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ARAB WORLD

## Tunisian NGO fights for political transparency

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جميع

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A Tunisian organization is monitoring the actions of government officials. Its aim is simple – to ensure greater transparency in politics so the country doesn't stray from its path towards democracy.

Al Bawsala has its office in an old building, in the heart of the city, adjacent to the bustling Tunis market. Al Bawsala ("The Compass") is a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) which wants to ensure that Tunisian politics is steered in the right direction. Apart from computers and internet access, the organization's five young workers need, above all, energy and a great deal of patience. Their aim is to achieve greater transparency in government by showing Tunisians what their politicians get up to behind closed doors.

### The result of 50 years of dictatorship

That's not yet always the case, as is exemplified in the constituent assembly. For almost a year now, the assembly has been working on a new constitution, but progress is slow. What goes on inside parliament is largely unknown to outsiders, and minutes are published only rarely and only after pressure. To counteract this lack of transparency, Al Bawsala publishes on its website Marsad.tn as much information possible about the constituent assembly. But the workers at the NGO want to achieve more.



The constituent assembly won't tell what happens at its meetings

The organization's 31-year-old director, Selim Kharrat, attributes the lack of a culture of transparency to Tunisia's more than 50 years of dictatorship. However, he says that even those who weren't part of the system and who came to power only after the revolution aren't necessarily any better. "None of the members of our current government who were in the opposition or in prison under Ben Ali has any notion of responsibility towards the Tunisian people," he says. But the politicians are accountable to the people: "They think that because they were elected that they get a free ride. Their whole way of thinking needs to change and that takes time."

### Putting pressure on politicians

Al Bawsala started a website, based on a German model, which helps citizens to directly post questions to their Members of Parliament. Their answers are then published on the website for everyone to see. The website allows Tunisians to check if their MPs are adhering to their campaign promises - and if they aren't, it gives them the opportunity to put pressure them to do so.



Kharrat want to expose more information on back door politics

In collaboration with the German site "Abgeordnetenwatch" ("MPwatch") and the Berlin organization MICT (Media in Cooperation and Transition), Al Bawsala developed its own version, adapting to it to the Tunisian context. However, Kharrat says that they can't do all their work over the internet because many MPs don't have internet connection in their offices. So Al Bawsala has appointed a parliamentary correspondent "to question MPs directly and to upload their answers as a video or audio file to the Internet." The answers are then available to Tunisians who, for the most part, have computer and Internet access.

## Fighting for democracy

Co-founder of Abgeordnetenwatch, Gregor Hackmack, is advising Al Bawsala. The German site has been online since 2004. Hackmack believes that the concept can also work well in Tunisia. "It's just a great opportunity to steer it in the right direction, now when institutions are just being formed and having to work out their procedures. I think Al Bawsala can make a big contribution with the Marsad.tn project." Hackmack says minor setbacks and daily confrontations with politicians shouldn't discourage the young team. "This is normal with democracy. You must continuously fight for it to be established."



Protestors celebrate the anniversary of the Tunisian revolution

Selim Kharrat, who returned from studying and working in France specifically to work for Al Bawsala, is optimistic that Tunisia's path toward democracy will be successful. "We will do it, just not tomorrow. It will take years." But Tunisia was doing quite well compared to other countries in the so-called Arabian Spring - at least the country hadn't sunk into violence. Tunisia held its first free elections in October 2011, and since then, it has been slowly moving along the path of democracy. Al Bawsala has already won its first victory after the NGO published details of how each MP voted over the dismissal of the head of the Tunisian Central Bank. Since then, the members of parliament are now well aware they're being watched.

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**Date** 12.09.2012

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12.09.2012

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