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BOOK REVIEW

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Salah Ben Youssef et les youssefistes: Au tournant de l'indépendance tunisienne, 1955–1956, by M'hamed Oualdi, Tunis, Cérés Éditions, 2022, 224 pp., DT 25 (softcover), ISBN 978-9973-19-809-9

History :

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The subject of M'hamed Oualdi's monograph is the rise and demise of the Youssefist current in the Tunisian national movement. The first two of the book's three chapters focus on the controversial leadership position in the Neo-Destour of Salah Ben Youssef, his exclusion from the party in October 1955, and the larger picture of his supporters across Tunisia's various strata and regions. The final chapter is devoted to the violent suppression of the movement after its official interdiction on 28 January 1956. The author draws heavily on documents from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and French military archives in Vincennes. Much of the book reads like a series of police reports of events, whether drawn from official sources or secondary ones centred on Ben Youssef, which multiplied after his official rehabilitation in the wake of President Habib Bourguiba's removal from power in 1987.

Professor Oualdi offers interesting observations on Ben Youssef's background. His father was a prosperous Djerban businessman, thus tying him into an extensive national network of Djerban grocers and wholesalers, and, on his mother's side, he was part of Tunis high society. His father's funeral in 1954 indeed assembled much of the haute bourgeoisie, including the eldest son of the bey (head of state). Also present was another future sympathiser, Fadhl Ben Achour, leader of a progressive faction of the Zitouna mosque and educational system.

Ben Youssef had served since 1948 as general secretary of the Neo-Destour, but he had also served, from 1950 to 1952, as minister of justice in a reformist government of the French Protectorate and was viewed as a political moderate, flexible, and willing to compromise with France. Yet in 1955, with the backing of Gamal Abdel Nasser, Allal al Fassi and other North African leaders in Cairo, he rejected Bourguiba's gradual approach to achieving political autonomy, insisting instead on full independence. Oualdi strives to portray Ben Youssef not as an opportunist but as a politician with a distinctive vision of Tunisia as a constitutional monarchy. In the brief conclusion of the book, he questions why Tunisia could not, like Morocco, have evolved into multiparty state. He cites Bourguiba's biographer, Mohamed Sayah, as claiming that his mentor had proposed to Ben Youssef in 1955 that he form an opposition party (89).

Oualdi might have analysed the persona of Bourguiba as well as Ben Youssef to explain why the former could not tolerate any opposition, either inside or outside the Neo-Destour. He argues instead that the violent conflict was

the product of a colonial political culture made up of repressive episodes since the 1880s... the new nationalist power that seized certain juridical and police structures established by the

Protectorate reproduced, in the course of conflict among the Neo-Destour veterans, the terms and obsessions of colonial power: those of order and the rejection of internal contestation. (148)

Professor Oualdi's book, it may be noted, is derived from his 1999 *mémoire de maîtrise* and then thoroughly revised between 2017 and 2020. It is thus unfortunate that he does not draw upon the rich source of political memoirs published in the two decades after the submission of his thesis, as these may have offered further insights, in particular the memoirs of Ahmed Mestiri (1925–2021), which are absent from the book's bibliography. Mestiri was a clandestine assistant to the Neo-Destour's top leadership in 1952–54, when much of it was in French prisons, and he offers samples of communications with both Ben Youssef and Mongi Slim, a member of Neo-Destour's Political Bureau. He explains why he preferred Bourguiba's sponsorship of internal autonomy and his policy of progression 'by stages' to Ben Youssef's 'adventure' and 'leap into the unknown' of immediate independence. He also spells out in further detail than Oualdi how and why Mongi Slim tried to keep Ben Youssef in the loop concerning the Tunisian negotiations with the French government in 1954–55 over the terms of internal autonomy. 'Perfectly knowing the two men and foreseeing their future attitude, he was trying to prevent the emergence of a single leadership [*leadership unique*], without any rival, on the political scene (and tomorrow in power)' (Mestiri 2011, 87, 95).

Oualdi might have delved more deeply into the history of the rivalry between Bourguiba and Ben Youssef by consulting the account readily available online of the latter's secretary, Habib Boularès, who is pictured with him on the cover of Oualdi's book (Boularès 2011, 570–676). Oualdi mentions him only as transmitting Ben Youssef's press statements to *Al-Sabah*, a leading Arabic newspaper, and subsequently, in 1960, becoming editor of the Neo-Destour's Arabic daily. He does not report Mestiri's account of Boularès being the editor of *Al-Sabah* who was arrested and about to be tortured, and 'probably liquidated' like other victims of Bourguibist thugs, had he not been rescued by Taieb Mehiri, who was the director in charge of the Neo-Destour's organisation (Mestiri 2011, 94).

The memoirs of Mansour Moallah might also have served Oualdi, who only reports in passing that the UGET, the national student union, was favourable to Bourguiba rather than to Ben Youssef. He simply cites a report of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Our author should have paid more attention to this critical recruiting ground for the national elite. Moallah, one of the founders of the UGET and its president in 1954–55, discusses the conflict within it between Bourguibists and Youssefists and also details Bourguiba's successful efforts to ensure his loyalty (Moallah 2011).

Oualdi does, however, discuss the other major national organisations: the UGTT for labour, UTAC for artisans and businesspeople, and UGAT for landowners. The powerful trade union led by Ahmed Ben Salah remained neutral until the eve of the Sfax Congress in mid-November 1955, when it took Bourguiba's side in exchange for a major voice in the party's social and economic policies. The UTAC remained under Bourguibist control despite Salah Ben Youssef's Djerban grocers, though these constituted a valuable network for penetrating the grass root cells of the Neo-Destour Party. Oualdi has an elaborate map of their urban locations and suggests, without foundation, that they may be correlated with Zitouna preparatory schools, which were another source of Youssefist support (130–132).

Of the national organisations, only the UGAT appeared in the Youssefist camp. Consequently, the Neo-Destour, controlled by officials loyal to Bourguiba, had loyalists inside the UGAT break away to form a rival organisation of landowners, UNAT.

Oualdi assembles a potpourri of citations, usually three to five per page, to document his three chapters, but how reliable are the sources? For example, his military archive dated 11 December 1955, almost a month after the Sfax congress, states that 140,000 pro-Youssefist membership cards were distributed, but that some Bourguibists opportunistically accepted them while also keeping their old party cards (116–117). The same military source (this time undated in the footnote) estimates that Youssefists constituted 40% of the party membership (118). On the following page another source indicates that on 7 December 1955, Boularès distributed 140,000 cards to Ben Youssef loyalists. Ten pages later this source elaborates that party membership increased from 100,000 in 1954 to 350,000 in November 1955 and 600,000 in March 1956. On this and many other matters it is difficult to follow the exposition, as citations are dropped in dribbles. And sometimes the author misunderstands or misrepresents the source.

And what is the reader to make of Ben Youssef's speech in Tunis on 18 November 1955, immediately following the Sfax congress, to an audience of 30,000 at the Géo-André stadium (114)?¹ Only 25 pages later do we learn that the meeting was 'en principe interdit' by Interior Minister Mongi Slim, a member of the Neo-Destour's Political Bureau, but Oualdi does not explain why it was allowed to happen. Was Slim then still hoping for peaceful coexistence between Bourguiba's Neo-Destour and a rival Youssefist political party? As late as 23 January 1956 Ben Youssef was displaying 'une étonnante ouverture d'esprit' to a former French colonial official (143). Then finally, on 28 January 1956, the regime cracked down on the Youssefists, while permitting its leader to escape to Cairo.

This book provides a useful chronology of events between 30 July 1954 and 25 December 1956. Readers will also find many interesting citations but will need to carefully crosscheck and contextualise them, unfortunately without the help of an index.

Notes

- 1 Google Maps picks up the stadium's old name and gives its new name (since 1963), the Chedly-Zouiten, with its normal seating capacity of 18,000. ✖

References

Boularès, Habib. 2011. *Histoire de la Tunisie: Les grandes dates de la préhistoire à la Révolution*. Tunis: Cérès Éditions.

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