

[Rights Activists Criticize the Arrests of Two Former Cabinet Members in Tunisia](#)

The actions of Tunisian President Kais Saied continue to elicit widespread condemnation, as concern grows over the political direction of the country. Saied has made blatant attempts to further consolidate power and silence his critics. In the preceding weeks, former Tunisian Justice Minister Nouredine Bhiri and former Interior Ministry employee Fathi Beldi have been arrested and imprisoned without warrants. Rights groups have characterized the unlawful arrests as abductions and further demonstrations of the threat to human rights following Saied's overthrow of an elected government and suspension of parliament in recent months. They have also highlighted how the arrests are being used to try and quell justifiable criticism of the president's behavior, which has fueled major fears of an authoritarian backslide in Tunisia. Saied's actions have prompted large-scale pro-democracy demonstrations across the country, as civil society groups and citizens alike speak out against him. Both Bhiri and Beldi have not been officially charged with any crimes, pointing to the clear political nature of their unjust detainments.

Outrage at the arrests has also been exacerbated by reports of food and medication being denied to the 62-year-old Bhiri, who is believed to be in poor health and now in critical condition. Bhiri was the deputy chairman of the country's largest political party, and is a prominent figure in Tunisian civil society and one of the most critical of Saied's power grab. An Interior Ministry statement announced that two individuals had been preemptively detained in order to protect national security, but impartial analysts and observers have seen through this obvious attempt to try and legitimize the unlawful detainments. The abductions of Bhiri and Beldi are ones in a series of actions by President Saied to consolidate his power after he suspended parliament and proclaimed himself the ultimate interpreter of the country's constitution. Saied has said that his overthrow of the democratically-elected Tunisian government was in the interest of ending governmental paralysis and economic stagnation. However, rights groups have been extremely critical of Saied and warned that his actions could revert the country back to authoritarian rule only 10 years after a revolution toppled the decades-long dictatorship of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Leading citizens in Tunisia have called on the international community to intervene on behalf of Bhiri and Beldi if ultimately necessary. The unchallenged detainment of a former cabinet minister and a government employee is dangerous for Tunisia and the wider region as a whole. The two are not the first to suffer abduction and imprisonment at the order of President Saied; many senior political figures and leaders in the business and media community have been imprisoned on questionable charges of corruption or defamation. Several months ago in October of 2021, a member of Tunisian parliament appeared on a television show and with the host, criticized President Saied for the overthrow of the democratically-elected government. Both were then arrested on charges of "conspiring against state security," with these types of detainments being heavily criticized by rights groups and activists.

Since President Saied's power grab, mass protests have taken place across the country. The response by the president has been undeniably repressive. The United Nations has expressed that the stifling of dissent by Saied and his improper use of military courts to try civilians is very concerning. It ultimately imperils the notable progress made by the country's government and civil society over the last decade in advancing human rights and correcting abuses from the past.