

Tunisia, after coup, enters a new era

by Philip Golub

In the early morning hours of Nov. 7, the aging and weak President of Tunisia, Habib Bourguiba, was replaced by his constitutional successor, Gen. Zine al Abeddine Ben Ali, as President of the Tunisian Republic. This sudden change was announced following the visit of seven doctors and the new President to the bedside of Bourguiba to impress upon him the need for political change.

In a declaration read by the new President on Radio Tunis that morning, General Ben Ali declared, "The senility and the aggravation of the health of the President . . . and his duty to the nation made it necessary to declare [Bourguiba] incompetent to act as President of the Republic. . . . In application of Article 57 of the Constitution and with the help of God, we are taking over the tasks of the Presidency and the Supreme Command of the Armed Forces."

Ironically, the removal of the founder of modern Tunisia was greeted in Tunisia with sighs of relief and growing hopes that the political instability caused by the growing capriciousness of an ailing President would now come to an end.

President Ben Ali has named a new government headed by Hedi Baccouche. A small number of leading individuals associated with the past few years' palace intrigues have been placed under house arrest.

Over these past years, Bourguiba, who had ruled Tunisia single-handedly since gaining independence for his country in 1957, had manifested growing signs of memory loss, incoherence, and physical weakness. Ministers named one day would be revoked the next, abrupt policy shifts derailed the functioning of a country which had always proclaimed itself an island of stability and moderation in an otherwise tormented Islamic world.

The commitment of successive Tunisian governments to secular and modernizing traditions, had begun to effect profound changes in the sociological makeup of the population, progressively transforming Tunisia into a modern state. Tunisia was thus better insulated than most Islamic countries from the shockwave effects, in both the Shi'ite and Sunni worlds, of the fall of the Shah of Iran in 1979.

This relative stability, however, was increasingly threatened by the dual effects of the economic crisis facing all developing sector countries and the growing disabilities of President Bourguiba. The rapid growth of the Iranian-sponsored Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) in past years fed on these causes of discontent. Similarly, Libya's efforts to

destabilize Tunisia escalated in 1985 as the medical problems of the President became ever more obvious. Bourguiba's state of health paved the way for a series of byzantine intrigues at the Palace of Carthage, which led successively to the abrupt removal of Prime Minister Mohamed M'zali in August 1986, only two weeks after the President confirmed him as his successor, Bourguiba's sudden divorce from his wife, the nomination and subsequent disgrace of Rashid Sfar.

Throughout the two-year crisis that erupted with the removal of M'zali, General Ben Ali remained a respected figure, the key to the stability and continuity of the state. Minister of the interior and head of security until his nomination as prime minister in early October, General Ben Ali had the institutional support of the Army, the internal security forces, and large parts of the political class. Seen in both Paris and Washington as the last resort for a country in crisis, the new President is assured a large measure of international support. General Ben Ali is a graduate of both the French military academy of Coetquidan and of the U.S. Higher School for Intelligence and Security.

General Ben Ali is now expected to engage in a policy of re-democratization of Tunisian political life. The priority of the new President will be to stabilize the country and he is expected to recognize the nonviolent opposition parties, allow the return of exiled politicians, and engage in a phased policy of amnesty for those unjustly condemned.

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