

Portrait

Slim Amamou – From Digital Activist to State Secretary

For hours he has been sitting on a plastic chair with his hands cuffed, secret service officers yelling at him. They want him to give up the damn password to his e-mail account. They took away his white smartphone, searching for contacts and compromising text messages. It is not the first time that 33-year-old software developer Slim Amamou has been arrested and held at the infamous Ministry of the Interior on Avenue Bourguiba in the centre of Tunisia's capital Tunis.

Somewhere down the corridor, Amamou can hear a woman screaming. They have told him they got his sister, too. A doctor scurries across the corridor. Amamou tries to fight

The police, too, who, early in January, had interrogated Amamou at the Ministry of the Interior had underestimated what a few clicks on his smartphone could do.

his rising panic, tries to keep a clear head. He knows, they may stick him in a dungeon, let him disappear for years. For months, the henchmen of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali have had their sights on the internet activist. Now they are accusing him of having been behind the hacking of government websites. It is the beginning of 2011 and the regime is very edgy. Tunisia is in rebellion. All over the country, angry young men have taken to the streets, protesting against poverty and unemployment. The security forces are trying to quell the protests using batons, tear gas,

and live rounds, too, yet the protesters will not budge. "We are no longer afraid," they shout at police. Slim Amamou is considered a saboteur, an enemy of the state, someone who has caused all this uproar.

A few weeks later Slim Amamou is walking down Avenue Bourguiba. The sun is shining and it seems as if, in the middle of winter, spring has arrived in the Arab world; it is the spring of freedom. For some weeks now, the feared dictator Ben Ali has been in exile in Saudi Arabia, and his Egyptian colleague Hosni Mubarak, faced with the strength of popular dissent, had had to give up too. In Jordan, Yemen, Algeria, Bahrain, Syria, and Libya, people are fed up with their regimes, which oppress them for so long.

Colorful graffiti on the walls of Tunis' white colonial era houses declare "Long live freedom" and "Thank you Facebook." Amamou who, only a few weeks ago, had been persecuted as an enemy of the state is now one of the hopefuls, one of the people to lead his country to freedom. "Somehow I've still not come to grips with what has happened," says Amamou. Until recently, he had only been an anonymous online activist and now, all of a sudden, he has to pose for press photographers and shake hands with European politicians. On January 14, 2011, four days after the overthrow of Ben Ali and only five days after having been released from prison, he was appointed minister. Now he is part of the country's new transitional government charged with preparing the first free elections in 60 years. In a country where 70% of people are younger than 30, the 33-year-old is Deputy Minister for Youth and Sports – a gargantuan task.



Eva Lehnen

German journalist Eva Lehnen writes for several journals and magazines and reports from the Middle East since 2009. She is based in Beirut, Lebanon.

Amamou's white smartphone is ringing continuously, his finger constantly tapping on the keyboard. Cheap plastic shells with internet access are the new symbols of power. The police, too, who, early in January, had interrogated Amamou at the Ministry of the Interior had underestimated what a few clicks on his smartphone could do. When they turned on the phone they took away from him and went online they had, within minutes, made the internet activist's covert arrest public knowledge. The mobile location app Google Latitude raised the alarm, as, on their screens, Amamou's friends could see his picture together with a map of Tunis and a pointer showing that his current location was at the Ministry of the Interior.

"We are with you, Slim. We'll not give up." The voice of young radio DJ Olfa Riahi is determined as she announces this on Tunisian radio station Express FM. Then she plays Bob Dylan's *Blowing in the Wind*. Thousands of Tunisians hear her at cafés, inside taxis, at their businesses, and online. Amamou may be in jail but he is still a step ahead of the regime.

For years the computer engineer has believed that modern technology is not just good for building shopping portals or music download websites but that it is a means to organize political resistance and that people like himself will be able to beat their oppressors by smartly using the internet. In the long run, they will be more effective than all the power at the state's command and the pressure they are able to exert peacefully will be able to overcome all repression.

This is just what happened in the days before the dictator's downfall. It was the third week of the uprising in Tunisia. For days, in the cities, the police had attacked demonstrators using tear gas and live rounds; thousands had been arrested. And now the dictator's henchmen had begun to reach out for the internet, too. With phishing attacks, they grabbed activists' passwords to their e-mail and Facebook accounts and deleted them. Helpless, many Tunisians could only watch as critical remarks



Slim Amamou

they had posted disappeared as if erased by an invisible hand.

Just then, out of the obscure depths of the internet, a friendly force came to their aid. Within only a few hours it had knocked out the websites of the prime minister, the president, the foreign minister, the stock exchange, and of four other government agencies. Wherever it appeared it left a black pirate ship as its signature, always followed by the same message: "An open letter to the government of Tunisia. Greetings from Anonymous. (...) Like a fistful of sand in the palm of your grip, the

Anonymous isn't a club – you can't apply for membership. Anonymous is an idea. It doesn't matter whether someone's Tunisian, Egyptian, Japanese, or German. The internet is the new nationality.

more you squeeze your citizens the more they will flow right out of your hand. The more you censor your own citizens the more they shall know about you and what you are doing. (...) Continue your oppression and this will just be the beginning." Where did these online pirates come from and who are they? Is Amamou part of Anonymous?

Instead of answering, the minister in his corduroy jacket and hoodie says conspiratorially: "Anonymous isn't a club – you can't apply for membership. Anonymous is an idea. It doesn't

matter whether someone's Tunisian, Egyptian, Japanese, or German. The internet is the new nationality." For years, online activists like him have been networking and working for a

Up until now, in the Arab world, it seemed there were only two ways for getting rid of dictators. Either the US would set its military machine, the largest in world, in motion, as happened in 2003 in Iraq, or one had to wait.

revolution in the Arab world. "We knew it would happen – just not exactly where and when."

In a region, containing some hundreds of million of people harrowed by dictators and at the end of their tether, a region where rage is rife and governments try everything to control the internet, for some time the question has been: When will a critical mass be reached? Amamou explains: "Once you have a certain number of users, state surveillance will fall apart. There will be ever new web pages, new groups, news eyewitnesses, film clips – protests spreading every second." This sounds as if he were rephrasing Anonymous' motto: „We are legion. We never forget, we never forgive. Expect us.“

That dictator Ben Ali would fall so fast surprised even someone as optimistic as Amamou. Last year, he speculated on his blog (just before it was blocked in Tunisia):

"In 2024, at the latest, we will have a new president."

Up until now, in the Arab world, it seemed there were only two ways for getting rid of dictators. Either the US would set its military machine, the largest in world, in motion, as happened in 2003 in Iraq, or one had to wait, as was the case with Ben Ali's predecessor Bourguiba, until nature had run its course.

Now, all of a sudden, the hope of democracy seems to be just a few clicks away. Tweets, Facebook posts, videos, and web raids such as the distributed denial of service (DDoS) attacks on government websites are the new weapons of choice to overthrow a hated regime: Programmers beat pistols, Twitter users vanquish terror squads. Traditional power structures are being turned upside down, and all of a sudden, people such as Amamou are in charge.

Every morning, somewhat outside the centre of Tunis, he has to thread his way through a crowd of people congregating in front of his office on the second floor of the Ministry of Youth and Sports. A mother blocks Amamou's way, demanding jobs for her sons. Graduates wrapped in the red and white flag of Tunisia demand to be hired as teachers. "Right now, I'm mainly a psychologist, I listen to what people have to say," says Amamou. Right now, everywhere in Tunisia's capital, one can observe what it means when people, all of a sudden, feel free and dare to say what is on their minds. Day after day, in front of the Casbah, the seat of government, and in front of the administrative buildings people will congregate to demand their rights: more jobs, fair food prices, higher wages. . They chant lines from Tunisia's national anthem. They come to present their grievances, to tell their stories. And they don't want mercy for those who they associate with the old regime. The last one too feel their rage was Amamou's boss, transitional premier minister Mohammed Ghanouchi. Ten thousands took to the streets until the former confidant of Ben Ali cleared his post. And Amamou? Also under Ghanouchi's successor he repeats what sounds like a mantra: "Folks, the transitional government is working hard – please have patience. A whole country has to be rebuilt – this can't be done overnight."

So far, the young minister did not have time to arrange his own office. His brown desktop is empty, a conference table is placed lengthwise, and the old computer the ministry has given him is turned off. Amamou's smartphone vibrates

almost non-stop. He checks the display, puts it back into the pocket of his brown corduroy jacket. Right now, he only reads his e-mails once every 48 hours. "My head's all in one big whirl. Since my arrest, I've been going without a break. I'm completely drained, really."

Yet, he cannot rest. First, he has to find out how to navigate this new country, his new life. What is most difficult? "To face criticism." The fact that some of the old ministers look at him askance, as he does not wear a tie for government meetings, is less of an issue. Much more difficult to stomach are accusations

Many Tunisians doubt that the transitional government will be able to achieve what millions desire. They are afraid that the new faces will follow old patterns and will not be working for the best of the country.

coming from other online activists, friends of his, who can not comprehend why one of their leading lights has changed sides: "Don't take this job – they're just using you," they say. "You're selling your soul!", "Slim, you're an idiot." Many Tunisians doubt that the transitional government will be able to achieve what millions desire. They are afraid that the new faces will follow old patterns and will not be working for the best of the country. Amamou, the beginner, too, is faced with criticism. Is he capable to manage his job in the first place? "I'm trying to take such accusations not too much to heart," says Amamou. "I tell myself, again and again, that it is a good thing that finally people dare to make their discontent public. What is the alternative? We've overthrown the old government and now we're supposed to look on as bystanders to see what the new one will do? This doesn't make sense. Plus, I think we're doing good work."

Still, Amamou has decided to withdraw from politics soon. "To know this loosens me up. I can say and call for the things I think are right without having to worry about my career." As soon as the first free and fair elections, the basis of democracy, have been organized, Amamou wants to resign and continue to work for his own computer company.

If this succeeds, will it mean that Tunisia's freedom has come thanks to the internet? Amamou disagrees: "This is a label that has been applied somewhat thoughtlessly to the events in Tunisia and Egypt. Without the people who actually took to the streets, our revolution wouldn't have happened. And satellite TV's played an important role, too." However, so has the online community, a confederation without borders – all for one, and one for all.

When, on January 28, 2011, Egyptian Google executive and online activist Wael Ghonim was arrested at Cairo's Tahrir Square, Amamou feared for a friend he mostly knows through his online activities. Only a few months ago, the Egyptian, now known around the world, had helped Amamou to regain access to his blocked Google account. It's a small world.

On February 7, Amamou tweeted from his account Slim_404: "Wael Ghonim is free. Our love goes out to him and his family." "404" is the error message for web pages that cannot be found – for example because they have been censored to prevent people from accessing information. The idea most dear to Amamou is that free access to knowledge will be enshrined in Tunisia's new constitution. In addition, he is working on new government websites, a network connecting ministries, and a platform for citizens to voice their grievances. Transparency is key. Those are seemingly strange activities for a Deputy Minister of Youth and Sports. Amamou is unconcerned: "Why not? In the new Tunisia the turf hasn't really been divvied up yet."

Just recently, Amamou has shown the Minister for Internet and Technology how to tweet. Many times a day, he will send news about his ministry to his Twitter followers,

admitting that he dented his new official car, reporting that Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi has asked him in person to stop tweeting live from meetings. What is Amamou's reaction? Four minutes later arrives his next tweet.

Hardly anybody in the transitional government has political experience. The new government as well as the people will first have to learn how to organize a democracy – and how to live in one. “On the one hand, I understand that the people out there hope things would move faster, that life will get better. On the other hand, I can become quite worked up when I hear some of the demonstrators' demands. What is somebody thinking who comes by to demand a pay rise? Do they seriously believe that that's the number one priority right now?” Especially in a country, where new laws have to

be drafted, old structures broken up, cronyism gotten rid off. Democracy is a gift but it is also a commitment – not just for the transitional government but for the people as a whole.

Amamou checks his watch, lunch break, he has to run. He has a doctor's appointment. Ever since the interrogation at the beginning of January, he is suffering from bad back pain. And how is his sister? The young state minister has a calm expression in his face. Ben Ali's people had lied to him. They did not hold his sister.

Published by Neon in April 2011 edition. Re-published with slight modifications and with kind permission of the author and Neon.

Translation from German by Bernd Herrmann.