

CHAPTER II

TUNISIA DEMOCRACY AFTER ARAB SPRING

When Ben Ali came to office in 1988, he took some measures toward democratizing the political system which he had inherited from Habib Bourguiba's era (1957–1987), by loosening restrictions on the press, amending the constitution, and limiting the presidential term in office to three 5 years periods, to avoid any comparison with Bourguiba's life presidency. Parliamentary elections were conducted in 1989 with fewer restrictions compared with Bourguiba's period, but the absolute majority of the parliamentary seats was controlled by the ruling party. Ben Ali himself was elected unopposed in Tunisia's first presidential election since 1972.

A. Tunisia before Jasmine Revolution

The Tunisian political system that existed prior to the January 14th Revolution was constructed on the idea that legitimacy could be based on results. Tunisia was often singled out as a model of economic reform because it was much more successful than its regional counterparts in reducing public sector employment and establishing a competitive export sector.

The result was impressive economic growth, at least in the aggregate, and the adoption of what appeared to be a more sustainable approach to economic development than the statist policies pursued by many of Tunisia's neighbors. In addition to closely adhering to the "Washington consensus", Tunisia's economic growth was aided by a large diaspora community in Western Europe that provided remittances, as well as a strong tourism sector that provided foreign currency and opportunities for service sector employment.

Tunisia's political system, however, was strongly authoritarian, even by regional standards. In the more than half century that elapsed between independence and the January 14th Revolution, only two presidents ruled Tunisia and the

country had no real experience with competitive multiparty politics. Ben ‘Ali, who took power from Habib Bourguiba in a bloodless coup in 1987, undertook constitutional reforms that removed term limits and extended the maximum age for office holders. Although Tunisia had presidential elections that were theoretically open to other candidates, Ben ‘Ali won these contests by huge margins. Any pretense of competitiveness was undercut by revealing moments such as when an opposing candidate actually endorsed Ben ‘Ali in a presidential debate. Parliamentary elections were no better. Although nominal opposition parties were granted a fixed quota of seats, they were otherwise unable to compete with the ruling Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD) that dominated the legislature and municipal councils.

The broad contours of the Tunisian system resembled something akin to Chile under Pinochet in that the regime relied on economic performance, rather than representative institutions, to legitimate its rule. In the absence of participatory politics, the regime pointed to the empowerment of women and the creation of a secular state as symbols of inclusion. Indeed, the state carefully cultivated this image—“The Liberator of Women” is engraved on Bourguiba’s tomb. Policies such as a quota for female parliamentarians, a progressive personal status law, and a ban on state employees wearing the headscarf were used to burnish the regime’s credentials as empowering individuals, despite the absence of opportunities for real political participation.

B. Political System under Habib Bourguiba

In the Tunisia system of Government, all the authority Under Tunisia's unitary system of government, all authority exercised by lower governmental units is delegated by the central government, they have no inherent or residual powers of their own. The single constitutional provision covering subnational government states simply that "the municipal and regional councils shall deal with matters (of local interest as

prescribed by law." Subsequent legislation has introduced a well-developed system of regional and local administration that stresses the interdependence of government and party. The highest regional authority is the governorate.

The number of governorates, totaling 13 when they were first created soon after independence, was increased several times and by 1984 numbered 23. The chief executive of the governorate is the governor, who is appointed by the president upon the recommendation of the minister of interior. The governor also serves as the regional director of the PSD and is a member of the party's Central Committee. He is assisted by the Governorate Council, which is composed of representatives from the national organizations, members of the party's regional coordination committee, and communal council presidents (see *The Destourian Socialist Party*, this ch.). The council's primary duties include examination of the governorate's finances and budget and consultation regarding social and economic requirements and regional planning.

The governor's personal powers are extensive; he represents the president at the regional level and is concurrently the senior party official. He supervises and coordinates the activities of smaller administrative divisions, exercises control over the police, is responsible for the execution of court decisions, and controls local public bodies. Beneath the governorate, the second level in the hierarchy is the delegation. Each of which is headed by a delegate. The delegate, a civil servant appointed by the central government, is responsible to the governor. Each delegation is divided into several sectors (secteurs or *oumadaat*: sing. *oumadab*, Sectors were created in 1969, replacing the traditional tribal-oriented subregional administrative unit known as the *shavkhat*. At the head of each sector is the *omda* (sector chief).

The new system shifted the focus of the lowest rung of local power from that of the *shaykh*, who most often came from a traditionally prominent local family, to that of a militant of the PSD, the *omda* is appointed from members of the local party cell. The *omda* acts as a conduit between the

citizens and the other tiers of government. He publicizes decisions and regulations promulgated by the governor and advises his superiors of local developments of political interest. The *omrda* registers births, marriages, and deaths, and he issues various official certificates and permits. He concerns himself with matters such as the organization of basic food supplies, application of traffic rules, distribution of seed grains, and army recruitment. He is in charge of local police activities and ensures the execution of civil judgments. The entire territory of the country is divided into sectors, which numbered more than 1,500 in 1985. About two-thirds of the sectors had within their boundaries only small villages of less than 4,000 population or, in some cases, simply hamlets consisting of extended rural families. In more populous areas, a degree of local self-government was accorded within the framework of another local unit, the commune. In larger communities, a single commune might be composed of several sectors. Created by decree of the central government, their number had risen from 69 after independence to 245 in 1985.

The country's first political party, the *Destour* (constitutions) party emerged by nationalist movement in 1920 as the reacting of the elitism of much party's French-educated against French protectorate. Election for constituent Assembly of 98 members followed in accordance with a decree issued by the bey. Who was to have no role in the drafting process and who was pledged to promulgate the constitutions as written by the assembly. On July 25, 1957, the Assembly unanimously passed a resolution ending the beylicate and establishing Tunisia as a republic. It further provided for Habib Bourguiba as the president of the Republic, to assume the duties of head of state in addition to those of head of state of Government, which he had the prime minister.

On June 1, 1959 The Constituent Assembly approved the draft constitution, which was promulgated by Bourguiba later the same day. The constitution guarantees to the citizens of Tunisia several basic liberties, including equality before the law

and presumption of innocence in legal proceedings; freedom of expression. Based on constitutional caveat they may be limited by laws intended to protect the right of others or to further law and order, national defense and economic social progress. The small Jewish and Christian communities in Tunisia worship freely. Although proselytizing and Government employment is confined by Muslims.

Three branches of Government are Executive, Legislative and the Judiciary were dominated by the President. Although judicial independence is prescribed, the status of the Judiciary is clearly regarded as inferior to that of the other. The court has no jurisdiction over disputes between the president and the legislature nor may they interpret the Constitution.

The Constitution has been amended on several occasions since 1959. Legislative sessions have been reduced from two to one per year, and the provisions pertaining to presidential succession have been modified, as have the requirements for eligibility for presidential candidates. In 1969 the office of prime minister was instituted. The proclamation of Bourguiba as president for life was embodied in the Constitution in 1975. Broad revisions reducing the age requirement for service in the legislature and altering the composition of the Council of State were adopted in 1976. A national referendum procedure was added along with a procedure for the legislature to force the resignation of the government and ultimately the president through adoption of censure motions. The 1976 revision also introduced a differentiation between ordinary laws and organic laws (those involving constitutional articles, civil liberties, judicial powers, electoral affairs, and budgetary matters) (Nelson, 1986: 209).

In early 1986 all real governmental authority in the Tunisian presidential republic was concentrated in its executive branch headed by the nation's architect of independence, Bourguiba, and under him Prime Minister Mzali and a cabinet composed of about 30 ministers and secretaries of state known as the Council of Ministers.

Regional and local organs of government were entrusted with a limited degree of autonomy by the central authorities; regional governors exercised considerable authority under ultimate supervision of the national leadership. The popularly elected Chamber of Deputies generally gave pro forma approval to legislative initiatives emanating from the president and his cabinet (211).

The strength of the formal institutions of government had not been exposed to a major test since they were put into place nearly 30 years earlier. The chief determinant of the system's stability was Bourguiba's prestige and personal authority, secured by a single party whose functions overlapped those of the government. One of the few real modifications in the system was its opening in 1981 to permit opposition parties. Although acceptance of the multiparty model was far from an accomplished fact in 1986, its introduction could bring needed vitality to the system at all levels.

The Constitution vests decisive political power in the president of the republic, who is both head of state and head of government (the executive branch). The Constitution stipulates that the president is elected for a five-year term (concurrent with the term of the Chamber of Deputies) by direct universal suffrage. Bourguiba was Tunisia's first and, as of early 1986, the country's only president, having been elected unopposed on four occasions—after the Constitution was introduced in 1959 and subsequently in 1964, 1969, and 1974—and proclaimed president for life in 1975.

The president determines basic national policies and directs their implementation. He appoints high civil and military officers upon the recommendation of the cabinet, accredits Tunisian diplomats, receives foreign diplomatic representatives, ratifies treaties, is the supreme commander of the armed forces, exercises the right of pardon, and declares war and concludes peace with the consent of the Chamber of Deputies.

The president shares the power to initiate legislation with the chamber, although his measures take precedence. Unless

he sends a bill back to the assembly, the president is called upon to promulgate laws within 15 days after having received them; he is responsible for their implementation and exercises general regulatory powers. If a bill is returned by the president for a second reading and is then readopted by a majority of two-thirds, he is obliged to promulgate the law. As of 1985 the legislature had never overruled a presidential veto. The president may submit to a national referendum any bill pertaining to the organization of public powers or the ratification of a treaty. The Chamber of Deputies may delegate to the president the right to issue decree-laws for a limited period and for a specific purpose. The president may also issue decree-laws when the chamber is not in session, with the permission of the permanent legislative committee concerned. In either case, the decree-law must later be submitted for ratification by the full chamber (Nelson, 1986: 213).

The communes are administered by communal councils (often referred to as municipal councils), which are popularly elected at three-year intervals. The councils annually hold four 10-day sessions convened in February, May, July, and November. Under a 1985 revision of the law on municipalities, most council decisions were to be subject to approval only by the governor.

The purpose was to consolidate the authority of the governor as the sole reviewing authority in local matters. More important actions, such as borrowings, would continue to be referred to the ministries of finance and interior. In the communal elections of May 1985, all 3,540 candidates were nominated by the PSD. Their elections were assured by the boycott mounted by the other legal parties in the absence of guarantees that the election would be conducted in an impartial manner.

The electoral lists were composed of PSD members headed in many cases by a member of the PSD Political Bureau or otherwise high in the party hierarchy—as well as members of national organizations representing women, agriculture, commerce, and industry, along with some

independents. The members of the communal councils select presidents from their own ranks. An exception is the municipality of Tunis. Whose head (called a mayor) is appointed from the elected council members by the president of the republic.

The president of a communal council plays a preeminent role in directing the council's activity and superintending the execution of its decisions. With the exclusion of Tunis, the presidency of the council is intended to be a part-time office. The highest full-time official, the secretary general, is in charge of the administrative apparatus of the commune. Although the or is still present. his role is considerably circumscribed in larger cities, being more a neighborhood representative of state and party. The orndo is likely to be a loyal party worker in need of employment.

In spite of Bourguiba's fragile health and infirmities of advancing age (he was officially reported to be 83 in 1986). he had maintained to a remarkable degree his place at the lead of the political order. On several occasions, it seemed that serious medical problems would force him to retire from active politics, and the maneuvering over the succession intensified correspondingly. The official media exploited every opportunity to portray Bourguiba as ceaselessly involved in the affairs of his country.

Whether or not this remained true in 1986, his personal approval was still indispensable for any major policy decision or new initiative. The philosophy guiding Tunisia's political course under Bourguiba has been one of limited democracy guided by mature, educated members of the elite; the nondogmatic acceptance of state economic planning and intervention; and the application of gradualism, pragmatism, and rationalism . The element of pragmatism has been uppermost, making it difficult to trace a consistent approach by Bourguiba to his nation's problems other than a willingness to shiftsometimes abruptly-if a given policy is seen to be ineffective.

At successive stages of Bourguiba's rule, various high appointees have had a prevailing influence, causing him to follow new directions in policy or to adopt fresh concepts. During the 1960s centralized planning and the collectivization of agriculture and retail trade were emphasized during the ascendancy of the trade union leader and planning secretary, Ben Salah. Growing opposition, which gave way to violence among farmers, coupled with Bourguiba's misgivings over Ben Salah's accumulation of power, led to the latter's downfall and curtailment of his policies. During the decade of the 1970s, the government's economic policies were liberalized under Prime Minister Hedi Nouira, although its political grip was tightened. Several ministers who called for democratization of the PSI) and more open political processes were forced out of government, and Bourguiba's control over party and state was reasserted in the PSD congress of 1974.

Some of the leading politicians who were discarded by Bourguiba after his rejection of their policies became involved in opposition movements at home and abroad. Increasing pressure for the relaxation of political life and the legitimation of organized opposition movements continued to be rebuffed by Bourguiba and Nouira. The violence kindled by a general strike in January 1978 dramatized the pent-up grievances that had been suppressed under a system inhospitable to dissenting opinions. The power of the unions, which were blamed for the riots, was curbed by arrests and imprisonment. The minor concession of allowing a choice between two candidates for each seat both carrying the endorsement of the PSD did little to mollify the public's resentment over the monopoly of political expression by the PSD.

Bourguiba's presumptive successor under the terms of the Constitution, had begun to solidify his authority. In that year he succeeded in replacing three key cabinet members Minister of Planning and Finance Mansour Moalla, Minister of Information Tahar Belkhodja, and Minister of National Economy Abdelaziz Lasram-with officials more congenial to him. The prime minister's differences with Moalla and Lasram

over tactics in dealing with the socially sensitive issue of lifting price ceilings that had kept basic foodstuffs at artificially low levels served as the motive for their removal. Although Mzali still had potential rivals in high places, he continued to strengthen his position during 1984-1985.

He was somehow able to escape censure for the abrupt rise in the price of staple foods that ignited the January 1984 riots and was even able to profit from the crisis by banishing Guiga, his main adversary. Guiga's portfolio was added to that of the prime minister, whose authority over that important ministry was reinforced by the appointment of Mzali's own cousin, Ameer Ghedira, as its deputy head. Mzali also succeeded in advancing several officers of his own choosing to high posts in the military and security services.

In March 1985 Bourguiba told the PSD Central Committee that "Mr. Mohamed Mzali has acquired experience over many years. When the moment comes, he will not find himself incapable of taking charge." In the confrontation with Libya in August 1985 that sprang from the Libyan expulsion of Tunisian workers, the prime minister appeared to demonstrate his ascendancy over another potential contender, Foreign Minister Beji Caid Essebsi. Mzali also waged a relentless campaign over union wage demands and management of the UGTT against veteran labor leader Habib Achour, whom some thought Mzali might later face as a potential opponent. Among other prominent figures considered to be likely challengers to Mzali for the presidency.

Minister of Public Works and Housing Mohamed Sayah was most often mentioned. Sayah was associated with a more authoritarian political style and was believed to be unsympathetic to the democratizing trends inspired by Mzali. He had headed the PSD over a span of 13 years and, while party director, had been responsible for the punishment of labor union members after the 1978 strikes and riots. He was said to have personal access to Bourguiba and was, moreover, considered to be a confidant of Habib Bourguiba, Jr., the president's son by his first wife, a woman of French origin.

The younger Bourguiba had long been a member of the cabinet (special adviser to the president) but was removed from this position in early 1986. He was also president of the Tunisian Industrial Development Bank. Said to be in poor health, he was not thought to harbor personal ambitions for the presidency. The president's second wife, Wassila Bourguiba, was accounted to be a factor in the maneuvering around the presidency, although her influence may have diminished after the disgrace of her ally, Guiga. She was said to be ill-disposed toward Sayah and Bourguiba, Jr. and was identified with the faction that included Essebsi and Minister of National Defense Slaheddine Baly. Hedi Baccouche, who had been called back from the important post of ambassador to Algeria to reinvigorate the decaying PSD apparatus. was yet another potential aspirant to the highest office.

1. The election 1981: Opposition parties sanctioned

When Nouira suffered a stroke in early 1980, Bourguiba grasped the opportunity to replace him as prime minister with the more liberally inclined Mzali. Acting with the advice of Mzali, the former minister of education, Bourguiba reconciled himself to the need for greater tolerance of political pluralism. Several ministers whose differences with Nouira's policies had earlier led to their departure from government were restored to the cabinet and the party. Political prisoners were released, and nearly 1,000 trade union members convicted for their role in the 1978 riots were pardoned.

When Bourguiba told an extraordinary congress of the PSD that he saw no objection to the emergence of other political parties, his announcement was greeted with approval by the delegates. In the special parliamentary election that followed, some opposition forces were allowed to nominate lists of candidates and were permitted to express their views in their own publications.

The Islamist group known as the Islamic Tendency Movement (Mouvement de la Tendance Islamique-MTI) was rejected as a religious organization legally precluded from

participation in politics. In spite of having to campaign in an atmosphere that was not free from intimidation, the other parties had believed they might win a substantial minority of the seats, an outcome that could have transformed the Chamber of Deputies from a virtual rubber stamp for Bourguiba's programs into one in which policy alternatives could be introduced and debated.

Moreover, although the IJGTT had combined with the PSD to form the National Front election coalition, the labor movement represented a separate power base that was soon at odds with the government on many issues. When the official results were announced, however, the opposition parties were crushed by the PSD-led National Front in every district. According to Richard B. Parker, a former senior United States diplomat in the Maghrib, at the last moment Bourguiba changed his mind about allowing a real opposition party to run and ordered his minister of interior to see to it that only Destourian candidates were elected.

In the period following the 1981 election, the momentum for liberalizing the political atmosphere slackened. Mounting economic difficulties contributed to a resurgence of social stress and unrest. In the absence of decisive leadership from the top, there was little incentive for other politicians to risk their futures by proposing the painful correctives that were needed. The uneasiness of the government in dealing with criticism was reflected in its suspension of several newspapers for expressing dissenting opinions. The PSD-UGTT coalition was strained when the labor federation's members in the Chamber of Deputies spoke out against the strategy of the 1982-86 development plan. Nonetheless, two opposition parties (the MDS and the MUP) were belatedly extended recognition in November 1983.

The country's economic fortunes and growth rates, which had been adequate during the 1970s to stay abreast of population pressures and rising consumer expectations, faltered during the early 1980s. More balanced in terms of resources than its Maghribi neighbors, boasting an industrious

and better educated work force, Tunisia's liberal economic policies had helped to attract the foreign capital needed to expand its manufacturing sector.

In spite of this, the economy came under mounting pressure from balance of payments deficits owing to lower market prices for its raw material and oil exports and its growing need for imported foodstuffs. With insufficient funds for job creation amid growing signs of poverty, resentment was fueled over the widening gap between the poor and the salaried workers and the wealthy elite. The 1983-86 development plan emphasized increased investment in agriculture to reduce the need for food imports and to stem migration to the cities. As a result of poor harvests and other unforeseen developments, these objectives could not be realized.

2. The riots of 1984 and their aftermath

One of the principal measures belatedly adopted by the Government to bring an alarming balance of payments drain under control was to restrict imports and reduce subsidies on sales of basic food products, notably cereals. Bread prices were to double, while semolina (used in making couscous) and pasta were to go up by nearly as much. Although the government had made known its intentions three months in advance and had pledged itself to earmark compensatory payment to wage earners, it neglected to take account of the harsh impact on the unemployed and rural poor subsisting on the very foods most affected by the price increases.

Even before the price rises were announced officially on January 1, 1984, protest demonstrations had begun. In the south, the region least advanced economically, mobs attacked shops, vehicles, and public buildings. In similar outbreaks at Gafsa in the west, the main industrial center of the south, protestors battled police with stones.

Symbols of authority and wealth were targets of arson and looting. A state of emergency was declared on January 3, and army units used automatic weapons against crowds barricaded

in the streets of Tunis when it became evident that the demoralized police were incapable of controlling the situation. Order was not restored until January 6, when Bourguiba appeared on radio and television to announce that in the face of the unrest the price rises would be rescinded and that he was directing the cabinet to submit a new budget to him that would avoid excessive price increases for food staples. It was officially reported that 89 Tunisians had died in the disturbances, 938 others had been injured (including 348 members of the security forces), and over 800 had been arrested. Most of the demonstrators were unemployed youths, joined by students and Islamists.

In its analysis of the cause of the riots, the Tunisian League of Human Rights alluded to the serious disparities among classes and regions, generating a gap between two worlds—one the idle and unemployed citizens without prospects and the other a class of entrepreneurs engaged in parasitic and speculative activity. The league's report noted that the promise of tangible reform of the political system had not been kept, producing a political vacuum in which the citizens were not involved in decisions affecting their daily lives. It forthrightly assailed the government's "determination to keep the legal opposition on the sideline of debates and decisions on major national issues and the continuance of political trials, suspensions of newspapers, and the monopoly of audiovisual media."

The restoration of order was followed by the dismissal of Minister of Interior Driss Guiga. A report by an official commission of inquiry later declared that Guiga had neglected his legal and security obligations, had been slow in summoning the forces at his command against the rioters, and had even tried to exploit the disturbances to further his own ambitions. Guiga had left the country after his dismissal, saying that he had been picked as a scapegoat; he called the commission report "unproven slander." He was subsequently tried in absentia in June 1984 and sentenced to a jail term.

C. Political System under Ben Ali

In October 1984 Ben Ali was made Secretary of State for National Defence and, in April 1986, was promoted again to be minister of the interior. Thus, when Bourguiba promoted him once more to the office of prime minister in October 1987, Ben Ali had behind him a significant degree of influence over both the military and the internal security forces of the country. Given his conviction that Bourguiba was incapable of continuing to govern the country, it is significant that Ben Ali chose not to launch a straight-forward military coup which he might well have done preferring instead to pursue a potentially more risky strategy which found deep resonance in the moderate political culture of Tunisia. From the very beginning, he was indicating that his rule would reconcile continuity with change.

President Habib Bourguiba was deposed today by his Prime Minister, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who named himself President of the North African nation of 7.4 million, the Tunis radio reported. In a statement read over the national radio, Mr. Ben Ali said the 84-year-old Mr. Bourguiba was deposed for "incompetence." Mr. Ben Ali said that based on his "faith in a medical report" he was removing Mr. Bourguiba from office "under Article 57" of the country's constitution (The New York Time, 1987).

Mr. Bourguiba named Mr. Ben Ali Prime Minister on Oct. 2. Mr. Bourguiba had been President of Tunisia, a former French protectorate, since 1957, when the Tunisian Constituent Assembly voted to abolish the monarchy and establish a republic. He ran unopposed in the country's first election under a new Constitution in 1959. On March 18, 1975, the Assembly named Mr. Bourguiba President for life. Mr. Bourguiba's Destourian Socialist Party has been the governing party since it gained independence from France in 1956. There are three opposition parties with Government authority to operate: the Communist Party, the Movement of Social Democrats and the Movement of Popular Unity.

Ben Ali attempted to reassure both the population as a whole, and the PSD in particular, that he represented a force for continuity through his appointment almost immediately of a government with virtually the same composition as the last cabinet of his predecessor. The most immediate potential challengers for power had to be removed, including most notably Mohamed Sayah (former secretary-general of the PSD and a would-be successor to Bourguiba) and Mansour Skhiri. Others who had been part of the tightly-knit coterie of palace aides, such as the president's chief secretary-general, Mahmoud Belhacine, the airforce chief, Mohamed Nooman and the influential Colonel Ghazi Iskander, were also arrested. In general, however, arrests were kept to a minimum and it was clear that there was to be no disruptive and blood-thirsty purge. Instead, one of the most senior of Bourguiba's statesmen, Hedi Baccouche, was appointed as prime minister.

Baccouche, the out-going social affairs minister, was also a former secretary-general of the PSD and was a conciliatory figure with impeccable party credentials. (He was also a long-time patron of Ben Ali, having earlier sponsored the young officer's entry into the St Cyr Military Academy against some opposition.) Others, such as the new foreign minister, Mahmoud Mestiri, were likewise drawn from the party old guard. In total, there were only six new ministers out of a total of 22 portfolios. Some significant new appointments were certainly made, two particularly important figures being Habib Ammar (the former head of the National Guard, who became minister for the interior) and Abdallah Kallel (who moved from his position as Secretary of State for the Interior to become Secretary of State for the Presidency).

Both these figures were old friends and allies of Ben Ali's, with common roots in the interior ministry and, in Kallel's case, a similar military background. The other men whom Ben Ali chose to promote into or within the new cabinet represented the younger, technocratic element of the PSD, which had been stifled and held down by Bourguiba's circle of close aides. Ben Ali chose, therefore, to draw the old and new

guards of the party together in a coalition against that self-interested coterie which was blamed for diverting Bourguiba away from the right path. He was, in essence, reassuring the party that its role was still intact, that he was a true Bourguibist, and thus could he could legitimately assume the mantle of the former head of state for his own.

The party might have been somewhat more concerned by his immediate declarations in favour of political liberalization and constitutional reform. However, while some among the party old guard resisted the notion, there were many among the younger technocrats who saw political reform as a vital way to recapture the sympathy and support of the middle and working classes, drawing them away from the Islamic opposition. In his first presidential address to the nation, Ben Ali stated:

The age in which we live can no longer permit either presidency for-life, or automatic succession as head of state, from which the people are excluded ... Our people deserve a political development and organization which truly relies on the plurality of political parties and popular organizations.

The new prime minister announced that the constitution would be revised as soon as was possible and that a new law on political activity was already being prepared. The imminent PSD congress was to be delayed in order that draft new laws could be drawn up and the party would have a chance to consider revisions to the constitution and its Ben Ali.

In September 1988, the legal opposition parties, together with representatives of trade unions, employers'and other national organizations, and even an unofficial representative of the MTI (a total of 16 organizations), were invited by Ben Ali to join a debate which would focus around a document to establish the terms and ambitions of a new national consensus. The National Pact, as it was called, was drafted by a committee elected by Ben Ali's own party, but was open to

editorial changes as agreed by the collective of representatives drawn from across the social and political spectrum. The final document was launched a year after the coup, on the 7 November 1988, and claimed to be based on the so-called Declaration of 7th November 1987, the commitments to liberal reform made by Ben Ali on his accession to power. The parties to the pact pledged themselves to regard the pact as a contract, binding Tunisians together in a single consensus.

Achieving a unity which is particularly important at the present decisive stage in our country's history, as we strive to usher in democracy and consolidate the legally constituted state.

In effect, through the establishment and processes of the National Pact, Ben Ali recreated the image of an organic corporatist state, reinvigorating the role of national organizations as partners with the state, rather than potential and sometimes actual combatants. In a statement concerning the identity of Tunisia and Tunisians, the pact asserted the Arab and Islamic character of the state. Rejecting Bourguiba's uncompromising secularism, the pact attempted to incorporate the Islamic character of the population within a context that reinforced, rather than challenged, the state:

The Tunisian state watches over the noble values of Islam and refers to them, so that Islam may be a source of inspiration and pride, open to the concerns of mankind and to the problems of the modern day and modern life, and so that Tunisia may remain what it has always been, a centre of Islamic influence and a focal point for science and Ijtihad.

The reference to Ijtihad, closely followed by a statement declaring women's emancipation to have been one of the state's major accomplishments, indicated clearly that reactionary or fundamentalist brands of Islamic political

activity were not considered a part of this consensus. By establishing the primary status of Islam in national identity, however, Ben Ali sought to reassure Tunisians that they could reconcile Islam with the modern state. There were three further sections to the National Pact: the political system, the strategy for development and foreign relations. The section on the political system began by asserting that the constitution of Tunisia guaranteed free elections, separation of powers, protection of human rights and basic liberties, the rule of law and the locating of sovereignty in the people.

The remainder of the section established the state's commitment to and responsibility for the protection of human rights and basic freedoms, protection from all forms of extremism and intolerance (another effort to justify the exclusion of Islamic militants from the sphere of legitimate political activity), freedom of political association and organization within the limits of the law and equality of all citizens regardless of race, gender or religion.

The terms of the pact were clearly framed to establish the division of religion and politics as a fundamental principle of Tunisian society. Finally, the section established the necessity for democratic pluralism; for periodic, free elections which provided for rule by the majority but with appropriate respect for the needs and interests of the minority. The military were clearly subordinated to the civilian arm of government and instructed to be politically neutral. As a means of reassuring the smaller parties, it was further agreed that political parties and organizations, while a vital ingredient of civil society, could not and should not replace the state, or assume its status. This seemed to equate with a satisfactory declaration by the RCD that it was itself not the state and would not seek to subordinate the institutions of the state to its own structures and machinery. In both the political and development sections of the document, great emphasis is laid on collective effort, solidarity and the responsibility of the citizen.

Tunisians are exhorted to pay their taxes scrupulously and to educate their children in the virtues of self-sacrifice and

hard work. In return, the state is obliged to be fair in its assessment of the needs and interests of the population, and to develop the economy in such a way as to ensure the fair distribution of benefits. Even the emphasis on the establishment of a new culture 'which illustrates man's ability to change the conditions of his life through perseverance and organization' and which 'reinforces the individual's consciousness of sharing the problems to which his existence and his fate expose him with all of mankind', are evidence of this reassertion of the interlinkage of the peoples' destinies.

The fact that the pact was given the blessing of so many parties and national organizations reflects the hopes of many Tunisians that Ben Ali was sincere in his determination to return the country to the values of the early post-independent state. His theme of continuity and change being reconciled was beautifully illustrated in the document which committed the legal opposition not least to his interpretation of the national consensus. From the perspective of the opposition and the national organizations, the document contained a clear commitment on the part of the RCD and the government to the introduction of a fully functioning multi-party political system, if not to the details of electoral reforms that would make such a system truly democratic. From the perspective of Ben Ali's critics, however, it represented the consolidation of presidentialism since it denied the proper role of party competition and committed the opposition to loyalty behind the presidency.

Opposition figures complained that they were being pushed into signing the pact in a way which made any subsequent criticism of the government seem unpatriotic. Even within his own party, Ben Ali faced resistance from those (including notable National Assembly members, regional governors and party committee members) who saw the pact as diminishing the power of the RCD. Ben Ali was, in effect, outpacing his own party and out-manoeuvring the others.

There can be no doubt that the National Pact served an invaluable purpose at a critical juncture in the country's

political history. It represented a continuation of the inclusory nature of the Tunisian regime, reassuring both the old incorporated interest groups, and those which had no formal representation (the poor, the unemployed and the ill-educated), that any changes that might be introduced to the political system would not have an exclusory impact. Lisa Anderson has pointed out that the text of the pact is largely concerned with political rights and responsibilities, rather than social or economic policies, thus appealing to the widest possible section of the population and allowing for future flexibility. In effect, however, the very inclusory nature of the document acted to limit the realms of political debate for those among the government's opponents who had been signatories. Again, as Anderson points out, the Communists had committed themselves to respect for private property, and the Islamists to acceptance of the Code of Personal Status.

The very principles upon which alternative political agendas were based were repudiated by their own advocates. Thus, while Anderson predicted that the pact would act as a forum for new and legitimate political competition, and for accountability as she puts it, 'an effort to foster the tolerance of dissent and opposition which is a cornerstone of democratic politics it contained within it the seeds for a structure which could potentially act instead to impede such liberal political developments.

The 1989 elections results also proved to be a turning point for the secular legal opposition parties, ending as it did the honeymoon with Ben Ali's RCD while simultaneously demonstrating that they had inadvertently passed the baton of opposition to the Islamist movement. The legal opposition were, in effect, caught between a rock and a hard place. They offered little in policy terms that contrasted with the RCD and their pro-democratisation platforms were seen as essentially self-serving. They could achieve little or nothing if they did not co-operate with the ruling party, but moves such as that of Daly Jazi from MDS ranks to those of the government tore at the confidence, independence and integrity of the opposition.

Moreover, in collaborating with the government and accepting the undemocratic political structures, they risked abandoning the one real policy that distinguished them from the RCD itself. Since they were not mass movement political parties they had little bargaining power in their dealings with Ben Ali other than as possible secular allies in the struggle against their common challenger, the Islamist movement.

The choice therefore between very limited access to the echelons of power on the one hand, and political integrity but no real chance of representation on the other, left the secular opposition parties weakened and divided. The president made it clear that he did not intend to see a multiplication of political parties which would, he claimed, be 'a waste of energy and creates antagonism'. Equally, he reminded the opposition that they had been invited to stand in the elections on a coalition slate with the RCD and had refused. Thus it was their own fault if they now found themselves unrepresented. In short, they had had all the political reform they were going to get, at least for the moment.

Defeated by this absence of reform, the MDS leader, Ahmad Mestiri, resigned. His place was taken by the younger Mohamed Moadda, who argued that the largest legal opposition party was being forced to take a position. Frustrated by the government's failure to consult them on issues such as price rises, or to admit to the deficiencies of the election, the MDS therefore led the smaller parties in reducing their co-operation and noisily criticizing the government. They demanded not simply revisions of electoral law, but full reform of all laws and codes to bring them in line with democratic standards. As Abderahman Tlili of the UDU said: 'the transformation from a personalized dictatorial regime to a democratic regime cannot be done simply through legislative elections'.

Together the smaller parties tried to regroup into an alliance to present eight propositions that would relaunch the democratization process ± an alliance which was weakened by the defections of significant individuals and which ironically

drew them into a de facto alliance with their Islamist opposition, if only by virtue of the similarities of many of their demands. The point was not lost on the president. By December 1989, the government had decided to alter its strategy, offering a relaunched National Pact which would include further electoral reforms, thereby isolating the Islamists once again and drawing upon the secular opposition's own fears of the Islamist challenge.

With the pace of economic reform hotting up, the government was eager to reduce tensions on at least one front of its many battles, tempting the secular opposition back into the RCD-created consensus and lining up the political, as well as military, troops to take on the true political challenge that of the Islamist movement. The government made it clear that it was now prepared to compromise further on electoral reform but that the legal opposition parties should not take this as *carte blanche* to interfere with government policies.

Two particular areas were out of bounds for the opposition. The first was interference in economic policy. While it was to be expected that the smaller parties would make disgruntled noises over price rises and austerity measures, they were not welcome to participate in on-going labour disputes or negotiations with the UGTT. 1990 was a critical year for the economic reform programme, a fact reflected in Ben Ali's cabinet reshuffles. Ismail Khelil was moved to the foreign ministry with a mission to sell Tunisia's new economic credibility to the outside world, while Mohammed Ghannouchi took on the post of Minister of National Economy as well as his existing jobs.

The government sought to create a delicate balance between rapid economic reform and preventing social upheaval. Thus the wage negotiations between the UGTT, UTICA and the government which took place during the first half of the year were a critical issue for the credibility and survival of the SAP. As Ben Ali sought to strengthen the government's hand, he equally wanted to give enough space to the union to quell any violent reactions, a tricky situation

which would not be helped by any opposition party attempts to radicalize the discussions.

The second no-go area for legal opposition politics was the issue of educational reforms. The Minister for Education and Higher Education, Mohamed Charfi, was introducing a broad range of reforms, the opposition to which was being led by the Islamist movement and, more specifically, the Islamist elements of the UGTE. Conscious that the university campuses had been a power base for opposition to Bourguiba, Ben Ali had strengthened the police presence on the campuses which had subsequently come to resemble a battleground. In early 1990 a series of student demonstrations brought a fierce response and hundreds were arrested or conscripted. The legal opposition parties were in no doubt that this was a battle that they should stay out of, if they wished to extract political reforms from Ben Ali. The secular opposition parties concentrated their efforts instead on winning electoral reforms.

The MDS, PCT and the unauthorized MUP joined forces in order to strengthen their position, establishing a joint committee to co-ordinate their activities. The parties had little in common except their exclusion from power. But while the coalition represented little in practical terms it was still able to prompt a response from the government. In the end, the government itself postponed the municipal elections until June in order to amend the election laws. Under the revised system, announced in May, the winning party in each constituency would take 50 per cent of the seats in that constituency, the remainder being distributed among other parties proportionately according to their share of the vote.

The concession was not sufficient to win the secular opposition over, and five legal parties including the MDS joined the still-unrecognized Nahda in boycotting the municipal elections. Not surprisingly the RCD won control of all but one of the 254 municipal councils, the last being dominated by independent candidates. The new system remained unfairly weighted in favour of the RCD and only served to fuel the opposition's conviction that Ben Ali's

commitment to democratic reforms was tactical rather than sincere.

The 1990 municipal elections mark a turning point in Ben Ali's government. Clearly the attempt to draw the opposition into an RCD-controlled national pact was beginning to crumble. Ben Ali had himself created the expectations for democracy but his unwillingness and inability to deliver had in the end frustrated the legal opposition and whittled away at its willingness to be entirely co-opted into Ben Ali's vision. Equally, however, the secular opposition was deeply aware that the Islamist movement posed as severe a challenge to them as to the regime.

To reject the regime entirely would be both to lock themselves out of the political arena and to fuel the militant Islamist fires by removing the centre ground. Without mass political followings, often still dependent on personal Destourian political roots, and torn by the twin horns of this dilemma, the secular opposition parties were fragile and ineffective.

Thus, while Ben Ali's strategy of disabling them through incorporation and minority representation had effectively failed, undermining his democratic credentials, his strategy had inadvertently achieved a similar objective. Unable and usually unwilling to pose any real challenge to Ben Ali's economic reforms, the legal opposition was reduced to complaining about its social and economic side effects; poverty, unemployment and price rises. The faster the reforms went, and the more that negative effects were countered by positive economic growth and targeted financial transfers, the weaker even this position would become. The onus was thus on Ben Ali to move ahead with the reforms and achieve positive results as quickly as possible, while undermining the opposition's position by being seen to protect the weakest of society. In such a tense situation, it was not surprising perhaps that one commentator was to observe:

Tunisia cannot afford sustained opposition from multiple organized and informal groups whose cooperation is essential to efficiently run the economy. Ben Ali thus must either accommodate them or break them. Until now, he has done the former, but there are signs that even he is tiring of this process, which more often than not is undercut by his own party.

With the secular legal opposition unable to present a real challenge, and with national organizations such as the UGTT weak and internally divided, the most sustained threat to Ben Ali's drive for rapid economic change came from the protesters of the Islamist movement, and specifically the Nahda, and it was with them that his patience finally broke.

The strategy of including the secular opposition within the offices of government was carried through the post-1989 period. Much as Mourou had been included in the quasi-government Islamic establishment, so Ben Ali made a point of inviting prominent opposition figures into his government. Given that the elections had clearly demonstrated the futility of seeking to exert influence through representative bodies, this offered ambitious opposition personalities the opportunity to express opinions within the circles of power.

While there was inevitably going to be criticism levelled at them for doing so, not least from within their own party ranks, there was equally a tempting justification in the mass appeal of Ben Ali's call for national consensus and cooperation. There had already been early defections from the secular opposition parties to the RCD by figures who had left the PSD in protest at its internal stagnation and corruption. To them, it was an easy step to return to the fold when promised party reform and national political and social reconciliation. In his first cabinet reshuffle in April 1988, Ben Ali had promoted Hamouda Ben Slamato the position of Secretary of State for Public Health. Ben Slama had transferred to the RCD after a career in opposition (MDS and LTDH) politics and attained a National Assembly seat in a January by-election.

His promotion, which was advanced still further in July with an appointment to the post of Minister for Youth and Sports, was thus enviably rapid and clearly illustrated Ben Ali's incorporative intentions. Ben Slama was replaced as Secretary of State for Public Health by Saadeddine Zmerli, also a former MDS member and president of the Ligue Tunisienne des Droits de l'Homme (LTDH). Another appointment was that of Habib Boulares, a PSD minister who had joined the liberals in exile in the 1970s, to the ministry of culture.

Susan Waltz has correctly pointed out, however, that the appointment of so-called independents to politically inconsequential ministries such as youth, health and culture signified the real limits to Ben Ali's desire to incorporate them into power structures. In the April 1989 post-election reshuffle, further opposition appointments were made. Mohamed Charfi, another former chairman of the LTDH, was given the education and science portfolio, while Daly Jazi, a leading member of the MDS, was awarded the post of Secretary of State for Health. Ben Slama and Boulares were ironically brought into the political bureau of the RCD. Two other groups were still increasingly being brought into the circles of power, at the expense of the RCD party old guard: technocrats who were notable advocates of rapid and complete economic liberalization; and Ben Ali's own immediate allies from the military and interior ministry.

The infiltration of these groups into the regime elite was initially subtle. In his first cabinet reshuffle in April 1988, Ben Ali promoted a number of young technocrats into the ministries by creating several new secretary of state posts. New appointments were made in the higher echelons of the public sector and, in a July reshuffle, more technocrats still were promoted, this time to directly head ministries. They included Ahmed Smaoui, a tourism official promoted to become minister of transport, Sadok Rabah (former secretary general of ETAP) and Moncef Belaid, the last two splitting the national economy ministry between them. In this

reshuffle, Ben Ali took the opportunity to remove several more ministers formerly appointed by Bourguiba, whittling away the old guard representation within the cabinet. By April 1989, only five ministers remained from the Bourguiba regime, apart from Ben Ali himself.

Hedi Baccouche, the prime minister, remained, a symbol of continuity more than anything else, as did Mohammed Ghannouchi and Ismail Khelil, two principal architects of structural adjustment and its chief advocates within the government. More sinisterly, perhaps, it became evident that the president was also moving more interior ministry and military personalities into the realms of civil politics. In April 1988 he had abolished the post of Minister of Defence, moving the incumbent, Salaheddine Baly, to the justice ministry (thereby replacing the old guard representative Mohamed Salah Ayari). Ben Ali kept for himself the role of head of the armed forces but made his close military ally, Abdallah Kallel, then Secretary of State at the Presidency, the secretary-general of the Ministry of Defence. Kallel had become a serious force to be reckoned with as his charge up the hierarchical ladders gathered momentum. He was to maintain his ascendancy by later accepting the reinstated post of Minister of Defence. Another figure with a similar reputation was Chadli Neffarti, named Secretary of State for the Interior with responsibility for police. Neffarti was promoted again in November when Ben Ali's old friend, Habib Ammar, was forced to step down as interior minister.

Although the official reason given was problems with Ammar's health, it was clear that Ammar was being punished for scandals involving his son. The message was being given that Ben Ali's government would not tolerate special privileges or immunities for their own class. In reality, Ammar was maintained in his position as Secretary of State and Special Advisor to the President, and was to return when the dust had settled. In April 1989, Abdelhamid Escheikh, the former youth and sports minister, was promoted to head the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Escheikh was a former chief of staff and one

of Ben Ali's former colleagues at the St Cyr Military College in France.

Thus in Ben Ali's restructured political bureau in 1989, four of the nine members, including the president himself, had their roots in the interior ministry or military structures that provided the background to Ben Ali's own rise to power. These included the president, Abderrahim Zouari (RCD secretary-general and former interior ministry official), Abdallah Kallel (RCD treasurer and Minister for Defence), and Abdelhamid Escheikh (former army Chief of Staff and now Foreign Minister). Also included were the two 'independents' (Habib Boulares and Hamouda Ben Slama), two pro-economic liberalization technocrats (Mohammed Ghannouchi and Ismail Khelil) and only one oldguard Bourguibist (the prime minister, Hedi Baccouche). It was thus clear that Ben Ali had not only stacked the cabinet but also the highest structure of the party with his own special coalition of forces. By imposing his chosen men upon the party structures, he had subordinated them and decapitated any effective resistance to his policies from within the party hierarchy (if not the lower local and regional cells).

The government was now not a mere extension of the RCD as it had been for much of the post-independence period, but a semiautonomous coterie of pro-economic-liberalization figures who carried with them the monopoly on coercive capacities and incidentally dominated the party itself. Bourguiba had in his final years attempted to achieve the same independence from the party, but had failed because of his inability to secure any alternative power-base. It was not a mistake that Ben Ali proposed to repeat, although he did not have an altogether easy ride. The temporary retreat from public life of Habib Ammar was rumoured to have exposed internal power struggles, as had the resistance to democratization shown by the lower echelons of the RCD in the 1989 national elections.

Ben Ali announced in November 1988 that he was bringing forward the next presidential and national elections to

May (later revised to April) 1989. The atmosphere of political dialogue was at the time reinforced by a general feeling that Ben Ali was finally taking the firm hand over the economy which Bourguiba had proved unable to do. The president's one-hundred-percent commitment to economic liberalization, and his policy of cramming his government full of young technocrats and colleagues eager to pursue it, had reassured the population that the ship was at least being firmly steered on a definite course, rather than changing direction seemingly with every swing of a senile president's political whim. The first months of 1989 saw the introduction of piecemeal electoral code reforms which, despite chipping away at the inevitability of comprehensive RCD victories in elections, did not satisfy the opposition. Opposition parties were given the right to sit on committees which distributed voting cards and an independent commission was established to supervise electoral disputes.

The number of seats in the National Assembly was increased by 16 to 141, divided between 25 constituencies, each with 2±9 seats on the basis of 1 seat for 60 000 citizens. The party winning the most votes in a constituency would win all the seats of that constituency. Much broader reforms demanded by the opposition, including full proportional representation, abandonment of the requirement that a party candidate must have 75 voters' signatures of support before he could stand in a constituency (parrainage) and the scrapping of the condition that every presidential candidate should have the support of 30 members of the National Assembly or heads of municipal councils, were rejected by the government. Opposition objections that the existing system still made it impossible for small parties to win representation were met with an RCD invitation to join the dominant party in a coalition slate.

Not surprisingly, the MDS, under Ahmad Mestiri, led the way in rejecting the suggestion on the basis that a properly democratic system should allow for the independent representation of small parties. In reality, the only concession

made by the government was an assurance that parties winning 3 per cent or more of the vote would have their campaign costs reimbursed.

Although they nonetheless contested the national elections, none of the opposition parties challenged Ben Ali in the presidential elections held simultaneously. Not only was it impossible to get the required list of supporters from an RCD-monopolized National Assembly, but it was also recognized that the president was still benefiting from a political honeymoon of popularity against which no opposition party could put up a serious challenge. In anticipation of the elections, the MTI had applied to be recognized as a legal party, having changed its name in February 1989. As Hizb al-Nahda, or the Renewal Party/Movement, Islamists claimed that they had fulfilled the requirement that they remove religious references from their title.

Moreover, they insisted that theirs was a movement not of revolution but of reform and thus presented no threat to the state. The rejection of their application, although unsurprising given that they remained a party driven by a religious agenda, meant that they were forced to field candidates as independents who were unable to benefit from provisions made for legal parties, such as the right to television and radio time. In fact, they were allocated some such media coverage and, unlike some of the legal opposition parties, they had no trouble finding the required number of voter sponsors for each candidate. Even so, many of their candidates were refused permission to stand causing early complaints of official malpractice.

It was rumoured that Ben Ali himself was strongly tempted to legalize Nahda, pulling them into his construction of apparent consensus and committing them to co-operative rather than confrontational behaviour. His aides, however, persuaded him that to do so would be threatening the entire secularist progressive political structure of Bourguibism and the modern Tunisian state. Instead, the progressive role of Islam in Tunisia was recognised in other ways which stressed

the importance of tolerance and the nonpolitical public role of religion Ben Ali's entire approach to Islam since assuming power had been somewhat confusing. On the one hand, he had granted an amnesty and release from prison to MTI leader Rachid Ghannouchi (who was nonetheless kept under house arrest) and had invited Islamic leaders in exile to return to Tunisia to participate in the National Pact debate.

Those who did return, such as Hamedi Jebali and Abdelfattah Mourou, were arrested and then freed, sending apparently contradictory signals that might have been intended to act as a reminder that the state was still powerful enough to rein in Islamists who stepped out of line. The Union Générale Tunisienne des Etudiants (UGTE), a student body closely linked to the MTI, was legalized in September 1988 and a new post, that of secretary of state for religious affairs, was created in November although it was filled with a former interior ministry man, Kacem Bousnina. In his 3 February and 7 November 1988 speeches, Ben Ali was at pains to emphasize the importance attached by his regime to the Islamic identity of Tunisia:

We are determined to raise the prestige of our religion and to apply its noble precepts, resolutely conforming ourselves to its majestic values and wise principles, far from all ostentation or formality. Turning away from all that goes against the spirit and essence of Islam, we reject all that is alien to authentic Tunisian Islam, or contrary to the good traditional heritage of our fathers and our ancestors, traditions which are as much elements of our personalities, or our spiritual being. (Kasmi, 1988)

In January 1989, Abdelfattah Mourou was one of eleven new appointments to the Supreme Islamic Council which supervises mosques and Islamic education, and the chairman of the council (formerly the Mufti who was known to be a close supporter of the regime) was replaced with the head of the Zaytouna University, Touhami Negra, seen as a conciliatory measure towards the MTI. Moreover, the RCD

tried to re-clothe itself in Islamic garb: Ben Ali himself appeared in election posters wearing the white robes of a hajji, other posters declared that 'the Hand of God is with the Assembly', speeches began with invocations of Allah and clerics made their appearances as RCD candidates.

These apparently positive, if limited, moves by the regime to draw the Islamists into the political debate, rather than to isolate and confront them, made it seem strange that the government was ultimately not prepared to legalize the party itself, especially when the latter was willing to alter its name and participate in government led debates. Yet Ben Ali and his government were ultimately determined that religion should remain the preserve of the individual and its only political manifestations should be via state sponsorship. It may be that the results of the election in 1989 illustrate the reason why, ultimately, Ben Ali was unable to legalize Nahda. With Islamist independents winning at least 13 per cent 27 of the votes nation-wide, far exceeding the performance of the secular opposition, it was clear that Nahda represented the only genuinely challenging opposition to the RCD. Ben Ali had no doubt hoped that all his measures at apparent political liberalization, internal party reform and Islamic reconciliation had undermined that part of Islamist support which stemmed from protest rather than conviction, and that he had won back the alienated middle classes.

The election results showed that, while to some extent he had managed to pull the carpet out from under the feet of the secular opposition, he had been unable to do so with the Islamists. Unlike the secular opposition, which had few credible alternative policies to offer and which had anyway mostly devolved from Destour roots themselves, Nahda offered a sufficiently distinct platform to have drawn and, more importantly to have kept, its own constituency (Guazzone 1995).

In the elections to the National Assembly, the RCD won all 141 seats, prompting bitter recriminations from the opposition. Apart from accusations of RCD malpractice and

voting irregularities, the opposition claimed that the result proved the inadequacy of the political reforms so far enacted. Ultimately, for all its talk of democratization, the RCD had proved itself unwilling to actually share power. The turnout was low averaging just 28.3 per cent across the country and without the financial and organizational benefits of the RCD, smaller parties were unable to mobilize support or to turn it into actual seats in the National Assembly. The RCD polled just over 80 per cent of the total vote, the MDS polling less than 1 per cent and the other legal opposition parties managing less than 5 per cent between them. The government interpretation of the results, which to some extent was justified, was that the population had seen little need for supporting the opposition when the RCD was so clearly reforming itself and leading the country on a path defined by a general popular consensus. The secular opposition parties were anyway themselves incorporated into the RCD-led process of national renovation.

The results had demonstrated the ideological, organizational and even financial weakness of the secular opposition. Parties like the MDS offered no significantly different economic agenda and had been somewhat wrong-footed by the RCD's new apparent accommodationist strategy regarding political reform and liberalization. Others, like the Communists, offered an economic strategy that had been discredited by the collapse of communism elsewhere and the failure of centrally planned models. The RCD, in contrast, was determinedly charging ahead with a clear agenda for economic change that was a welcome alternative to the chaos, crisis and vacillation of Bourguiba's final years.

Ben Ali's strategy was not necessarily well-served by the RCD's sweeping victory. His intention had been to allow the opposition to gain some representation, giving the National Assembly credibility as a democratic institution and drawing the smaller parties into the support-base for his government. The fact that the RCD won so convincingly, and that there was a degree of result tampering in the regions, demonstrated that

the regional structures of the RCD did not view democratization as favourably as he did. They were distinctly unwilling to share power and regional committees, unlike the higher echelons of the party, could not be so easily stuffed with pro-Ben Ali reformers.

Middle-ranking party officials remained true to the old guard of the party, and still exercised virtually absolute power in their own domains. The editor of a leading magazine, *Realites*, said at the time:

Despite what I sincerely believe are the president's good intentions, we are dismayed to see a number of his own men not follow his direction. That continues right through to the regional and local levels, where people are following first what is in their own interest. (La Franchi 1990)

Thus they stymied the leadership's efforts to create an illusion of power-sharing and alienated the less-conciliatory wings of the secular opposition parties from the reform process. Moreover, the elections represented a direct head-to-head of the RCD versus the Islamists, a position which Ben Ali had sought to avoid by offering the legal opposition parties the opportunity to run on a combined National Front'slate.