



GLOBAL PANDEMIC: CORONAVIRUS AND GLOBAL DISORDER

# Coronavirus Threatens Freedom in North Africa

SARAH YERKES, EDITOR

Regions across the globe, including Asia, Europe, and North America, are now witnessing the catastrophic effects of the new coronavirus pandemic. But because North Africa is not likely to see a peak in cases of the virus until later this year, the effects on its economies and governance are still largely unknown. Yet it is clear that the strict measures governments have adopted to stem its spread are already having a dramatic impact on the region's people—particularly activists, journalists, and anyone critical of the governments' leaders.

Most governments, be they at the helm of democracies or autocracies, have severely curtailed civil liberties to prevent the virus from spreading, but North African governments have capitalized on the global acceptance of this step to enact even harsher restrictions on free speech and expression.

The extreme crackdown on Algerian antigovernment protesters for “undermining national unity,” the [prosecution of more than 25,000 Moroccans](#) (including several critics of the government) for violating the state of emergency, and the consolidation of the prime

minister's power in Tunisia are all forms of suppression and represent potential power grabs that, even if temporary, will likely have a lasting impact on the citizen-state relationship.

In this new environment, lack of transparency—especially regarding the outbreak itself and the governments' responses—has become an even greater problem and further reduced the space for freedom of expression. According to journalists in the region, lockdowns have made it impossible for them and civil society activists to conduct on-the-ground research. Instead, they must rely on phone calls and secondhand information to verify claims of arrests. A rise in unreliable reporting has also made it extremely difficult for independent media, where they exist, to fact check or produce their own stories—and to thereby counter misleading or false information.

But perhaps most troubling is how aggressors are using the distraction the coronavirus pandemic provides to push their incursions forward. For example, in Libya, the diversion has given General Khalifa Haftar cover to



conduct strikes with less attention and consequence. Despite some calls for a truce, he recently [attacked a medical facility](#) housing supplies to treat patients with COVID-19, the disease caused by the virus.

When viewed together, the developments in Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia show that COVID-19 is not only a dangerous disease with the potential to sicken and kill but also a threat to freedom of expression across the region. Leaders are taking advantage of the uncertainty and chaos to silence dissent and rein in opposition. Even more worrying, in some cases, the publics are not reacting to the crackdowns. Ultimately, the governments' restrictive measures could hobble civil society and media or add fuel to existing conflicts long after the health crisis has passed.

## ALGERIA: "CORONAVIRUS IS A LESSER EVIL"

### LAMINE AISSANI

On February 22, 2020, hundreds of thousands of Algerians took to the streets to celebrate the first anniversary of the Hirak protest movement. It was about one year ago that millions of Algerians began occupying major city roads across the country every Friday in an overwhelming display of peace, civility, and even joy. Their goal was to break the chains of fear and oppression set by a decades-old military regime that had ruthlessly battered any opposition and led the country to a degraded state characterized by political corruption, economic decay, and social injustice.

Over the year, the Hirak movement achieved several major successes: first by ousting former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika after twenty years in office and then by forcing the government to implement additional reforms, including imprisonment for many

former politicians and their corrupt business associates. But the movement has since suffered a serious setback due to the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic.

On February 25, Algeria recorded its first case of the virus—an Italian citizen on a business trip in Algeria. While this case had no immediate impact on Hirak, subsequent confirmations of infections in the city of Blida (45 kilometers southwest of the capital, Algiers) raised the level of concern. (Blida is currently considered the epicenter with 628 cases and 89 deaths as of April 19; Algeria had a total of 2,629 cases and 375 deaths as of this date.) It eventually became clear that keeping up the weekly demonstrations would very likely accelerate the spread of the virus.

In early March, activists nationwide, including many Hirak supporters, urged protesters to put the protests on hold for their own safety and that of others. Many called for keeping the fight alive by focusing on digital campaigns and petitions for the liberation of Hirak detainees. For example, on April 8, Amnesty International's Algeria team launched an online petition for the immediate [release of Karim Tabbou](#), one of the arrested opposition figures.

While the majority complied with the request to move the protests online, others refused to give up the street demonstrations because they were either unaware of the magnitude of the danger or suspected the government was using the pandemic to quell the movement. Chants and signs featured [slogans](#) roughly translating to "Corona is a lesser evil than you [the government]." This created new frictions between activists, some of whom were insistent on staying in the streets. But the matter was finally settled on March 17 when President Abdelmadjid Tebboune banned all public gatherings including protests.



*Protesters demonstrate and chant slogans in the streets of the capital, Algiers, March 13, 2020. Photo by Billal Bensalem/NurPhoto, Getty.*

The government presented the ban as a prevention measure against the virus's spread, but leaders were quick to take advantage of the changing circumstances. When thousands of Algerians went out to demonstrate on March 7, the government response was overly severe. [Security forces mobilized](#) in large numbers to stop the demonstration, and police forces chased protesters and used clubs to beat them back. No distinction was made between men and women, young and old. Several activists, journalists, and students were arrested and accused of undermining national unity, including the famous journalist Khaled Drareni who was filming the protest live. Imene Meddour, a thirty-year-old mother, was arrested for posting a video that denounced the alleged corruption of officials managing a quarantine site in the city of Oran. Her baby was taken away while she was in confinement on April 2. Many perceived this action as excessive oppression, and her case went viral on social media.

These kinds of incidents—coupled with an increasing number of political arrests, rising concerns over the government's incapacity to handle the pandemic, and

plummeting oil prices, which threaten to cripple the Algerian economy—have all given rise to new tensions that are likely to remain long after the virus is gone. For now, most Algerians have taken to social media to voice their protests—for example, through campaigns such as the hashtag [#Vendredi\\_57](#), which signifies the fifty-seventh week of Hirk. Many call on people to stay home and protest virtually, but they promise a renewed burst of the movement once (and if) Algeria makes out it of the woods. This time—the warning goes—the movement will be even fiercer and will take down whatever is left of the old regime.

## EGYPT: CORONAVIRUS COULD SPREAD LIKE FIRE IN PRISONS

### SHAIMAA ABOELKHIR

The coronavirus outbreak has given Egypt's military regime an opportunity to improve its popularity, which declined sharply after an Egyptian construction contractor, [Mohamed Ali](#), [accused](#) the government of corruption in September 2019. The claim that state and army budgets were being used to build palaces for President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and his entourage brought hundreds of people into the streets demanding Sisi's ouster.

Although Sisi and Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly were largely silent in the early weeks of the outbreak, they are now using the crisis to connect with the public and boost the regime's image. On March 24, Madbouly announced a series of precautionary measures to stop the virus's spread, including a nationwide curfew from 7:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m., a ban on gatherings, and the suspension of schools, universities, and air travel. On April 8, he extended [the curfew](#) for a second time, fearing that an epidemic could devastate the country's health



system, which already suffers from a significant shortage in physicians and medical crews when compared to its population of almost 100 million.

Madbouly's statements have been well-received and were followed by a surprisingly serious and diligent [speech by Sisi](#). The information and figures Sisi cited came from his meeting with the army's chief commanders, during which they discussed the army's preparations to support the civil sector in stemming the virus's spread. Despite the technocratic nature of his speech, the president made sure to offer proper credit to the sole guarantor of his survival, the army.

What is perhaps more significant—given the prior accusations of corruption—is Sisi's sudden visits to at least two construction sites, where [he addressed workers](#) on how to maintain their safety during the work that “should not stop.” His guards distributed masks to workers, and he rebuked those who had failed to meet safety provisions. Sisi likely wanted to be viewed as a president who is close to his people rather than a corrupt leader who hides in his palace.



*Authorities man the door as Egyptians line up to collect their monthly pension, Cairo, April 5, 2020. Photo by Ziad Ahmed/NurPhoto, Getty.*

Despite the desire to change the regime's image, Egyptian authorities are tightening an already securitized environment by arresting an increasing number of citizens—mostly for breaking the curfew—without considering the issue of overcrowding inside detention sites. Furthermore, instead of adopting a policy of transparency and providing clear and reliable information about the virus's spread in the country, Egyptian authorities are suppressing critical voices by arresting many who have spoken out about the false reporting on social media.

Due to the horrific conditions inside Egypt's detention centers, this security approach may exacerbate the health crisis rather than mitigate it. A recent [report by the Committee for Justice](#), titled “Slow Death,” notes that, in 2019, there were 819 incidents of overcrowded cells inside prisons and police stations; 85 incidents of poor ventilation; 331 incidents of lack of provision of personal belongings, including clean clothing and personal hygiene products such as soap and cleaning detergents; 909 incidents of the banning/restriction of toilet visits; and 546 incidents of the denial of medical care. (Note that the committee could not verify all of these incidents.)

Consistent with other countries' measures to limit the virus's spread, the Ministry of the Interior has ordered the end of family visitation in prisons. But, at the same time, prison directors have prohibited prisoners from receiving personal hygiene products, disinfectants, and medicine from their families that would help protect them from those who may have been infected, including police officers and administration members who travel to and from their homes.

Meanwhile, Egyptian authorities continue to ignore the recent demands of domestic and international human rights advocates to release thousands of vulnerable detainees, such as pregnant women, children,

persons with disabilities, elderly prisoners, and those approaching the end of their sentences and others who can be safely reintegrated into society.

If the government's increased securitization fuels the virus rather than mitigates it, any improvements in the public's perception of the regime will likely be short-lived.

## LIBYA: CORONAVIRUS CREATES A CATCH-22

### ELHAM SAUDI

In Libya, the coronavirus pandemic has effectively provided cover for escalating the conflict. With the world distracted by their own responses to the pandemic, Libya's belligerents have embarked on desperate attempts to create new realities on the ground. General Khalifa Haftar and his Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF), in particular, have mercilessly [shelled Tripoli](#) in the most ferocious bombardment witnessed since Haftar began his assault in April 2019.

This escalation has made it nearly impossible for medical professionals to prepare an effective response to any outbreak. The health sector has already been decimated by almost a decade of conflict, and over the last year, the Tripoli offensive has included a systematic targeting of healthcare facilities and emergency personnel in the capital. This has included the [shelling of Al Khadra General Hospital](#), a principal hospital in Tripoli currently tasked with addressing coronavirus cases. Further escalations in violence will inevitably increase the number of wounded and further strain Libya's limited resources. It is a reality that painfully highlights the importance of the right to access to essential healthcare.



*The view from a room inside Al Khadra General Hospital after Haftar's forces conducted a strike, Tripoli, April 5, 2020. Photo by Amru Salahuddin/Anadolu Agency, Getty.*

In areas under Haftar's control, a committee headed by LAAF Chief of Staff Abdul-Razzaq al Nadouri has responsibility for handling the outbreak. However, [Nadouri recently banned](#) any criticism of his committee's management of the pandemic and condemned those who do so as "traitors." Going even a step further, a doctor who brought attention to the conditions of hospitals in eastern Libya was reportedly detained. This curtailment of rights is not new. However, the exceptionalism that the response to the pandemic provides will likely result in further excuses for clamping down on basic human rights like freedom of expression.

The wretched catch-22 of many Libyans' general situation—created by this cocktail of coronavirus and war—is highlighted by Tripoli's attempts to contain the outbreak. Measures like curfews and quarantines have been imposed to stem the virus's spread, but this has put lives at further risk as the LAAF shells the capital to an unprecedented degree. Many have chosen to flee their homes and the immediate, visible danger. With over [150,000 people displaced](#) since April 2019, the impact on this particularly vulnerable group will be



immense. Their access to healthcare will likely be further compromised, and their fundamental right to life will continue to be threatened by indiscriminate bombing.

Tripoli's large population of migrants and asylum seekers, especially those in the notoriously overcrowded and unsanitary detention centers, are similarly innocent and even more vulnerable to this attack on their rights and dignity. Worse still, there are no records of any public health response for the detained.

Meanwhile, the voice of the international community has been limited to calls for a humanitarian truce that may allow vital assistance to enter the country and a proper response to be enacted. Until some coercion accompanies these calls—or at least a halt to the incoming shipments of arms and mercenaries (and possibly the coronavirus in tow)—the costs of Libya's war will place an even heavier burden on its most innocent and vulnerable.

## MOROCCO: A STATE OF EMERGENCY COULD INFLICT LASTING DAMAGE ON CIVIL SOCIETY

### ILHEM RACHIDI

To contain the spread of the coronavirus, Morocco instituted a state of emergency on March 20 and enacted measures that greatly control the movements of Moroccan citizens. As in numerous other countries, citizens can only leave their homes to buy everyday necessities at local stores and pharmacies, seek medical treatment, or attend to essential work. However, in Morocco, people who defy the state of emergency can be sentenced to jail for one to three months and be fined 300 Dhs (\$30) to 1,300 Dhs (\$130).

In an early show of force, Moroccan authorities displayed army vehicles in the streets and dramatically increased the presence of police. Around **50,000 people have been**



*Soldiers inside a Moroccan military armored personnel carrier instruct people to stay home, Rabat, March 24, 2020. Photo by Fadel Senna/ AFP, Getty.*

**arrested**—of which over 25,000 have been prosecuted—for violating the state of emergency, according to the General Directorate of National Security.

But despite the number of arrests, the public has generally accepted the health measures. Even reporting and widely shared videos of police officers and local officials forcing people to go to their homes, sometimes violently, have raised little public criticism. Nor has the **prosecution** of at least seventy people, including nineteen held in detention, for distributing so-called fake news or for so-called hate speech. For example, the Salafi preacher **Abou Naim**, who slammed authorities for their decision to close mosques, was arrested on March 17 and sentenced to one year of jail for inciting hatred and undermining public order.

Activists at the Moroccan Association for Human Rights (AMDH) are concerned, however, with other arrests they say strictly relate to freedom of expression. They are working on six cases of detention for publications on social media, including the cases of Mohamed Zarguiti, sentenced to two months in jail for sharing a video, and Amine Hasnaoui, sentenced to six months in jail for a post on Facebook. In a separate case, according to the AMDH central bureau and several AMDH

activists, Yassine Fellat—a hairdresser and member of the AMDH and the leftist party the Democratic Way—was reportedly arrested for working after the state of emergency had just been announced. He was officially charged with insulting a local official and subsequently sentenced to four months in jail and fined 1,500 Dhs (\$150).

Meanwhile, according to the local media, on March 19, the government swiftly adopted a draft law against fake news and cyber crime during a council held by video conference. The law's contours are still unclear, and parliament needs to discuss and approve it, but local human rights defenders have already expressed heavy skepticism. In light of Morocco's recent human rights record, they fear that authorities might use the state of emergency as a pretext to further restrict freedom of expression and to target dissidents.

In the last eight months, ten people have been prosecuted for criticizing the state or its king on social media, according to [Human Rights Watch](#). Since Morocco's Hiraq protest movement erupted in 2016, the AMDH has documented more than [1,000 cases of political detention](#) throughout the country. Those detained include protesters, human rights activists, trade unionists, and university students. The AMDH central bureau says hundreds have received a royal pardon, while many others have completed their sentences, leaving about one hundred currently jailed for political motives.

It is too early to determine the effects of the state of emergency and its democratic cost. But what will make this task even harder in the coming weeks is the lack of information due to the impediment to field work and observation. For example, when people are arrested, it takes a lot longer for journalists and activists to get the information, check it, and react to it because there is no way for them to conduct field work. And other sources of information, including local organizations and observers, are likewise limited to operating online.

While the difficulties related to freedom of expression and the general atmosphere of repression are not new, the state of emergency is exacerbating them. The longer it stays in place, the more weakened Moroccan civil society may become, putting the culture of protest that has taken years to develop at risk.

## TUNISIA: CORONAVIRUS VERSUS A NASCENT DEMOCRACY

YOUSSEF CHERIF

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, Tunisian President Kais Saied and his National Security Council first ordered a semi-lockdown on March 18, with a 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. curfew. However, since then, more severe measures have been enacted. Circulating between neighborhoods requires an official authorization, and ports and airports are closed to civilian travel. Police, army troops, Humvees, and helicopters are patrolling the country, fining people who refuse to abide by the rules up to \$100. Security forces now have the authority to confiscate people's driver's licenses and cars. Surveillance has reached a whole new level, with [police robots](#)—in limited numbers and areas—ordering people, in an angry tone, to go home. Additionally, on April 4, parliament [activated Article 70 of the constitution](#) by a majority vote, delegating some of its powers to the prime minister.

On the positive side, police officers are reluctant to use force against citizens, apart from notable exceptions, such as when [policemen physically dispersed](#) a crowd waiting to get paid. And criticism of the government, generally, continues on traditional media sites and social media with no restrictions, as citizens complain about shortages of goods or the poor public health infrastructure. The spread of disinformation and devastating rumors has even been an issue—for example, most recently when an incorrect interpretation of a social media post about a government decision to distribute aid to those in need



*Security forces close the gate as impoverished Tunisians protest the confinement and seek financial aid, headquarters of the Mnihla delegation in Ariana Governorate, March 30, 2020. Photo by Fethi Belaid/AFP, Getty.*

led to massive crowds, breaking the social distancing requirement.

Another positive sign, when a group of parliamentarians wanted to pass a law punishing fake news producers—while providing extra immunity to themselves—the popular backlash was so strong that many members of this group had to retract their position. And as for the prime minister’s new powers, they have a two-month limit and are constrained by several conditions, not least the parliamentary scrutiny on any decree-law.

Nevertheless, there are worrying signs for the future of Tunisia’s nascent democracy. For example, when a member of parliament known for his conservative Islamist views was **beaten in public** by a local leader of

the national labor union, very few people spoke out. Parliament, which only a minority of those polled trusts and appreciates in normal days, is now seen as even more useless.

On social and traditional media, people call on the security forces to be more aggressive toward those who disobey the lockdown and curfew. An old adage, “Don’t mention human rights when it comes to fighting terrorism,” is creeping into the public debate, with “coronavirus” replacing “terrorism.” Police and army officers are everywhere, and the power given to the security and armed forces could easily increase by popular mandate. Advocates of the police state that collapsed in 2011 have been trying to bring it back since, and the pandemic offers them another opportunity to leverage high levels of anxiety, which are felt even more broadly among the public.

Even if the crime rate has been static so far during this crisis, a middle-income country such as **Tunisia cannot endure the lockdown** for a long period: popular anger and the needs of families could increase lootings, violent protests, assaults, and attacks on public buildings and representatives. Those feeling insecure may implore the generals to protect them. And the social, economic, and security effects of this pandemic will increasingly divert Tunisia’s attention away from democratic consolidation and long-term reforms, as well as decrease civil society oversight of public affairs. The longer this situation lasts, the more likely it is that authoritarian and martial habits will take root. And it may prove very difficult to supplant them, even after life returns to “normal.”



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## NOTES

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