



HAL
open science

Saadia Mosbah, Black Tunisian Activist, Arrested on 6 May 2024

Shreya Parikh

► **To cite this version:**

| Shreya Parikh. Saadia Mosbah, Black Tunisian Activist, Arrested on 6 May 2024. 2024. hal-04636358

HAL Id: hal-04636358

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-04636358>

Submitted on 5 Jul 2024

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial - NoDerivatives 4.0
International License

SAADIA MOSBAH, BLACK TUNISIAN ACTIVIST, ARRESTED ON 6 MAY 2024

Shreya Parikh, Sciences Po, Centre de recherches internationales (CERI), CNRS, Paris, France

In : *Jadaliyya*, 19 June 2024

URL : <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/46064/Saadia-Mosbah,-Black-Tunisian-activist,-arrested-on-6-May-2024>

Saadia Mosbah, prominent black Tunisian activist and president of Association M'nemty, was arrested on 6 May 2024. According to Bassem Trifi, lawyer and president of the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), her house was searched and she was placed under police custody while the police investigated the charges of “money laundering” against her organization. Saadia and her organization have spoken and acted in support of black migrants’ rights, especially following the anti-sub-Saharan migrant statement by President Kais Saied on 21 February 2023 and the anti-black violence that it triggered; this support has led to social media-based commentary against and arrest rumors about Saadia.

The rising anti-migrant discourses and violence, including the arrest and expulsion of black migrants into the desertic borders with Algeria and Libya, come in the light of the Tunisian state’s negotiations for financial aid from the European Union (EU); the EU has used this opportunity to strengthen the militarization and externalization of its borders into Tunisia. While the goal of EU’s policies is to curb the clandestine migration of Tunisians as well as other (mostly black) migrants, Saied has reframed EU’s policies and politics as ridding Tunisia of black migration. His populist discourses attribute the blame of structural inequalities like unemployment in Tunisia on ‘Africans’ – a vernacular term used to indicate the racial and foreign blackness of these migrants; today, any form of support for these migrants is seen as a critique of the state and may lead to an arrest, as is the case of Saadia.

While I was conducting fieldwork in Tunisia between 2020 and 2022, I had the honor of getting to know Saadia. I have followed her colossal work in support of black rights through her organization Association M'nemty: I have seen her conduct legal training sessions for black migrants, organize professional training programs to ease the socio-economic integration of black migrants, coordinate a legal team to support the filing of cases under the law criminalizing racial discrimination (Law 50 passed in 2018) that she was pivotal in lobbying for, and act as an informal emergency contact for many migrants (including myself) in Tunisia. It was Saadia who coordinated legal aid when I was refused entry into Tunisia in October 2021 and July 2022. It was through Saadia's legal network that I received support after I faced police detention and interrogation while in Tunisia.

Saadia's Biography

Saadia Mosbah, 64 years old, was born to Tunis-based Mosbah family, which traces its origins to the region of Gabès in the south of Tunisia, with her paternal ancestors tracing roots to Mali. Many members of the Mosbah family have been prominent public figures who have denounced anti-black racism since before the 2011 revolution; this includes her sister Affet Mosbah as well as her brother (and musician) Slah Mosbah.

Saadia was educated in a French Catholic school in Tunis. After obtaining her high school diploma, she started studying law. She began working for Tunisair, Tunisia's national airline, first as an airhostess, and, later, as a cabin manager. Her work was a site of many experiences of racial discrimination. For example, one of her colleagues refused to fly with her because they considered it "degrading to fly under the orders of oussifa [or slave]." Saadia was married for about 20 years and has a son. Watching her young son experience racial exclusion in the Tunisian society marked her deeply and became one of the key motivations for her fight against racism. Saadia founded Association M'nemty in 2013, after the 2011 revolution; under the authoritarian regime of then-President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali, she had

(unsuccessfully) tried twice to set up a civil society organization to address issues linked to racism.

After about three decades of working with Tunisair, Saadia retired from her position. She has since spent a significant amount of her time working with her organization M'nemty. When we met for the first time in 2020, she was planning to continue her studies in law and sociology; she noted that this education would help her understand the inequalities faced by black populations better.

Association M'nemty

M'nemty translates to 'My dream' and takes Martin Luther King's 1963 speech 'I have a dream' as its inspiration. In one of its earliest Facebook posts, M'nemty describes itself as "committed to the progressive and peaceful eradication of all forms of discrimination, racism, segregation and exclusion through education and the development of a new consciousness."

After its creation, one of M'nemty's key activities was organizing regular discussions among its mostly black and Tunis-based Tunisian members; for many of these Tunisians, M'nemty provided the first space for openly reflecting on anti-black racism and racial discrimination in the Tunisian society. Zied Rouin, black Tunisian activist (in his 30s) working as a project manager for M'nemty, noted during our 2020 interview that it was through these discussions that he overcame his denial about the existence of anti-black racism; unfortunately, on 6 May 2024, Zied was also detained with Saadia and released later. M'nemty has also been pivotal in raising public awareness about anti-black racism: for example, by organizing public events to mark the anniversary of the abolition of slavery on 23 January 1846 by Ahmed Bey, then-governor of Ottoman Tunisia. Black Tunisians make up around 10 to 15 percent of the population.

Over the decade following the 2011 revolution, activism by black Tunisian and migrant activists and civil society organizations has resulted in the passing of Law 50 criminalizing racial discrimination; Saadia and M'nemty were crucial in lobbying for and drafting of this law. M'nemty has since collaborated with Minority Rights Group and United Nations' High Commissioner for Human Rights to train lawyers to file cases under Law 50. It was through this legal collaboration that, in October 2020, 81-year-old Hamden Atig Dali successfully filed a case demanding the removal of 'Atig' from his last name; Atig, which translates as 'manumitted by,' marked Hamden as a descendant of ex-slaved black families. This landmark case has set the precedent for the filing of similar cases to remove stigmatizing last names indicating slavery descent and which are carried by many black families across Tunisia. In the recent years, M'nemty has sought to expand its activities to the south of Tunisia where a significant black Tunisian population, including those of slavery descent, live. In this light, M'nemty inaugurated a center in Gabès city in November 2023.

While Tunisia has been hosting a significant number of black students from francophone West and Central Africa since early 2000s, black migrants came to be constructed as a socio-political 'problem' following the setting of Choucha camp in 2011 for black migrants fleeing the civil war in neighboring Libya. Since then, the question of black rights in Tunisia has also become a question of migrant rights. It is in this light that M'nemty has come to lobby for the rights of black migrants living in or transiting through Tunisia.

Saadia's and M'nemty's Work in Support of Black Migrants

On 9 August 2023, Saadia Mosbah received the U.S. Secretary of State's Award for Global Anti-Racism Champions for "demonstrating exceptional courage, strength, leadership and commitment to advancing the human rights of black Tunisians, and combating systemic racism, discrimination and xenophobia while advocating for robust legal policy frameworks for the rights, dignity, and safety of black Tunisians."

What this misses out is her commitment to the rights and dignity of the black migrants in Tunisia.

Saadia and her organization have provided material and symbolic support to the sub-Saharan migrant communities in Tunisia since before President Kais Saied's anti-migrant statement in 2023. For example, during COVID-19-linked lockdown, M'nemty conducted an informal survey of black migrants in the neighborhood where they were located, and organized material aid; many of these migrants had lost their jobs due to lockdown and found themselves unable to pay for basic supplies. M'nemty-supported legal team also helps black migrants who face false accusations and linked police arrests. Unfortunately, the post-revolution political and social space in Tunisia has witnessed increasing repression since President Saied's coup d'état on 25 July 2021, making it increasingly difficult for organizations like M'nemty to continue working.

Populism, Xenophobia, and Anti-Blackness

Black individuals in Tunisia carry a double weight: the weight of black stigma and the weight of the taboo linked to speaking about this racism. Anyone who dares to speak about the persisting anti-blackness faces social (and, in many cases, political) harassment; Saadia Mosbah has faced accusations of 'separatism' (i.e., seeking to divide the Tunisian nation) and of 'importing foreign ideas.' Today, these (false) accusations take the form of conspiracy theories that Saadia is 'getting rich by allowing the colonization of Tunisia by African migrants.' Following Saadia's police interrogation, an arrest warrant was issued on 16 May 2024; she appeared before the tribunal on 22 May where the spokesperson of the tribunal clarified that her arrest is linked to her aiding the illegal entry of individuals in Tunisia, a punishable crime under the Tunisian law.

Saadia's arrest is a part of a series of ongoing arrests of Tunisian civil society actors. This includes Sherifa Riahi, former director of Terre d'asile Tunisie, who has been arrested on the grounds of aiding undocumented black migrants, a crime under Tunisian law. This also

includes lawyer and media personality Sonia Dahmani, who has been accused of spreading false information. In parallel, the Tunisian state has scaled up the arrests and deportations of black migrants.

Paradoxically, while Tunisia is trying to assert its autonomy from the Global North, it is more than ever integrated in a regional system for the limitation of migrant mobility and the repression of anti-racist voices.