

SIGHTLINES TUNISIA BREAKING WHAT REMAINS OF INTERMEDIATION: SAÏEDISM IN LATE 2025

Hatem Nafti
September 2025



THE AUTHOR

Hatem Nafti

Hatem Nafti is a non-resident fellow of Noria Research. He is an essayist and a member of the Tunisian Observatory on Populism. The author of several books on political life in Tunisia since the revolution, Nafti's works include *From Revolution to Restoration: Where is Tunisia Heading?* (Riveneuve, 2019) and *Tunisia: Towards an Authoritarian Populism?* (Riveneuve, 2022). A regular contributor to *Middle East Eye* and *Nawaat*, he has collaborated with various research centers such as CAREP, IREMNO, and the Jean-Jaurès Foundation.

■ At first glance, Tunisia looks to have had a quiet political summer. No elections were held. Cabinet members retained their ministerial portfolios. And the opposition, enfeebled from years of repression, made little public noise. But politics never truly come to a stop. And beneath the surface, a great many contests for power were waged amidst the summer heat. Significantly, the UGTT trade union federation entered into a standoff with the Saïed regime. Also of note, Tunisia's mainstream media accelerated its drift into depoliticization. Finally, with an eye toward closing the book on transparency, Carthage "unplugged" the National Authority for Access to Information.

Though the three developments look unrelated, each follows from the logic of Saïed's populist project. Across the board, what we see is an attempt at weakening or eliminating the intermediate layers connecting state and society.

I. The Hour of Confrontation for the UGTT

After Ben Ali's fall, the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) famously became a major player in Tunisian political life. The Federation's interventions during 2013's national dialogue earned it the Nobel Peace Prize two years later. Lifting and sinking governments across the 2010s, the unionists were kingmakers and breakers, growing into (arguably) the leading force in the country.

With the election of Kais Saïed in 2019, the UGTT initially tried to (again) position itself in the role of mediator. For two years, leadership did what could be done to resolve a deepening political crisis pitting the president against Parliament. When Saïed executed his coup d'état of July 25, 2021, however, the union hierarchy made the choice of backing the President. The decision was justified in light of Saïed taking the fight to Ennahda and the wider Islamist current, for whom the UGTT had developed a healthy level of animosity.

Despite the UGTT's initial show of support, with time, Saïed worked to tame the union and to reduce its autonomy. (In this manner, he operated much like Ennahda and the Islamist-populist coalition Al Karama before him.) In December 2021, the President had Najla Bouden's government publish Circular 20, which required all public administrations and companies to refrain from entering into any discussions with trade unions without the prior agreement of the government's general secretariat. Next, he moved to undermine the UGTT's status as arbiter and key societal interlocutor: Principally, this was done through refusing to engage with the UGTT General Secretary's proposals for a national dialogue after Carthage suffered a setback in the legislative elections of 2022. Starting in 2023, Saïed also began deploying the law to discipline more recalcitrant members of the union's leadership, arresting and detaining a number of top officials.

After the tense days of 2023, a stalemate of sort set in between Carthage and the UGTT.^[1] Alas, as intimated, the calm gave way this past summer. On August 7, dozens of protesters claiming to support the President gathered at Place Mohamed Ali in Tunis in front of the UGTT headquarters. Under the slogan "The people want the purification of the Union," the protesters demanded the departure of the UGTT's current leadership. For the secretariat, the demonstration was an affront, one made all the more threatening by the fact that the

■ [1] The UGTT's executive board reflects the balance of power among the country's progressive forces. As such, the board's positions on the current political situation in Tunisia give insights into the vacillating fortunes of different left factions. At the time of writing—with the government becoming increasingly clear on its plans to do away with all intermediary bodies—the UGTT shows itself divided between two broad camps: one that seeks to remain loyal to Carthage, one that seeks to break from it.

slogans chanted bore a close resemblance to those promoted by pro-Carthage influencers in the months prior. For the UGTT's leaders, this all had the looks of a "militia operation" reminiscent of the attack on December 4, 2012, when groups close to Ennahda attempted to storm the UGTT headquarters, injuring union members in the process.

With the hope of preventing any intensification of the conflict, parties close to both the regime and the UGTT—such as Mongi Rahoui's Watad and the Popular Current—have asserted that there is no link between the August protesters and the government. The credibility of such claims has been undermined by Kaïs Saïed himself, however, who has taken to defending the protesters against any accusation of wrongdoing. In Saïed's words, the crowd gathered in August 7 "had no intention of attacking or breaking into the building, as malicious rumors claim." Furthermore, a few days after the incidents at Place Mohamed Ali, the head of government, Sarra Zenzri, issued a circular ending the secondment of trade unionists from the civil service.[2]

Seeking a display of strength in response to the perceived agitation from the President's office, an extraordinary meeting of the UGTT's National Council called for a large gathering to be held in front of the union headquarters on August 11. And yet, despite the support of major NGOs and opposition parties, the event drew only around 3,500 people. This figure can be viewed in two ways. In the current context, it is above average for large opposition rallies. Set against recent history, contrarily, it is undeniably low, the poor turnout even more disappointing in view of the UGTT's estimated 800,000 members. On balance, this speaks to the effects of a number of factors, the general climate of fear that has consolidated in Tunisia and the poor regard in which the federation's current leadership is held above all.

Seen in full, the maneuvers of Carthage have served to diminish the strength and legitimacy of the UGTT. They also served to nudge the federation outside the domain of politics. For Saïed, this is part and parcel of a political project seeking to bring the Presidency into direct, unmediated communion with the Tunisian people.

Certainly, the UGTT does not make an easy target: Different from institutional bodies such as the High Judicial Council, which Saïed could just dissolve by fiat, the UGTT retains a grounding in the national social fabric. Nevertheless, with the President taking up much of the federation's socioeconomic mantle—championing an anti-liberal discourse, showing distrust of the IMF, and rejecting privatization, amongst other things—the UGTT too has proven vulnerable to a war of attrition. Looking ahead, it should be expected that Saïed will try either to bring the UGTT's leadership fully to heel or to continue undermining the union's standing through legal, political, and economic means.

II. Media Forced to Toe the Line

The schism opening between the government and the UGTT offers a good opportunity to discuss the second development touched on in the introduction: the mainstream media's depoliticization. Indeed, it is instructive that the August stand-off between the Federation and Carthage was hardly even mentioned by leading print, television, and radio outlets. The contrast to the 2011-2019 period could be no more stark.

■ [2] For what it is worth, the union's leadership stated that this practice had been marginalized since 2022.

Over the past three years, most television and radio stations have either taken their political programming off the air or brought the shows in question into line with Carthage's line. This follows after their general deplatforming of political actors: In the days after the coup of July 2021, national television stopped inviting political parties—including those that support the regime—to its talk shows. Various public radio stations followed suit. With time, television stations largely stopped broadcasting political debate shows, too, leaving only openly pro-regime ones running.

What got the ball rolling here was Kais Saïed's promulgation of Decree-Law 54 in September 2022. As soon as it was published, Article 24 caught the eye of many concerned onlookers. Under the heading "Rumors and fake news," the article states: "Anyone who knowingly uses information and communication systems and networks to produce, spread, disseminate, send, or write false news, false data, rumors, false or falsified documents, or documents falsely attributed to others, with the aim of infringing on the rights of others, undermining public safety or national defense, or spreading terror among the population." The same penalties apply to "any person who uses information systems to publish or disseminate false or falsified news or documents or information containing personal data, or to attribute unfounded data with the aim of defaming others, damaging their reputation, harming them financially or morally, inciting attacks against them, or inciting hate speech." Finally, the penalty is doubled when "the person targeted is a public official or equivalent."

Journalists and activists recognized from the outset that Article 35 could be used to roll back what was the main, lasting achievement of the Tunisian revolution: the freedom of expression. And very quickly, it was. The judicial authorities initially targeted individuals—persons with powerful voices and a following—while allowing some critical content and commentary from the mainstream media to be issued forth. This regime of selective censorship then gave way to something more resembling total censorship and repression starting in May 2024. The pivot began with the police raid of the Tunis Bar Association and the arrest Sonia Dahmani. The lawyer and columnist had barricaded herself inside the bar association's headquarters to protest the case prosecutors had just decided to bring against her. Charges derived from comments Dahmani made earlier in the week on a television program. Reflecting on a Saïedian conspiracy theory claiming that sub-Saharan migrants were seeking to colonize Tunisia, she said: "What a wonderful country for migrants to steal from us!" For this remark, Dahmani was to face trial for having violated Decree-Law 54. On the same day Dahmani was taken in, moreover, police also arrested journalists Mourad Zeghidi and Borhen Bsaïess, who had appeared on the same morning radio show where Dahmani had made the aforementioned joke. These second two arrests were made on Saturday evening, a time when security and justice services are only supposed to act in cases of in flagrante delicto or imminent danger.[3] While in detention, the lawyers of Zeghidi and Bsaïess claim they were questioned extensively about their political analyses.

Not seeking to waste any time, the judicial authorities pushed the trials of Zeghidi and Bsaïess to the top of the docket. Convicted for offenses dating back to publications from 2019, they would each be sentenced to one year in prison. In being forced to serve time for what amounts to crimes of opinion, the fates of Zeghidi and Bsaïess, like that of Dahmani, had a significant chilling effect on the wider community of journalists. As mentioned, most mainstream media outlets adapted to the new climate by reducing or even canceling their political programs. Where they do venture into the subject matter, they do so with kid gloves and a non-critical eye.

[3] For those familiar with the workings of the Saïedian justice system, the element of surprise allows investigators to seize electronic devices with a view to building other cases. The almost simultaneous arrests of Dahmani, Bsaïess, and Zeghidi and the content of the investigation files send a clear signal from the authorities that they will no longer tolerate any dissent.

The State of Talk Radio: 2024-2026

The start of the 2024-2025 television and radio season coincided with the presidential election campaign. At that time, the three biggest political talk shows (Midi Show on Mosaïque FM, Houna Tounes on Diwan FM, and Politica on Jawhara FM) were still on the air, though each took an increasingly conciliatory tone toward the government. A year later, only Houna Tounes remains on the air on Diwan FM. Politica has been canceled outright, “by mutual agreement” according to its star presenter Zouhaier Eljiss. Midi Show has become Midi Mag, a kind of infotainment program purged of commentators critical of the regime.

In some ways, Saïed’s crackdown was a function of his asphyxiation of the institution meant to oversee and protect the audiovisual media industry: La Haute Autorité Indépendante de la Communication Audiovisuelle (HAICA). Created in 2011 and established as a provisional body in 2013, HAICA was meant to evolve into a permanent regulator. However, with Saïed’s coup d’état and repeal of the 2014 Constitution, this progression was halted. Over the course of 2022 and 2023, its administrative officials retired and were not replaced. Then, in February 2024, the state stopped paying its members’ allowances.

Like with the UGTT, Carthage’s crackdown on the media can and should be seen in light of his intention to remove all intermediating institutions between state and society. Since his election, Kais Saïed has given only one interview to a national media outlet.[4] Otherwise, communication goes directly through the Facebook page of the Presidency of the Republic.

III. The End of Access to Information

Saïed’s de facto abolition of the National Authority for Access to Information (INAI) represents his final summer salvo against intermediation.

The INAI was set up in 2016. Building off measures first established via decree laws issued in 2011 by Béji Caïd Essebsi, the INAI’s fundamental purpose was to maintain trust between citizen and elected officials. It served this purpose by requiring that various public bodies publish information about their operations and decision-making processes. The INAI also stipulated that public authorities must provide, upon request, any document requested by a citizen, within the usual limits (classified documents, protection of privacy, etc.).

For more than a decade, the INAI served civil society well. Critically, it allowed for the flourishing of the Al Bawsala association, which launched a number of projects for monitoring the activities of decision-making bodies such as the National Constituent Assembly, Assembly of People’s Representatives, and municipal governments. At the end of the day, despite its legal standing, the INAI’s ability to fulfill its mandate hinged on the goodwill of those in power.[5] So long as a culture of transparency held amongst the political classes, civil society was able to use the institution to hold those in power to account. Alas, in fits and starts, that culture of transparency gave away in the aftermath of July 25, 2021. Thereafter, some associations still attempted to use the INAI to demand accountability.

[4] Journalists who wish to interview him must take advantage of public appearances to hope to obtain a statement.

[5] The legal status of the INAI was affirmed at a number of stages across the 2010s. The 2014 Constitution enshrined the right to information in Article 32. Decree-Law No. 2011-41, meanwhile, was made into proper legislation via Organic Law No. 2016-22 of March 24, 2016. The Organic Law in question uplifted the INAI as a key intermediary/mediator between citizens and the state.

However, their requests for information generally wound up stonewalled by Carthage. This was notably the case with Al Bawsala, whose demands for the results of the audit Saïed ordered on foreign aid—which he alleged had been embezzled by those in power during the post-revolutionary decade—was rebuffed.[6] Even though the 2022 Constitution reiterated the right to transparency in Article 38, in practice, the government does not honor it. For all effects and purposes, the INAI is at this stage an empty husk.

IV. Conclusions

The attacks on the UGTT, the state's increasing control over the mainstream media, and the de facto dissolution of the INAI are all part of the Tunisian government's strategy to weaken intermediary bodies and to eliminate countervailing institutional powers. Flipside of the same coin, these moves have functioned to centralize power and render its administration more vertical.

If this all gives reason for fear, it should be noted that resistance to Saïed's project remains. The election of Boubaker Bethabet as head of the Bar Association on September 13, 2025 illustrates this dynamic. Elected in the first round, Bethabet seems to want to break with his two predecessors, who were close to the government. His example shows that, despite increasing restrictions, part of civil society continues to take up the issue of the rights and freedoms that emerged from the revolution.

■ [6] This claim, repeated many times by the president, was a pillar of the demonization campaign that helped justify the President's coup. Given that the report has not been published and that, to our knowledge, no prosecutions for embezzlement have been brought, it is likely that the audit was inconclusive.

Reference

Hatem Nafti, « Sightlines Tunisia no.4: Breaking What Remains of Intermediation: Saïedism in Late 2025», Brief: Noria Research, September 2025.

License

Noria Research encourages the use and dissemination of this publication. Under the cc-by-nc-nd licence, you are free to share copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format. Under the following terms, you must give appropriate credit, provide a link to the license, and indicate if changes were made. You may do so in any reasonable manner, but not in any way that suggests the licensor endorses you or your use. You may not use the material for commercial purposes. If you remix, transform, or build upon the material, you may not distribute the modified material.

Credit

Author: Hatem Nafti

Cover Photo: Mohatou, "Siège UGTT, Tunis, 2019-2" (2019).