

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DJV-17

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POLITICS IN TUNISIA - SOME RECENT EVENTS.

Mr. Peter Martin
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Dear Peter,

For a few hours last Saturday morning (27 June) a small antechamber in Tunis's main court building was filled to capacity with a veritable who's who of the country's opposition. At any other time and different venue those present would have risked arrest for unlawful assembly. But here - ironically beneath a large discolored print of President Bourguiba in lawyer's garb - they milled around without restrictions. Also in the room were a representative of Amnesty International, four or five journalists from the BBC, Reuters and other international news agencies, an observer from the International Commission of Jurists and a junior official from the American embassy.

They had all gathered to attend the trial of Chamais Chamari, a member of Tunisia's Mouvement Démocratique Socialiste. But Mr. Chamari's tribulations this time had little to do with his membership in the MDS, an essentially loyalist opposition party headed by Mr. Ahmed Mestiri. Mr. Chamari is also the Secretary General of the Tunisian League of Human Rights, an organization founded in 1977 to watch over human rights conditions within the country.

Ever since then the League has been a gadfly to the Bourguiba regime. These last couple of years, however, it has become a real thorn in the flesh of Tunisia's ruler. This evolution does not so much reflect a change in the League's activities as a confirmation that the Tunisian regime has become increasingly authoritarian. The Tunisian League of Human Rights has consistently demanded - among other things - legal reforms that would precisely define the conditions under which people can be arrested and detained. Under Tunisian law suspects can be held indefinitely, without access to lawyers or relatives.

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PICTURES

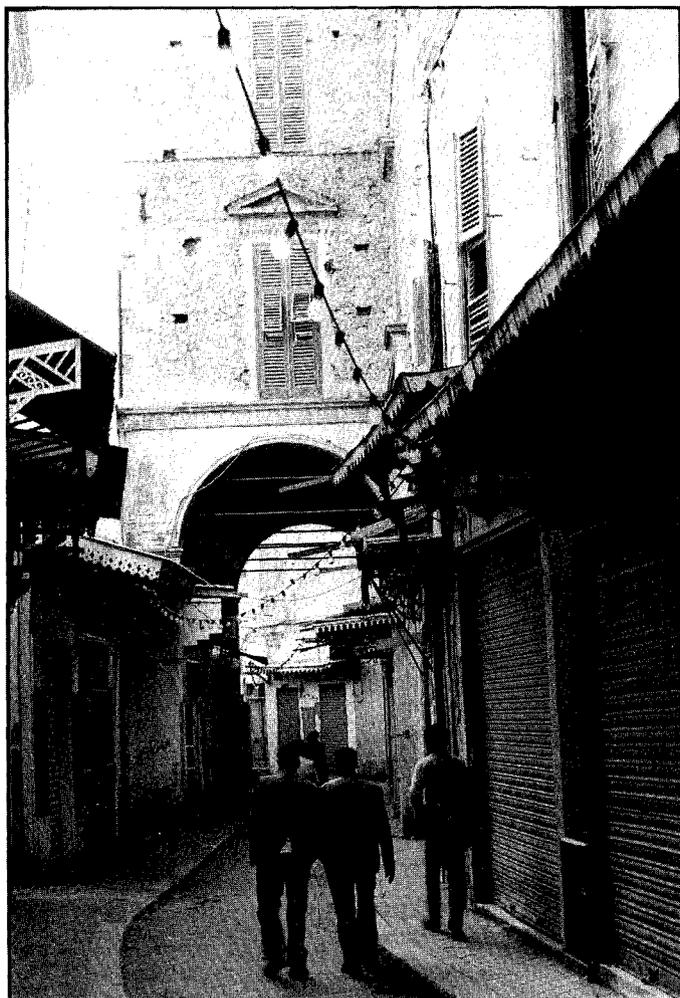
- Page 3: Early morning in the medina near de Porte de France.
Page 4: A view of Tunis with the Gulf of Tunis in the background; Avenue Habib Bourguiba in the center.
Page 5: A view of Tunis, across Avenue Bourguiba. The tall structure is the Africa Hotel, part of the Meridien chain.
Page 6: Women dressed in safsaris window shopping in the gold souk.
Page 7: Fruit seller in Sidi Bou Said, one of Tunis's fashionable suburbs across the Gulf of Tunis.
Page 8: Western movie poster carefully repainted to avoid upsetting local sensibilities.
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Mr. Chamari himself had just been released from Tunis's central prison after three weeks of incarceration. He had been accused of "spreading false rumors" and "insulting the honor of the Prime Minister." The charge is rather vague and unsubstantiated. As with other opposition figures, the real purpose of the proceedings is to intimidate Mr. Chamari. An earlier trial was postponed, perhaps in part because of the international attention it attracted. Soon after the proceedings started last Saturday the trial was again put off, this time until October. The Tunisian opposition considers this kind of repeated postponement an intimidation tactic, a way of wearing opponents down. Ostensibly free, they can then be picked up at random by the local police for preventive detention.

Mr. Chamari is only the latest - but perhaps the best known - of a number of opponents that have run afoul of the Bourguiba regime. Opposing the government in Tunisia has never been an enviable task. Careers and personal advancement are often closely tied to membership and allegiance to Mr. Bourguiba's PSD party. But in the last few years the government has gone beyond simply denying its opponents a place in the sun. And lately it has seemingly embarked upon an active intimidation campaign.

During the last year matters have taken a turn for the worse: Nabil Barakati, a young leftist militant, was arrested on suspicion of distributing leaflets critical of the government. He died a few days later. According to the official explanation he had grabbed a policeman's revolver, fled and then committed suicide by shooting himself. But the body showed signs of abuse and... Mr. Barakati was handcuffed when he died. Then Tawfik Marzouk, a young fundamentalist, was tortured and died. Shortly before a prisoner was beaten to death in the civil prison of Mahdia.¹ And then a few weeks ago, in a scene that resembled events at the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina a few years ago, about fifty women gathered

¹ The guards were later sentenced to long prison terms.

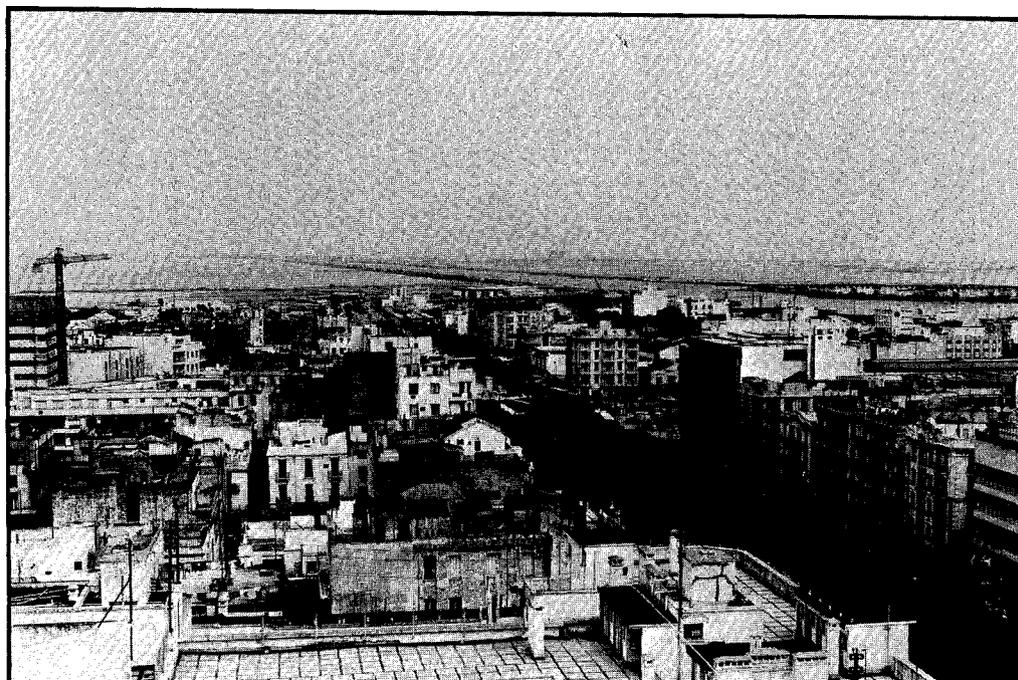


outside Prime Minister Rachid Sfar's office, demanding information about disappeared relatives and friends.

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It is hard to conceive of Tunisia acquiring a bad human rights record. For decades it has been considered one of the more enlightened developing countries. Nevertheless, in its latest issue of Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, the State Department noted that "during the year the human rights situation in Tunisia underwent serious deterioration."

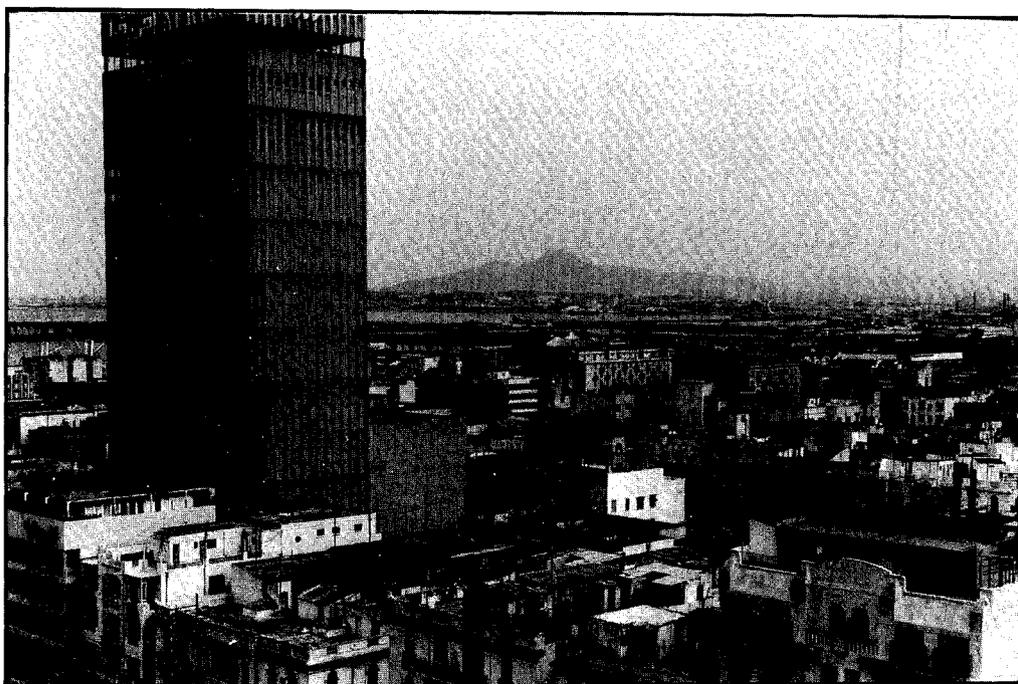
The incidents described above are only a few of those culled from among events that took place these last twelve months. There are also a



number of other worrisome developments: the house arrest or imprisonment of several union leaders and journalists, massive arrests of islamacists last year and again this year, the disappearance of all opposition publications, the fact that cases are sometimes assigned to military rather than to civilian courts² and a few instances where family members were held as hostages for people sought by the government. The State Department's report also noted the unusually harsh sentences imposed for relatively minor infractions. Some of the fundamentalist student protesters I wrote about in DJV-15, for example, have been sentenced for periods up to four years.

And in an interview a couple of days before his latest trial Mr. Chamari pointed out to me the recent re-establishment of the Cour de Sûreté de l'Etat in April of this year. The court deals essentially with crimes that impinge upon the security of the state. The government decides which

² Under Tunisian law a court case can seemingly be referred to a military tribunal if one or more defendants belong to the military. A couple of years ago three fundamentalists were executed; one of them was performing his military service at the time and all were judged by the military court. "Belonging" to the military is not a very well defined concept: in 1967 already Mohamed Ben Janet, a taylor who occasionally provided uniforms for the Tunisian army, was convicted before a military court to twenty years of imprisonment for participating in riots.



cases fall into this category and the court can impose the death sentence. Some of its members are from the National Assembly. And since Tunisia remains for all practical purposes a one-party system it means that Mr. Bourguiba's PSD in part administers justice in the country. Human rights activists in Tunisia denounce this as one more indication of the judiciary's lack of independence.

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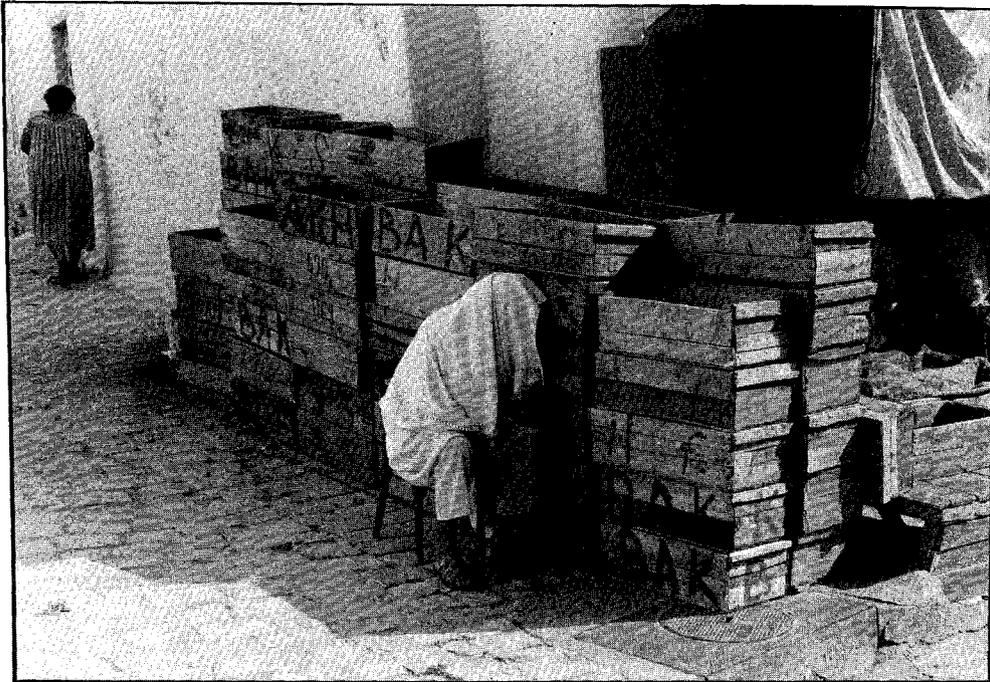
How did matters get this way in Tunisia? This "durcissement du régime" (as a promptly suspended Le Monde called it) took place for several reasons. Until the end of the 1970s Tunisia faced few real economic or social problems. The country was called a "pays pilote" - an example for development in Africa. By the mid-1980s, however, it was adopting a "plan de redressement" and was struggling to avoid further economic hardship. In a few years' time optimism had given way to a profound pessimism, heightened by a lingering political crisis over Mr. Bourguiba's succession.

As I described in previous reports, many of the conditions that prompted the dramatic economic reversal were outside government control. But Tunisia's political leadership - increasingly Bourguiba and a narrowing political clique around him - can also in part be blamed for economic mismanagement. And these shortcomings are now taking their toll.



I do not want to exaggerate any of this. Tunisia remains a relatively prosperous country in comparison to many other African countries with roughly similar resources. But what matters for most Tunisians is not so much what they have, but what they have been promised. After 1980, reality for the average Tunisian contrasted sharply with the steady and heady diet of official propaganda the newspapers kept printing. Almost everyone - except perhaps President Bourguiba - seemed painfully aware of a credibility gap. And it was in what was essentially this crisis of leadership that much of the fundamentalist and secular opposition grew.

After these few months here - and after a substantial number of interviews with present and former technocrats and politicians - I tend to think that Bourguiba never understood or was seriously interested in economic issues. Those entrusted to guide the country's economic development were often chosen for reasons that had little to do with demonstrated competence. But as long as the Prime Minister himself was able and kept close supervision over his team, one could expect some kind of trickle-down effect of responsible stewardship for the economy. This was essentially what happened in the 1970s under the leadership of Prime Minister Hedi Nouira and his righthand man for economic planning, Mr. Moalla. After 1980, politics (and economic development) in Tunisia became increasingly a Byzantine affair. It was guided from the Carthage palace by the Supreme Commander and a small entourage that often played a game of musical chairs, seemingly orchestrated by a conductor without a



master score. When Mr. Moalla and several of his team left in disgust - I still consider it the finest planning team the country ever possessed - the situation resembled a ship adrift.

Mohamed Mzali's self-proclaimed task - he became Prime Minister in 1981 - was to bring a measure of political pluralism to the country and to turn the economic situation around. Parliamentary elections were held in 1981, this time contested by several opposition parties. But the elections were rigged and it was quite clear that Bourguiba had no intention of seriously reforming the political system.

One of the reasons for this refusal - in addition to his almost instinctive rejection of any situation that diminishes his own role as powerbroker - was undoubtedly the rapid growth of the Mouvement de Tendence Islamique and other opposition movements in Tunisia. The government and the opposition had diametrically opposed viewpoints on how to resolve the crisis: the government demanded stability in order to promote economic growth while much of the opposition pointed out that only economic growth and equity could bring stability. The mistrust was fueled by the economic hardship and the persisting crisis of leadership in the country. In his book Makalaat (Reflections) Rachid Ghannouchi, the MTI's imprisoned leader,



describes some of these dynamics in rather sobering and eloquent language.³

The government ultimately chose for an increasingly confrontational and violent approach. It necessitated the evisceration of the opposition. It was - and remains - in many ways a policy of desperation. The deterioration of the human rights situation is only its latest manifestation.

³ As an increasing number of books it is taboo in Tunisia. It has not been translated into french or english and is therefore relatively unknown. But Ghannouchi, a former professor of philosophy, is in many ways as sophisticated as some of his more famous Egyptian, Pakistani and other temporary islamic thinkers. The copy I have is seemingly printed in Paris but does not mention a publishing house or an exact date of publication.

Another book that quickly became an underground classic in Tunisia is written by the Syrian journalist Salah Darwish. In Yahduthu fi Tunis (What's happening in Tunis) he draws a very critical, almost caricaturist picture of Tunisian politics. Within a few days after publication it was removed from newsstands in France. A final hot item is Mohamed Mzali's recently published Lettres Ouvertes A Bourquiba. In the book he repeats some of the detailed charges of corruption and mismanagement he described in his original handwritten letters (in arabic) sent to friends in Tunisia.

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There are those in Tunisia who claim that the recent crackdown on the opposition, particularly the islamacists, is a preventive measure. They argue that by tough actions now the government can prevent political turmoil in the future. But one friend, a university professor who has closely investigated the MTI and who has written extensively on social unrest in Tunisia, pointed out a different dimension. He observes that the government has already reached the limits of what suppression can possibly achieve. The government needs to look for other means; violence can no longer contain the unrest.

His analysis seems to be supported by a recent campaign in the government-controlled newspapers. For weeks they have been printing testimonials from fundamentalists who have turned their back on "the tyranny of those who claim to represent Islam." They have simultaneously printed an astonishing number of pictures, allegedly showing private and public property damaged by fundamentalists, as well as a large number of pictures showing homemade bombs, rifles and ammunition taken from intégristes.

It is a battle for the hearts and minds of young Tunisians; a battle, as Bourguiba stressed, to convince the Tunisian people that reason will prevail and that the state is the best guarantor of Islam's position in the country.

The effect of the campaign has been much less powerful than the government expected - for two reasons. First, the disclosures of the destruction came at a time when the exiled former Prime Minister Mohamed Mzali, in a series of handwritten letters from Paris, carefully and in great detail described official corruption in Tunisia. As much of the other opposition literature in the country, the letters quickly found their way to a larger audience. The fourth and fifth letter in particular were damaging to two very close friends of Mr. Bourguiba, giving a blow-by-blow account of some of their alleged misdealings. Not before long the former, Mr. Skhiri, was demoted. Formerly Director of the Presidential Cabinet, he no longer has access to the presidential palace. The other, Mr. Hedi Mabrouk, wisely chose to leave the country on the pretext of needing medical attention in Paris. He is not expected to return to Tunisia. Against Mr. Mzali's charges the destruction of a few busses and cars by the fundamentalists looked almost insignificant.

Second, the rather graphic newspaper campaign made many people realize that if all the accusations of destruction are indeed true - and for once the government's extensive newspaper campaign may have backfired - the presence and impact of the islamacists is much greater than the government has so far admitted (something I briefly hinted at in DJV-15). Two of my regular MTI contacts even showed some satisfaction with the campaign, arguing that it put them on the map to an extent undreamt of until now.

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For Mr. Chamari the struggle continues. Already the government has attempted to remove him and the League from the limelight by appointing a rival Association des Droits de l'Homme et des Libertés Publiques. Even in normally cynical Tunisian circles this produced a cry of derision. The

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president of the supposedly politically neutral Association is Dr. Dhaoui Hannablia. He was Minister of the Interior in 1978 when he ordered the army out during a national strike. The event is still known in Tunisia as Black Thursday. To add insult to injury Mr. Ezzedine Ben Ali, the current Minister of the Interior who was recently promoted to Minister of State, signed the Association into existence. As I detailed in DJV-15 Ben Ali is a military man, considered to be one of Tunisia's hardliners.

As I leave Tunisia for Morocco the country remains politically as moribund as ever. Everyone - the PSD, the opposition parties, the military - is waiting for the Supreme Commander to leave the scene. Everyone that is except Mr. Bourguiba himself. Swathed in his ubiquitous white scarf and heavy overcoat he has started on his yearly spring tour of the country. A few days ago I caught a glimpse of him in downtown Tunis. He looked very old. He was reclining in the back of his Mercedes, leaning slightly against the shoulder of Mr. Sfar. But the eyes were still bold as he looked out over the crowds. His chin still jutted out defiantly as it did in pictures taken thirty years ago. He rode along the main avenue named after him, past several public buildings that bear his name. Then, with a magnificent motorized honor guard in front of him, the Supreme Combattant passed underneath the strong bronze eye of his own statue at the Place d'Afrique and disappeared in the direction of Carthage.

All the best,

J. V. ...

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Although I cannot thank all of those who have been helpful during my stay in Tunisia, I would like to single out a few people who were particularly forthcoming with their help: Mr. Ahmed Mestiri and Ismail Boulahia of the Mouvement Démocratique Socialiste; Mr. Najib Chabbi of the Rassemblement Démocratique Socialiste; Mr. Brahim Khayder and Mr. Tijani Harcha of the Mouvement de l'Unité Populaire; Mr. Tayyib Baccouche of the Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens; Mr. Rachid Driss of the Association des Etudes Internationales; Professors Abdelkader Zghal, Hisham Djait, Elbaki Hermassi, Sadok Belaid, Habib Slim, Hedi Cherif, Khalifa Chater and Lawrence Michalak; Dr. Muhammad Rouz at C.E.R.E.S.; Mr. Khemais Chamari of the Ligue Tunisienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme; Tanya Matthews and Simon Ingram of the BBC. A number of members from the Mouvement du Tendance Islamique as well as from the UGTT and the PSD asked me to keep their names confidential. A special thanks to Dr. Moncef Khaddar of the Institut Bourguiba des Langues Vivantes.