

PRESS RELEASE

Tunisia: Media Independence Crucial To Democratic Transition

ARTICLE 19

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“Tunisia is a small country with a big impact on the Arab world and beyond, with the potential of becoming a regional leader in terms of media freedoms. However, it is worrying to see that, only a week before Tunisia marks the first anniversary of the fall of Ben Ali, the new government has seemingly curtailed the country’s already fragile media independence by appointing heads of public media institutions,” said Dr Agnes Callamard, ARTICLE 19 Executive Director.

“It is crucial for any emerging democracy to assure the independence of media from the government. Without this assurance, the seeds of democracy will bear little fruit, as the likelihood of the media being used once again as a manipulative propaganda tool increase,” continued Dr Callamard.

In response to Jebali’s announcement members of the Union of Tunisian

Journalists and the General Tunisian Labour Union, along with other independent journalists and citizens, gathered to express their discontent with the PM's decision by holding a protest on Monday, January 9 2012.

On the day, banners bore slogans warning of a return to the same practices of the Ben Ali regime, but with an Islamist twist.

"We are issuing an alert after the increased assaults and attacks against journalists, and we also denounce recent anarchic appointments at the head of the media, without seeking the advice of specialized bodies," said Nejiba Hamrouni, president of the National Union of Tunisian Journalists.

The syndicate described the new designations as "random and threatening," given that some of the newly appointed media executives were part of the old regime and others were related to corruption cases.

ARTICLE 19 also notes that the recommendations the Independent Media Reform Committee (INRIC) made to the government included the proposal for public consultations on such appointments and the creation of the High Independent Authority for Audiovisual Communication (HAICA) – a regulatory body consisting of experts and representatives of all stakeholders to protect media against all forms of corruption and abuse.

ARTICLE 19 has previously urged the Interim Government to allow for editorial freedom and secure the independence of all media as a matter of priority, as well as reforming state-owned news agencies and broadcasters into public service media. Safeguards for media and editorial independence are crucial to ensure freedom of expression and information in the country. Although the appointments concern the media outlets owned by the state, the *Declaration on Principles of Freedom of Expression in Africa specifically stipulates that any print media published by a public authority should be protected adequately against undue political interference. The editorial independence of public service broadcasters should be guaranteed. The recent appointments go directly against these requirements.*

ENDS

