditions and participating in government commissions. The Association was expelled from the World Association of Newspapers in 1997 for its lack of action on attacks against journalists and violations of freedom of expression.

## 11. Support to media in Tunisia

The independent Tunisian media<sup>8</sup> has received little to no financial or technical support. Tunisian civil society has little experience fundraising and has had little exposure or contact with funding institutions. It is unclear whether the "unofficial" status of some media institutions hinders access to funds. This said, Tunisian independent media and civil society organizations are genuinely home grown. They should be proud of their accomplishments given the fact that they have operated largely on the basis of volunteerism and the sheer will and determination of individuals and often because of great personal financial sacrifice.

While I was only able to meet with a limited number of "donor" institutions while I was in Tunis it seems quite clear that two dynamics are preventing direct support to independent media: reticence of independent media to accept certain funds and restrictions that are placed on the funding that is available because it is largely bilateral in nature. On the one hand, most individuals involved in the independent media are weary of receiving funds directly from governmental institutions for fear of being labeled a tool of foreign governments. They are also weary of any conditionality placed on support that would restrict their activities. They would prefer that funds flow through a non-profit organization or from private foundations. On the other hand, most foreign government assistance programs are

---

<sup>8</sup> By independent I refer to media that is privately owned and with an editorial line independent of any political or other type of influence.

based on bilateral agreements and as long as the Tunisian government has a say in the matter funds will not flow to the few independent and critical voices in Tunisia.

The largest fund available to media in Tunisia is the "support to media" fund, which is part of the MEDA Grants Program aimed at promoting democracy and human rights in the context of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership. It has a total of €2,150,000 available to Tunisian media between 2002 and 2004 out of a total budget of €248,000,000. The objective of the program is to develop objective and professional media through training. The program provides training support in the area of management, marketing, use of ICTS, general journalism skills etc. As mentioned earlier the main executing partners in Tunisia and abroad are the African Center for Journalism Training and Communications and the Maastricht-based European Journalism Center.

The EU representatives I met with clearly stated that they were aware that the media funds were entirely supporting official media and individual journalists who are acceptable to the Tunisian government. "Our hands are tied, either we fund these activities or we fund nothing at all. We do not want to get involved in internal politics," said one MEDA representative. The MEDA program has an extremely poor reputation among the independent civil society actors in Tunisia and they have all but given up on MEDA. They feel it is not contributing to Tunisia's democratization process and there is no consultation with a broad spectrum of Tunisians about strategies for the program. As a result, there is little to no contact between independent media actors and the program's representatives.

## 12. Conclusion

Given the political context in Tunisia, supporting independent media initiatives are essential to begin to create a space – albeit small and fragile – for independent, alternative perspectives on a range of political, economic, social and environmental issues in the country. I think it is important that support be also embedded in a program that takes into account the overall needs for the development of free media in Tunisia:

- The establishment and professionalization of local structures that defend journalists;
- The establishment and professionalization of structures that analyze all aspects of media developments and lobby against repressive laws as well as garner international support and attention to these issues;
- The training and development of a "new" generation of professional journalists who have the ability to think critically.

Achieving such objectives in Tunisia poses enormous challenges of course. Very few international institutions have taken any initiative whatsoever to consider providing support for the development of Tunisian civil society, including media. I encourage IMS to take a leading in providing support to this spirited yet fragile media sector and especially mobilizing others to take a step in the same direction.

.....