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Letter to the rector of la Sapienza University concerning the honorary degree awarded to the Tunisian president

Professor **Antonella Polimeni**
Rector,
University of Roma La Sapienza

Madam Rector
Dear Colleague

We take the liberty of writing to you today to alert you to a worrying situation concerning your university. A senior politician, who was awarded an honorary doctorate by La Sapienza, has openly committed serious abuses against sub-Saharan African migrants residing in or transiting through his country, including students and refugees. This is the President of the Tunisian Republic, Mr. [Kaïs Saïed](#).

On February 21, 2023, during a meeting of the National Security Council, he [described](#) sub-Saharan migrants as “hordes of illegal migrants” and accused them of being responsible for “violence, crimes and unacceptable acts”, insisting on “the need to quickly end” this immigration. He further argued that this clandestine immigration was part of a “criminal enterprise hatched at the dawn of this century to change the demographic composition of Tunisia”, in order to transform it into an “African only” country and blur its “Arab-Muslim” character. These racist and xenophobic remarks by President Saïed triggered an unprecedented [wave of violence](#) against black Africans residing in Tunisia. Groups took to the streets, attacking black people indiscriminately, whether migrants,

students or asylum seekers. The police forces arrested and expelled many individuals from these communities.

More recently, the city of Sfax, in central Tunisia, has witnessed great tension between the local population and sub-Saharan migrants. Tunisian residents [campaigned](#) for the departure of African foreigners, which led to attacks on black people and clashes with Tunisians. A [Beninese](#) was killed in May and a [Tunisian](#) on July 3. Tunisian police, national guard and army have carried out raids in and around Sfax, arbitrarily arresting hundreds of black African foreigners, including students, asylum seekers, children and pregnant women. They [forcibly expelled or transferred](#), without any respect for legal procedures, up to [1,200 people](#), divided into several groups, to the Libyan and Algerian borders. These people were forced to walk in the desert without sufficient food or water, pushed back by Tunisian, Algerian and Libyan security forces. Several of them said they were beaten and assaulted by members of the national guard or soldiers during their deportation; a 16-year-old girl, in particular, claimed to have been sexually assaulted. These abuses were condemned by [United Nations experts](#) and by several human rights organizations including Human Rights Watch, which published a [detailed report](#), and the [Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights](#).

This murderous violence cannot leave your University indifferent. While climate and political changes are increasing the number of refugees of African origin, you have publicly expressed your concern to preserve their lives and their dignity by joining the [UNICORE](#) project (University Corridors for Refugees), promoted by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Far from pushing them back into a desert where they are exposed to thirst, hunger and heat, you are thus offering refugee students from African territories the possibility of continuing their studies in Italian universities.

And yet, on June 16, 2021, the same year that La Sapienza University joined the UNICORE project, it [awarded](#) Mr. Saïed an honorary doctorate in Roman law, theory of legal systems and private market law. Barely a month later, he triggered a coup against the young Tunisian democracy. Since then, he has taken a [series of measures](#) aimed at concentrating power in his hands, undermining essential institutional foundations for human rights, including undermining the [independence of the judiciary](#) and the [right to freedom of expression](#). On July 25, 2022, President Saïed organized a referendum for the adoption of a new [constitution](#) that he drafted himself. This text repealed the 2014 constitution, which you praised in your [speech](#) during the honorary doctorate ceremony, and established a new constitutional order which strengthens the executive power (in particular the powers of the President of the Republic) to the detriment of the legislative and judicial powers. This led Italian colleagues to [ask](#) you in January 2022 to withdraw the honorary title conferred to President Saïed, considering that his actions already contradicted the fundamental principles that your institution represents.

It seems inconceivable to us that Mr. Saïed can still boast of the title of doctor honoris causa in law from La Sapienza University. After the coup, the ratonnades. After the establishment of an authoritarian regime, a racist and murderous campaign against black people because they are black. And we may not have seen the worst yet: Mr Saïed has just concluded a [memorandum of understanding](#) with the EU under which the European Union agrees to grant Tunisia development aid in return for controlling migratory flows. We note in particular “*technical assistance*” from the EU intended to allow “*effective border management, the development of a system for the identification and return of irregular migrants already present in Tunisia to their countries of origin*”. When we see how migrants are currently treated, we can only worry about the multiplier effect that this “technical aid” will have. The international

organizations for the defense of human rights were not mistaken, and [unanimously denounced this agreement](#).

There have always been dictators who come to power by overthrowing the constitutional order and who maintain it by stirring up the lowest instincts of the population, such as racism. What is exceptional in this situation is that a reputable university grants him an honorary doctorate, in law moreover, in full knowledge of the facts. Maintaining this title associates La Sapienza with an authoritarian and racist regime, and legitimizes its abuses.

Mrs Rector, the worst dictators die one day, but universities do not. They are institutions of knowledge and education, whose purpose is to sustain these values through the ages, and they have a reputation to maintain. Almost fifty years ago, in 1975, the University of Nice [granted](#) an honorary doctorate to Nicolae Ceausescu, president of Romania. He is long gone, but the memory of his crimes is not, and the good name of the University of Nice is tarnished forever by its association with him. We do not wish such a fate to La Sapienza.

We call on you to reconsider the honorary title granted to Mr. Kaïs Saïed.

Respectfully yours

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