

AI Index: PRE 01/029/2011
24 January 2011

Tunisia must act decisively to break with Ben Ali's legacy of abuse

Amnesty International has today called on the Tunisian authorities to fundamentally overhaul the country's repressive security apparatus and justice system as part of a human rights action plan to be presented to the new government.

"This is a critical moment for Tunisia" said Claudio Cordone, Amnesty International's Senior Director for Research and Regional Programmes.

"Those now in power have an unprecedented opportunity to make fundamental and lasting reforms and to break with Ben Ali's legacy of decades of abuse. Tunisians deserve real, not cosmetic change."

The call came as unrest and political uncertainty continued to grip Tunisia and threaten its new caretaker government, formed following the flight of the former president and his family 10 days ago.

"As a first step, the new government must immediately rein in the security forces which have for so long harassed and oppressed ordinary Tunisians, and make them accountable under the law.

"Human rights cannot be an optional part of the new government's programme but must be placed at the very foundation if Tunisian institutions are to be made just and accountable."

Amnesty International has welcomed the new government's pledge to release all political prisoners but its Human Rights Agenda for Change demands other urgent and far-reaching action by the authorities:

- The security forces must be fundamentally overhauled. From now on, no member of the security apparatus should be above the law. The continuing use of live fire to disperse protesters underscores the urgent need to publicly issue clear instructions on the use of force.
- The authorities must publicly condemn torture and move swiftly to eradicate it, including by bringing to justice those who order, commit or try to cover up torture and by providing reparation to the victims.
- Tunisians need to trust that the justice system will treat them fairly. Judges must be given independence and security of tenure for them to be able to protect Tunisians.
- Tunisians must be allowed to speak and act freely. The authorities must repeal all laws which criminalize the peaceful exercise of the rights to freedom of expression, association and assembly, and stop harassing former political prisoners, including abolishing the restrictions which ban them from travelling outside Tunisia.
- The root causes of the current protests must be urgently addressed by ending discrimination and abuse of power, and the inequality of access to essential public services and ensuring the minimum essential levels of economic, social and cultural rights for the whole population.

Reform without a proper investigation into the abuses which were the hallmark of Ben Ali's rule would remain hollow. Amnesty International therefore calls on the Tunisian authorities to fully investigate the last two decades of human rights violations, including the events of recent weeks, to provide Tunisians with truth, justice and reparation. "Tunisians are looking forward to a proper investigation, not toothless commissions with no power to compel officials to testify," said Claudio Cordone.

"Tunisians must be told the truth about the repression and abuse of power that occurred, and those who were its victims must have access to justice and reparation."

See the full [*Tunisia: Human rights agenda for change*](#)