

Tunisian Conference Probes Police Reforms

Author: [Megan Radford](#)

Some say too little has changed since reforms were launched after 2011 revolution.

After the Tunisian uprising of 2011, transforming the police force from an instrument of repression into an institution fit for a democracy became a priority for the incoming administration.

Nearly two years after the fall of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, officials and civil society groups on Tunis gathered to discuss progress. The Regional Conference on Police Reform was held on January 25-26 by the Reform Tunisia group, with IWPR as one of the co-organisers.

The event brought government officials, civil society members from Tunisia, and experts from around the world together for the kind of dialogue that would never have been possible in Ben Ali's time.

Said Mechichi, secretary of state in charge of police reforms at the interior ministry, told participants that changes were under way, mostly in Tunisia's police colleges.

"Officers receive 30 hours of human rights training," he said, adding that this never happened under Ben Ali's rule.

"Everyone must participate in this reform," Mechichi said. While welcoming greater public engagement, he said the government would not be conducting surveys to assess people's view of the process.

Mechichi also disagreed with comments from some of the conference participants about the extent of public anger at continuing police violence and torture.

"I don't think it's total dissatisfaction," Mechichi said.

One young man disagreed. Facing the audience on crutches, his trousers pinned up over his amputated leg – the result of a police shooting during the 2011 revolution, he said, "The security forces still have the same mindset. There has been no change at all."

He said the Tunisian interior ministry had yet to publicly identify the police officers who shot protesters like himself.

"If you want to gain people's trust and confidence, you have to disclose the truth. "I'm 22 and my whole life has been destroyed, but I'm still hoping to find the truth," the young man said to applause from the hall.

Conference organiser Bassem Bouguerra said that ahead of the event, the interior ministry had promised to send representatives to attend. After the first panel discussion, however, one of the organisers asked whether any ministry staff were still present, and no one spoke up.

People in the audience reacted with a mix of amusement and dismay. One woman called out, "They aren't interested!"

Although ministry staff did not participate after the first debate, a number of police officers and members of their trade union were present.

During the last session of the day, Sahbi Jouini of the Tunisian police union defended his members, saying, "We are proud to be police officers. We have chosen this career and we believe in the job we are doing."

Jouini said his union needed support from civil society groups if police officers were to stand up to corruption and other abuses. If that happen, he warned, police officers would remain "slaves to the ministry".

The challenges now facing the police, and their rights and working conditions, featured prominently during discussions at the conference. The police face particular dangers on the borders with Algeria and Libya, they lack decent equipment, and their living conditions are tough.

As Christopher Stone, president of the New York based Open Society Foundations, told the conference, "If civil society wants to play a real role in police reform, we have to be concerned with the rights of everyone, even police officers."

A workshop held on the second day focused on the next steps in the reform process. Most participants agreed that the conference had helped delineate what the problems were, but as South African criminal

justice and security expert Sean Tait put it, it was now up to the country's government and civil society groups to continue talking and "articulate what reform looks like in Tunisia".

Abdessattar Ben Moussa, head of the Tunisian Human Rights League, called for "better institutional channels of communication" to facilitate dialogue between officials and non-government groups in future.

Megan Radford is a freelance journalist from Canada, currently working as a consultant for IWPR in Tunisia.

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