

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-13

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### "ENFORCED ACCOMMODATION" IN TUNISIA

Mr. Peter Martin  
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Dear Peter,

Ever since independence in 1956 Tunisia has pursued a rather unique form of development. There has always been a strong flavor and insistence on major state participation in the country's economic initiatives. In the early 1960s Ahmed Ben Salah, one of Bourguiba's early collaborators and Secretary General of Tunisia's most important union (Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens - UGTT) even attempted to introduce some sort of socialism to this small North African country.

Ben Salah's effort floundered, for reasons that were political as well as economic. His ten year development plan was admittedly too ambitious for a country that still relied heavily on its former colonial power (France) and that had little infrastructure to begin with. But a major factor in Ben Salah's demise was also the fact that he belonged to the UGTT, a potential opposition force at the time - and that his reforms threatened to touch the economic interests of those elites Bourguiba relied on to retain political control during those initial years after independence.

The state in Tunisia still actively participates in the planning and the actual running of a great number of enterprises - even though the current buzzwords here, as in most other Arab countries, are economic privatization and liberalization. My readers shouldn't pay too much attention, however, to the slogans or catchwords the Bourguiba regime uses these days. The Supreme Combattant and his Tunisian planners often describe current development as being "socialist" in nature. Hence the Destour Socialist Party (PSD).

Whatever socialism means these days in Tunis, it certainly is not the kind of socialism one associates with the Soviet Union or with some Third

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World countries. Most leftist thinkers in Tunisia these days argue that Tunisia's socialism is nothing more than a disguised form of advanced capitalism guided by Tunisia's western trading partners and international banks. On the other hand many of them would admit that it is not the kind of unbridled capitalism many western development specialists have advocated for the country.

Labels in Tunisia mean very little. Bourguiba has often expressed his dislike for any ideological analysis that pigeonholes an individual into a certain category and then classifies him/her accordingly. Tunisia is above all itself, as the president for life is fond of saying.

Well, yes and no. Once Ahmed Ben Salah was sacked Tunisia adopted a development scheme in which the state continued to take the lead in planned development, and in which it allegedly prevented an elite from enriching itself at the expense of the population. Bourguiba has argued again and again that this strategy allowed Tunisia to escape the kind of class struggles many developing countries have faced. So far he has been right.

But the more important point to make is that the absence of really serious convulsions inside Tunisia until now may have less to do with Bourguiba's so-called egalitarian pursuits. I would argue that it owes more to Bourguiba's skillful manipulation of Tunisia's political system since he came to power. The kind of economic policy Bourguiba adopted in the 1950s had been tested twenty years earlier in Turkey. I have no idea if he had any inkling of this. But as in Turkey in the 1930s, his strategy for a more equal division of wealth initially paid off handsomely.

If one thing strikes me in Tunisia today, it is the rather egalitarian nature of its society. A walk through Tunis on the whole shows a fairly uniform - even bland - housing pattern. Some streets are seemingly better off than others, and here and there one can see some solid bourgeois blocks that almost, but not quite, manage to stand out among the remainder. A walk at night shows mostly middle-class interiors.

I haven't seen the ostensible disparities of wealth that schocked me in Cairo.<sup>1</sup> One can see an occasional fancy imported car here, but on the whole they are rather rare. The message seems to be to blend in, or at least not to stand out. In Cairo the upper middle-class seemingly enjoyed flaunting the wealth it had - from expensive automobiles to several servants (preferable imported from the Philippines or elsewhere) and spending evenings in westernized bars or places of entertainment.

All of this in Tunisia would only be considered bad manners. This is solid bourgeois territory. Even a well-off Tunisian would probably prefer a quite dinner at his favorite restaurant - with ample Tunisian wine - to

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<sup>1</sup> As Ambassador Richard Parker points out in his North Africa: Regional Tensions and Strategic Concerns (New York: Praeger Special Studies, 1984), many of these perceptions depend on what one takes as a point of reference: "While one reporter will find the inequalities represented by the villas and palaces of Carthage compared to the slums of Tunis shocking, another will find them less obvious than those encountered in Morocco. A third, coming from Egypt, will be impressed with the general prosperity of Tunisians and see no squalor at all."

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cavorting around some international five star hotel. I personally witnessed a number of ministry officials sipping coffee and mineral water at a meeting at the Africa hotel's patio facing Avenue Bourguiba, rather than retiring to the more exclusive back rooms. And a friday evening at Tunis' National Theater is by almost all standards a subdued affair - even cabinet people often arrive in taxis and I have yet to see some of the mink stoles that were de rigueur in (suffocating!) Cairo.

Despite the continuing problems with unemployment and more general economic problems, life in Tunisia for the average citizen is reasonably good. There seem to be very few shortages of food. The home of a lower-class family I regularly visit is not particularly attractive, but quite adequately provided with running water, electricity and paved roads. There is little of the chaos here that I found in Cairo. Clothing seems utilitarian and, yes, even a little drab. The model to imitate does not seem to be the US - as it was in Egypt - so much as Europe. There is no equivalent here of an American University in Cairo where part of the students seem intent on proving how westernized they can be.

All of this does not, as you may well imagine, make Tunis a particularly vibrant city. Don't expect to hop from bar to bar until the sun rises over Tunis bay. By ten o'clock most places have closed - except perhaps for some restaurants. Tunis at ten o'clock in the evening resembles Cairo at three in the morning. Despite the importance of tourism here, there is no real entertainment industry in the capital geared toward tourists. There is no equivalent here of Cairo's Pyramids Road with its gaudy and often racy late night shows. The few nightclubs are sedate affairs where one is unlikely to see much more than a bare belly button. There are of course the topless beaches further down south but they mostly discreetly screened away from the population.

Tunisia may be "above all itself" as Bourguiba points out, but culturally and socially there is no doubt about the lasting French influence. The country was a colony for slightly over seventy years and the most visible symbols of that legacy still stand across each other on the Avenue Bourguiba: the cathedral and the French embassy. The metropole's influence still ranges far and wide, from Tunisia's cooking - a delightful mixture of local and French cuisine - to everyday life and to close financial links between the two countries.

Why then are so many people worried about Tunisia's future? As I hinted at in DJV-11, the current beneath the surface is much more troublesome than these impressionistic images and the government-controlled morning papers reveal. Tunisians, as well as Egyptians, are in essence very accommodative. One of the real remarkable things I observed in Egypt was that despite the enormous economic and physical difficulties people live under, conflict rarely surfaces on an everyday level. In Tunisia where the living standard is substantially higher, this phenomenon is even more pronounced. Several unemployed young people I talked to seemed worried but not particularly bitter about their unemployment. In contrast with Egypt, the state has always helped people find employment but it has never made this an explicit promise or a right in itself.

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Accommodation seems to be the message in Tunisia and it is a message almost daily propagated by Bourguiba himself. Only last week in La Presse, (11 February) one of the few bland newspapers that are still available, the Supreme Combatant's Prime Minister, Mr. Rachid Sfar, talked about the role of the UGTT. Meeting with the union's Executive Committee, Mr. Sfar said that in Tunisia syndicalism based "on a spirit of revenge is an anachronism." Toeing the official line, Minister of Social Affairs Ben Dhia added that Tunisia needs "a strong independent and patriotic syndicate... [to defend] the interests of the workers and the greater interests (l'intérêt supérieure) of the country.

There are a couple of interesting elements in these few lines. The country's interests always come first. What was left unsaid of course is that Bourguiba more often than not defines what is in the national interest. Furthermore, a number of recent UGTT developments were carefully omitted from La Presse's article: the fact that a new Secretary General, M. Abdelaziz Bouraoui, has been forced upon the union and the stipulation that no one outside this UGTT Executive Committee will have the right to discuss syndicalist issues. Above all, of course, there was no mention of Habib Achour, the UGTT's imprisoned former leader.

The union issue is only one example of where "accommodation" has been pronounced - usually by fiat from the Carthage palace where Mr. Bourguiba daily receives an intimate circle of handpicked advisors and ministers. I hope to write a more in-depth report on the UGTT at some future point because I believe that their influence in the post-Bourguiba era (an expression forbidden to utter in the presence of any official here!!) will to a large extent determine Tunisia's future.

But the UGTT issue is only one among many of Tunisia's unsolved political problems. None of them are popular topics to discuss in Tunisia right now. I was told very early on by an Embassy official and a Tunisian professor that no one would openly talk about any of the following issues: fundamentalism, the role of the army and the UGTT. As a ministry official said with a slight grin: "these are non-issues until Bourguiba dies." And that in itself is a form of accommodation to what the President has decreed. It is what I would call this "enforced accommodation" that Tunisia will have to deal with in the future.

Tunisia reminds one a bit of what Edmund Wilson once wrote in warning to Vladimir Nabokov during his stay in California: "You know, it is like getting into Yeats's fairyland... The weather is fine every day, and the rest of the world seems very unreal." It is this profound contradiction in Tunisia that remains puzzling. It is a country that is seemingly quite liberal, publishing a number of magazines in arabic and french that can only be rivaled in number by Egypt, and that is seemingly tolerant of occasional criticism in the local press (perhaps it is also one of the few Arab countries to provide rather neutral coverage of international news). On the other hand there is a debilitating stability and occasional ruthless suppression of whoever wants to upset that carefully cultivated internal equilibrium. Let me wax more lyrically about this. Tunisia is an overripe peach; the hand only feels the velvety texture of the skin but the mind knows by the discoloring of the flesh of the rottenness beneath.

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A few years ago it seemed as if this political sclerosis was finally ending. In 1980 a new Prime Minister, Mohamed Mzali, was appointed. At his insistence - and the toleration of Bourguiba - it seemed as if truly liberal politics would make their entry into Tunisia. Opposition papers were once again published and foreign newspapers were allowed to be imported without seeming restrictions - except that occasionally its circulation could be suspended when publishing an article too critical of Bourguiba. This happened to Le Monde several times.

Under Mzali, Bourguiba allowed free elections to Parliament. (His own position remained unchanged; he is president for life.) Two main opposition parties declared themselves in the running: the Communists and Ahmed Mestiri's Mouvement des Democratres Socialistes (MDS). The fundamentalist Mouvement de Tendence Islamique was not allowed to participate. (Ironically all Tunisian opposition parties until today are known as mouvements. Not being able to really contest elections, that is exactly what they are - movements and not parties.)

The two opposing parties were expected to gain a sizable number of the seats of Parliament. In a last minute decision Bourguiba reversed his earlier decision. The election that followed was by almost all reasonable accounts a massive fraud. Running on the same ticket the PSD/UGTT alliance got all 136 seats.<sup>2</sup>

The situation after the 1981 "elections" was as before. Tunisia's one-party system was still in place and the succession issue remained unsettled. The situation has even gotten worse since. Although Mzali was seemingly being groomed as Bourguiba's eventual successor, he was forced to flee the country a few months ago (at Sakiet Sidi Youssef, the little town I wrote about in my travel report - see DJV-12). There are a number of speculations as to his demise. Most of the politicians I talked to cited his bad record in getting the Tunisian economy back on its feet. But perhaps the decline of Mzali's influence can be traced to December 1983 when increased food prices led to serious rioting. Bourguiba later rescinded the measures, blaming his prime minister for the events - a not unprecedented turn of events in Tunisia.

An added factor in this chaotic system was - until a few months ago - Wassila Bourguiba, the president's wife. The descendant of a prominent Tunisian family, she was until recently one of the éminences (not quite) grises surrounding the president. Her influence was very strong and she systematically had her own people promoted inside the government. Then at the end of 1986 Bourguiba suddenly divorced Wassila. One of the president's nieces is now his personal assistant.

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<sup>2</sup> Of these, 27 went to the UGTT. It split the union, pitching those who objected to any cooperation with the PSD against those who were willing to collaborate with the government. For a couple of years the two rival unions - the UGTT and the newly formed UNTT - existed side by side. The UNTT was eventually reabsorbed into the UGTT and its leader became the Secretary General of the UGTT. I have been gathering more information on the unions to write a separate newsletter on them.

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One of my American friends always asks me whenever we meet "how the soap opera in Tunisia is going these days?". I must admit there is a touch of tragi-comedy to events here. However, as I'm beginning to delve deeper into some of these issues, my inclination - given Tunisia's recent history - is to say that the succession issue will in all likelihood be settled in a peaceful way. The problem is how to put the country back on the road to what is known in Tunisia as pluralisme, i.e. giving free reign to a wide range of political opinions and ideologies.

The problem of concentrating so much power in one person for so long often means that once that person leaves the scene, all bets are off. There are no guarantees that the PSD will not split into factions. Some political insiders I talked to sketched different alternatives possible in this regard, with some of Bourguiba's top collaborators heading different factions. Whoever heads the après-Bourguiba government will certainly not have the charisma the Supreme Combattant has enjoyed until recently. And there seems to be little doubt that charisma and careful manipulation of political spoils has kept Bourguiba in power for so long.<sup>3</sup>

For several years the common wisdom was that Mzali and Bourguiba's widow (!) Wassila would inherit and fight over the spoils of the Bourguiba legacy. Speculating about events after Bourguiba's death, however, is a rather unproductive activity. Prof. Carl Brown in 1970 wrote an article on Bourguiba for the Washington Star, intended as a pre-obituary notice. As he pointed out in a letter to me recently, "The Star is no more but Bourguiba continues."

What post-Bourguiba Tunisia will look like remains uncertain. Mzali and Wassila's return to Tunisian politics once the president is gone, is not at all inconceivable. Both have created a strong and loyal following within the Tunisian elite - Mzali's aligned with Bourguiba's Monastir allies, Wassila's with the Tunisian high bourgeoisie whose fortunes she promoted vigorously while in office.

For those who have not benefited greatly from the Bourguiba era - the poor southern part of the country, sections of the working class and of the salaried middle class and a growing number of the unemployed youth - all of this remains academic. Of these groups I would think the working class and the unemployed youth are potentially the most volatile. The working class because of their alliance to the unions who almost certainly will grab the chance to force changes upon any post-Bourguiba government. The unemployed youth since they now make up a sizable group of unemployed lumpenproletariat who congregate in the major cities, waiting for a spark that could render the situation explosive and tear the traditional process of accommodation asunder. It is these youngsters that I see and talk to daily as I drink my café-au-lait at various cafes. There are few kind words among them for Bourguiba or for the PSD. Although some are drawn to the fundamentalist cause, most seem to be apolitical.

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<sup>3</sup> In an article in The Middle East Journal, "Bourguiba, Charismatic Leadership and the Tunisian One Party System" (Spring 1980) I discussed in more detail the close interaction between these phenomena.

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While Tunisia's economic problems seem - at least at this point of my inquiries - manageable (the subject of a separate report), the political succession issue seems more problematic. The United States has taken a great interest in it, primarily for strategic reasons and on the assumption that Tunisia by itself will have a hard enough time to solve its problems without any interference from any surrounding - or more distant - countries. The US thus seems intent on making sure that no undue interference takes place. The real bogeyman at whom much of this silent campaign is being waged is of course Libya's Colonel Qadhafi.

Policymakers cite as an example of his interference the Gafsa incident. Gafsa is a city of about 55,000 inhabitants almost 220 miles south of Tunis. In 1980 a number of Tunisians slipped across the Algerian border and "occupied" the city for a few days - seemingly with support of part of the workers. They had been Libyan-trained and armed. The incident was judged serious enough by France to despatch three warships to the Gulf of Gabes, aided by logistical support from the US Sixth Fleet.

Since then the incident has been used again and again by journalists and authors as a warning against what the Qadhafi regime can do in Tunisia. The warning itself is not misplaced - having been in North Africa now and again I would be the last to cast caution to the wind regarding Colonel Qadhafi. But a few even more important points were lost in the current obsession with Libya's ruler. The first is of course that a very few people were able to disturb Tunisia's social fabric to such a large extent. Furthermore, very few accounts have described the eagerness with which a sizeable number of Gafsan workers joined the fray.<sup>4</sup>

I interviewed some of them last week. Gafsa is a mining town, and many of those I talked to were union members who complained about inadequate wages, the suppression of their union and the generally bad economic conditions in southern Tunisia. All this of course hints at the more profound underlying problems I described.

Meanwhile Bourguiba, between bouts of senility, continues to rule the country. On his 84th birthday a few months ago he was shown swimming at the Carthage palace. Like some latter-day Mao Tse Tung he smiled and joked with reporters. Perhaps the comparison to Mao is not too farfetched. Both men imposed on their country a legacy so strong that it will take years to dismantle it. Hopefully in Tunisia as in China that process of dismantling will be relatively peaceful and accommodation will prevail.

All the best,



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<sup>4</sup> Official sources put the number of "dissidents" around 200. But as one UGTT lawyer told me, several times that amount of people were put on trial. I was not able until now to get a clearer estimate of the number of people involved. The numbers given to me by some of the workers were clearly exaggerated (usually in the thousands), but the government figure seems to be a clear underestimation. In a rather startling exposure, a US Embassy official told me that some of Gafsa's "prominent families" had also joined the "guerrillas."