

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

OP-ED

AI Index: MDE 30/013/2013
8 August 2013

Time for Security Reform in Tunisia

By Hassiba Hadj Sahraoui, Deputy Director for the Middle East and North Africa at Amnesty International

“The police surrounded me and started to beat me with their hands, their feet, their sticks – everything. They continued to beat me all the way to Bouchoucha.”

These are the words of Oussama Bouajlia, a young Tunisian activist describing his arrest by security forces at a protest last month, on the same day the opposition politician Mohamed Brahmi was slain. Many Tunisians had hoped that after the toppling of President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in a wave of mass protests in 2011, they would never have to hear such stories again. Reform of the security sector remains a crucial challenge as Tunisia struggles to confront a burgeoning political crisis coupled with security threats. The country was still reeling from its second political assassination in recent months when armed fighters killed and mutilated eight soldiers on Mount Chaambi near the border with Algeria on July 29. Meanwhile, demonstrators who have taken to the streets calling for the dissolution of the government and National Constituent Assembly (NCA), the body responsible for drafting the constitution, have faced repressive tactics reminiscent of the police abuses which had been a trademark of Ben Ali’s rule.

The misconduct of security forces against demonstrators speaks louder than the Ministry of Interior’s statements to protect the right to peaceful protest. Mohamed Belmufti, an activist with the Popular Front political party coalition, was killed when a tear gas canister struck his face during a demonstration in Gafsa on 26 July. A French-German photojournalist Lucas Delega died the same way while covering an anti-government protest during the Tunisian uprising in 2011. More than two years on, security forces continue to misuse tear gas – evidence that they have yet to be adequately trained in the lawful use of force.

Hamza Belhaj Mohamed, an activist with the Socialist Party, was injured on 29 July as security officers forcibly dispersed a protest in front of the NCA building, known as the Bardo Palace. Eyewitnesses claimed that, in addition to firing tear gas, security officers used vehicles to chase protesters out of the area. Hamza’s leg was fractured multiple times when a police car knocked him to the ground and drove over him twice.

Recent protests have been fuelled by the severe erosion of public trust in the authorities after a failure to adequately investigate violence against government critics or the killing of opposition politicians. Months afterwards, the killing of Lotfi Naguef from the Nidaa Tounes party in the southern city of Tataouine last October remains unsolved. Meanwhile, progress on the investigation of Chokri Belaid’s killing was only unveiled in the wake of Mohamed Brahmi’s assassination, when the authorities revealed that the same gun was used in the assassinations of both men, who were vocal critics of Ennahda and members of the Popular Front.

Tunisia’s Interior Minister Lofti Ben Jeddou has promised to protect anyone who receives serious death threats and asks for protection. Yet Ammar Amroussia, a leader of the Workers’ Party, part of the Popular Front coalition, told Amnesty International that his request for protection has remained unanswered since February. The veteran political leader from the mining hub of Gafsa has received fresh death threats in recent days.

“They accuse me of being behind all the demonstrations. They’ve threatened me so many times by now it’s almost become part of my everyday life,” he said.

Meanwhile, attacks have been carried out by groups believed to include the vigilante Leagues of Protection of the Revolution and other groups against those they deem to be critical of Ennahdha or to have offended Islam through their art. The lack of accountability for such crimes has helped fuel a climate of mistrust and political polarization. It took an attack on the U.S. embassy last September for the authorities to begin to address such violence.

Reforming the Interior Ministry is no easy task – but steps taken so far have failed to satisfy most Tunisians. Despite the dissolution in 2011 of the feared Department of State Security (DSS), responsible for years of human rights abuses under Ben Ali, security forces continue to perpetrate human rights violations with impunity. Assaults by security forces on demonstrators and journalists, including those on April 9, 2012 as Tunisians protested in solidarity with victims of the 2011 uprising, have not been conclusively investigated, despite the formation of a parliamentary committee of inquiry. Ministry of Interior officials have failed to devise clear reform plans, while multiplying allegations that informal militias and parallel bodies exist within the ministry reveal growing public distrust.

As protests continue, the Ministry of Interior needs to signal its will to regain the trust of the people by granting effective protection to politicians and activists targeted by death threats, and by investigating and prosecuting individuals or groups who use violence against or threaten others. Transparent guidelines must be issued on policing demonstrations in a way that upholds the right of Tunisians to protest, a right they have fought for. Those responsible for unlawful use of force must be held accountable. Security forces must also be vetted and trained according to international human rights standards and security and intelligence structures and chains of command must be made public.

Only concrete steps will convince the Tunisian people that true reform is underway. Reforming Tunisia’s “deep state”, including the security sector, remains the main challenge to securing Tunisians’ human rights in months ahead. Only then will the Ministry of Interior fully transition from its position at the heart of an authoritarian apparatus, to its new role of serving and protecting all citizens regardless of their political leanings.