

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
DIRECTOR OF INTELLIGENCE AND RESEARCH

RECEIVED  
H. S. C.  
MAR 21 10 25 AM '69

*Intelligence  
Note* - 198

March 20, 1969

To : The Secretary  
Through: S/S  
From : INR - Thomas L. Hughes *tw*

Subject: TUNISIA: Succession Question Again to the Fore

President Habib Bourguiba is expected to break his long silence on plans for the succession by the end of March. The prospects are that the transfer of power, whenever it occurs, will be orderly. Shortly, thereafter, however, divisions within the party-government apparatus may break into the open. In such a contest, economic czar Ahmed Ben Salah is likely to emerge on top, although perhaps within a collegial leadership. The pragmatic and essentially Western orientation of the regime is likely to continue, although no successor can be expected to be as firmly in control--and as outspokenly pro-US--as Bourguiba.

Bourguiba's Health--A Question Mark. Medical experts believe that while a recurrence of the coronary thrombosis he suffered in March 1967 is probable, Bourguiba --now 65--can probably look forward to several years of active leadership. A recent bout with the flu--for which a leading French heart specialist flew to Tunis--caused concern mainly because it came only a week after his annual month's vacation in Switzerland.

Indecision on Succession Procedure. Bourguiba had the National Assembly pass an amendment to the succession provision of the constitution in 1966, but he never signed it, apparently fearing it would reduce his maneuverability. In January 1968 Bourguiba said he would announce a new

This report was produced by the Bureau of Intelligence and Research. Aside from normal substantive exchange with other agencies at the working level, it has not been coordinated elsewhere.

DECLASSIFIED  
PA/HO Department of State  
E.O. 12958, as amended  
September 6, 2007

GROUP 1  
Excluded from automatic  
downgrading and  
declassification

plan for designating a successor prior to the 1969 meeting of the Party's Central Committee. That meeting, twice postponed, is now scheduled for later this month. The impression prevails that Bourguiba will for the first time name a prime minister, and that whoever holds that post will succeed to the Presidency.

Ladgham Still Primus Inter Pares, But... Until recently, 56 year-old Bahi Ladgham, who acts as chief of state during the President's absences, was considered the almost inevitable successor, at least for the medium term. Although a colorless figure, long content to live in Bourguiba's shadow, Ladgham is influential, hard-working, and a man with few enemies. He would be the candidate best suited to emphasize stability and continuity.

...Ben Salah is Rising Fast. In recent years power has steadily accrued to Ahmed Ben Salah, the young (43) and dynamic architect of Tunisia's planned economy. He heads a super-ministry comprising the former ministries of Plan, Finance, Agriculture, Industry, and Commerce. Last July Bourguiba added the Ministry of Education as a mark of special confidence. While still dependent upon Bourguiba's support, Ben Salah has placed loyal proteges throughout the government and party machinery. The greatest obstacle in his path is probably the number of enemies he has accumulated among conservatives, businessmen, trade unionists, and small farmers--all of whom have been hurt by his reforms. These elements might well succeed in preventing his selection.

Dark Horses. Ben Salah has outdistanced other contenders like former UN General Assembly President Mongi Slim and Foreign Minister Habib Bourguiba, Jr. Slim, already slowing down, suffered a heart attack in 1968. Bourguiba, Jr.'s

concentration on foreign affairs has left him little time to build a domestic base of support. Both men however, would figure prominently in any regime based on collegial leadership.

Struggle for Power? Ben Salah would almost certainly resist any effort to deny him the major leadership role on other than an interim basis. While Tunisia's leaders are not divided by any profound ideological dispute, their competition for power, sharpened by differences in method and personality, could lead to a split when Bourguiba is no longer about to act as mediator. The new succession plan may seek to reduce the possibilities for an open clash by creating some form of collegial rule--possibly by sharing the powers now held by the Presidency with a prime minister.

Significance for the US. Bourguiba's Tunisia has developed its own economic and political structures, borrowing both from Western and Eastern models. Its close ties with the West, particularly France and the US, have proven profitable, and no successor is likely to want to reduce them substantially. At the same time, no successor is likely to be as domestically strong, and as frankly pro-US, as Bourguiba.