

## America's Tunisian dilemma.

By Mark A. Bruzonsky

Washington  
Tunisia's likely next president, Prime Minister Hedi Nouria, is in the US for a state visit. With President Bourguiba in poor health, Nouria is here prematurely acting presidential, polishing his image for the succession struggle.

In the '60s this Mediterranean land of 6 million people was of key importance in America's Middle East thinking. Then it was seen as a model of third-world development in a region of chaos and instability. Street riots last January which left more than a hundred dead and the imminent succession crisis do elicit a few headlines. But the internal political struggle which will determine Tunisia's political future is not a priority in this overburdened capital. As with Iran, the US Government may be out of touch with the social forces likely to erupt.

"Nouria is not liked, and after Bourguiba only force will rule Tunisia," a young professional in Tunis predicted to me recently. On the other hand, an American diplomat sensitive to the repressive trends in the country confided that "Nouria is the only ameliorating force here."

These contrasting views capture the basic dilemma for American diplomacy. Decrepit institutions of government and party have lost popular support. They "are in the advanced stages of rigor mortis," as phrased by one Tunis diplomat. Yet Nouria is the only political figure likely to prevent Tunisia from falling victim to what one scholar speaking at the Middle East Institute's annual conference here in September termed "fascist" tendencies.

Tunisia faces far more than a succession crisis. The coming struggle will determine whether the country moves toward a repressive, single-party police state or evolves toward a multi-party democracy. Like Iran, Tunisia is in the painful transition to modernity and American influence is a crucial factor affecting the outcome. But, unlike Iran, US pol-

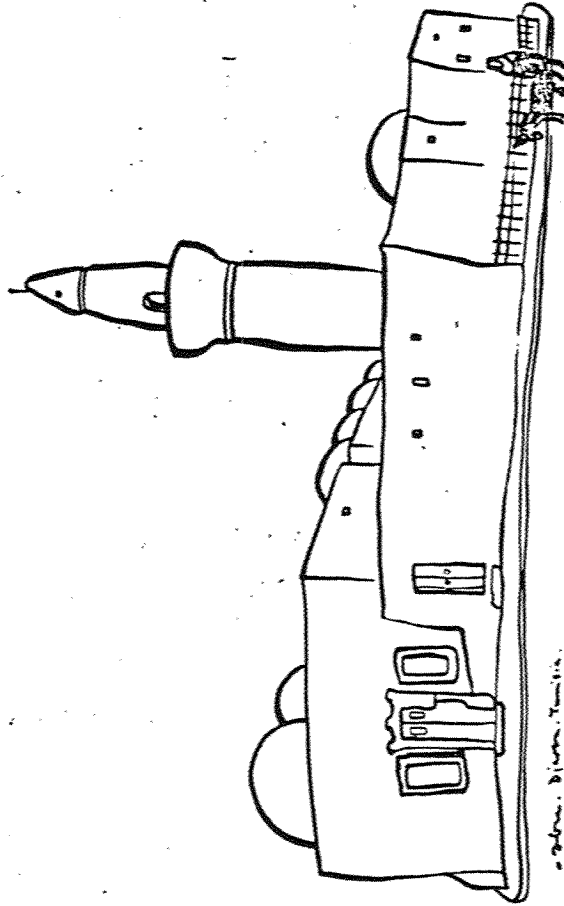
view last month in Tunis whether democracy was his goal. "Listen," he hedged. "For the US to have reached today's democracy required 200 years. Now in Tunisia we have hardly 22 years. Do you honestly believe that you can transfer your ways of thinking and of doing in the US to a country like ours?"

The same query put to Mestiri, revealed a far more positive attitude. "Our history makes us a special country in this area," Mestiri began. "We should be judged more by the standards of Western parliamentary democracy than of North Africa. We want a multi-party system here. We want a Tunisian democratic system. We consider the single-party regime no longer adaptable to the conditions of Tunisia. The system is now failing."

American diplomacy now is being tested by the domestic turmoil in this small country where the US has no vital interests but much influence. If the US fails to understand the interplay of forces and personalities and to encourage those who uphold values similar to its own, the hypocrisy of its human rights attitudes and democratic values would be glaring.

"The union had much confidence in America because they were acting legally," a young Tunisian banker commented. "They were only demanding their worker rights and never thought America would let them be arrested." This is the kind of naive faith many foreigners still have in American virtue. We need to find ways to be responsive.

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—John Dixon, Tunisia.

More attentiveness by Washington last year might have given Tunisia a much-needed push toward democracy. Unfortunately, when Habib Achour, head of the powerful labor union, approached the US about creating a labor party, he found little interest. Disillusioned, the union turned to a general strike. In the turmoil that resulted the director of the country's single legal party, Mohammed Sayah, was able to strengthen his illegal party militia and enhance his rightist political posture. As an American diplomat, embittered by Washington's indifference, now reflects, "if Achour had only declared a new party instead of a general strike history here would have been different."

Achour was sentenced last month to 10 years through the charade of a special State Security Court. Ahmad Mestiri, former interior minister and now the primary opposition leader urging democratic reforms, told me, "We con-

sider Achour completely innocent. It was a political trial and all the political problems remain."

Tunisia is a good case for exertion of the kind of moral and political influence originally envisioned by the Carter administration. Support for democratic reforms and human rights by the US Government is likely to have considerable impact in a country so sensitive to Western opinion. Nouria's visit here is the appropriate time to impress on him America's commitment to democratic freedoms as well as self-interest.

I asked Prime Minister Nouria in an inter-