Mark Bruzonsky Interviews

TUNISIA'S PRIME MINISTER, HEDI NOUIRA

When Tunisian Prime Minister Hedi Nouira visits Washington in the final days of November, issues of human rights, American aid, and evolution toward a multiparty democracy are sure to arise.

Both constitutionally and politically Nouira is Tunisia's crown prince—the designated successor of ailing Habib Bourguiba, "president for life" of this Mediterranean country of six million.

But the events of last January, which saw more than a hundred deaths and brought the imprisonment of Tunisia's powerful trade union movement leadership, have left a certain tension in their wake. Unemployment, rising expectations, and a growing alienation from the single-party regime—the Parti Socialiste Destourien (PSD)—are contributing to destabilization in Tunisia.

An embryonic opposition, led by former Interior Minister Ahmad Mestiri, is calling out for a more pluralistic political system. And at the same time, Colonel Qaddafi's Libyan Jamahiriyya is poised ominously to exploit any further chaos.

Worldview *Associate Editor Mark Bruzonsky visited Tunisia in June and in October. In mid-October he interviewed both Prime Minister Nouira (a simultaneous translation from the French was provided) and opposition leader Mestiri. Excerpts from the two interviews follow.*

BRUZONSKY: What are the major issues you hope to discuss with President Carter when you visit the United States at the end of November?

NOUIRA: Economic cooperation is one important thing we will discuss. And I will also want to discuss with President Carter the general situation in the region and the opinion of the Tunisian Government about that situation.

We are hoping for more help from the U.S. on some important projects that have an impact on the economic and social life of Tunisia, especially in the less-developed areas of Tunisia.

You mentioned regional political issues. You will be the first Arab head of government to visit Washington since the Camp David agreement. What will you tell the president Tunisia's attitude is toward the Camp David agreement?

Let me summarize the position of Tunisia. Of course you can't make war without Egypt, but can you make peace without solving the Palestinian problem? I doubt it.

Will you indicate to Carter your hope and support for the policy he has now initiated?

This policy must be seen as a positive gesture in order to restore peace to the Middle East. But this action must be pursued so that the solution will be a global one, an overall one, not a partial one.

Have you had any contact with President Sadat indicating your position?

President Sadat has informed President Bourguiba of his actions and explained to him the scope and aim of his policy. We have always told President Sadat that we wish him good luck in the action he has taken, but this has not prevented us from making some remarks.

Why have you decided to attend the Baghdad rejectionist meeting?

It's not rejectionist; we will be in good company with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and all others coming.

There has been much criticism in the American press about the human rights situation in Tunisia. I know that you recently met with Ambassador Dean Brown. His Middle East Institute recently held an important conference in Washington. And at that conference an American professor, Professor Moore from the University of Michigan, spoke about Tunisia. I want to read you one paragraph of what he said and ask for your comment:

"Tunisia is no longer a single bullet regime. Bourguiba has not been running the country for many years. In a sense Tunisia has already been weathering its succession crisis, but there is a potential for the Nicaraguazation of Tunisia. The image of a cohesive country has been tarnished. Even the term Fascism has been used and in a technical sense it can apply. Tunisia is not a simple authoritarian regime, it is a regime building on the fears of the middle class against the masses."

I am sorry that Professor Moore is using just slogans. It's very easy to have judgments without nuances. He seems to be thinking that the police simply went into the streets and shot people dead in January and that that's why Tunisia's image has been tarnished.

The police actually found themselves in the presence of a general riot in the streets. There was looting and arson, and this lasted for at least five to six hours. What do you expect government to do if not to restore law and order in the streets?

The criticism in the U.S. comes about for other reasons besides the January events. The American press reports that there are instances of torture in Tunisia. And Amer-

icans are also confused why other parties—like that of Ahmad Mestiri—are not allowed to function. We know he publishes a newspaper, but we wonder why Tunisia does not move in the direction of a multiparty democratic system.

First of all, the question of torture. There are many allegations but very few facts. In fact, only three specific instances of alleged torture have been mentioned in the press, and all have been shown not to be true by the government.

Now about the question of parties. Mr. Mestiri was himself one of the originators of our being a single-party system. Now, what is done in the U.S. or in Europe is not necessarily valid for developing countries like ours.

Do you think that the only precondition of a democracy is a multiparty system? Do you believe that Spain is a true democracy with its 150 parties? Do you think that in Portugal they have true democracy after their revolution and with so many parties? Do you think these are good examples to follow? Is it good to have so many parties so as to have the Red Brigades in Italy? Was it real democracy in the Fourth Republic of France, when they had a new government every two months? Do you think it is real democracy to have the crises they have in Brussels because they have too many parties? Do you think these are lessons for a developing country such as Tunisia?

I'll tell you our conception of democracy. All of the government's policies—whether economic, social, or educational—are done in consultation with what we call the social partners. These are the trade unions, employers organizations, farmers organizations, and also the consumer representatives and the party.

And within the party itself we have many tendencies, many trends. The people speak freely and openly within the party even in the presence of the highest officials.

Real democracy is the true representation of all these interests and trends.

And for us and for the government and for the whole of Tunisia the top priority is to create as many jobs as possible and to distribute incomes and raise the living standard of the people and to educate the people.

We have 1.25 million children going to school now. A third of our budget is devoted to education. We are the only country in the world spending between 8 and 9 per cent of our GNP on education. Our budget is two-thirds for social concerns—education, public health, culture, youth, and sports. What other country in the world—especially in the developing countries—is spending so much on youth and education?

Less than 15 per cent is spent on internal security and home defense. Do you think that such a country can be called a "fascist" country?

Per capita income has greatly increased since we came to power in 1970. And the distribution of that income is much better today than before. Tunisian society is like a diamond, with few rich and few poor at the top and the bottom and most in the broad middle. And since we are the exception in this way in this part of the world, we are the target of all extremists and fanatics.

But it is also why many Americans believe that as your people are educated and your middle class grows, the normal result should be a multiparty system.

Listen, for the U.S. to have reached today's democracy required two hundred years. Now in Tunisia we have had hardly twenty-two years. Do you honestly believe that you can transfer your ways of thinking and of doing in the U.S. to a country like ours?

No, but what is the goal? What are you aiming for?

Yes, of course, we believe that you can have a serious dialogue only between the social partners—the consumers, the producers, the trade unionists, and, of course, investors.

Modern, multiparty pluralism is a dubious policy of some people claiming to be attached to democracy in order to gain power.

We have so many urgent things to achieve. Many regions of the country are underdeveloped, and we are technologically backward. Of course we need cohesion, which is completely different from coercion. In a civilized community the last word must be left with law and order and not with rioting people.

But it's difficult to convince Americans that the single-party system is sufficient to allow even a partially developed society such as yours free expression.

It is not a one-party system. We have a party with very numerous tendencies. It's not the kind of party you think of in the U.S.

And I want to add something for security reasons. Can you imagine this small Tunisia being divided up into tendencies and presenting itself to the world in small bits, whereas its neighbors face the world with very solid monolithic regimes? Do you think this would be a good policy for Tunisia?

In September Colonel Qaddafi of Libya called for "Tunisian Liberation Committees." And an American diplomat recently told me that in his view Qaddafi would like to absorb Tunisia and one day Tunisia could be a province of Libya. There have also been recent reports of arms caches found in southern Tunisia and apparently financed by Libya. And it's known that Qaddafi is giving military training to Tunisian expatriots. What steps are you taking against this?

The first step is to maintain the cohesion of the Tunisian people through two actions. First, we don't want in Tunisia hungry or unemployed people. Second, we don't want to allow anyone to nourish these centrifugal forces. It is not just by chance that Mr. Mestiri is keeping quiet and is not stating his position regarding Libya, which is misbehaving and hiding arms and training people.

But you are taking any strategic measures, any military measures, any alliance measures in case of problems with Libya?

We have friends. And we have an army to act if need be. But we are a small country, and Tunisia cannot devote all its small resources to arms and military equipment. So we are relying on international legality and international organizations to protect us against anyone who wants to make any adventures against Tunisia.

. . . and an Opposition Leader, Ahmad Mestiri

BRUZONSKY: About the recent trial of union leader Habib Achour and the situation of the trade union today; what are your thoughts?

MESTIRI: The trial is over, but the political problems remain. We expected the condemnation of these unionists, especially since the prosecutor asked for death. The climate was not very favorable inside the court or among the official mass media.

But we are against this trial in principle. The trial was not normal because only one version of the facts was presented. The conditions of the trial didn't allow the defendants the possibility of freely expressing their opinions. We expected a debate about the events of January 26. Unfortunately we heard only the official version. This was a political trial and the political problems remain.

Could you define the political problem of Tunisia today?

It is that the single-party regime, the government, is no longer able to resolve by political means this sort of crisis. Essentially there was a conflict between the trade union organization and the single-party regime, the PSD. The PSD has all the powers of the state and yet it was not able to resolve this clash by political means. It was obliged to use the army, repression, in order to eliminate all these leading people of the trade unions. It was obliged to liquidate, not only the national leadership, but also the sections of the trade union organization—200 to 300 people.

In place of these people the government couldn't find others to organize free elections inside the trade union. And we consider that in the case of Tunisia the basic problem is that of the future of free trade unionism.

Tunisia was the very rare case in Africa and the Third World that had effective, democratic, free trade unionism. Before our independence all the other countries of Africa and the Third World had organizations dependent on some other organization in Europe. Tunisia has a nationalist trade union movement that has been authentic and free. Now for us in Tunisia the problem is the future of this movement.

But the government tells me that Achour was doing more than being a trade unionist; that he had different political policies and was almost a separate political party; that he advocated union with Libya, for instance, and was involving the union with Libya.

We expected the government to offer proof of these charges, proof that there was some connection between Achour and Libya or between Achour and political forces in Tunisia aiming to take power. But the government hasn't.

Isn't it possible the government feels it is too politically sensitive to discuss this situation in public and prefers to charge Achour with less political offenses?

But when you argue that the trade union leaders tried to take power, you have to prove it.

What will now happen to the union with Achour sentenced to ten years?

The union doesn't exist, is no more. The problem now is the future of free trade unionism here.

Are you saying Tunisia is becoming a repressive one-party state?

Yes, it risks this.

What is the state of your party today?

Our party remains unauthorized. We still haven't received an answer about establishing our party.

They do allow you to publish your paper though?

Yes, but we haven't the possibility of organizing because we are not recognized.

You told me a few months ago that you hoped Tunisia will be judged not by the standards of North Africa but by the standards of Western European parliamentary democracies. So when the prime minister visits the United States at the end of November, what would you hope the American president will attempt to influence him to do in Tunisia?

First of all, the prime minister is going to Washington as our legal, official representative for Tunisia. I am an opponent. But I consider that what the prime minister will talk about in Washington involves all of us in Tunisia. We don't like any foreign interference in our affairs. Also we agree with all of the foreign assistance requests.

Even when it comes to human rights?

Well, we consider that the question of human rights is not internal, it is universal. Also the issue of democracy. We think that human rights are violated here in Tunisia. Our paper has published a statement by all the people tortured during the trials. We've published details.

Tell me about the torture. How many people?

We had this trial in Suisse, and they talked about the torture and signed documents. Also, in Tunis before the Security Court people talked about the torture. Partly because of this I and a colleague sent a letter to the court saying that we consider Ashour completely innocent.

What positions did you hold in the Tunisian government?

It was eight years ago that I was minister of interior. But before that, between '66 and '68, I was defense minister. I resigned then to protest against government methods. Before that I was minister of justice and after that minister of finance. I was also ambassador in Algiers, Cairo, and Moscow.

What are the goals of your movement for Tunisia?

Our main goal is to democratize the system. We want a multiparty system here. We want a Tunisian democratic system. We consider the single-party regime no longer adaptable to the conditions of Tunisia. The system now is failing. Our second goal is social reform.

You want social democracy like in Scandinavia?

Yes, like in Portugal, like in Sweden.