

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

c/o Prof. Moncef Khaddar
Rue de la Révolution
8000 Nabeul

DJV-26

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RETURNING TO TUNISIA - PART II

Mr. Peter Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Former president Bourguiba's chronicler, Muhammad Sayah, once referred to Tunisia under his mentor as the New State. Through his designation Sayah wanted to indicate the originality and the lasting nature of Bourguiba's attempt to transform Tunisia and Tunisians into a modern country. If the New State needed some crutches by the end of its existence, few would deny that Bourguiba's accomplishments have been enormous. Tunisia remains to some extent a guiding light for other developing countries, despite the Supreme Commander's last years that undid many of the accomplishments Tunisians had been proud of.

The New State lasted for thirty years, from independence in 1956 until 7 November 1987. Then Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali took over and promptly announced that Tunisia was now in a New Era. Since then most important gatherings and announcements include some reference to this New Era. No politician will end a speech without a referral to it; no PSD (Parti Socialiste Destourien) poster is complete if it does not mention this dawn of post-Bourguiba renewal.

The first visible test of the New Era came a few weeks ago with the elections for some empty National Assembly seats. They had been forcibly vacated by some of Bourguiba's old political supporters who found themselves put under house arrest after the take-over. It was clear that Ben Ali wanted this to be a clean election. For days before the event he had given instructions that all should take place in serenity and calm. He had warned that opposition candidates should be given every opportunity to express themselves. At one point he intervened personally when one of the independent candidates from Gafsa had lost his privilege of using a government car for his campaign. The would-be politician from that

Dirk Vandewalle is a North Africa Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs. His interest is the political economy of Egypt and North Africa, in particular the development strategies of Egypt, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Morocco in the last two decades.

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southern town had been trying for days to get his car back - it had been impounded by the local PSD militia on some trumped-up charge - but to no avail. Then he called the president one afternoon and by nighttime was on the campaign trail again, seated in the disputed government voiture. All his trouble came to naught: he was not elected.

As a matter of fact, no non-PSD candidate was elected in any of the elections. I had went out early that morning to Monastir, Bourguiba's birthplace, a coastal resort about 120 miles south of Tunis. There was



THE GOVERNMENT CANDIDATE ARRIVES

very little doubt in my mind about the chances of an opposition or independent candidate to win in the town. Monastir has traditionally been at the receiving end of Bourguiba's porkbarrel politics. It has its own airport, a barely used metro system that connects the town with Sousse and some of the richest hotel resorts in the country. In return for this Monastirians have shown a not surprising loyalty to their native son. A token of their appreciation stands beside the townhall: a golden statue of the Supreme Commander as a Young Man, staring confidently into the future and into the waves of the Mediterranean just beyond his mausoleum.

The Mediterranean had formed the backdrop for the PSD's posters that were pasted all over Tunisia's public buildings. They showed a ship on it - symbolizing the Tunisian state - with a white dove soaring toward the sky, a voting ballot in its beak. On the side of the ship was a padlock epitomizing the sanctity of the approaching event. Monastir was remarkably

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calm that morning. I had expected some support rallies for the local PSD candidate, Mr. Abdelwahab Abdallah, who also happens to be the Minister of Information.

I headed for polling station #52, a small school building near the edge of the town. Here I was received with open arms: the officials took a look at my cameras and judged that I was a foreign journalist. (As I mentioned in my previous report, the Ben Ali government has been particularly forthcoming with the international press.) I didn't disabuse



PSD POSTERS AT STATION #52

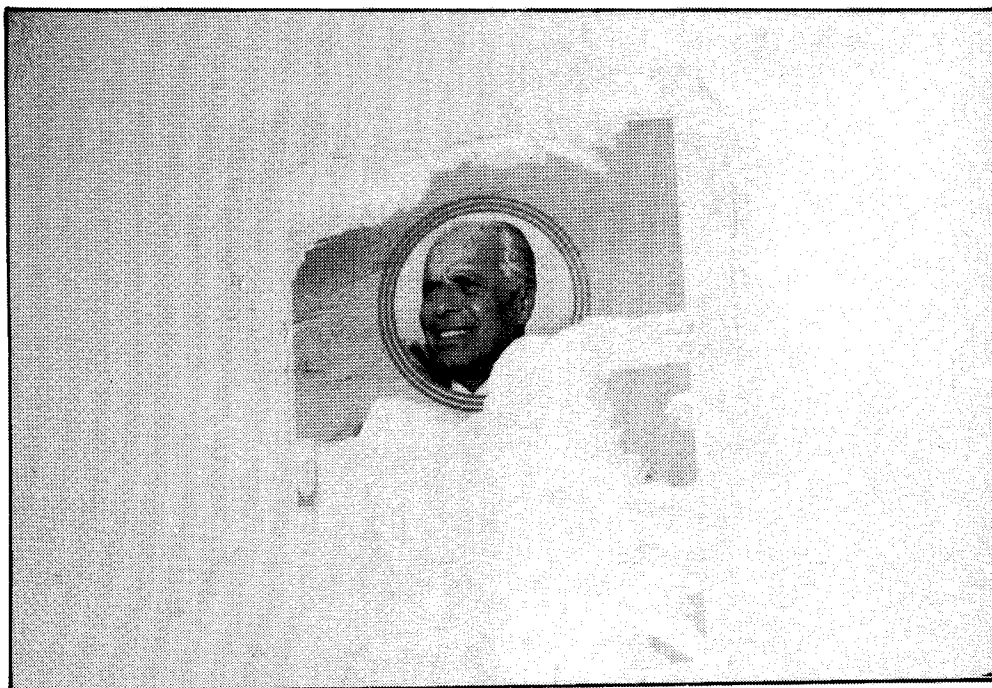
him of the notion and was - almost literally - taken under the wings of an enormous man with a huge burnous that kept flapping back and forth when he moved his arms underneath.

The first thing I noticed when entering the building was that the entire entrance had been taken up by posters of the PSD candidate - and no others. I immediately inquired but my guide - who turned out to be one of the local cell's leading members - simply said that the opposition candidates here were not very popular and had not bothered to put up posters. I entered one of the voting offices, filled to the ceiling with PSD posters in a soft pink color. I was a bit taken back when a minute later the young woman behind the counter handed me a voting ballot: it was of the same soft pink! And later that day I was to find billboards, traffic indicators, even the cupola of a marabout shrine, swathed in pink. Inside the voting booths there were more posters of the same color. (Ahmed

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Mestiri of the opposition Mouvement des Démocrates Socialistes later fumed at what he called this "affichage sauvage".)

Most of the men and women at polling station #52 were loyally dedicated to the PSD. With all the finance and infrastructure of the country's political machine behind them they managed to bring out their supporters in droves. Local taxis shuttled older people back and forth. They functioned at the same time as distributors of leaflets. When I asked a local official for a bayan (an official program) he said he didn't have



END OF THE NEW STATE : TORN POSTER OF BOURGUIBA
IN MONASTIR

one with him, but then simply gestured to one of the taxi drivers to bring me one.

I really wanted to see one of the Communist party's posters and drove out to Ksibet el-Mediouni, one of the poorer suburbs of Monastir and reputedly a Communist stronghold. The little village was crumbling at the edge of the sea, without paved roads or adequate sewage. I saw plenty of pink posters but no others. On my way back to the Monastir governorate building I finally spotted a Communist poster high up on the back of a traffic sign, the only one I would see all day.

At the governorate building the local PSD officials were lining up beside the entrance. My guide from station #52 hurried from his car to join the fray. A few minutes later Mr. Abdallah was chauffeured up and talked with his local supporters. He then went to vote, chatted a few more minutes, and disappeared. Immediately the square emptied out, reclaimed by

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a small knot of youngsters who had used it for some motorcycle acrobatics and who had been chased away a few minutes before Mr. Abdallah's appearance.

Mr. Abdallah received 95% of the votes cast. In just about all other cities where elections took place the PSD candidates were equally successful. The opposition leaders - except Mestiri whose MDS had not participated - denounced the elections as a fraud. By doing so they demonstrated the kneejerk reaction that has given them so little



STREET SCENE IN MONASTIR

credibility in the past. There had perhaps been some overzealous PSD supporters and some marginal infringements, but in general the elections were clean and free of the traditional ballot stuffing that had often marked elections under Bourguiba.

Mr. Ben Ali was forced to claim the election results as a victory, but it was clear that he felt uncomfortable with the results. They showed not only how difficult it is to reform a political system that has been dominated for so long by a single party, but also undoubtedly brought home to the new president a clear message of how strong Mr. Bourguiba's political machine still is. As many of its critics point out, it is a political machine that often depends more on the favors it can provide to people than on a real ideological commitment of its members. But that is of little consolation to Ben Ali who seems intent on moving forward with his reforms.

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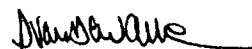
Following the elections the new president appeared on television in his first speech since the announcement of 7 November 1987. He guardedly defended the elections as opening the "road toward a democratic process" but quickly launched into a broad philosophical discourse of what his New Era wants to accomplish. It is clear that Mr. Ben Ali is a cautious man. His recent battle cry has become "Au travail" - to work. But he doesn't promise to solve the country's unemployment problems. He also doesn't reduce complex socio-economic problems to the rhetorical simplicities of the Bourguiba era.

Nevertheless, if anything strikes me as I leave this tiny North African country, it is the amount of uncertainty that still lingers on. The president's talk is reassuring and very few people would want to return to the New State. For the average man in the street, however, there simply seems no solution to the economic problems of the country. Although there was a surge of support from its supporters in the international community after 7 November, Tunisia will not be able to provide adequate housing or jobs to many of its younger generation in the next two decades. Its own statistics show the growing gap between rich and poor, between the northern part that has traditionally been economically privileged and the poor south. Educational facilities are already stretched to the limit. Education has always been considered one of Bourguiba's greatest accomplishments but last year not quite 20% of its high school students passed their last year exams.

To those who have known Tunisia for a long time the results of this gradual pauperization are already visible. Perhaps nowhere are their consequences so well exposed as in the big cities. Those who remember Tunis's café society of the 60s and early 70s can only shudder at life downtown these days. The terraces where once men and women mixed freely, seemingly intent on proving Bourguiba's emancipatory campaign right, are now filled with young unemployed men. The economic difficulties and rural flight have provoked an unintended retraditionalization; Tunis is again an Arab town, or almost so.

The theatres, showing mostly cheap movies that feature violence or sex, are overwhelmed by these young crowds. The last two times I went there was a fistfight, something I had never before seen in Tunisia. As Réalités wrote a few weeks ago, this is a public that would do anything to forget its boredom. President Ben Ali has announced a moral re-education campaign. The night before I left the national soccer team had won a match against Morocco. Thousands of young men were roaming Avenue Bourguiba. All traffic came to a halt; the policemen near the Ministry of the Interior withdrew quietly before the onslaught. For about two hours they sang and danced and then withdrew. There were no incidents, no damage that night - that night.

All the best,



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