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First UA: 76/24 Index: MDE 30/8456/2024 Tunisia of August 30, 2024

## TUNISIA

### CALL FOR THE RELEASE OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER SIHEM BENSEDRINE

On August 1, 2024, Tunisian authorities detained Sihem Bensedrine, a leading human rights defender. She is accused of “fraud,” “forgery,” and “abuse of official capacity.” These charges relate to her work as president of the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD) and allegations of falsifying a report on corruption in the banking sector. Her detention is arbitrary and violates international standards and appears to be a direct reprisal for her work exposing human rights violations. Sihem Bensedrine is now in Manouba Women’s Prison. Authorities must release her immediately, drop all charges, and stop misusing the justice system to target her.

#### **Write to the Tunisian President urging him to:**

- Immediately release Sihem Bensedrine, drop all the charges against her and end the misuse of the criminal justice system to target her.
- Pending her release, ensure she is granted regular access to her family, lawyers and adequate medical care
- Ensure that she is held in conditions that comply with international standards for the treatment of prisoners.

#### **Write to:**

President of the Republic Kais Saied  
Route de la Goulette  
Site archéologique de Carthage, Tunisie  
Email: [contact@carthage.tn](mailto:contact@carthage.tn)  
Twitter: @TnPresidency  
Salutation: *Your Excellency*:

#### **And copy:**

His Excellency Lassaad BOUTARA  
Ambassador  
Embassy of the Republic of Tunisia  
515 O'Connor Street  
Ottawa, ON K1S 3P8  
Tel: (613) 237-0330, -0332 Fax: (613) 237-7939  
Email: [tunisianembassy canada@diplomatie.gov.tn](mailto:tunisianembassy canada@diplomatie.gov.tn)

## ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Siham Bensedrine, 74, is a well-known human rights defender. She gained recognition for her independent journalism and [human rights work](#) under Ben Ali's regime. Since President Kaies Saied's power grab in July 2021, she has been a vocal critic of actions that undermine Tunisia's rule of law and judicial independence. From 2014 to 2018, Bensedrine led the Truth and Dignity Commission (IVD), which was established to [document and seek accountability](#) for human rights violations and corruption by state officials from 1955 to 2013.

The IVD concluded its work in December 2018 and transferred 205 cases of human rights violations and corruption for prosecution before Tunisia's 13 Specialized Criminal Chambers. These cases included allegations of corruption within the banking sector involving high-profile individuals like former ministers, businessmen, and state bank employees. Despite opposition, the IVD extended its mandate until the end of 2018. [The IVD faced resistance](#) throughout its mandate, with some government agencies failing to fully cooperate. In March 2019, the IVD published its [final report](#), which included a section on corruption in the Tunisian banking system.

In May 2020, a former IVD Commissioner filed a complaint against Bensedrine, accusing her of forging the IVD's final report for personal gain. This complaint alleged that changes made to the report could lead to costly reparations for the government. The complaint led to an investigation by the judicial police's economic investigations unit in 2021. In March 2023, the investigating judge changed Bensedrine's status from a witness to a suspect, and in August 2024, ordered her pre-trial detention. The prosecution has not presented concrete evidence to justify these serious charges. Bensedrine's detention appears to be a retaliation for her work with the IVD, particularly for the prosecutions initiated against alleged perpetrators.

In May 2023, UN human rights experts expressed concern that Bensedrine's prosecution seemed retaliatory, tied to her role with the IVD and its corruption cases. International standards require states to ensure the right to truth about gross human rights violations through non-judicial means like truth commissions. They also mandate protection for IVD members from defamation or legal action related to their work.

***Please take action as soon as possible until October 20, 2024! The UA will be duly updated should there be the need for further action.***