



FETHI BELAID/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

WORLD | MIDDLE EAST

## Tunisian Ex-Dictator's Allies Fight Efforts to Seek Justice

Human rights commission in the Arab Spring's sole democracy battles fallen regime's remnants over punishment for past abuses

SHARE



By *Jared Malsin*

TUNIS, Tunisia—A historic effort to reckon with the abuses from Tunisia’s fallen dictatorship is pressing ahead despite opposition from that regime’s remnants, presenting a test for the only democracy to emerge from the Arab Spring.

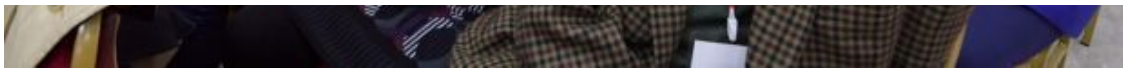
From its inception in 2014, Tunisia’s Truth and Dignity Commission was a powerful symbol of how former autocratic regimes could be held accountable for crimes committed before the 2010-2011 uprisings across the Middle East.

Tunisia’s attempt to seek justice has stood out in a region where authoritarian leaders from [Egypt](#) to [Syria](#) are cementing their grip on power or mired by conflict like in [Libya](#) and [Yemen](#).

But now the Tunisian commission, which is comprised of civil-society figures, is racing against time after parliament this spring voted to shut it down by Dec. 31. The panel held its final hearing earlier this month, concluding an extraordinary series of public events in which victims offered impassioned testimony of past torture, rape and other abuses under ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.

Rached Jaidane, 55, who was imprisoned for 13 years on charges of plotting to overthrow the Ben Ali government, told the commission that he was beaten so badly his teeth fell out. His jailers ripped out his fingernails and subjected him to electric shocks while he hung suspended by his hands and feet, a technique known in Tunisia as “roast chicken.”





Relatives of Tunisian victims attended the closing conference of the Truth and Dignity Commission in Tunis on Dec. 14, where one man described being subjected to a torture technique known as 'roast chicken.' PHOTO: FETHI BELAID/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

Mr. Jaidane said the commission's race to start criminal prosecutions gave him hope that he and his fellow political prisoners could hold their torturers to account. Like many other Tunisians, he said he was willing to reconcile with the men who tortured him, but only if they confess. "Winning is applying the law," he said.

ADVERTISEMENT

That mission appears to be succeeding against all odds.

Arrayed against the truth commission are former Ben Ali allies, now governing in a fragile coalition with an Islamist party. The commission's advocates worry those officials will interfere with prosecutions and with the implementation of its recommendations to overhaul the country's notorious security services.

The commission has tried to outmaneuver opponents, rushing to refer as many cases as possible this month to a politically independent judiciary for criminal prosecution. The commission is also set to complete a report in the coming weeks detailing other alleged crimes of current and former Tunisian officials.

The question now is whether the courts will convict Mr. Ben Ali and other former officials, and whether the government will endorse the

commission’s findings, for example by entering its report in the official gazette, and by vetting police for past rights abuses.

ADVERTISEMENT



Human rights groups fear that Tunisia’s security forces could refuse to cooperate with the trials, or that witnesses and victims could face reprisals.

The battle raises questions about whether Tunisia will solidify its democracy or, as many Tunisians fear, [slide back into authoritarianism](#).

“Everyone is looking at Tunisia,” said Salwa El Gantri, the head of the Tunisia office of the International Center for Transitional Justice, a New York-based non-profit advocating accountability for human-rights violations. “Now the real fight will begin.”





President Beji Caid Essebsi was a senior official under the regime of ousted dictator Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. PHOTO: HASSENE DRIDI/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Tunisia's current president, [Beji Caid Essebsi](#), a senior official under Mr. Ben Ali, and his party passed a law in 2017 granting immunity to officials accused of corruption aimed, they said, at achieving political reconciliation. The Interior Ministry, military courts, and other institutions have refused to cooperate with the panel, in what the commission's leaders say is obstruction.

ADVERTISEMENT

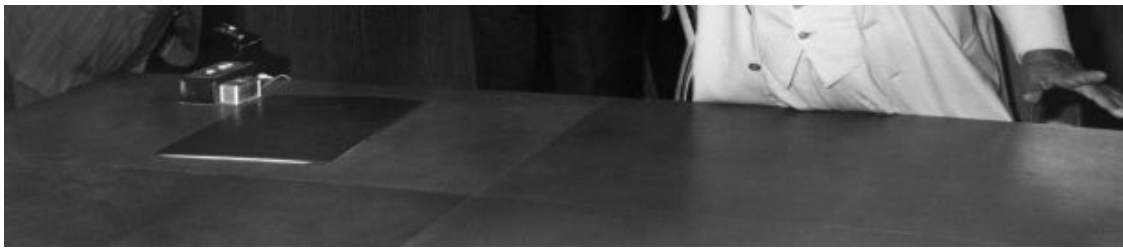
For calls informa  
call on us.

**MarketWatch**  
PREMIUM NEWSLETTERS

LEARN MORE

When it voted to shut down the commission, Mr. Essebsi's party, Nida Tunis, accused the commission's president of creating "dangerous national strife" and casting doubt on what it called Tunisian national symbols including former President Habib Bourguiba, whose dictatorship preceded Mr. Ben Ali's. A spokeswoman for the Tunisian president's office didn't respond to a request for comment.





Mr. Essebsi's party accused the truth commission of creating 'dangerous national strife' and casting doubt on what it called Tunisian national symbols, including former President Habib Bourguiba, right, whose dictatorship preceded that of the ousted dictator, Mr. Ben Ali, left. The image is from 1986. PHOTO: AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The commission has accused Mr. Essebsi's government of protecting the old regime, including Mr. Ben Ali. The former leader is in exile in Saudi Arabia, a country allied with several governments opposed to the Arab Spring revolts. [Prosecutors are trying Mr. Ben Ali](#) in absentia the Tunisian city of Kasserine for the deaths of 20 demonstrators during the uprising that overthrew him.

At the event in Tunis earlier this month presenting some of its findings and marking the end of its historic inquiry, the truth commission's president, Sihem Bensedrine, directly addressed officials who she said "wanted to obstruct this process."

"I would like to tell them: You are fighting for a losing cause. Tunisia is determined to become a country of democracy and rule of law," she told lawmakers, judges and victims who had testified to the commission.

ADVERTISEMENT

intel | WSJ. CUSTOMER STUDIES

**THE ETHICS OF**  
How can businesses develop ethical AI strategies?

[Learn more](#)

Mr. Essebsi's government didn't send any representatives to the event.

The challenge of holding Tunisia's alleged torturers and killers to account has drawn attention as the Arab Spring revolutions have sputtered. In [Syria](#) and [Egypt](#), authoritarian regimes are resurgent. Libya and Yemen are mired in civil conflict.

"We're looking at a historic chance for the country to shift a pattern of impunity," said Fida Hammami, a Tunisia-based researcher at Amnesty International.

People held Tunisian national flags as they demonstrated against Mr. Ben Ali in 2011 in Marseille, France, near the Tunisian consulate. PHOTO: GERARD JULIEN/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

The Truth and Dignity Commission is one of the most dramatic and concrete results of Tunisia's revolution. It has pressed ahead with its work through four years when the country was [troubled by a stagnant economy](#), recurring unrest, and abusive security state that remains largely unreformed from the Ben Ali era.

The commission has collected nearly 50,000 individual testimonies and reams of documents in a sprawling investigation into decades of physical abuse, corruption, and the inner workings of the regime's domestic spy apparatus, which forced ordinary Tunisians to report on one another.

In the committee's held public hearings, victims offered emotional stories. It also attempted to track down perpetrators to offer them a chance to confess and apologize. Suspects who refused risked prosecution.

“It was the only place I was able to sit and speak out,” said Samira Al Hakimi, 50 years old, who testified about how she was stripped of her head scarf and beaten by a police officer in the 1990s.

---

### Arab Spring's Mixed Legacy

- **January 2011** Protests topple Tunisia's President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali, inspiring rebellion across the Arab world.
- **February-March 2011** Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak cedes power, followed by an uprising in Syria. Saudi troops enter Bahrain to crush unrest. Rebel forces kill Libya's leader Muammar Gaddafi that autumn.
- **June 2012** Islamist leader Mohammed Morsi sworn in as Egypt's first freely elected president.
- **July 2013** Egypt's military ousts Morsi in a coup, setting in motion a government crackdown that leaves more than 1,000 people dead and thousands in prison.
- **January 2014** Tunisia's Islamist Prime Minister Ali Larayedh resigns, ending a political crisis keeping the country's democratic transition on track.
- **June 2014** Former military chief Abdel Fattah Al Sisi sworn in as president.
- **May-July 2014** Libya's fragile post revolutionary government splinters, plunging the country into civil war.
- **March 2015** Saudi Arabia launches air war against Houthi rebels in Yemen, escalating a conflict that leaves more than 10,000 people dead.
- **December 2016** Syrian city of Aleppo falls to President Bashar al-Assad's regime, delivering a decisive blow against rebels.
- **May 2017** Tunisia's Truth and Dignity Commission refers first criminal case to court, continuing the region's only sustained attempt at transitional justice since 2011.

**Write to** Jared Malsin at [jared.malsin@wsj.com](mailto:jared.malsin@wsj.com)



[WSJ Membership Benefits](#) | [Customer Center](#)  
[Legal Policies](#) | [Download WSJ Apps](#)

Copyright ©2018 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved.