

## Tunis party system under fire

After interviews in Tunis in October with Prime Minister Nouira, party head Sayah and opposition leader Mestiri, *Mark Bruzonsky* was in Washington in late November for the Prime Minister's visit.

The Americans, Bruzonsky concludes, have decided to back Nouira, hoping to help him to consolidate his hold when Bourguiba is gone. Still, our correspondent foresees a period of some uncertainty for Tunisia.



**Nouira: mustering support in American circles**

Tunisian Prime Minister Hedi Nouira's visit to Washington some weeks ago was but one act in the presuccession struggle already haunting Tunis.

That struggle broke out in earnest last January when Habib Achour, head of the General Union of Tunisian Workers and one of the inner circle in Tunisian politics, called the first general strike in the history of independent Tunisia.

In the disorders that followed at least a hundred people were shot dead in the streets, and there were charges that the country's single political party, the *Parti Socialiste Destourien* headed by Muhammad Sayah, had instigated the rioting to discredit both the union and Achour.

With Achour imprisoned through the charade of a special state security court, Nouira and Sayah are both preparing, partly against each other, for what will be a bitter internal struggle once the ailing President Bourguiba succumbs.

One Nouira insider confided that the Prime Minister may attempt to purge Sayah after he consolidates himself in the presidency. He recalled Bourguiba's 1969 sacking of the "economic overlord" Ahmad

Ben-Salah only a month after he had publicly insisted that any criticism of Ben-Salah was criticism of the President himself. "The same could happen to Sayah," he hinted. But Sayah comes over as a tough, resourceful figure who cannot easily be pushed aside.

An American diplomat was far more candid. "Sayah wants to be prime minister," he said, "but his head will roll if Nouira steps into power after Bourguiba's death." Such speculations are widespread throughout Tunisia in this time of pretransition.

Surprisingly, another Nouira confidant suggests that "Ahmad Mestiri is a possible prime minister under Nouira". Mestiri is a former minister of the interior who was purged from the party in 1972 and who now champions evolution towards a multi-party democracy. "Mestiri is now speaking the language of an alternative prime minister," it was pointed out. "Mestiri and Nouira aren't that far apart" the confidant noted, the implication being otherwise about Sayah.

With Achour, Sayah, and Mestiri all vying for political position in anticipation of

### Sayah: preparing for bitter internal struggle



**Mestiri: possible prime minister for the future?**

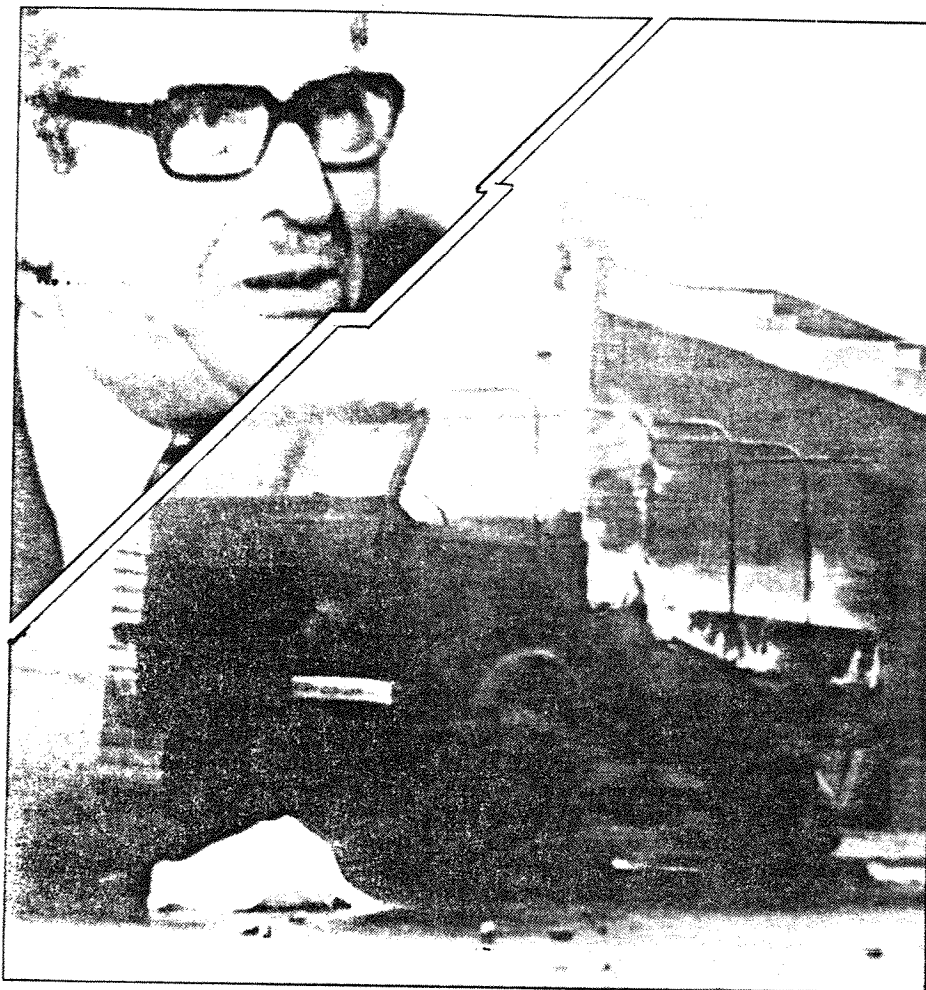
the unstable period sure to follow Nouira's takeover, the "crown prince's" decision to "prematurely act presidential by visiting Jimmy Carter's White House," as one analyst in Washington put it, seems a sound gambit. Nouira knows only too well how difficult a time he will have juggling political forces and personalities, especially in the early months of the transition. He came to Washington seeking Carter's blessing.

An admired technocrat, Nouira lacks any semblance of charisma – the main reason for the widespread uncertainty whether he can hold the fracturing political scene together for long. "Nouira is not liked, and after Bourguiba only force will rule Tunisia," one pro-Achour young professional prophesied.

Still, Nouira is supported by a variety of established interests. And the American Government apparently decided to boost Nouira's image through his recent Washington debut. "He's the only ameliorating force" against the repressive tendencies represented by Sayah, one US official noted.

Though the Americans continue to toy with the idea of encouraging Mestiri – enticed by his promotion of democratic freedoms and human rights – Mestiri's lack of any popular base seriously weakens his appeal. Only Achour really has a substantial following. But his downfall was partly the result of his having believed the Carter Administration's early human rights slogans. "The union had much confidence in America because they were acting legally," one young banker reflected. "They were only demanding their worker rights and never thought America would let them be arrested."

Achour had attempted to get US backing last year for establishing a labour party. But



Achour is still imprisoned after last January's riots while the Workers' Union has been reshaped to suit the Government (Associated Press)

Washington's indifference was an important factor causing Achour to choose the alternative tactic of a general strike to push for his economic and political reforms. An American diplomat, embittered by Washington's inattentiveness, now concludes that "history would have been different if only Achour had declared a new party instead of a general strike".

Serious tensions between the union, the party and the Government will undoubtedly continue and an eruption like last January's could occur. Unemployment, rising expectations and growing alienation from government and party institutions are all destabilising forces.

Under Achour, the union's popular base was half a million – nearly 60 per cent of Tunisia's total labour force. Furthermore, the union attracted new vitality from the educated young and provided a forum for progressive ideas which the decrepit party could not handle. But now even this outlet is gone as the union has been remade to suit the Government. "In effect," Mestiri charges, "the union is no more."

The party, largely representing the nationalist bourgeoisie, is, according to one Tunis diplomat, "in the advanced stages of

rigor mortis" – though Sayah insisted that a majority of the claimed 570,000 party members "are young people very supportive of our system".

Interviews with Nouira, Sayah and Mestiri highlighted how the internal political struggle is now being publicly manifested through the debate over the benefits and dangers of evolution toward a multi-party democracy.

The single-party regime "is now falling" in Mestiri's view: "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".

Though investment-seeking advertisements in US newspapers at the time of Nouira's visit touted Tunisia's "Western style", both Nouira and Sayah keep insisting that their capitalistic version of "single-party democracy" is best.

Sayah condemned "the plurality of parties as an evil in itself" and spent a full 15 minutes reading a 1971 Mestiri speech praising the virtues of the single-party system. "Mestiri is only playing to international public opinion," Sayah insisted. "Our objective in Tunisia," he added, "is a

democratic community – a goal higher than a multi-party system".

Nouira, in an unmistakable reference to Mestiri, suggested that "multi-party pluralism is a dubious policy of some people claiming to be attached to democracy in order to gain power".

An aide confided, however, that "Mestiri's conversion to democracy may be real; and even if his conversion isn't honest, people around him are".

Nouira's replies in Washington to those who questioned him regarding democratic freedoms were similar to his comments in Tunis in October. "I'll tell you our concept of democracy," he said. "All of the Government's policies – whether economic, social or educational – are done in consultation with what we call the social partners. These are trade unions, employers' organisations, farmers' organisations 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... What is done in the US or in Europe is not necessarily valid for developing countries such as Tunisia."

Fearing the inconclusiveness of the approach, Nouira added something of an excuse for restraining free political expression in Tunisia: "Can you imagine this small country being divided up into tendencies and presenting itself to the world in small bits whereas we have neighbours with very solid monolithic regimes?"

During Nouira's visit Tunisian newspaper advertisements in the US proclaimed: "Tunisia's political soundness and Western-style economic philosophy" provide investors with "a businessman's dream... the way to bigger profits in Europe and the Middle East".

But an American scholar offered a somewhat more restrained vision when the Middle East Institute in Washington held its annual conference a few months ago. Professor Clement Moore of the University of Michigan summed things up this way: "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 Nicaraguasation 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".

And in Tunis one middle-class moderate, sensitive to the aspirations of the masses, warns: "No one expected the army to attack last January. Next time the workers go out on the street they may have their own weapons." □