



# Tunisia country briefing

## Tunisia's October 2024 elections: Context and key facts

Tunisia, the country known as the birthplace of the democratic revolutions (also known as the Arab spring) over a decade ago, held presidential elections on 6 October 2024.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the months leading up to the ballot confirmed what many have been warning for years: the North-African country is becoming ever more repressive and president Kais Saïed, in power since 2019, has emerged as a dictator.<sup>2</sup> The election was neither free nor fair.<sup>3</sup>

Receiving over 90% of the vote, Saïed won by a landslide, following a takeover of the election committee, decimation of the judiciary and a vicious crackdown on opposition, civil society groups and the media.<sup>4</sup> The disillusionment of the electorate was evidenced by a low voter turnout. Barely 29% of the country's eligible 9.7 million voters cast their ballots, with the youth vote accounting only for 6%.<sup>5,6</sup>

The incumbent ran almost unopposed. Tunisia's electoral commission approved only three candidates for the race, including Saïed and rejected the administrative court's order to reinstate three other presidential candidates. In the end, Saïed had to face only two other candidates; former parliamentarian Zouhair Maghzaoui and businessman Ayachi Zammel.<sup>7,8</sup> Though the latter was arrested weeks before the vote.<sup>9</sup> Others who submitted their candidacies for the presidential bid have faced judicial harassment and in some cases had been convicted on charges of "falsified ballot endorsements."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/08/g-s1-26834/tunisia-kais-Saïed-election-2024-arab-spring>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/09/12/presidential-election-in-tunisia-kais-Saïed-is-a-new-dictator-a-new-ben-ali\\_6725758\\_23.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/opinion/article/2024/09/12/presidential-election-in-tunisia-kais-Saïed-is-a-new-dictator-a-new-ben-ali_6725758_23.html)

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/04/nx-s1-5073973/observers-warn-tunisia-presidential-election-wont-be-free-and-fair>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/08/g-s1-26834/tunisia-kais-Saïed-election-2024-arab-spring>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/08/g-s1-26834/tunisia-kais-Saïed-election-2024-arab-spring>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.france24.com/fr/info-en-continu/20241007-tunisie-le-pr%C3%A9sident-ka%C3%AFs-sa%C3%AFed-r%C3%A9%C3%A9lu-avec-90-7-des-voix-selon-les-r%C3%A9sultats-officiels>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240902-tunisia-s-electoral-body-dismisses-court-ruling-that-reinstated-presidential-candidates>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20240928-tunisia-lawmakers-strip-court-of-electoral-power-days-before-presidential-vote>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20240902-tunisia-s-electoral-body-dismisses-court-ruling-that-reinstated-presidential-candidates>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.newarab.com/news/tunisia-adds-jail-time-former-presidential-candidate>

Days before the vote, the Parliament passed a new law stripping the Administrative Court of its jurisdiction in electoral matters, essentially removing checks and balances on electoral irregularities.<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, over 170 individuals were detained on “political grounds” or “for exercising their fundamental rights”, according to Human Rights Watch.<sup>12</sup> Among them were over 110 people with ties to the Ennahda opposition party.<sup>13</sup> The electoral commission also denied accreditation to the media and election observers.<sup>14</sup>

Parallel to the real-world crackdown, in the months leading up to the vote Saïed and his supporters had been targeting civil society groups and opposition figures on social media platforms, and Facebook in particular. The president’s false and inflammatory remarks about rights groups helping migrants have set off an online smear campaign targeting all civil society organisations, resulting in what the UN described as a “general climate of hate speech”.<sup>15</sup>

## Social media landscape

Meta’s platforms, and Facebook in particular, are the go-to places for Tunisians for accessing information and news. As of April 2024, Facebook had almost 9 million active users, accounting for over 71% of the country’s 12 million population (with more than half of the users being male).<sup>16</sup> Some estimates put the video sharing app TikTok right behind, 5.3 million users.<sup>17</sup> Instagram and YouTube on the other hand have a tiny user base of a little bit over 4% of the population per platform, according to some data.<sup>18</sup>

Facebook is also among the main channels of communication of the Kais Saïed regime with its electorate and the general public. The Facebook pages associated with the president<sup>19</sup> and his office<sup>20</sup> have some 3,6 million followers, in a country with over 9 million registered voters.<sup>21</sup>

Consequently, the regime and its supporters have weaponized Facebook to silence Saïed’s critics. And so, whenever the president publicly identifies targets, his backers attack them online,

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/tunisia-assembly-votes-electoral-bill-nine-days-before-poll-opposition-calls-2024-09-27/&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1729584933902370&usq=AOvVaw123AdzPN9dn2Yq0c4EKWNF>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/03/tunisia-authorities-undermine-election-integrity>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/03/tunisia-authorities-undermine-election-integrity>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/10/03/tunisia-authorities-undermine-election-integrity>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2024/10/tunisia-un-expert-alarmed-arrests-and-smear-campaigns-against-migrant-rights>

<sup>16</sup> Disinformation Surge on Social Networks in Tunisia Ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election, July - September 2024, Mena Media Monitoring.

<sup>17</sup> <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-tunisia#:~:text=TikTok%20users%20in%20Tunisia%20in,at%20the%20start%20of%202024>

<sup>18</sup> <https://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/tunisia>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Presidencedugouvernementtunisien/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/voting-begins-in-tunisia-crucial-presidential-election/3352965>

according to journalist Amine Snoussi, who argued the attacks involve at least some level of coordination with state authorities.<sup>22</sup> (More information below).

## Shrinking civic space

The Kais Saïed regime has been persecuting its critics – offline and online – since early 2021, when the first wave of anti-government protests sparked by the growing discontent among citizens towards the ruling political elite, further exacerbated by lack of employment opportunities economic mismanagement and the mishandling of the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>23</sup> By the summer of 2021, Saïed had shuttered the parliament with tanks, suspended the constitution and dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council. He later also took control of the country’s electoral commission, further consolidating power.<sup>24</sup>

The authorities have ramped up their crackdown on civil society again in 2023. That’s when rights groups had spoken up against Kais Saïed’s xenophobic comments – including on social media – in which he accused “hordes” of migrants from sub-Saharan African countries of bringing violence, alleging a “criminal plot to change the country’s demographic make-up.”<sup>25</sup>

Saïed’s comment, which spread on Facebook like wildfire, upped racial tensions and led to real-world violence in July 2023, which saw one Tunisian man killed in an altercation between Tunisians and migrant workers.<sup>26</sup>

The regime had weaponised local laws, including Kais Saïed-issued Decree 54, which criminalises misinformation and provides for up to a five-year prison sentence and a fine of 50,000 Tunisian dinars (around 14,800 euros).<sup>27</sup> In the leadup to the 6 October 2024 ballot, around 60 activists, dissidents, opposition politicians and regular citizens – including a high-school teacher<sup>28</sup> – were arrested and/or detained under the law, a Tunisian activist monitoring the situation on the ground told Digital Action in an anonymous interview.<sup>29</sup>

***“Decree 54 has been really terrifying. Everyone here is trying not to go to prison,”*** they said. ***“It has become clear that everything you say in public and private spaces, that is critical, not only of***

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<sup>22</sup> <https://yearofdemocracy.org/case-study/she-led-anti-government-protests-in-tunisia-social-media-attacks-forced-her-to-flee/>

<sup>23</sup> <https://yearofdemocracy.org/case-study/she-led-anti-government-protests-in-tunisia-social-media-attacks-forced-her-to-flee/>

<sup>24</sup> <https://yearofdemocracy.org/case-study/she-led-anti-government-protests-in-tunisia-social-media-attacks-forced-her-to-flee/>

<sup>25</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/07/15/tunisia-rights-groups-urge-aid-shelter-for-stranded-migrants\\_6053501\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/07/15/tunisia-rights-groups-urge-aid-shelter-for-stranded-migrants_6053501_4.html)

<sup>26</sup> [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/07/15/tunisia-rights-groups-urge-aid-shelter-for-stranded-migrants\\_6053501\\_4.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/international/article/2023/07/15/tunisia-rights-groups-urge-aid-shelter-for-stranded-migrants_6053501_4.html)

<sup>27</sup> Disinformation Surge on Social Networks in Tunisia Ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election, July - September 2024, Mena Media Monitoring.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=955160376654329&set=a.480097710827267>

<sup>29</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

*the president, but of officials, even someone criticising the judge could get you in trouble. That has created higher rates of self-censorship.*<sup>30</sup>

While dozens of individuals were persecuted under Decree 54, the actual number of those arrested, persecuted and imprisoned by the authorities is much higher, as they also made arrests under counter-terrorism laws.<sup>31</sup> Between 12 and 13 September 2024, at least 97 members of opposition group Ennahda were arrested and charged with conspiracy and other charges under the counter-terrorism law.<sup>32</sup>

The climate of fear has also permeated the media, with some outlets getting in the authorities' crosshairs because of statements made by guests on air.<sup>33</sup> While independent media has faced pressure to reveal their sources.<sup>34</sup>

In an effort to shield themselves from arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, activists have been enabling factory resets on their smartphones, erasing all data, settings, and applications that were previously stored on the device.<sup>35</sup> But even that is illegal under the Decree and can result in further legal sanctions.<sup>36</sup>

## Meta undermining election integrity and safety of activists

Despite public warnings from UN agencies and rights groups, including the Global Coalition for Tech Justice, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, about the country-wide crackdown on opposition, civil society and media, Meta hasn't communicated about its plans to safeguard information integrity across its platforms. Nor does it appear to have prioritised the safety of activists.

Weeks before the ballot, Siwar Gmati of civil society group I Watch, which is part of Meta's trusted partner programme – an initiative that Meta says taps into the expertise of local groups to “address problematic content trends and prevent harm”<sup>37</sup>-- has flagged incendiary Facebook posts targeting rights groups to the tech giant. In response, Gmati said, Meta told them there's nothing it can do because posts accusing rights groups and their employees of being “traitors” working against the interest of the Tunisian state are just an opinion.

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<sup>30</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20240503-tunisian-decree-54-on-false-news-stifles-dissent-rights-groups>

<sup>32</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/09/tunisia-at-least-97-arrested-as-authorities-escalate-pre-election-crackdown/>

<sup>33</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

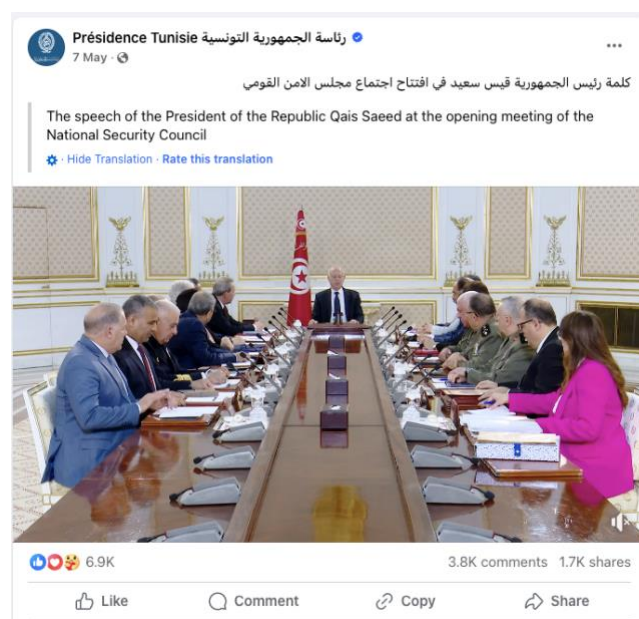
<sup>35</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

<sup>36</sup> <https://legislation-securite.tn/latest-laws/decret-loi-n-2022-54-du-13-septembre-2022-relatif-a-la-lutte-contre-les-infractions-se-rapportant-aux-systemes-dinformation-et-de-communication/>

<sup>37</sup> <https://transparency.meta.com/policies/improving/bringing-local-context>

*“Facebook is in a way responsible for democratic backsliding and it’s not doing anything to stop it or to protect human rights defenders.” Gmati told Digital Action. “They [Meta] claim that they’re defending freedom of expression. But sorry this is not just an opinion if someone says that you’re a traitor, that you’re not a patriot. What is going to happen offline to an activist who is labelled as a traitor?. We see double standards in treatment. When it comes to countries and consequences – i.e. they take down pro-Palestine content or against Ukraine or pro-Russia content.”*

The social media posts and the hateful narrative in question were first started by the president. On 7 May 2024, in his speech shared on Facebook, Kais Saïed referred to rights groups helping migrants as “traitors” “[foreign] agents” and



“rabid trumpets driven by foreign wages”.<sup>38</sup> The video was played almost 290 thousand times and was shared 1.7 thousand times, with some users explicitly repeating Saïed’s inciting language.<sup>394041</sup>

While the initial attack targeted organisations supporting migrants in Tunisia, including a group working with UNHCR<sup>42</sup>, soon the online and offline persecution extended to pro-democracy groups and LGBTQI+ organisations.<sup>43444546</sup> The president has set the narrative and his supporters, including influencers and state media have picked it up, becoming organic spreaders of disinformation.

Since then content targeting members of civil society groups standing up to president Saïed and referring to them as “traitors” have become ubiquitous on Facebook.<sup>47</sup> Digital Action reviewed eight screenshots of Facebook posts and comments shared by and targeting one civil society

<sup>38</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=3838758239713948>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/riahi2>

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100083324804056>

<sup>41</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/p/benny-michel-100074260636221/>

<sup>42</sup> <https://reliefweb.int/report/tunisia/tunisia-repressive-crackdown-civil-society-organizations-following-months-escalating-violence-against-migrants-and-refugees-enar>

<sup>43</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

<sup>44</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024, anonymous interview conducted on 15 October 2024, anonymous interview conducted on 18 October 2024.

<sup>45</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/05/tunisia-repressive-crackdown-on-civil-society-organizations-following-months-of-escalating-violence-against-migrants-and-refugees/>

<sup>46</sup> <https://hawaat.org/2024/09/20/tunisie-les-militants-lgbt-dans-le-collimateur-de-saied/>

<sup>47</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024, anonymous interview conducted on 15 October 2024, anonymous interview conducted on 18 October 2024.

group, which requested anonymity fearing regime reprisals. The posts accused the organisation of serving foreign interests and being on the payroll of foreign agents, among other things.



Because they were made by the president, Saïed’s inflammatory comments fall under Meta’s political speech exception.<sup>48</sup> While the deluge of Facebook media posts by regular users that mirrored the incumbent’s hateful rhetoric appear to have been treated by the tech platform like an opinion – which likely doesn’t breach Meta’s misinformation policies, nor is it subject to fact-checking or action like content take-down.<sup>4950</sup>

Meta appears to have failed to consider the local context of the dangers an activist labelled a “traitor” faces in a hate-filled environment.<sup>51</sup> The president’s rhetoric and the dehumanising language that flooded Facebook has put Tunisian activists at risk of real harm, according to I Watch’s Gmati and two other activists interviewed on conditions of anonymity. Meta says it takes factors like individuals’ safety into account when implementing its policies, but it appears not to have done this in the case of these inflammatory posts.

Since Saïed shared the incendiary post in May 2024, dozens of employees, leaders of civil society groups had been harassed, interrogated or arrested, while organisations’ funds had been frozen, sometimes without any notice or possibility to appeal the decision.<sup>52</sup> I Watch, which is the country’s leading anti-corruption group, was arbitrarily denied accreditation by the regime-

<sup>48</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/315131736305613?id=673052479947730>

<sup>49</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/business/help/315131736305613?id=673052479947730>

<sup>50</sup> <https://transparency.meta.com/policies/community-standards/misinformation/>

<sup>51</sup> <https://transparency.meta.com/policies/community-standards/>

<sup>52</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024, anonymous interview conducted on 15 October 2024, anonymous interview conducted on 18 October 2024.

controlled Election Committee, which said its decision stemmed from the fact that the organisation received “suspicious foreign funding ... from countries with which Tunisia does not have diplomatic relations”.

***“Although NGOs and activists are being arrested, at some point people will be hurt physically because this is what you get from a dehumanisation campaign of activists online,”*** said Siwar Gmati of I Watch, which has been taken by the authorities in the crosshairs and whose funds had been frozen in September 2024.

Mere days before the ballot, on 26 September 2024, Saïed doubled down. His Facebook page shared another consequential post – one that some activists say fully unleashed the inflammatory narrative of civil society groups “pretending to support democracy”, and accusing them of “betrayal” and “interference in Tunisia’s internal affairs”.<sup>53</sup> It wasn’t long before the falsehoods were picked up again by his supporters, some of whom turned to Facebook live videos to accuse rights groups of conspiring against state security with entities based in foreign countries.<sup>54</sup>

As pointed out by Gmati, Meta has been employing double standards when applying its content policies, allowing for freedom of speech endangering the safety of Tunisian civil society members, while censoring content supporting Palestine and opposing the genocide in Gaza. Rights groups, including Global Coalition for Tech Justice and Human Rights Watch, have raised concerns over Meta’s inconsistent and biased implementation of its content policies to Pro-Palestine speech, which have resulted in removal of posts expressing support of the Palestinian cause or content documenting human rights violations and war crimes against Palestinians that has news value.<sup>55</sup>

***“It’s a matter of time before this turns into real world violence,”*** said one Tunisian interviewed on conditions of anonymity.<sup>56</sup> ***This narrative isn’t only dangerous in terms of them [NGOS] getting charges but these campaigns are successful at convincing the public opinion and removing the public support from civil society. Even my mom believed it. ”***

## Facebook pages filled with mis- and dis-information

Between July and mid-September 2024, researchers at Mena Media Monitoring looked into posts across a number of Facebook pages and groups, discovering that misinformation has made its way into the content published, shared and often boosted online.<sup>57</sup> The posts were meant to

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<sup>53</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn/posts/pfbid02eGw6YvdZYP5rmqPctrD6jryLfMUziXYePXZvDWWg7vWb9YVDwqGfzppx2Ze6VmVI?rclid=4BvERE3K9RmVe3lr>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/zakia.zakiakasraoui/videos/1109385847469548/>

<sup>55</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/20/meta-systemic-censorship-palestine-content>

<sup>56</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

<sup>57</sup> Disinformation Surge on Social Networks in Tunisia Ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election, July - September 2024, Mena Media Monitoring.

confuse, influence or manipulate public opinion through the dissemination of false information or incitement to hatred or violence among the Facebook users.<sup>58</sup>

The pages and groups have tens of thousands of followers, post daily and have increasingly been generating more interactions in the leadup to the ballot.<sup>59</sup> While some of the pages were managed from Tunisia, most were operating from abroad, further obfuscating who's behind them.<sup>60</sup>

They include:

- Tunis Today, with 69 thousand subscribers.<sup>61</sup>
- Politiket, with 103 thousand subscribers.<sup>62</sup>
- I voted Kais Saied and I regret it, with 800 thousand subscribers.<sup>63</sup>
- (Kais Saied fans) with 373 thousand subscribers.<sup>64</sup>

While attacking opposition members and presidential candidates, many of the posts had targeted Kais Saied and those seen as puppets of the regime, like the president of the election committee Farouk Bouasker. Posts pertaining to Mr Bouasaker appear to instil fear, confuse, incite violence and portray him as a “war criminal”.

One post from August 2024 reads: "As part of their master's fight against artificial intelligence, Farouk Bouasker proposes, in a correspondence sent on August 15, 2024, the president of the Republic to cut off social networks including Facebook, TikTok and this until October 6 with the support of the Ministry of Technology."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Disinformation Surge on Social Networks in Tunisia Ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election, July - September 2024, Mena Media Monitoring.

<sup>59</sup> Disinformation Surge on Social Networks in Tunisia Ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election, July - September 2024, Mena Media Monitoring.

<sup>60</sup> Disinformation Surge on Social Networks in Tunisia Ahead of the 2024 Presidential Election, July - September 2024, Mena Media Monitoring.

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/tunis.today>

<sup>62</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=61553683547540>

<sup>63</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/KaisSaiedfanpage>

<sup>64</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/carth.network>

<sup>65</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid02tTaWYfNujx7azRyN2wbSogspWkC1fwDyYtHRMyqi3pc7HPnQ7mp\\_eybGUDKfjCQFI&id=61563395371042&rdid=FN4SWrFiqQ3WGY04](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid02tTaWYfNujx7azRyN2wbSogspWkC1fwDyYtHRMyqi3pc7HPnQ7mp_eybGUDKfjCQFI&id=61563395371042&rdid=FN4SWrFiqQ3WGY04)





Another August 2024 post alleges that according to “backstage info” Bouasakar and all election committee members are about to go to prison, while Saied is in the process of securing a safe exit from Tunisia, taking him to Razi Psychiatric Hospital and then smuggling him abroad.<sup>66</sup>



Both posts are blatantly false, yet they remain on Facebook at the time of writing.

<sup>66</sup> [https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story\\_fbid=pfbid0m95XAzho5g7QCqVwFAgfATbXrKjGkPRwNCtGHvgBnPRxeobsX1FP1ZhcJ22X72q2l&id=61562868311940&mibextid=ZbWKwL&rdid=GUve6iQNcp5JdA9f](https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=pfbid0m95XAzho5g7QCqVwFAgfATbXrKjGkPRwNCtGHvgBnPRxeobsX1FP1ZhcJ22X72q2l&id=61562868311940&mibextid=ZbWKwL&rdid=GUve6iQNcp5JdA9f)

## TikTok

Activists have also reported a widespread use of TikTok videos by Kais Saied supporters either to spread falsehoods about opposition figures or to incite hatred and violence against them and vulnerable groups, like migrant workers from Sub-Saharan countries.<sup>67</sup> In some videos Saied’s supporters were calling opposition politicians who defended migrant workers “rats” and “pests”, according to one activist interviewed by Digital Action on conditions of anonymity.<sup>68</sup>

While TikTok acted on reports of hate speech targeting migrants, they did nothing to address slanderous and inflammatory videos targeting the opposition, the activist added.<sup>69</sup> TikTok was also used by influencers with ties to the regime to praise Saied. Such political influence campaigns could be a way to circumvent TikTok’s ban on political advertisements on its platform.<sup>70</sup> Though more research is warranted to determine whether this may be true.

Overall, both Facebook and TikTok appear to have failed to implement its policies and act on content that incited violence or put civil society members at risk of harm offline. This is likely caused by the fact that neither company has invested enough in content moderators who speak Arabic and understand the Tunisian context, and its automatic review systems continue struggling with language other than English.

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<sup>67</sup> <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-hate-speech-black-africans-social-media>

<sup>68</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

<sup>69</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous interview conducted on 2 October 2024.