Report
Observation mission
Trial of lawyer Sonia DAHMANI
November 11, 2025 - Tunis

1. Background

Sonia Dahmani is a Tunisian lawyer and «columnist».

She has been held in Manouba women's prison since May 11, 2024[1], in very harsh conditions, under high security and strict surveillance.

She is facing at least five criminal proceedings related to her profession and the exercise of her right to criticism and expression.

More specifically, **three proceedings** relate to critical statements:
- in May 2024 on television on Tunisia's migration policies;
- in 2021 on the radio on widespread racist behavior in Tunisia;

[1] Sonia Dahmani was arrested at the premises of the Tunisian Bar Association, where she had sought refuge and protection. On May 7, during a television broadcast, she had criticized the humiliating treatment of sub-Saharan migrants and Tunisia's migration policies. On May 10, an arrest warrant was issued against her.

- also in 2021 and again on widespread racist behavior in Tunisia, but broadcast on television.

Sonia **has already been sentenced** for these proceedings:
- to one year of imprisonment in the first instance (July 6, 2024), then reduced to eight months of imprisonment on appeal (September 10, 2024);
- to two years' imprisonment in the first instance on October 24, 2024, reduced to eighteen months' imprisonment on appeal (January 24, 2025);
- to two years' imprisonment in the first instance (June 30, 2025)[2]; the appeal was set, without prior notice, for early November and postponed to November 21, 2025; this hearing will probably be further postponed (however, this is yet to be confirmed).

The remaining **two proceedings** relate to critical statements (made in particular in 2023 during a television broadcast) about prison conditions in Tunisia.

2. The trial scheduled for November 11, 2025.

The trial on November 11, 2025, was scheduled to take place before the “Chambre criminelle” of the Court of First Instance in Tunis.

This case concerns one of the two proceedings related to the statements made by Sonia Dahmani regarding prison conditions in Tunisia.

The investigation was initiated on the basis of Decree-Law No. 54 of 2022.

[2] The OIAD conducted an observation mission for this hearing. The report can be found at the following link: https://protect-lawyers.org/it/mission-dobservation-judiciaire-audience-de-sonia-dahmani-tunisie/ .

The charge is the dissemination of false information.
The alleged offence is provided for under Article 24, a highly problematic and widely contested provision that has been repeatedly used against Sonia and other individuals prosecuted for opinion-related offences.

Moreover, the Court of Cassation was asked, by way of a preliminary ruling, to assess the validity of the charge and the legitimacy of applying Decree-Law No. 54 of 2022. At the hearing of 11 November 2025, the trial was quickly adjourned because the case file lacked exactly this decision from the Court of Cassation.

3. The hearing.

The hearing, as mentioned, was scheduled before the Criminal Chamber of the Court of First Instance of Tunis at 9:30 a.m.

The delegation of international observers (composed of a dozen Italian and French lawyers representing various organizations, including the O.I.A.D.) gathered outside the courthouse, where they met with Sonia Dahmani's defense team.

Entry into the courthouse was swift.

Unlike on the previous occasion on June 30, 2025, there were no problems, even for the international observers, in entering the courtroom.

The courtroom was quite large, with many people present, but not crowded.

Sonia was also present in the courtroom, escorted by several police officers. She appeared very distressed and suffering, compared to last June.

The hearing proceeded quickly and in an orderly manner.

The judge acknowledged the absence in the case file of the preliminary ruling by the Court of Cassation on the regularity of the indictment and therefore announced the postponement of the trial.

The defense attorneys made a few comments, insisting on the need for postponement.

The prosecutor did not intervene.

The judge reserved the right to announce the new trial date at the end of the morning.

The delegation, Sonia's defense attorneys, family members, and other acquaintances therefore left the courtroom.

The delegation remained in the Bar Association’s library for some reflection and to await the announcement of the postponement date.
They then left the courthouse.

The postponement date was only announced the following day.
The new hearing is scheduled for December 26, 2025.

4. Preliminary observations on the hearing.

The judge's decision to postpone the hearing appeared to be planned.

The absence of the Supreme Court ruling in the judge's file also appeared curious.

The failure to transmit this ruling does not seem to have been a matter of negligence, but rather a deliberate choice.

After all, the defense attorneys had obtained a copy of the ruling in the previous days from the registry of the Court of Cassation (which, unfortunately, affirmed the applicability of Decree Law 54 to Sonia's case and the jurisdiction of the Chambre Criminelle).

The date chosen for the postponement is also curious: December 26, 2025.

Initial comments suggested that the postponement date was chosen to discourage the presence of international observers.

The delegation had a long discussion while consulting with Sonia's defense lawyers and her family about the possibility and, above all, the advisability of a future visit to the prison.

5. Meetings during the mission.

Before and after the hearing, as mentioned above, observers met with Sonia's defense attorneys and her two brothers.

Among other things, it was learned that in recent weeks a request for release from prison had been filed, given that Sonia has now almost completely served her sentence and is not subject to provisional (precautionary) detention measures.
To this day, no response has been received.

The relatives also highlighted the harsh conditions of detention and the frequent and incomprehensible bureaucratic difficulties they face in visiting and communicating with Sonia.

From a more general point of view, and taking into account the numerous ongoing trials against lawyers, magistrates, and journalists[3], it is now clear that the situation in Tunisia is increasingly serious and that the rule of law is increasingly compromised.

[3] Just as an example, based on a list compiled by Tunisian lawyer Kilani, who lives in exile in France:

Similarly, there have been recent protests in the country (in the South) with a general climate of tension and anticipation.
Some have therefore linked this climate (and thus the need to avoid creating further opportunities for protests) with the decision to quickly postpone the trial.

On the afternoon of November 11, the Italian and French delegations were received by their respective ambassadors, as they had been during the previous mission on June 30.

• 31 octobre 2025 — Procès de Me Ahmed Souab, ancien magistrat administratif : condamné à cinq ans de prison et trois ans de contrôle administratif, à l'issue d'une audience expéditive de sept minutes, sans sa présence ni celle de sa défense.

• 02 novembre 2025- délibération au procès de Hamadi Rahmani le magistrat révoqué il 'est condamné à un total de 18 mois de prison sur la base de l'article 24 du décret-loi 54/2022 pour des statuts facebook dénonçant la corruption de l'ancien président de la Cour de Cassation alors que ce dernier a été condamné le 27 octobre2025 pour ces faits avérés.

• 11 novembre 2025 — Procès de Me Sonia Dahmani, avocate et chroniqueuse, poursuivie sur la base du décret-loi n°54/2022 relatif à la cybercriminalité, pour des propos critiques exprimés dans les médias devant la Chambre criminelle du tribunal de prmiére instance de Tunis.

• 14 novembre 2025 — Procès de Mme Abir Moussi, présidente du Parti destourien libre (PDL), dans l'affaire dite du « bureau d'ordre » ; le même jour, procès en appel du journaliste Mohamed Boughaleb, poursuivi lui aussi en vertu du décret-loi 54.

• 17 novembre 2025 — Audience d'appel dans l'affaire dite du "complot contre la sûreté de l'État", impliquant plus de quarante opposant·es politiques et militant·es poursuivis pour leurs opinions.Parmi les personnes détenues arbitrairement figurent Jaouhar Ben Mbarek, Ghazi Chaouachi, Ridha Belhaj, Abdelhamid Jelassi, Issam Chebbi, Khayaam Turki et Kamel Letaief
– Procès de Sihem Ben Sedrine, ex-présidente de l'Instance Vérité et Dignité, accusée d'atteinte à l'administration publique dans le cadre de sa mission de justice transitionnelle. La première audience devant la chambre criminelle du pole financier du tribunal de première instance de Tunis.

• 20 novembre 2025 — Procès des journalistes Mourad Zghidi et Borhène Bsaïs, poursuivis pour leurs analyses critiques du régime. Première audience devant la chambre criminelle du pôle financier du tribunal de première instance de Tunis

• 21 novembre 2025 — Deuxième procès d'Abir Moussi, dans une autre affaire à caractère politique.

• 21 novembre 2025 Audience d'appel de Sonia Dahmani dans l'affaire des déclarations doublement poursuivis

• 24 novembre 2025 Procès de l'affaire du conseil tunisien des réfugiés de Mustapha Jammali et Abderazek Krimi première audience devant la chambre criminelle du tribunal de première instance de Tunis

• 25 novembre 2025 — Procès de Me Dalila Ben Mbarek Msaddek, avocate et militante des droits humains, et de Borhène Bsaïs, journaliste, dans une nouvelle affaire d'atteinte présumée à la sûreté intérieure.

• 22 décembre 2025 — Procès de Saadia Mesbah et de l'association M'nemty, poursuivies pour leur engagement contre le racisme et pour la défense des droits des minorités.

The willingness and attention of the authorities seem positive.
Perhaps, these are a sign of the importance given to lawyers and associations that protect human rights and the right to defense in particular.

The topics discussed were general in nature and related to the overall situation in the country and Tunisia's current sensitivity to initiatives that could be stigmatized, instrumentally, as foreign pressure.

6. Conclusions.

In such a deteriorated context, the presence of international observers is considered indispensable by Sonia's Tunisian colleagues and family members.

It therefore seems necessary to intensify the presence of observation missions, but also to inform lawyers and European public opinion about the conditions in Tunisia, Tunisian lawyers, and human rights defenders[4].

In this perspective, we must not forget that one of the most sensitive issues is that of the migration policies of Tunisia and European countries.

[4] In this sense, the CCBE's decision to award Sonia Dahmani the 2025 prize for the defense of human rights and freedom of expression on November 27 appears significant.