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Tunisia: Recent attacks against freedom of expression and association and trade unions, in particular the case of journalist Noureddine Boutar

European Parliament resolution of 16 March 2023 on recent attacks in Tunisia against freedom of expression and association, and against trade unions, in particular the case of journalist Noureddine Boutar (2023/2588(RSP))

(C/2023/407)

The European Parliament,

— having regard to Rules 144(5) and 132(4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas President Saied has been ruling alone since 25 July 2021, dismissing the government, dissolving the Assembly, the 2014 Constitution, the Independent High Authority for Elections, the High Judicial Council, all municipal councils and 57 judges;

B. whereas on 13 February 2023 counter-terrorist units arrested journalist Noureddine Boutar, director of Tunisia's largest independent radio station, on politically motivated grounds and unfounded allegations, alongside a dozen opposition voices, including Chaima Issa, Issam Chebbi, Ghazi Chaouachi, Khayam Turki and Jaouhar Ben Mbarek; whereas a military court sentenced journalist Salah Attia to three months in prison and a counter-terrorism court sentenced journalist Khalifa Gasmi to a year in prison; whereas on 24 February 2023, police raided newspaper *OneTN*; whereas the arrested journalists were branded 'terrorists' and 'traitors';

C. whereas a number of presidential decrees have undermined democratic institutions, rights and freedoms, including Cybercrime Decree-Law No 54, imposing five-year prison sentences for spreading fake news;

D. whereas sub-Saharan migrants have been falsely accused of seeking to demographically replace Tunisians, and were subsequently attacked;

E. whereas union representative Anis Kaabi was arrested on 31 January 2023, over 36 trade unionists were prosecuted for striking, ETUC General Secretary Esther Lynch was expelled from Tunisia on 23 February 2023, and unions from six EU countries were denied entry;

F. whereas the NGO Bill allegedly provides for 'prior government approval of NGOs and Central Bank approval for foreign funding';

1. Urges the Tunisian authorities to immediately release Noureddine Boutar and all others who have been arbitrarily detained, including journalists, judges, lawyers, political activists and trade unionists such as Anis Kaabi, and to respect freedom of expression and association as well as trade unions' and workers' rights, in line with Tunisia's Constitution and international treaties, including ILO conventions; condemns the expulsion of Esther Lynch, ETUC General Secretary, and the criminalisation of international trade union solidarity, as a blatant attack on UGTT and global trade unionism;

2. Calls on the Tunisian Government to ensure social dialogue, to respect collective agreements and to take action to tackle the cost of living crisis;

3. Is deeply concerned about President Saied's authoritarian drift and his instrumentalisation of Tunisia's dire socio-economic situation to reverse the country's historical democratic transition; calls, therefore for an end to the ongoing crackdown on civil society;

4. Urges the authorities to immediately reinstate the judges who were arbitrarily dismissed, reverse all measures undermining judicial independence, and end the use of military courts to prosecute civilians; deplores the authorities' refusal to comply with the administrative court order to reinstate 49 judges;

5. Urges the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the Member States to publicly denounce the sharp deterioration of the human rights situation; underlines that specific EU support programmes to the Ministries of Justice and Interior Affairs should be suspended; calls on the EU Delegation and Member States to monitor and attend political trials and engage in regular dialogue with civil society;

6. Recalls that preserving representative institutions is fundamental to the country's development; expresses deep concern at the NGO Bill; underlines the importance of an inclusive national dialogue and a free and strong civil society, including the Nobel Prize-winning National Dialogue Quartet, notably the UGTT;

7. Strongly condemns President Saied's racist discourse against sub-Saharan migrants and the subsequent attacks; calls on the authorities to comply with international and national laws, notably law 50-2018 against racial discrimination;

8. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission, the EEAS, the Vice-President of the Commission / High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, the President of Tunisia, the Government of Tunisia and the Assembly of the Representatives of the People.