

Human Rights Watch

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The Tunisian government is holding dozens of political prisoners in inhumane conditions of solitary confinement, Human Rights Watch said in a report released today.

The 33-page report, Tunisia: Long-Term Solitary Confinement of Political Prisoners, documents how the Tunisian authorities continue to hold as many as 40 of the countrys more than 500 political prisoners in long-term isolation in prisons around the country. This policy violates Tunisian law as well as international penal standards, undermining government claims of prison reform.

Some of these political prisoners have spent 13 years in isolation, with few breaks. Their only direct human contact is with prison staff and during brief family visits. Most are locked in their cells for 23 hours or longer each day, and they face highly restricted access to books and other media.

Tunisia is using long-term solitary confinement to crush political prisoners and the ideas they represent, said Sarah Leah Whitson, executive director of Human Rights Watchs Middle East and North Africa Division. This inhumane policy does not serve any legitimate penal objectives.

All of the prisoners in prolonged isolation are Islamists, most of them leaders of the banned Nahdha party. Authorities have not told them why they are in isolation, or given them any means to appeal. After tolerating Nahdha in his first years of office, President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali launched a crackdown against the party in 1990 that has continued to this day.

Tunisian law forbids long-term isolation as a form of punishment. International penal standards dictate that solitary confinement should be imposed only for short periods, in an individualized fashion, under strict supervision (including by a physician) and only for legitimate penal reasons of discipline or preventive security. Isolation should not be imposed to stop prisoners from exchanging political views and information.

Despite recent prison reforms in Tunisia, inmates in isolation continue to face atrocious conditions, said Whitson.

Political prisoners are held in tiny cells that lack windows, adequate lighting and ventilation. Most receive less than an hour of exercise a day outside their cell. The lack of reasonable mental stimulus and normal social interactions puts their mental health at risk. Many of the prisoners have staged open-ended hunger strikes to demand an end to their isolation and improvements in their conditions.

The Tunisian government maintains nevertheless that Nahdha is an extremist movement that sought to establish a fundamentalist state in Tunisia. In 1992, it obtained convictions in military court of 265 Nahdha leaders and supporters for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government. Many of todays prisoners in isolation are from that group.

However, human rights organizations that observed the proceedings condemned the 1992 trials as unfair and concluded that the charges of a coup plot had not been proven. The defendants in those trials were not convicted of carrying out any acts of violence. Since then, Nahdha has not been linked to any violent activities. Nor has evidence been released to suggest that, while in prison, the inmates currently held in long-term isolation engaged in behavior that would justify such an extreme measure against them.

Prisoners convicted for nonviolent acts of speech or association should not be in prison at all, Whitson said. Until Tunisia declares an amnesty, it must immediately end its policy of placing political prisoners in long-term isolation.

Human Rights Watch welcomed a comment by Tunisian Minister of Justice and Human Rights Bchir Tekkari on April 20, hinting that Tunisia might accept prison visits by the International Committee of the Red Cross. If the authorities do open prison doors to independent monitoring groups, visiting inmates in prolonged isolation should be among the highest priorities.

The Human Rights Watch report is based in part on interviews with the relatives of prisoners in isolation. The government did not reply to the organizations requests for access to prisons and for information about its isolation policies.

Testimony from Tunisia: Long-Term Solitary Confinement of Political Prisoners

Wahida Trabelsi, wife of Hamadi Jebali, an imprisoned Nahdha leader, told Human Rights Watch about the lengths officials go to restrict his human contacts. She described what happens when she arrives at the prison on visiting day:

Everything stops. All the doors are closed, and neither my husband nor I see any other prisoners. There are always at least four guards present, one at least behind me and three behind him. There is a grill between us, and we are more than one meter apart. The visit is supposed to last 15 minutes, but the guards can cut it short if they do not approve of our conversation. So what we talk about is limited to Im fine, Everythings OK, that sort of thing.

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