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TUNISIA - AN UPDATE

Mr. Peter Martin
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Dear Peter,

I was interviewing a member of the FLN's Politburo [the FLN, the Front de Libération Nationale, is Algeria's sole political party] in Algiers when a telegram, announcing President Bourguiba's removal, was brought into the room. He sighed briefly and put the piece of paper on his desk: "Maybe Tunisia can now proceed with some of its more urgent problems."

It was a sentiment shared by many of us who have been observing Tunisian politics the last few years. Since I wrote in detail on political events in the country, (see DJV-11 through DJV-17), I thought my readers might like a quick update on the events that led up to Mr. Bourguiba's removal, some details of the last few days of his stewardship and some speculation about the new Tunisian president, Mr. Ezzedine Ben Ali, and the country's political and economic future.

Within a few hours of hearing the news I was able to get in touch with several contacts I had carefully cultivated during my stay in Tunisia. Most of the information in this report has been carefully crosschecked; some of it comes from a couple of what I consider to be impeccable sources within the PSD leadership. I must add a caveat: although some details continue to circulate in Tunisia's normally lively rumormill, the very nature of the actual take-over makes it hard to verify some of the events.

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Looking back at events in Tunisia this last year I was struck by the rapid change that transformed its leadership from its customary and lingering decrepitude into a panic-stricken government. In my newsletters I

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described in detail some of the continuing struggles between the government and the UGTT [Tunisia's main labor union], the islamicists, the Tunisian League of Human Rights and the students at the universities.

President Bourguiba's spring tour of the country showed the extent of his physical weakness; at ribbon cutting ceremonies one of his ministers had to support the hand that held the scissors. Longstanding rumors of senility have now been officially admitted. It was in many ways a frightening year for Tunisia. The megalomania of Mr. Bourguiba - longstanding, but undoubtedly exacerbated by his bouts of senility - reached unprecedented heights. A few examples: the indiscriminate hirings and firings of officials (the PSD directorship, for example, changed hands three times in a period of three weeks), the intrigues at the Carthage palace, the vindictiveness against the former prime minister Mr. Mohamed Mzali and his family, the start of one more city named after Mr. Bourguiba and the plans for yet another and more grandiose mausoleum in his honor.

All of this took place in a context of serious economic hardship; the country's international lenders were anxiously pointing out that several troublesome economic difficulties could only be resolved if some underlying political issues were settled. A few weeks before Mr. Ben Ali's action, a long article appeared in La Presse. In it an IMF director was quoted at length arguing exactly that point. Although the countries he was referring to did not include Tunisia, the message was quite clear. And since La Presse is a carefully controlled government paper, it was obvious that its publication had been sanctioned by a high official.

As I showed in my newsletters, most of these concerns were not new. For many years Mr. Bourguiba had shown himself extremely skilled at delaying needed political and economic reforms. Most observers (myself included) did not expect serious changes until his death. We had resigned ourselves to the fact that until then Tunisia would have to muddle through.

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In retrospect one crucial detail stands out: Mr. Ben Ali's rapid rise in Tunisian political life. A consummate politician, President Bourguiba had always kept military men at arms' length throughout his years in power. Mr. Ben Ali himself had no longstanding ties to the PSD. Under normal circumstances he would never have risen in Tunisian political life. His promotions, from a background of military security to the Ministry of the Interior and ultimately to the position of Prime Minister, hint at the slow intrusion of security concerns in Tunisia these last few years.¹ They also

¹ In a couple of my earlier newsletters I have traced this concern to the 1980 Gafsa incident when a number of Libyan-trained Tunisians occupied the town in southern Tunisia. The official version attributed the attack to a band of renegades acting on Qadhdhafi's orders. My own interviewing in the area did not challenge this, but made clear that the group had enjoyed substantial support within the town and that several prominent families and PSD members had helped the rebels. Gafsa, however, is above all a symbol. It marks a breaking point in recent Tunisian history.

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testify to the fact that the now deposed leader must have felt the need to deal with Tunisia's problems in a way he would have considered unacceptable even a few years ago.

The events of these last few years thus help us to understand Ben Ali's rise in Tunisian politics. The fact that since October he had become not only Prime Minister but was also in charge of Tunisia's army and PSD director made him the right man in the right place. But the underlying question remains: what turned him from a willing, strategically placed bystander into an interventionist?

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In a rare interview before he deposed his political mentor, Mr. Ben Ali repeatedly stressed the need for order in Tunisia. As I detailed in DJV-15, in trying to achieve this order he had shown himself one of the regime's hardliners. But Mr. Ben Ali is perhaps above all a pragmatist, and I believe that it is in part this pragmatism that forced him to step in and take over.

I must provide a little more detail here. In one of my last reports from Tunisia I described the trial of the islamacists that had been arrested on several charges, including the attempted overthrow of the government. President Bourguiba always had a particular dislike for what he once called "the forces of darkness" that threatened to upset his vision of reformist Islam and of a westernized society.

When the courts imposed only seven death sentences in September - five in absentia - and saved the MTI leader Rachid Ghannouchi from execution, Mr. Bourguiba insisted on a retrial. Ben Ali refused to endorse the Supreme Combattant's order, fearing that this would lead to a breakdown of an already precarious situation after the various troubles of this last year. At that point Bourguiba wanted to dismiss Ben Ali as Prime Minister in order to replace him with Mohamed Sayah, an old confidant and chronicler of Mr. Bourguiba's life.²

Military and security concerns intrude more forcefully afterwards. At the same time the event coincides with an important turn-around in Tunisia's economic planning: after Gafsa the economic growth of the 1970s could only be sustained if real structural change and austerity took place. Such economic change, needed to turn the inefficient agricultural and industrial sector around, could seriously upset the already strained social fabric in the country. Mr. Ben Ali and his new government must now face this challenge belatedly.

² According to one of my sources it was Mme. Saida Sassi, Bourguiba's niece and most recent companion, who warned the Ben Ali faction of the imminent danger. The story has some plausibility; Mme. Sassi was never put under house arrest and was allowed to join the president at his residence in Mornag after his removal. Before the actual intervention by Ben Ali, an old friend of Mr. Bourguiba, Mohamed Ben Hassine, had been sent to Carthage to talk the Supreme Combattant into stepping down. It was only when he

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If for reasons of analysis I focus briefly on only one aspect, it seems to me that the trial of the islamicists was crucial in understanding much of what went on in Tunisia during the last few months. The elaborate press campaign waged against them backfired for reasons I detailed in DJV-14. At the trial Rachid Ghannouchi had concluded an eloquent and impassioned defense of his actions with a single poetic sentence that encapsulated all the fears Tunisian pragmatists must have felt: "Sur ma tombe pousseront des fleurs islamiques - Islamic flowers will grow on my grave."

There was also a larger issue, one Ben Ali had commented on in his interview. The trial pitted Islamism and Bourguibism against each other. Ben Ali conceded that the islamicist threat was only the symptom of a deeper malaise within Tunisian society. Bourguibism, or rather the remnant of a once vibrant political strategy, was no longer a serious contender in this struggle. Simultaneously there was the feeling that suppression had reached the limits of the possible and that, to use an old cliché, this was a struggle for the hearts and minds of Tunisians. It was a struggle the government was losing, despite the attempted reinvigoration of the PSD and the propaganda campaign in the officially controlled press. Finally, the new president must have been aware of the fact that the MTI and Mr. Ghannouchi were starting to lose power to extreme splinter groups within Tunisia's islamicist movement. Perhaps it was better to compromise at the edge of the abyss?

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Mr. Ben Ali must be credited for his correct reading of the situation and for his pragmatic moves. But this pragmatism may well be his Achilles heel. His critics charge that his standing up to Bourguiba was only a tactical consideration, perhaps executed in part under pressure from Tunisia's western allies. However, his skillful use of article 57 of the Tunisian constitution to depose Bourguiba for incapacity hint at political savvy. They also testify to the strength of institutionalization in Tunisia. Ben Ali's inclination to move toward some form of multi-party system, his willingness to release some political prisoners, his intention to abolish the presidency-for-life and to allow more press freedom are commendable actions. His insistence on ending the cult that elevated the Supreme Combattant to a demi-god can only be applauded.

If I cannot refrain from quoting what I wrote in DJV-15 that "Ben Ali's political views and his growing presence may one day become a worrisome fact for Tunisia's future" it is because his views before and after the removal of Mr. Bourguiba differ so radically. The hardliner turned suddenly into an advocate of accommodation. In part one must give him, for the time being at least, the benefit of the doubt. His earlier actions were in part imposed upon him by his official position. There is the possibility that his personal views as they now emerge are indeed quite

refused that the invocation of Article 57 of the Tunisian constitution was used to depose him.

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different.

But almost everyone I interviewed denies this. Most argue that his hardline positions during the Bourguiba era closely reflected his personal beliefs. This raises a further question: does Ben Ali still consider those earlier positions warranted in the present political context? For the moment that answer seems to be "no" as the new regime continues to enjoy the tacit support of most groups within Tunisian society. But that tacit support may waver and there is another cloud on the horizon: the new political team Ben Ali has surrounded himself with comes (perhaps not unexpected) from the old guard of the PSD. What the new regime needs is new blood. Again it is too early to argue for much immediate change; Ben Ali will undoubtedly want to consolidate his regime even more before considering an infusion of new and younger elites.

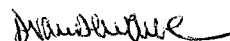
It is impossible yet to speculate on his success or failure. There are no clear indications at this moment of what factions will emerge. Some members of the current leadership, such as Mr. Hedi Baccouche, the new prime minister, may in the end prove even more important to shaping the country's future than Mr. Ben Ali himself.

No matter what configuration emerges, a few issues seem likely to determine the extent to which any new regime can move forward with meaningful change: the reinvigoration of the PSD (including a containment of internal rivalries), and, perhaps the litmus test of the regime, the resolution of the crisis with the islamicists and the implementation of economic measures necessary to turn the economy around. To some extent the three go hand in hand: the islamicist movement, for example, was bolstered by the lack of political expression within the country and by the effects of the economic hardships and inequities that took hold in the late 1970s.

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For now, most Tunisians are breathing a sigh of relief. The UGTT and the opposition parties have cautiously but favorably responded to Mr. Ben Ali's announcement of political liberalization. An old union activist told me: "We've heard all this talk about political overture before under Mzali [Tunisia's former prime minister]. But that was when Bourguiba was still here; maybe this time it will be different."

All the best,



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