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Tunisia: Hundreds of prisoners released -- A positive step but up to 1,000 still detained after unfair trials

The release of 600 political prisoners, according to official figures, is a positive step but up to 1,000 political prisoners sentenced after unfair trial are still detained, Amnesty International said today.

Hundreds of political prisoners, including some prisoners of conscience, were released around 7 November on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali's accession to power. Most of the released prisoners are alleged members of the unauthorized Islamist group *al-Nahda*, and a few are alleged members of the unauthorized *Parti communiste des ouvriers tunisiens* (PCOT, Tunisian Workers' Communist Party). Most of them were serving long prison terms imposed after trials that did not comply with minimum standards for fairness.

"Once again, these releases show that international public opinion matters and that the lobbying efforts of the human rights community do have an impact," the organization said.

In recent years, human rights organizations at the national, regional and international level have campaigned to bring to light the scale and gravity of human rights violations in Tunisia and to disclose the gap between the official rhetoric and the reality of the human rights situation. United Nations human rights treaty bodies and mechanisms have repeatedly condemned Tunisia for its non-compliance with minimum international human rights standards.

Amnesty International however remains concerned by the fact that these releases are conditional: those released could be re-arrested at any time upon the decision of the Ministry of the Interior. Moreover, all Islamist released prisoners are reportedly subjected to "administrative control", a measure which often requires them to register daily in a police station.

These releases could hopefully symbolize the beginning of a new era, if they are followed by significant measures to change human rights practices. Today, Amnesty International calls on the Tunisian authorities to:

- release or retry according to international standards for fair trial all political prisoners convicted and sentenced after unfair trials;
- ensure that human rights defenders, who have been increasingly targeted and prevented from carrying out their work, are protected and allowed to carry their human rights activities, without interference, intimidation or persecution;
- repeal or amend laws which authorize the imprisonment of prisoners and conscience to bring them into compliance with the human rights international standards ratified by Tunisia.

Among those released were several prisoners of conscience, on behalf of whom Amnesty International had campaigned:

* **Mohamed Habib Hemissi**, the relative of prominent exiled leaders of *al-Nahda*, was sentenced to ten years' imprisonment in 1997 on charges of membership of *al-Nahda* and after he refused to collaborate with the police. He was released during the night of 7 November. He thanked Amnesty International members for all their efforts and especially those who had written to him: "they gave me more than anybody else in my life and their letters have been a great support too for my fellow inmates."

* **Najib Baccouchi, Chedli Hammami, Taha Sassi, Noureddine Benticha and Ali Jallouli**, five students who had been arrested at spring 1998 after students demonstrations and sentenced to up to four years' imprisonment on charges of membership of the PCOT in a grossly unfair trial in July 1999, were released on 6 November.

***Mahjouba Boukhris**, the mother of three and the wife of an imprisoned alleged member of *al-Nahda*, who had been sentenced to seven years' imprisonment in 1996 for her alleged links with *al-Nahda*, is also among the released.

Background

In June and July 1999, five prisoners of conscience, including four women, had been released before completion of their sentence, after an international lobbying campaign on their behalf.

Since 1990, the Tunisian authorities have increasingly repressed known or suspected members and sympathizers of political opposition groups, government critics, and their relatives. Thousands, mainly members of the unauthorized Islamist group *al-Nahda*, have been detained, tortured (dozens died as a result of torture) and sentenced to prison terms. Some of them were sentenced more than once on the same charges.

The circle of repression has continued to widen and in recent years human rights defenders who have spoken out against the deterioration of the human rights situation in the country have themselves been increasingly targeted.

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