

Summary

The political climate in Tunisia remains tense with ongoing protests and government crackdowns. In May, government security services detained several journalists and lawyers for criticizing the government. Moreover, the National Salvation Front, the primary opposition coalition, has decided to boycott the upcoming elections expected in autumn, citing inadequate conditions for fair and free elections. Additionally, President Saïed continued his criticism of NGOs, labeling them as Western “foreign agents” and arresting several NGO employees in the process.

Recent events and developments

Instability persists in Tunisia as widespread protests continue to plague the country since 2021 when President Saïed dissolved the parliament and seized more powers. May saw another round of protests as people gathered on the streets to demand a date for fair presidential elections which are expected to take place in autumn and the release of arrested government critics. Protests have occurred on May 2, 12, 16, and 25 in Tunis. The government responded by clamping down on freedom of speech and arresting prominent critics. May 11 and 13 saw a wave of arrests targeting journalists and lawyers, resulting in several prison sentences. Due to this, the National Salvation Front, the main opposition coalition, announced a boycott of the upcoming election. The President also targeted NGOs on May 6 during a National Security Council meeting, calling them “traitors” and “foreign agents” due to their Western funding and criticisms of the Tunisian government as well as blaming them for the migration crisis. These inflammatory comments are not new, as between July 2023 and April 2024, the President accused NGOs of meddling in the internal affairs of Tunisia and financing corruption. These statements are further bolstered by action, as security services crack down on NGOs. The arrest of 3 Italian NGO workers for alleged financial crimes on March 5 serves as an example. Pro-government protests supporting the position of the President occurred on May 19, calling for an end to “foreign interference”.

Impact assessment

The ongoing situation in Tunisia remains tense with no signs of improvement in the near future. It is unlikely that the announcement of an official date will decrease the number of protests throughout the country as the main opposition coalition has already announced its intention to boycott the upcoming election. With further protests and the elections coming closer, more arrests of opposition politicians, lawyers, journalists, and other government critics can be expected. Additionally, the government campaign against civil society organizations might also instigate further arrests and harassment of local NGO employees. The recent arrest of Italian NGO employees signals that Western NGO employees are also likely to be targeted in future potential waves of arrests. The portrayal of NGOs as a national threat might also be used for further justification to curb their freedom to operate in Tunisia. A draft bill to revise Decree 88, which aims to implement restrictive measures on civil society groups and their establishment by introducing an unwieldy registration process, is already in development. However, a date for the implementation of the bill has not yet been set. Further inflammatory comments by the President pertaining to NGOs and Western influence in Tunisia might spark additional pro-government protests which will oppose closer collaboration with Western organizations. Although unlikely, violent clashes with state security services cannot be ruled out, as incidents of vandalism and looting by activists were reported during the protests of October 2023.

Advice from Forth Global

- Ensure that all employees travelling to Tunisia receive a three-day HEAT training prior to deployment.
- Employees should avoid all protests and other public gatherings.
- Employees should refrain from sharing their opinions on the political situation in Tunisia.
- Closely monitor the local and international media and liaise with local partners for updates on the political situation and potential protests.

Customized advice

Please contact us for specific advice:

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