

Political Changes in 1956
The Expulsion of Tahar Ben Youssef from Neo-Destour

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TUNISIA

Political and Economic Background

During the period under review (July 1, 1955, through June 30, 1956) Tunisia passed from local autonomy to a *de jure* status of independence, whose precise meaning was in dispute with France. The situation at the end of June 1956 remained confused pending further negotiations between the two countries.

Political developments moved with startling rapidity. On June 3, 1955, the Franco-Tunisian conventions according internal sovereignty to Tunisia were signed and submitted to the French parliament. They were ratified by the National Assembly on July 6 by a vote of 538 to 44, with 29 abstentions. On August 4, the Council of the Republic approved them 253 to 26. Eight months later, on March 20, 1956, an accord was reached whereby France recognized the independence of Tunisia. It provided:

1. The Treaty of Bardo signed between France and Tunisia on May 12, 1881, would no longer govern the relations between the two countries.
2. Articles of the conventions of June 3, 1955, incompatible with the new status of Tunisia as an independent and sovereign state would be modified or abrogated.
3. Tunisia received the right to conduct its foreign affairs, its security, and its defense, and to establish its own army.

Both countries agreed to define the future ties of "interdependence" and to cooperate in the areas where their interests coincided, notably defense and foreign affairs.

Shortly after Foreign Minister Christian Pineau and Premier Tahar Ben Amar signed the March 20 agreement, a divergence of views on its meaning emerged. Tunisia insisted that as of that date it had become an independent and sovereign nation; that the Treaty of Bardo of 1881 had been abrogated; and that the articles of the conventions not reconcilable with complete independence were null and void. While agreeing that the Treaty of Bardo could no longer govern the relations between the two countries and that the articles of the conventions not reconcilable with complete independence would be modified or abrogated, France insisted that the agreement constituted the framework within which the future negotiations would fix the facts of independence.

p343 On August 27, 1955, the Bey of Tunisia affixed his seal to the ratification of the conventions. Four days later, Resident General Pierre Boyer de Latour left Tunis for Rabat, Morocco, to take up his post as resident general of Morocco. He was succeeded by Roger Seydoux, who was given the new title of French high commissioner to Tunisia. Later, Seydoux became the first French ambassador to Tunisia. On September 14, 1955, Premier Tahar Ben Amar was asked by the Bey to form the first new all-Tunisian government.

Within the triumphant Neo-Destour Party the conflict between Salah Ben Youssef, general secretary, and Habib Bourguiba, president, broke out into the open and led to the expulsion of Ben Youssef by the political bureau of the party. Ben Youssef violently denounced the Franco-Tunisian conventions, calling for immediate outright independence. Bourguiba supported the conventions, declaring that they constituted an important step towards independence.

On November 17, 1955, in the city of Sfax, the Neo-Destour Party held its first postconvention congress, approved the conventions, and repudiated the position of Salah Ben Youssef. Resolutions were passed affirming the ultimate goal of complete independence and the continued struggle to revise those sections of the conventions regarded as incompatible with the aspirations of the Tunisian people. The congress approved the election of a constituent assembly by direct universal suffrage to give the country a constitution under a system of constitutional monarchy.

By a beylical decree published on March 1, 1956, Tunisia was divided into eighteen electoral districts and the number of deputies to the assembly set at ninety-eight—one for each 35,000 Tunisian citizens. The three lists of candidates for election to the constituent assembly held on March 25, 1956, were: the Front National—made up of the Neo-Destour Party, the UNAT (Union Nationale de L'Agriculture Tunisienne), the UGTT (Union Generale des Travailleurs Tunisiens), and the UTAC (Union des Travailleurs Artisans et Commerçants); the Communist Party; and the Independants. The Front National, headed by Habib Bourguiba, swept the election and won all ninety-eight seats.

The assembly convened on April 9, 1956, and by a unanimous vote elected Bourguiba president. On April 13, after having validated the mandates of the ninety-eight deputies, the assembly unanimously voted for Article 1 of the future constitution, declaring:

1. Tunisia is a free, independent, sovereign state, religion Islamic and language Arabic
2. The Tunisian people are the legal depositors of the sovereignty which will be defined by the new constitution.
3. The state will assure the liberty and practice of all religious creeds, conforming to the spirit of the law.

Under the pressure of the UGTT, which had in the meantime launched a series of strikes, the government of Tahar Ben Amar submitted its resignation to the Bey. The executive bureau of the constituent assembly unanimously asked Bourguiba to form a new government. By April 15, 1956, a government, with Bourguiba as president, and composed of fifteen ministers and two secretaries of state, was formed and accepted by the Bey. André Barouch was appointed minister of reconstruction and housing, replacing Albert Bessis, who had served in the previous cabinet. Thus, the Jewish community of Tunisia continued to be represented in the government.

On April 24, 1956, President Bourguiba informed the members of the foreign diplomatic corps of the desire of his government to establish diplomatic relations with their countries. By the end of June 1956 more than twenty nations, including the United States and Great Britain, had recognized the independence of Tunisia and raised their consulates to embassies or legations.

At the invitation of French Premier Guy Mollet, President Bourguiba left for Paris on May 8, 1956, to begin discussions on the future ties with France in accordance with the agreement of March 20, 1956. The negotiations progressed slowly. Bourguiba made several trips to consult with his government; and on May 29, in a speech before the constituent assembly, declared that no negotiation was possible before the abrogation of the Treaty of Bardo. He informed the assembly that a Tunisian army of 3,000 men would be created before June 16. On Bourguiba's return to Paris on June 25, 1956, to resume the discussions with the French, Foreign Minister Pineau declared in a speech to the Council of the Republic: "It is out of the question to envisage the departure of the French army from Tunisia and Morocco. The presence of the French army in the two former protectorates is not contrary to the independence of these countries." The negotiations were broken off when Bourguiba affirmed: "We will never admit that on the pretext of Western strategy or the defense of the free world, the presence of French military forces in our country—particularly at Bizerte—can assume a permanent character."

The Tunisian delegation then returned home.