

# Tunisia after Ben Ali: retooling the tools of oppression?

By Derek Lutterbeck

## ■ Executive summary

Tunisia under Ben Ali was a police state par excellence and reforming the country's internal security apparatus has thus been one of the major challenges since the long-standing autocrat's fall. This policy brief examines the various efforts to reform Tunisia's internal security system in the post-Ben Ali period and the challenges this process faces. It argues that reforms in this area have been limited so far, focusing mainly on purges rather than on broader structural or institutional reform of the country's police force. Moreover, not only have human rights violations committed by the police – despite important improvements – continued on a significant scale, but there are also concerns that the police will once again be instrumentalised for political purposes, this time by the Ennahda-led government. Indications to this effect have included in particular the seeming complacency of the police vis-à-vis the growth in religiously inspired violence. The recent killing of opposition leader Chokri Belaid in the first political assassination in Tunisia since Ben Ali's fall has further underscored the need to reform the country's internal security system.

## Introduction

Since the toppling of Tunisia's long-standing autocrat, Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, in January 2011 the country has made some significant steps towards establishing a more democratic regime. The most important of these so far has certainly been the holding of the country's first free and fair elections in late 2011, which were won by the moderate Islamist – and previously banned – Ennahda party. However, in its transition towards democracy Tunisia remains confronted with a number of significant challenges, both political and economic. One of the key issues of the post-Ben Ali period has been the reform of the former autocrat's main instrument of oppression: Tunisia's internal security apparatus. This policy brief discusses the various efforts to reform the country's internal security system since the fall of the Ben Ali regime and the challenges this process faces.

## Ben Ali's police state

Tunisia under Ben Ali was commonly considered a police state par excellence. The police not only served as the Tunisian autocrat's main source of power, but also as his

principal instrument for repressing internal dissent. Ben Ali's ascent to the presidency is revealing in this respect. While military leaders in many Arab states came to power through military coups, Ben Ali – despite his military background – did so through Tunisia's internal security system. Before he removed then-president Habib Bourguiba from office, Ben Ali occupied the post of director-general of national security, which is the highest position within Tunisia's police structures, and subsequently that of interior minister. This position gave him command over the country's police and internal security forces and enabled him to topple Bourguiba. Rather than a military coup, therefore, it was a "police coup", and throughout Ben Ali's presidency the internal security apparatus rather than the military formed the backbone of his regime.

Tunisia under Ben Ali was generally viewed as one of the most heavily policed states in the world. Estimates by both domestic and international human rights organisations put the number of police officers in Tunisia at anywhere between 130,000 and 200,000. This would have meant that Tunisia had a ratio of police officers to inhabitants that was three to four times higher than even the most heavily

policed countries in Europe. While after the fall of Ben Ali these figures turned out to be vastly exaggerated, the commonly held perception of such overwhelmingly large police forces is in itself telling, highlighting that the police in Tunisia were commonly seen as omnipresent, closely monitoring the population and suppressing any (potentially) “suspicious” activity or dissent.

As the main pillar of Ben Ali’s authoritarian regime, the police were certainly the most feared and reviled institution in Tunisia, and abuses committed by police officers were widespread. As reported by numerous human rights organisations, these included practices such as arbitrary arrests and detention, harassment of political opponents or anyone considered politically “suspicious”, and the regular use of torture and other forms of inhuman or degrading treatment. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the event that sparked the anti-regime uprising in Tunisia that started the Arab Spring was an abuse committed by a police officer against an ordinary citizen.

### **The challenges of police reform after Ben Ali’s fall**

Given the oppressive nature of the Tunisian police force and its centrality to the Ben Ali regime, reforming the country’s internal security apparatus has commonly been seen as one of the key challenges of the post-Ben Ali period. Both the initial transitional government and the Ennahda-led government that came to power after the elections in late 2011 have – at least in principle – committed themselves to transforming the Tunisian police force from an instrument of repression into a “republican” force that would serve the interests of the nation and its citizens rather than the regime in power. There is also common agreement that such a transformation would require changes on at least three levels: the legislative level, where there is a need to establish a clearer legal framework for practically all areas of police work and organisation, as well as to abolish or amend the repressive laws of the former regime; the institutional level, where reforms should focus on the greater transparency and accountability of the police force; and the level of “police culture”, which should be transformed from a culture of repression and abuse with impunity to a culture of respect for the rule of law and human rights.

However, rather than engaging in such broad, structural reforms, the efforts of both the initial transitional government and the Ennahda-led government have thus far focused mainly on purges within the country’s internal security apparatus, as well as some rather cosmetic improvements. For example, the main action in this area under the first transitional government of Beji Caïd al-Sebsi was the dismissal of some 40 high-level officials from the Interior Ministry. The al-Sebsi government also announced the dissolution of the country’s so-called “political police”, but many observers agree that this has been a largely symbolic act, given that under Ben Ali large

parts of the Tunisian police force acted as “political police”, so that disbanding a single agency hardly made any difference. Moreover, in late 2011 the al-Sebsi government issued a White Paper on Police Reform entitled “Security and development: towards security in the service of democracy”. However, the White Paper has never been made public and few – if any – of its recommendations seem to have been implemented so far. The only noticeable measures taken by the al-Sebsi government in this area were the adoption of a new communication strategy by the Interior Ministry, including the creation of a Facebook page and the introduction of a new police uniform.

Largely the same can be said of the current Ennahda-led government. Despite the fact that many of its members, including the interior minister, Ali Larayedh, are former political prisoners who experienced severe abuses at the hands of the police, no major overhaul of the country’s internal security system has been undertaken so far. Larayedh has sacked a number of high-level officials who were considered too closely associated with the former regime, but has not engaged in any more far-reaching structural, institutional or legal reforms of the country’s internal security apparatus.

It is noteworthy that among the most vocal advocates of internal security reforms have been the police unions that were formed in the aftermath of the fall of the Ben Ali regime (previously, police officers were not allowed to form unions). These unions have in particular called for an improvement in the welfare and working conditions of police officers and the establishment of clearer legal frameworks for all aspects of police work, ranging from recruitment and promotions to training and remuneration. Indeed, even though the police were Ben Ali’s main instrument of repression, the working conditions of Tunisian police officers under the former regime were very difficult – apart from the highest cadres, they too were exploited by the Ben Ali regime. The abovementioned estimates of the number of police officers in Tunisia are telling in this respect. Rather than 150,000 or even 200,000 police officers, as was commonly assumed, after Ben Ali’s fall of it was revealed that the real number of police officers in Tunisia was much lower, around 50,000. The massive overestimation of their numbers had been mainly a consequence of Tunisian police officers’ excessively long working hours, which could easily average 12 or more hours per day. Moreover, police officers in Tunisia were poorly paid, with an average salary of around \$230 per month, which was less than the wage of a bus driver and only around half that of a low-ranking bank employee. The widespread corruption within the Tunisian police was also a consequence of this precarious material situation and arguably a deliberate strategy of the former regime.

Because the Ennahda government has thus far failed to implement any significant reforms of the country’s internal security system, the police unions have voiced their growing dissatisfaction with the interior minister. Notably,

in a recent sit-in in the centre of Tunis by all major police unions, the French slogan “*dégage*”, which was originally used during the popular uprising against Ben Ali, was addressed at Interior Minister Larayedh.

### The human rights situation and police behaviour in the post-Ben Ali period

Clearly, the overall human rights situation in Tunisia since Ben Ali’s overthrow has improved markedly. The 2011 elections were generally considered free and fair, political prisoners have been released, and freedom of expression and other fundamental rights have been expanded significantly, if not dramatically. Freedom House now qualifies Tunisia as “partly free”, with the main improvements recorded in the field of political rights, whereas during most of the Ben Ali period it was considered “not free”.

Serious shortcomings in Tunisia’s human rights situation remain, however, and the absence of significant police reforms so far has been one – if not *the* – main reason for this. Thus, as both Tunisian and international human rights organisations have documented, human rights abuses committed by the police have continued on a considerable scale. These have included in particular the use of disproportionate force in dispersing demonstrations, arbitrary arrests, and the harassment of journalists and political activists. Moreover, even though torture is no longer committed on the same scale as under the previous regime, numerous reports of torture by police officers have surfaced over the last two years.

In addition there are some indications that the police may again be instrumentalised for political purposes, this time by the Ennahda-led government. This has concerned in particular the seeming complacency of the police vis-à-vis violent acts committed by radical Islamists (Salafists). In the post-Ben Ali period Tunisia has generally seen a rise in Salafist-inspired violence, involving, for example, attacks on restaurants selling alcohol, the harassment of journalists and artists, or the storming of the U.S. Embassy in Tunis. The Ennahda government has been accused of not doing enough to prevent such acts, despite its verbal condemnation of them. More recently the so-called Leagues for the Protection of the Revolution have also committed a number of attacks on opposition politicians, unionists and civil society organisations. Officially these organisations declare themselves to be guarantors of the

achievements of the Tunisian revolution, but many see them as an unofficial militia linked to the Ennahda party.

The assassination of opposition leader Chokri Belaid in early February 2013 has further underscored the need to reform the country’s internal security apparatus. Even though allegations made by some journalists and opposition leaders of the Interior Ministry’s or the Ennahda party’s implication in the murder have not been proven, the incident at the very least highlights the inability of the country’s security forces to adequately protect opposition politicians. Marking the first “political assassination” in Tunisia since the fall of Ben Ali, Belaid’s killing has also led to the most serious crisis of the Ennahda-led government so far, with large-scale demonstrations across the country as well as the first general strike since 1978. After lengthy negotiations, and initial refusals of Ennahda to cede control over the interior and other key ministries, a new government was formed. While (perhaps ironically) Larayedh was appointed Prime Minister, several key ministries, including the Interior Ministry, were handed over to political independents.

Finally, according to human rights organisations, there have also been a growing number of instances of police harassment of women for “indecent” clothing or other allegedly “immoral” behaviour. Many have seen this as indicative of Ennahda’s efforts to instrumentalise the police for its own purposes. The most widely publicised case involved a young woman who was raped by three policemen after she was found in her car together with her fiancé. When the woman filed a complaint against the three police officers she was herself charged with “premeditated indecency”, which is punishable under Tunisian law.

Thus, despite Tunisia’s many achievements since Ben Ali’s fall, there is a need for the revolution to continue and to be extended to the former regime’s main instrument of repression. Given the severe economic challenges the country is still facing – such as high levels of general unemployment (19%) especially among the young (40%), a growing fiscal deficit and a still-slow recovery after the 2011 recession – popular unrest is likely to persist, especially in Tunisia’s most disaffected regions. This too will continue to pose challenges to the country’s internal security system, whose effective reform will be key to Tunisia’s transition towards more democratic governance. ■

## ■ THE AUTHOR

**Derek Lutterbeck** is deputy director and holder of the Swiss Chair at the Mediterranean Academy of Diplomatic Studies in Malta. His research focuses mainly on security and security sector reform issues in the Mediterranean region, and he has published widely on these topics. He holds a PhD in political science from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva.

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