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MOROCCO:

SUMMER STOCK

Observations on Moroccan Political and Economic Problems

by Charles F. Gallagher

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"The circumstances in which we live are of an exceptional gravity. It is important that each citizen be aware of this..." begins the editorial in Avant-garde, the weekly organ of the Moroccan Labor Union.

"We must spare no effort to win the battle of the evacuation, of the restoration of our frontiers, of economic liberation, and of respect for fundamental liberties," says the bannerhead on Al Istiqlāl, one of the principal vehicles of the old-wing of the split Istiqlal party, now in bitter opposition to the present government.

In much the same vein At Tahrīr, the Arabic-language daily of the Union, attacks and Al 'Alam, the old-guard paper counterattacks, and to their mutual recriminations are now being added those of a revived Rayy al 'Amm, the journal of the once semisuppressed Democratic Independence Party (Hizb ash Shūra). The terms and attitudes are immoderate and indiscriminate, but that is something of a tradition in the press of the Arab world. The most clear-cut distinction between them is that government supporters can come very close to labeling its opponents traitors, while their adversaries are a shade more limited to castigating the

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authorities as incompetent, unjust, and irresponsible. But calling withal for the scrupulous maintenance of a liberty of press and expression which they, when in power, were quite uninterested in extending to their former foes. Probably the first observation to be made is that it decidedly does not pay to be out of power.

Thus the press runs on day after day, enveloped in an atmosphere of crisis, tension, and rage. But after a bit there comes to be a curious dissonance between the words and slogans bandied about in professional political circles, and what one hears from the average, unaffiliated Moroccan. Just as there is between the rumbles of rival political gangs who raid opposition rallies and burn or sack their opponents' offices wherever one side happens to have the all-out support of local authorities, and the almost studied indifference of the mass of the population, especially in the countryside, to this kind of political passion.

The reaction of the uncommitted--a group which includes many who, formerly committed, are now disengaging in some dismay--can best be summed up in a popular statement now circulating: le hzāb kīf er rīh ("The parties are just hot air"). As with a teen-age singer no longer popular, politicians seem to have gone far out of fashion in the 1959 Moroccan style.

Although there is a certain levity in the deprecatory attitude toward politics and its actors, several important consequences ensue. One becomes conscious, first of all, of a vacuum of interest and emotion which used to center upon the rallies, discussions, and parades that followed one another in an almost unbroken chain; one speculates upon the vacuum of respect once given to men now sharing the lot of one former Prime Minister who can now be seen passing in the street without his compatriots paying the slightest heed to his presence. How are these vacuums being filled today?

A simple answer can possibly be found in the ubiquitous sign which appears in shops, around photographs of the ruler, as the motto of the

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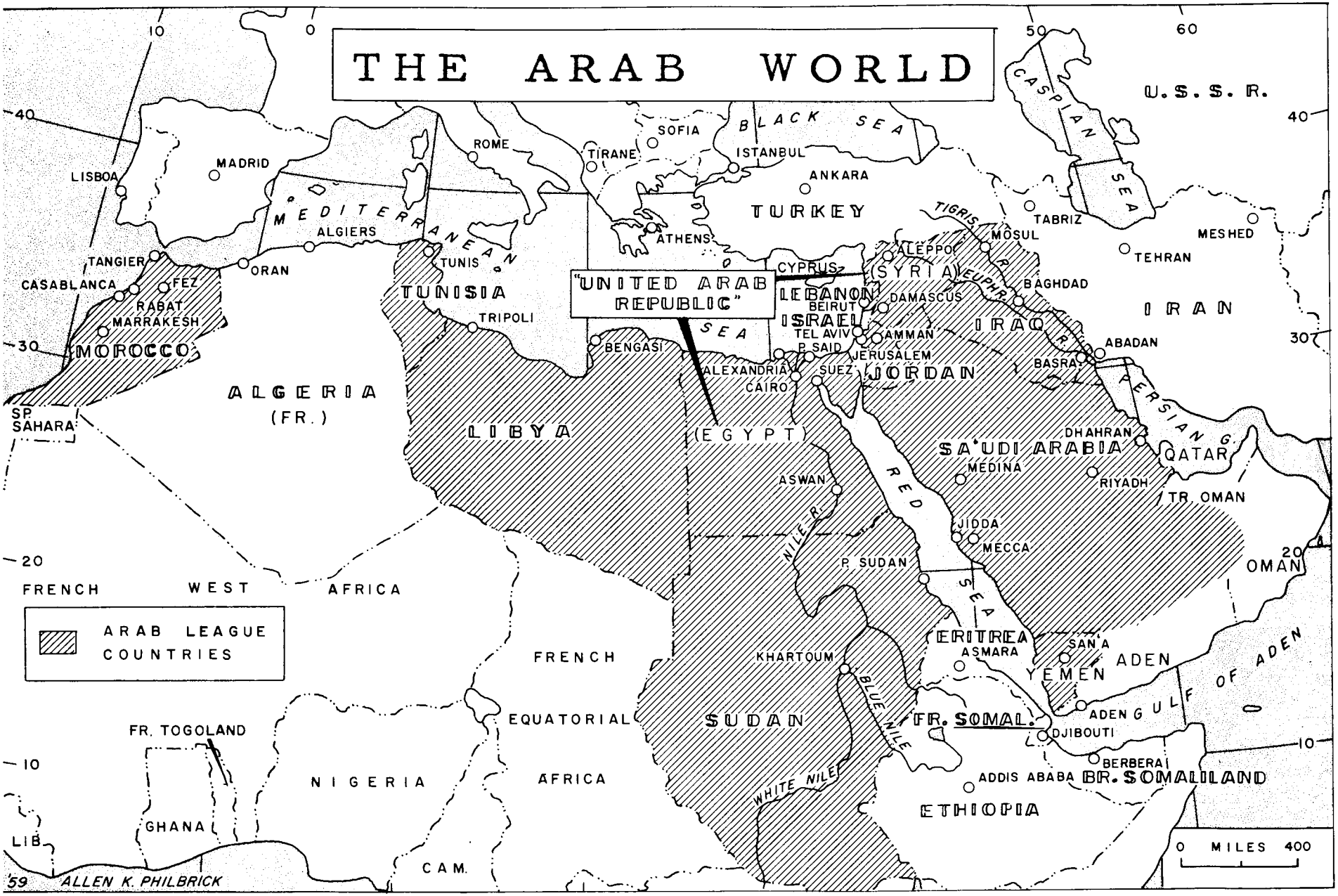
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gendarmerie, and even adorning the ruled notebooks which children carry off to the schoolroom. Allah, Al Watan wa-'l Malik (God, Country, and King). A formally anodyne phrase, a banquet toast not unlike what might be heard in London, Athens, or Oslo, wherever monarchies are found, but one representing, nevertheless, at this particular moment in Moroccan development, a profound sentiment held in a sincerity which serves as a refuge against the shifting winds of petty politics. Let it be put this way: that most Moroccans seem at present to be more consciously Muslim, more specifically nationalist and Moroccan, and more royalist than at any time in the recent past. These statements require some elaboration.

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The political history of the first half of this year in Morocco is, more than anything else, that of the reinforcement of royal prestige and power. Their erosion, in an institutional rather than personal sense, had been evident in the latter part of 1958, dating from the time of the Iraqi revolution. [Cf. North Africa and the Middle East Crisis (CFG-8-'58), an AUFS publication.]

When later in the autumn signs of the imminent internal breakdown of the ruling Istiqlal party became unmistakable, the crown found itself beset by difficulties in two principal areas. There was the growth of discontent from what is perhaps too conveniently called the left--the urban masses, principally the workers in and around Casablanca hard hit by unemployment, recession, and inflation; ambitious union leaders who have made of their syndicalism a potent political force; and some personal opportunists who wanted to make capital out of the stagnancy into which the country was falling. But a threat from the so-called right, the ultratraditional countryside, was more immediate.

There, in the Rif and parts of the Middle Atlas which have long had the tradition of being the bled es-siba (the land of dissidence), some areas, driven by drought and poor economic conditions, plus political maladeptness on the part of the "city intellectuals" who were sent out to govern in the provinces, began to be unmanageable toward the end of the year. The sudden flight of Lahcen Lyoussi, a Berber notable who was one of the consulting Crown Ministers, from the threat of arrest in Rabat to safety in his home mountain region, pointed up the seriousness of the split at highest level and the degree to which the central government lacked physical control of parts of the country.

Finally the anarchic unrest in the Rif brought forth an open challenge not only to the political figures of the administration, but inevitably to the principle of obedience to the throne and state. The risk of throwing the royal prestige into the balance to quell an uprising which claimed to be in complete loyalty to the monarchy (and directed only against the incompetent politicians that surrounded it) was great. But the risk was weighed, taken and the gamble won. An ultimatum from the King brought a goodly number of backdowns and

the Royal Army, proving itself solidly loyal under the command of the Crown Prince, struck down the remnants in combined land and sea operations along the Mediterranean coast and in the northern mountains. The blows dealt the hardiest tribes, such as the Beni Uriaghel and the Gzennaia, were severe enough to be visibly remembered by the chastened population when the King visited the Mediterranean seaport town of Alhucemas early this summer; as the Crown Prince said meaningfully, "1959 will be a year among the Beni Uriaghel which will not be forgotten." And let it also not be forgotten that this is the tribe of the self-styled Amir Abdel Krim, the hero of the Rif rebellion of 1921-25, who still lives in a tenuous exile in Cairo.

A few days later in January came the test at the other end of the scales --the split in the Istiqlal party. Led by Mehdi ben Barka, the astute President of the National Consultative Assembly, Mahjoub ben Seddik, Secretary General of the Moroccan Labor Union, and the shadowy resistance leader, Muhammad al Basri, a significant fraction of the Istiqlal broke away from its traditional founder-leaders and established autonomous regional committees which were later merged into a federation. The neo-Istiqlal had many reasons for coming into being, apart from the more impure motives of power gratification which have often been ascribed, probably unjustly, to its animators. Although the line of demarcation is not absolute, one can fairly speak of a revolt of youth against veterescent middle age. By and large the neo-Istiqlal leaders are a decade or more younger than the principle figures of the Istiqlal--Ben Barka, Seddik, Basri, and the present Prime Minister, Abdallah Ibrahim, are all forty or under. And they all shared an impetuously youthful dissatisfaction with the platitudinous immobilism of their elders, and an eagerness to get on with social and economic reforms which they felt were being sidetracked.

The two principal figures of the neo-Istiqlal, Mahjoub ben Seddik (left), Secretary-General of the Moroccan Labor Union, and Mehdi ben Barka (center), President of the National Consultative Assembly.

It is more questionable if they can be described as being farther to the left, for the spectrum of politics in a country like Morocco is far more variable in this regard than in Western states. In terms of international politics, neo-Istiqlal attitudes betray an even firmer orientation toward the doctrine of "nondependence" and an increased trend away from lingering vestiges of French, and Occidental, protectivism. The comment on international events found in At Tahrīr, for example, often hews rather closely to the Communist line. But the pressure upon any group in power in a neutralist, ex-colonial country, to show itself free of any taint of subjection to its former masters must be taken into account.

Internally the rather general support which the new movement has from the urban proletariat and union members tends to confirm the conventional view of it as leftist. But it is really doubtful if most Moroccans themselves think of the neo-Istiqlal as a "radical" group opposed to a "conservative" party element. Socializing terms are in fashion politically: the first opposition movement of 1958 called itself the "Mouvement Populaire," or Harakat ash Sha'bīyah, and the rebels of the Rif issued a manifesto describing themselves as "Islamic Socialists." In all events the reader of Al 'Alam, the daily of the old Istiqlal, would hardly get the impression from its diatribes against feudalism, privilege, illicit accords with foreign capital, spoliation of the people's property, and so on, that he was reading a right-wing newspaper attacking a left-wing government.

Much of the popularity which Allal al Fassi, the leader of the original Istiqlal, still has among rural masses lies, it should be stressed, in his background as the representative of religious circles in Fès, in the countryside, and among the small businessmen, traders, and artisans who make up the sharply limited Moroccan middle class. In this sense he and the people about him might be called conservative, that is, traditional. But they have as great an appeal to those who hold to the old-style social egalitarianism of Islam that expresses itself among the countryfolk in particular, but among many humble city people as well, and it is this which enables them to have an audience in many regions which is denied to their rivals of the neo-Istiqlal. Actually Allal al Fassi speaks more often of socialism, social justice, and such, than do many of the neo-Istiqlal figures, but it is quite likely that these terms are understood in a traditional, nondoctrinaire, almost Quranic sense, by many of his listeners.

It gradually became apparent this spring that the real gainer through the scission was the King. With the partisans and hatchetmen of all tendencies making noise and doing reciprocal damage, Moroccans have often been upset, confused, and a bit disgusted by learning that so-and-so was always an incompetent, that an ex-minister was really a disguised servant of the imperialists, or that a present cabinet official now claims to have been the driving force behind the labor movement all the time. History, if not being somewhat rewritten, has at least been subject to some startling reinterpretations. And so

the baffled citizen has naturally tended to turn more than ever to the one figure which, by rising above politics, represents to him his country as an idealistic whole, and stands for stability in a troubled period.

The pilgrimage of the King to his place of exile in Madgascar this spring was a master stroke which utilized this feeling to full advantage. He left a country in strident vocal disorder, with the threat of worse to come, and some diplomats here predicted freely that he was planning a one-way voyage. But, in calling for a return to the spirit of unity of 1955 around his person, so surely did he gauge the temperament of his subjects that he returned from this "second exile" with almost the same power and glory he had four years ago when he landed in Rabat to the accompaniment of a worshipful hysteria.

The difference lay in the subdued quality of the acclaim on this occasion; the bonds which had been reforged between the ruler and the people were now more mature and solid. And more than ever a good deal of this renewed confidence has rubbed off onto the royal family which is beginning to appear to many Moroccans as an institution of insurance in itself, instead of being merely an appendage of an extremely popular man. The experience of the Crown Prince in directing the affairs of the state while his father was resting abroad and preparing for medical treatment, seems to have strengthened this feeling.

Following up the advantage he had gained by his pilgrimage, Muhammad V late this spring made a series of trips to all parts of the country. He visited the far south, where a small portion of territory had been returned by Spain to Moroccan jurisdiction, and was greeted enthusiastically in this nether region which is usually said to be under the effective control of Basri's "Army of Liberation" and where no foreigners go. He went to the Tadla to distribute land, and to the subdued Rif where he was received as a conquering ruler of the olden days who had drawn his sword and was respected for it. And to cosmopolitan Tangier, which lives in a nebulous state of economic grace thanks to the Royal Charter which he bestowed on it. In such diverse regions he was accepted, admired, welcomed with a genuine warmth felt only for a righteous patriarch of imposing style and presence. In one of those interesting phenomena which sometimes befall figures of state, the King has grown both in stature and in the hearts of his countrymen.

There is something paradoxical in these voyages throughout the country. The royal suite, ministers of state, civil servants, and diplomats bring the court with them wherever they go in attendance upon the sovereign, and there is a nostalgic hint of the times when Morocco had no formal capital and the Sultan pitched tent and held court wherever he happened to be. But one must really see the spectacle in action to realize the degree to which one man incarnates the nation in a spiritual as well as political sense, remembering that --despite parties, politicians, assemblies, charters of public liberties, and plans for elections--he is still a ruler of absolute power, in no way limited

except by the traditional Islamic concept of divine right; he rules as well as reigns. Morocco has been aptly described as a "popular monarchy" but it might be as succinct to say of Muhammad V in 1959 as of Louis XIV in the 18th century: L'état c'est lui.

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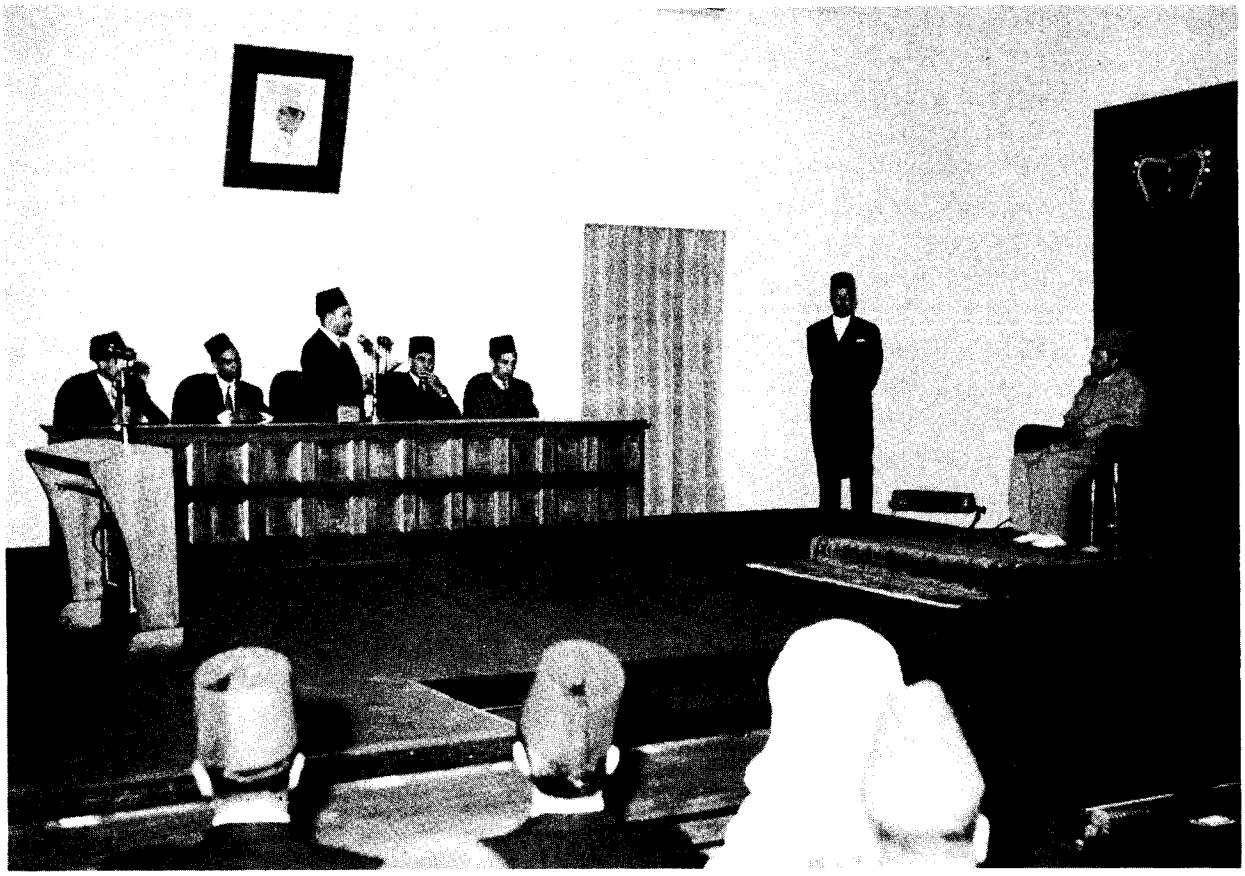
The popular rediscovery of the King is negatively connected with the general disenchantment about the economic situation; curiously this is one aspect of life with which he has no tie. Complaints are widespread but they are directed against the government, against local officials, against "greedy people enriching themselves in office," and occasionally against the Europeans. ("The French are paying their businessmen to shut down their factories," is a current legend.) Then there are those who do not protest, but simply accept--at least for the time being--their situation, as they always have in the past, as the will of God.

The truth lies somewhere in between, and it is complicated enough to defy expert analysis let alone that of the man-in-the-street. The most brutal



King Muhammad V at the opening session of the National Consultative Assembly, being welcomed by its president, Mehdi ben Barka.

explanation is one that applies to so many new countries: the laws of political nationalism bring into play the countereffects of economic forces in inverse proportion.

Thus, faced with the unpalatable task of aligning the Moroccan franc with the French franc when the latter was devalued at the end of 1958, the Moroccan government stood on political nationalism. The national currency was held at 420 to the dollar while the French franc was soon solidly stabilized, through a successful austerity campaign and sound financial practice, at 493 to the dollar. To be sure economic reasons were adduced against devaluation, such as the necessity for an underdeveloped country like Morocco to equip itself at a more favorable rate, but the overriding consideration seems to have been the psychological need (reinforced by the cries of demagogic politicians) to achieve what is called here economic independence.

But Morocco needed to sell in order to buy and when it tried to dispose of its vegetable and citrus fruit crop at the higher rate there was a marked diminution in exports, only partly redressed by reduced imports. Furthermore, political pride, like blackmail, grows as it is fed. The country needed its own institute of emission, the Banque d'Etat du Maroc being in reality a private institution outside the control of the government. When an agreement was reached finally to set up a new Bank of Morocco as a national institution, the price that had to be paid was the liquidation by France of the operations account which until then had covered the emission of Moroccan banknotes, through an agreement with the old bank, and so assured the free interchange of monies between Morocco and the countries of the franc zone. The resulting financial crisis, which has made it almost impossible to change Moroccan francs outside the country, is still unsettled, and the price for settlement is now considered to be devaluation and complete reintegration within the franc zone. (Severe measures of financial control plus the stoppage of the operations account have resulted in a de facto withdrawal of Morocco from the zone.) No agreements have been reached, and it may be difficult to arrive at any, for national pride continues undiminished. There is now talk of devaluation, to be assuaged by withdrawal from the franc zone and a change in the nomenclature of the currency: the rial, or the hassani, will replace the foreign-named coins which are under attack as nonnational. But it is dubious if the franc, by any other name, will go farther.

It is true that individual Moroccans are much less directly concerned with the currency problem than are the French in this country. It is the latter who do most of the business, and keep the larger bank accounts from which transfers to France are now for the first time blocked. But the situation will not take long to erode what confidence is left in a shaky economy. An accentuated flight of capital is already noticeable this month and has been denounced by Moroccan businessmen in sympathy with the government's financial policy. Shutdowns of industry in Casablanca were more numerous this spring, the liberal investment law has attracted little outside of an automobile assembly

plant and a projected textile factory. And the exodus of Europeans, the vital reservoir for training the local population before their ultimate departure, is continuing--heightened by a combination of discouraging economic, political, and psychological prospects. As one example, the sardine industry, beset by high costs, labor troubles, and a reduced market, was desperately trying to reduce its operations and cut losses; only after a series of conferences with the government was it prevailed upon to agree to a compromise minimum catch which would avoid large-scale dismissal of workers in the industry. So in a vicious circle the economic outlook darkens, unemployment grows, political tempers become shorter, and over all hangs the shadow of the resurgent Communist party, whose previous gains stand to increase now that it has begun to publish again legally.

But for all his concern with the economic problems of the day--and just keeping fed is becoming difficult enough for many--the Moroccan in most cases does not yet equate them directly to the political scene. Perhaps the workers of Casablanca, who are heavily politized, do; but Casablanca is not Morocco, nor is Rabat with its hierarchies of government employees, nor sedate Fès. It is the fact that there is no "real" Morocco, except perhaps the countryside of tomorrow which has not yet realized its potentiality, that makes discussion of this sort difficult. Yet it would not be wrong to note a widespread feeling among the people that there is no valid prophet or plan which will bring economic relief; that all individuals and parties are selfish, everyone in this lower world is wicked...except the King.

And conversely there is a surprising lack of interest on the part of opposition groups in attacking the government on valid economic grounds, perhaps because they realize, if only vaguely, that if they themselves were in power they would be equally impotent to solve the fundamental problems. It is significant that the issues which Allal al Fassi talked about as he stumped the country (prior to the ban on all public meetings which has just been announced) were such secondarily remote concerns as the Saharan boundaries and Mauretania; everyone pays lip service but it is clearly less burning a question than a year ago. And it is astonishing on the other hand that Al 'Alam should day after day vituperate the government for its alleged bungling of the negotiations to establish the Bank of Morocco, a technical question in which most Moroccans are remarkably uninterested.

Finally the foreign observer is struck by how much this indifference is extended to foreign affairs in general. Once again the press is no guide, but the cafe is. The endless questions of a short year or two ago about the Middle East, Arab politics, Abdel Nasser, and African liberation have subsided to a whisper. So, too, have the fire-and-brimstone discussions of yesteryear about Maghrebian unity, although to this as to the Algerian revolution official circles give an attention which is more than a formality and less than passion. Certainly Morocco is taking its place in the Arab League, which will hold a meeting on ambassadorial level in Casablanca later this summer, the

Prime Minister is in Liberia and his trip is prominently displayed in the headlines, and the King will visit the United Arab Republic on what may be a most important state journey next January--but, all this activity on an official level does not appear to dissipate the somehow indrawn aloofness of the country at this writing.

Moroccans should not be blamed for their indifference to the balance of trade or their coolness to factional politics; it is rather the lack of prophets which is at fault. Societies move because a few men with ideas stir them into action, and men with ideas seem to be notably missing in this country at the moment. The old dilemma of the Istiqlal, reflected in its name, is here to roost. The idea of political independence, a fine and necessary one in our times, no longer stirs men's hearts in Morocco; the idea of economic independence, no less fine in many ways if it can be achieved for the benefit of the great majority, is not arousing anyone to heights of emotion. And perhaps this is not lamentable in the short run. For countries, like individuals require periods of contemplation and marking time in between their bursts of activity. For a good five years Morocco has had its share of exercise and most observers agree that the past few months have been, by reaction, a time of stocktaking and a curious calm approaching lassitude. The principal question, looking back on the turbulence of the events of last winter that immediately preceded this period, is whether the country, reunited around its monarch, is recovering after having passed through a dangerous squall or whether this is the eye of the storm.

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[All photographs, courtesy Photo Belin, Rabat.]