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## **One year on, Tunisians still waiting for human rights overhaul**

Tunisia's interim government is yet to deliver the comprehensive human rights reform that protesters were calling for a year ago, Amnesty International said today.

A year after former President Zine al Abidine Ben Ali fled the country, the authorities have taken some positive initial steps, including signing up to key human rights treaties and allowing greater freedom for media and human rights organizations.

But Amnesty International said that the country's security forces remain largely unaccountable and victims of human rights violations are still waiting for justice.“

There have been some encouraging signals from the interim government in the direction of human rights reform,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Amnesty International Middle East and North Africa Deputy Director. “But for many Tunisians the pace of change has been too slow.”

“Until we see a new constitution that guarantees fundamental rights, accountability for abuses and the establishment of the rule of law it is too early to tell whether the political will for real human rights change is there.”

### **Pressing concerns**

Amnesty International said that a radical shakeup of the security forces should be an urgent priority for the authorities in 2012.

In March 2011 the feared Department of State Security (DSS), responsible for years of abuse under Ben Ali, was abolished. But there are fears that the members of these forces have simply been integrated into other security forces, which remain opaque and unaccountable.

Amnesty International has documented a number of incidents since Ben Ali stepped down where protests and sit-ins have been forcibly dispersed and protesters beaten up.

The organization called on the Tunisian government to make public clear instructions on the use of force and establish an independent body to oversee the work of the security forces.

The organization also said that the government had not responded adequately to demands for justice for past abuses, both during the uprising and the repression of the previous 23 years.

According to the official figures, at least 300 people died and 700 were injured during the uprising in December 2010 and January 2011.

While Ben Ali and his family members were tried – some in absentia – on corruption and other charges in June, Tunisians had to wait until November to see Ben Ali being tried, again in absentia, along with about

40 other senior officials, for the killing of protesters. Ben Ali remains at large in Saudi Arabia in spite of attempts by the Tunisian authorities to secure his extradition.

A fact-finding commission into violations during the protests has still not reported, and few perpetrators have been prosecuted.

Some high level security officers accused of abuses initially simply refused to be questioned, and though investigations into some cases were initiated by civilian courts, some judges proved unwilling or unable to carry out full and independent investigations.

The families of those killed or injured by government forces have told Amnesty International that many of the alleged perpetrators are still free and that some have even been promoted.

“If the government is serious about protecting human rights and establishing the rule of law, they cannot skip providing truth and justice to the families of those killed or those injured and holding those responsible to account,” said Hassiba Hadj-Sahraoui.

### **Positive steps**

Amnesty International said the decision of the Tunisian authorities to sign up to a number of key international human rights treaties in 2011 was a welcome step.

Tunisia has in the last year joined the International Criminal Court and withdrawn its reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

But many women have expressed concern that in the political transition they were marginalized by political parties, which put forward mostly men as their main candidates for elections.

In other positive developments, political prisoners and prisoners of conscience held before the uprising were released and the systematic harassment and limits on former political prisoners by security forces ended. However no comprehensive reparation and rehabilitation scheme had been put in place.

Following the uprising human rights organizations have been able to meet freely for the first time. The Tunisian League for Human Rights held its first annual congress in over a decade in September, an event attended by the interim Prime Minister.

After October elections the new coalition government was formed. Moncef Marzouki, a human rights activist and former Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, is the country’s interim president.

In a meeting with Tunisian civil society, Moncef Marzouki signed Amnesty International’s Manifesto for Change, pledging to uphold 10 key human rights measures.

### **New constitution**

The organization said that the drafting of the new constitution was a key opportunity to embed human rights into the country’s institutions, and called for the new document to enshrine the principle of non-discrimination and independence of the judiciary.

“The National Constituent Assembly has a big responsibility now to break with the abuses of the past and ensure human rights are enshrined in the constitution,” said Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui. “It must take the chance of drafting the new constitution to guarantee the protection of human rights and equality under the law.”

“Tunisians won’t be satisfied with piecemeal reforms. A key test will be the ability of the authorities to deliver on economic and social rights with all the challenges they represent.”

## **Background**

- The caretaker government ratified key international human rights treaties in 2011, including:
- the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights;
- the Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment;
- the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance;
- the authorities have withdrawn specific reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); and
- Tunisia became the 116th state party to the Rome Statute on the International Criminal Court in July 2011.

## **Notes for editors**

- Amnesty International's key human rights recommendations for Tunisia are contained in its [Agenda for Change](#) released after the fall of Ben Ali.
- Amnesty International experts are available for interview on development in Tunisia, in English, French and Arabic