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Middle East/North Africa - Tunisia

Back to the wall

New radio stations threatened with closure or prosecution

25 February 2013

[Read in Arabic \(بالعربية\)](#)

Reporters Without Borders is very worried about the increasingly uncertain future of the radio stations that emerged in the aftermath of Tunisia's January 2011 revolution.

A news conference is to be held at the National Union of Tunisian Journalists in Tunis this afternoon to draw attention to journalists' concerns about the media's future and to protest against the government's foot-dragging and failure to take needed decisions.

Reporters Without Borders regards the emergence of these new radio stations as indispensable for developing and reinforcing media pluralism and information diversity in Tunisia, and reiterates its support for the creation of new media, especially in the remoter parts of the country.

"One can only wonder about the reasons for this foot-dragging and clear lack of interest in reforming the media sector for the past two years," Reporters Without Borders secretary-general Christophe Deloire said. "Will we have to await a wave of popular discontent when stations are closed before the authorities finally take the decisions that are so crucial for freedom of information?"

"Tunisia's current political and economic crisis cannot be used as an excuse. Terms of reference must urgently be established for privately-owned and community radio stations. At the same time, the Independent Broadcasting Authority (HAICA) must finally be created."

Since the fall of the dictatorship in January 2011, only 12 radio stations have obtained a licence to broadcast in Tunisia and they are now threatened with closure.

Those that agreed to sign a contract with the National Broadcasting Office (ONT) now find it impossible to pay the exorbitant sums demanded by the ONT – an average of 100,000 dinars (48,460 euros) from each radio station – for the rental of its transmitters and other broadcast equipment.

Those that chose to reject the ONT monopoly of broadcasting equipment and operate independently are now illegal. All could be forced to close if reforms are not quickly adopted.

Those that are not facing direct closure will have to reschedule their debt payments, but will nonetheless still be unable to meet them because the ONT is pressing for unrealistic amounts and is hounding them with warning letters.

"Whether they are unable to pay the ONT's bills or whether they are broadcasting illegally, the survival of these radio stations is a major challenge for the right of Tunisian citizens to receive and impart news and information," Deloire added.

These 12 radio stations owe their existence to the can-do attitude of the National Body for Reform of Information and Communication (INRIC), an entity created in March 2011 to reform the media sector. Seeking to renew Tunisia's media landscape, INRIC gave the green light for the creation of these radio stations on 28 June 2011.

But ever since the 28 October 2011 elections and the installation of the Troika, reform of the

media has been blocked by political differences. The [INRIC's recommendations](#) for the continuation of the reform process have been ignored. Although the INRIC has been dissolved, the authorities have not moved ahead with the creation of the [Independent Broadcasting Authority](#) (HAICA).

The broadcasting landscape inherited from the era of the ousted President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali is now paralyzed, and unblocking it does not seem to be one of the priorities of the current government, which has taken advantage of the legal void to keep the state-owned media [under close control](#) and discourage any local initiatives.

As a result, those who want to create radio stations have nowhere to go to apply for a broadcast frequency and those who decide to ignore the legal void and broadcast without a permit risk a sentence of six months to five years under the current telecommunications law for "using a broadcast frequency without prior permission from the National Agency for Frequencies (ANF)."

Despite repeated requests by the Tunisian Union of Free Radio Stations (STRL) and the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC), the authorities have yet to establish a special status for community radio stations. And it is impossible for new radio stations to import the equipment they need to build a transmitter without exposing themselves to severe penalties.

Former information technology and communication minister Mongi Marzoug and ONT president Sadok Toumi told Reporters Without Borders on 12 February that the ministry is currently considering a revision of the charges for radio stations but no deadline has been set for completing this revision.

The new tariffs could be based on the following criteria: number of inhabitants in an area, the geographical development index, existence of a state subsidy and the kind of radio station (community, state-owned or commercial).

The ONT's monopoly of broadcasting equipment is meanwhile being challenged and, to end the current impasse, community radio stations are demanding the right to broadcast using their own equipment. But the much-criticized ONT is powerless to make the changes itself.

Ending the ONT monopoly and allowing privately-owned broadcasters would require a political will to make the necessary legislative changes but, for the time being, the politicians prefer to use the ONT as a scapegoat.

Reporters Without Borders urges the authorities to show some understanding by suspending payment of the sums owed to the ONT, quickly revising the ONT's tariffs and ensuring that radio stations using their own transmitters are not prosecuted pending reform of the telecommunications law.

You can download those documents on our website :

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