



SUPPORTING
AN ENABLING ENVIRONMENT
FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Enabling Environment Snapshot

Tunisia

July 2025

Context

Following the January 2011 revolution, Tunisia embarked on a democratic transition that places it among countries in transition that are not yet consolidated, with a score of 6.7/10 in the [Economist Intelligence Unit \(EIU\)](#) 2019 Democracy Index. Civil society quickly emerged as a central actor in this process, catalysed by [Decree-Law No. 2011-88](#) on associations, which dismantled the restrictive legal frameworks inherited from the Ben Ali regime and guaranteed freedom of association.

This [momentum](#) was reinforced by the [2014 Constitution](#) and progressive legislation, including laws on gender-based violence, racial discrimination and local governance, which promoted decentralisation, institutional pluralism and civic participation. Independent bodies, media freedom and partnerships between the public sector and civil society have developed, creating a dynamic ecosystem conducive to democratic consolidation.

However, the trajectory [changed dramatically](#) on 25 July 2021, when President Kais Saied assumed sweeping powers, [undermining](#) judicial independence, [dismantling](#) checks and balances, [restricting](#) civic space and targeting intermediary institutions. The dissolution of the High Judicial Council and [the dismissal](#) of 50 judges [without judicial guarantees](#) are evidence of excessive interference by the executive branch. Arbitrary arrests, such as that of lawyer [Ahmed Souab](#), and [public threats](#) by the president against judicial actors further erode legal guarantees.

Civil society now operates under increasing pressure, facing legal threats, smear campaigns, funding restrictions and regulatory uncertainty. These measures have led to [a reduction in civic activity](#), the arrest of activists, [the withdrawal](#) of international civil society actors and the erosion of public trust.

Despite these setbacks, Tunisian civil society is showing resilience. Many organisations are refocusing their strategies, adapting to new political realities and strengthening their solidarity networks. Efforts to comply with evolving regulations, diversify resources, and continue advocacy demonstrate a continued commitment to democratic values. This overview provides a snapshot of a sector that is navigating adversity with determination, seeking to preserve its role in Tunisia's contested transition.

1. Respect and protection of fundamental freedoms

In Tunisia, respect for and protection of fundamental freedoms, particularly freedom of expression, association and assembly, have deteriorated significantly, undermining the enabling environment for civil society.

Freedom of expression faces increasing [restrictions](#) and growing [threats](#). During the 2024 presidential elections alone, at least 97 people [were arrested](#) in flagrant violation of this right. The cases of journalists such as [Mourad Zeghidi](#), detained since 2024, and [Mohamed Boughalleb](#), sentenced despite his critical health condition, illustrate the targeting of critical voices, even in dire health conditions. [Lawyers](#) such as [Sonia Dahmani](#), [political opponents](#) and even ordinary [citizens](#), including [content creators](#), have been arrested or prosecuted for [expressing](#) their opinions. Press freedom has also declined significantly. Tunisia fell 11 places in [the 2025 World Press Freedom Index](#), now ranking 129th globally. The National Union of Tunisian Journalists has [documented](#) 39 legal proceedings based on laws incompatible with

journalistic practice, as well as numerous cases of non-payment of salaries and unfair dismissals affecting more than 250 journalists.

Freedom of association is increasingly politicised. Civil society organisations are subject to opaque investigations and public [accusations](#) of foreign interference or criminal activity. Groups such as [I Watch, Mourakiboun](#), accused of money laundering, and [DAMJ](#), an association working with racial and sexual minorities, have been harassed or delegitimised.

Freedom of assembly is also restricted. Prominent activists, including [Saloua Ghrissa](#), executive director of the Association for the Promotion of the Right to Difference (ADD), Saadia Mosbah, anti-racism activist and founder of the Association Mnementy (My Dream), and members of Tunisie Terre d'Asile such as [Cherifa Riahi](#), Yadh Bousselmi and Mohamed Joo, have been arrested and imprisoned for their activities. In May 2025, [activists](#) such as [Mohamed Ali Rtimi](#) and [environmental](#) defenders from the Stop Pollution movement in Gabès were also prosecuted for peaceful protest. These cases reflect a broader trend towards criminalising and silencing civic activism.

Together, these trends point to a [repressed](#) civic space where civil society actors operate under constant pressure, legal uncertainty and risk to their reputation, all of which stifle democratic engagement and public accountability.

2. Legal framework conducive to the work of civil society actors

Tunisia's legal framework for civil society is increasingly unstable and restrictive, seriously undermining the enabling environment for its work. Following [the dissolution](#) of Parliament by President Saïed in July 2021, the suspension of the 2014 Constitution and the adoption of the [2022 Constitution](#) by presidential decree, the legal guarantees enjoyed by civil society have been weakened, with the state increasingly governed by [presidential decrees](#).

Decree-Law No. 88 of 2011, which previously guaranteed freedom of association, is under threat. The proposed reforms, [currently](#) under consideration in Parliament and [reportedly](#) to be included in a [draft](#) law, [aim](#) to replace the notification-based registration system with a prior authorisation system, impose stricter controls on foreign funding and strengthen state surveillance. These measures would significantly reduce the independence and self-determination of civil society organisations (CSOs), in violation of international standards.

Although registration is not yet mandatory before the start of activities, the imminent reforms risk making it a prerequisite, thereby hindering the emergence of a dynamic sector. The use of Organic [Law](#) No. 2015-26, the "[Anti-Terrorism and Money Laundering](#) Law", originally intended to [combat terrorism and money laundering](#), to target activists and journalists further illustrates the misuse of legal instruments to repress dissent. Its broad definition of terrorism revives authoritarian practices established since 2021 and risks continuing to be used as a weapon against civil society entities.

In addition, anti-migration laws are [being used](#) against civil society solidarity efforts, equating humanitarian aid with trafficking or illicit financing. These trends reduce access to financial resources and networks, particularly for organisations working with vulnerable populations.

Despite these pressures, Tunisian civil society remains resilient — [mobilising](#) to defend Decree-Law 88 through coalitions, campaigns and international advocacy. However, without

judicial protections against arbitrary interference and restrictions, the sector's viability and democratic function remain under threat.

3. Accessible and sustainable resources

Access to sustainable resources remains a major constraint for civil society in Tunisia. Public funding is [limited](#), poorly structured and often reserved for associations aligned with the government's interests. Independent NGOs, particularly those working on human rights, governance or minority issues, are heavily dependent on foreign funding. The [suspension](#) of aid from partners such as USAID has led to the freezing of projects, job losses and a weakening of advocacy efforts.

Fundraising is further hampered by increasing banking restrictions. Some financial institutions refuse to open or maintain accounts for certain NGOs, citing informal administrative instructions. International transfers are subject to prolonged delays due to arbitrary [control](#) by the Central Bank and relevant ministries, disrupting the continuity of operations.

Available funding is generally short-term and project-based, and depends on donor priorities rather than the needs of organisations. This undermines long-term sustainability, strategic planning and independence. Financial monitoring and reporting requirements are often burdensome, particularly for small organisations with limited capacity.

Access to information on funding opportunities is uneven, with marginalised and rural organisations facing greater barriers. There are no tax exemptions or significant incentives for donors, and the economic contribution of civil society, estimated at [1.7% of GDP](#), remains largely unrecognised in public policy and national statistics.

These structural and regulatory [obstacles](#) compromise the viability of Tunisia's civil society sector, particularly [community actors and small actors](#). Without reforms to improve access, flexibility and recognition, the sector's capacity to contribute meaningfully to democratic governance and social development will remain severely limited.

4. Openness and responsiveness of the state

The openness and responsiveness of the state towards civil society in Tunisia has deteriorated significantly since 2021, undermining the environment conducive to civic engagement. While principles such as transparency, participation and collaboration are formally enshrined in law, their practical implementation is increasingly lacking.

[Formal](#) channels for civil society participation in decision-making, once [supported](#) by decentralised governance and independent oversight bodies, have been [dismantled](#). The dissolution of the municipal councils elected in 2023, and of institutions such as the National Anti-Corruption Authority (INLUCC) and the High Council of the Judiciary, has eroded mechanisms for accountability and citizen participation. Access to the current Parliament is restricted and parliamentary [debates](#) are not easily accessible.

Consultations with civil society are now rare, often unilateral or symbolic. Collaboration between public authorities and NGOs has [largely disappeared](#), with dialogue platforms being abolished or rendered meaningless. Civil society contributions are rarely taken into account and feedback mechanisms are virtually non-existent.

Access to information is also limited. Law [No. 2016-22](#) officially guarantees the right of access to information for all citizens, with the aim of promoting transparency, fighting corruption and strengthening good governance. While the law provides a comprehensive framework covering public institutions and entities performing public functions, its implementation remains [inconsistent](#) and often [obstructive](#). Civil society actors frequently [face](#) delays, vague refusals and cumbersome procedures when submitting requests, with limited mechanisms for appeal or feedback. The lack of proactive disclosure by government agencies further undermines the intent of the law, limiting civil society's ability to conduct informed advocacy and exercise public scrutiny. As a result, [the gap](#) between legal provisions and practice weakens the enabling environment and reflects broader challenges in terms of institutional openness and accountability.

These trends reflect a centralisation of power and a shrinking civic space. The lack of meaningful channels for participation and responsive governance not only weakens the role of civil society in public policy-making, but also reflects a broader democratic backsliding. Without institutional reforms and renewed political will, civil society's capacity to contribute constructively to Tunisia's development will remain severely limited.

5. Political culture and public discourse on civil society

The political culture and public discourse surrounding civil society in Tunisia have become increasingly hostile. Since 2019, and even more so after the coup d'état of 25 July 2021, civil society actors have been [the](#) target [of aggressive rhetoric](#) from the highest levels of government. Public statements by the president, [members of parliament](#) and [government officials](#) have [portrayed](#) NGOs as "traitors", "foreign agents" or threats to national sovereignty, particularly those working in the fields of human rights, migration, minority rights and the fight against corruption. This populist [rhetoric](#) has fuelled [smear campaigns](#), administrative and financial restrictions, and growing public mistrust of CSOs, which are perceived as "[alien to the people](#)". This rhetoric has had tangible [consequences](#).

Civic engagement is not significantly integrated into Tunisian school curricula, and civil society contributions are rarely acknowledged in official discourse. The lack of institutional support and public recognition further marginalises the sector, discourages youth participation and weakens long-term sustainability. Without a change in political discourse and reinvestment in civic education, civil society will continue to operate in a climate of suspicion, repression and reduced legitimacy.

6. Access to a secure digital environment

The digital environment in Tunisia has become increasingly risky for civil society actors. While [internet access](#) reached 84.9% in 2025, placing Tunisia among the most connected countries in Africa, this connectivity is compromised by growing [digital repression](#). Decree-Law 54, adopted in 2022 to combat cybercrime, has become a tool to [silence](#) government critics. Its [vague provisions](#) criminalise online expression, allowing prosecution for "false information", defamation or content deemed harmful to public order. The decree has been widely [condemned](#), particularly by media professionals. More than [70 people](#), including journalists, lawyers, artists and activists, have been prosecuted under Article 24 of the decree for their social media posts, fostering a climate of fear and self-censorship.

This climate of intimidation has had a domino effect across various sectors of society. Journalists such as Mourad Zghidi, [Borhen Bssaies](#) and Mohamed Boughalleb, lawyers such

as Sonia Dahmani and [Ayachi Hammami](#), artists such as [Rached Tamboura](#), and bloggers such as [Noureddine Halimi](#) and [Abdelmonem Hafidh](#) have all been victims of judicial harassment or prosecution for expressing critical opinions.

Digital surveillance and insecurity are on the rise, with civil society organisations reporting increased surveillance and arbitrary restrictions. Internet shutdowns have not been widespread, but access to government platforms and parliamentary sessions remains limited, undermining transparency. Banking and administrative controls further complicate online fundraising and cross-border collaboration.

Despite strong urban connectivity, rural areas face persistent gaps in access and infrastructure, limiting outreach and mobilisation. On a more positive note, Tunisia ranks second in [the 2025 African AI Talent Readiness Index](#), with 71.37% of the population possessing ICT skills and a growing ecosystem of developers and digital professionals. However, AI adoption by civil society remains limited due to resource constraints and regulatory risks.

Challenges and opportunities

Over the next four months, the enabling environment for civil society in Tunisia will face a delicate balance between challenges and opportunities. A key priority is to secure the release of civil society actors and journalists imprisoned for exercising their right to freedom of expression. Their continued detention reflects a general climate of repression and undermines citizens' trust.

It remains essential to preserve Decree-Law No. 88. Any attempt to replace it with more restrictive legislation would further weaken civil society's autonomy. It is essential to reduce the use of repressive laws, such as Decree-Law No. 54 and anti-terrorism provisions, in order to protect civic space and restore legal guarantees.

Another urgent challenge is the regularisation of relations between CSOs and financial institutions. Arbitrary banking restrictions continue to disrupt activities and threaten the viability of many organisations.

On the opportunity side, civil society can create momentum by countering hostile rhetoric with coordinated advocacy and public engagement. It is essential to restore legitimacy in public discourse. Reopening genuine spaces for dialogue, consultation, and participation with public authorities would be an important step towards restoring trust and institutional collaboration.

If these issues are addressed with urgency and political will, Tunisia could begin to reverse its civic regression and restore a more inclusive and rights-respecting environment for civil society.

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