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TUNISIA AT THE CROSSROADS

Mr. Peter Martin
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Dear Peter,

It is almost ten years ago that I first came to Tunisia. It was my first introduction to the Middle East and it was not until a few years later that I realized that despite a partially shared heritage, Tunisia and the remainder of North Africa belong in a separate category. When I finally did return five years ago I was struck at the time by the steady decline in Tunisia's fortunes. I believe I expressed some of those sentiments in a letter I originally submitted for my fellowship application.

Returning to Tunisia once more only reinforces that same feeling. Tunis has an even more dejected look about it. Unemployment and underemployment seem to have stagnated at a high level. A sure sign of continuing economic decline: the fancy international hotels have seemingly lost the sophisticated clientele I once saw. Into their bars, where once as a graduate student I threaded carefully and with considerable unease, I now find myself much more comfortable. Undoubtedly this has much to do with my own improved financial status. Gone are the days when a bric-à-l'oeuf or some other cheap Tunisian meal, washed down with a glass of local wine, would suffice. But it seems to me that the bar at the Africa hotel was now filled with types who would gladly eat bric-à-l'oeuf on a daily basis, and no longer with the rather exquisitely dressed Europeans I remembered from earlier days. Perhaps much of this is nostalgia. But a look at recent Tunisian history reveals that my impressions are matched by more solid economic facts. In this first report from this small North African country I would like to recall some of the relevant facts for my readers, so that subsequent reports make more sense.

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At first glance there is a difference between Tunisia and many other Middle Eastern countries. One rarely finds the massive posters that greet the arriving visitor in Syria, Iraq, and Libya. Few revolutionary slogans grace Tunis. There are no youth brigades or revolutionary guards to spurn the population to political action.

But this first impression is in many ways misleading. For in Tunisia the impact and presence of president Habib Bourguiba and his Destour party is as pervasive as that of many of his counterparts in the countries mentioned above. What is distinctly different, however, is the style of ruling. Above all paternalistic, Tunisia's ruling party and its "Supreme Combatant", as Bourguiba is known here, have devised a system that relies extremely little on muscle. For decades Tunisia has spent almost nothing on defense or on an elaborate internal security apparatus. Bourguiba has nevertheless managed to stay at the helm of his country for three decades. It is this phenomenon that needs examining, and no better way to analyze it than to take a quick look at Bourguiba himself.

It is perhaps telling that in a country where the fate of its president is a daily topic of discussion, no one seems to know how old Bourguiba exactly is. Officially 81, it is rumored that he may be a few years older. Whatever his age, most Tunisians agree that Bourguiba has been crucial in Tunisia's recent history - and that his exaggerated role within the political system has saddled the country with a moribund political life.

Habib Bourguiba was one of the main figures in Tunisia's attempt to achieve independence from France after World War II. Throughout the struggle he showed himself a crafty politician who insisted on compromise and accommodation rather than a resort to violence. When France finally granted its colony independence in 1956, Bourguiba emerged as the top leader of the Destour party. He had been one of the founders of the party in 1934.

The political system that emerged in Tunisia - a small country by African standards, both physically and in terms of population - has been extremely paternalistic. Even today many of Tunisia's politicians come from the Monastir area, the birthplace of the aging president. For politics in Tunisia has always been the politics of Habib Bourguiba. For thirty years he has hired and dismissed ministers in an almost cavalier fashion, often at the insistence of his (now former) wife Wassila.

I don't mean to diminish Bourguiba's achievements. Tunisia has been among the Arab world's most stable countries. It has not degenerated into an army camp. It now boasts the fourth-largest per capita income on the African continent. And the style in which he has reigned (for only that verb accurately describes his role) still inspires respect.

Nevertheless, something is quite wrong in Tunisia these days. For decades Bourguiba has prevented anyone around him from becoming too powerful. As long as he was in good health no one had the courage to criticize him. But what could once be defended as an attempt to keep the country unified has degenerated since 1969 into a kind of political status quo that leaves the country badly prepared for the future.

Since that year a number of political contenders and economic reformers have been summarily dismissed: Ahmed Ben Salah, the country's economic czar until 1969; Muhammad Masmoudi who signed a treaty with Libya in 1974; Mancour Moalla, one of Tunisia's best-known politicians who questioned Bourguiba's lavish spending on his native Monastir; and Ahmed Mestiri, Tunisia's former Minister of Defense who now heads the opposition Mouvement des Democratres Socialistes.

Perhaps the most famous person to be sacked in recent times was Muhammad Mzali. Personally groomed for the job by Bourguiba himself, Mzali headed the Tunisian government for six years. Until a couple of years ago, Mzali seemingly enjoyed Bourguiba's full confidence. Even Habib Bourguiba Jr., the president's son and for a few years his heir apparent, was shunted aside to accommodate the new protege. But after January 1984 when Tunisia experienced riots in the wake of price rises of subsidized food, Mzali became a marked man. Bourguiba quickly rescinded the economic measures, shifting the blame to his own Prime Minister. It has been a favorite tactic for the octogenarian president to settle difficulties in this fashion. And while he lives no one expects great new strides to be made in preparing the country for the "après-Bourguiba" era.

All of this has taken place while the country's economic management is under attack. Until a few years ago Tunisia was held up as a model of development. But it is clear now that the lavish praise heaped on its economic development may have been premature. These last few years the World Bank in particular has been quite critical of the country's performance. It has pointed out that many capital intensive projects - funded primarily by Tunisia's oil exports that make up 35-40% of all foreign income - are now of questionable value in the 1980s. The Mzali government has been blamed for granting major wage increases in the early 1980s while productivity has stagnated. Exports have been discouraged, mostly by bureaucratic red tape, and the Tunisian dinar remains overvalued. To exacerbate all this, the country has been a spending spree of expensive imported consumer goods.

Much of this sounds familiar to anyone familiar with development issues. Tunisia has not fared any worse than many other countries. It may even have done slightly better in some selected aspects. But Bourguiba's relentless message that all is well in Tunisia has been severely questioned. Even the dismissal of Mzali - and his cloak-and-dagger escape to Algeria a couple of months ago - has finally left the population and many of the country's politicians uneasy.

One interesting aspect I will take a look at here in Tunisia is the position of the labor movement. Ever since independence there has been an uneasy alliance between the government and the unions. For most of this period the government has kept them under close supervision, imprisoning its leaders when they threatened to become too independent. Long-time union representative Habib Achour has once again been put under house arrest. In his place Sadok Allouche has now taken over. But labor issues are a big issue in Tunisia. After the large wage increases in the early 1980s, the Tunisian government froze wages after 1983. They have remained unchanged ever since, despite a yearly inflation of approximately 10%. In June 1986 the union-government talks broke up and an uneasy state of

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suspended activity remains.

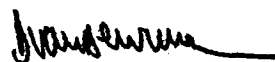
An interesting footnote to this is that the major union - the Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens, UGTT - has become one of the only voices of dissent in the country, primarily because of the absence of other alternatives. An old friend pointed out the dilemma this represents. Bourguiba may resent the unions but considers them much less of a danger than the Muslim fundamentalists. I have been trying to reach Rachid Ghannouchi - so far unsuccessfully - who is the head of the Islamic Tendency Movement in Tunisia. Some of its leadership was jailed in 1981. But the ITM membership publicly took to the streets for the first time in October 1985 after Israel bombed the PLO headquarters near Tunis (Tunisians angrily point out that they accepted the PLO after pressure from the US!) and after the interception of the Egyptian plane that took the Achillo Lauro hijackers to safety.

Bourguiba's attitude toward Islam has generally been rather unorthodox. Tunisia has secularized its courts and universities, although the latter (as in Egypt) are now becoming hotbeds of Islamic activities. Women have been granted equal rights in marriage and divorce. Only government-licensed preachers can be appointed to mosques and Bourguiba himself led the campaign against fasting in Ramadan by sipping orange juice on television. Polygamy has been officially banned since 1957 and women can have custody over their children. All of this - not to mention the fact that Tunisia, heavily dependent on tourist income, is the only Arab country to allow nude bathing - has created more resentment among the growing number of Islamic converts.

A final aspect of Tunisia's current plight concerns the period after Bourguiba. The country has long been considered enthusiastically pro-Western. But there have been doubts as to what direction any successor to the president-for-life will take. For the last two years the United States has been taken a particular interest in the issue. Since then a number of delegations, one including Deputy Secretary of State John Whitehead, has visited Tunis.

I could only sketch a few of Tunisia's present conundrums in this very short initial report. Like so many other middle eastern countries, Tunisia is in a state of political, social and cultural transition. More about all of this in my next few reports.

All the best,



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