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BOURGUIBA himself is almost unique in the Arab world. In the history of the Arab national movement it has always been difficult to find a mean between well-heeled conservative politicians like the Egyptian Wafd-men of democratic speeches and large motor cars, and the frustrated, explosive, and often murderously revolutionary lower-middle-class radicals, whose nationalism is often near-nihilistic. Bourguiba seems to be this missing middle term. In a political milieu which is everywhere else destructive and fanatical, he is Fabian, reformist, and conciliatory.

His history is the history of scores of nationalist Arab politicians from the petite bourgeoisie. Born to a humble family in the fishing village of Monastir, educated in Tunis and France, he came back to Tunis in 1927 with his French wife and became a successful lawyer and a militant nationalist politician in the Destour (Constitutional) party. But unlike most Arab leaders he never allowed the bitterness of the national struggle against France to wipe out his affection and respect for French culture – nor, indeed, the French formation of his thought. To talk to Bourguiba is to talk to a French liberal who happens to be a Moslem.

In 1934 Bourguiba broke away from the conservative Moslem and "bourgeois" elements in the Destour party and became the secretary of the Neo-Destour, a new group whose essential aim was to assimilate the bottom half of Tunisian society by means of a network of political "cells." The next step was taken not by Bourguiba but by a trade union leader from Sfax called Ferhat Hached. In 1943 Hached began to set nationalist influence against Communist in the French-controlled Confederation Generale du Travail. This eventually led him to create a new nationalist trade union, the UGTT, which by 1950 had completely driven the Communist CGT from the Tunisian scene and was collaborating closely with the Neo-Destour party in a single popular national movement.

In this period, most of which Bourguiba spent in exile in Egypt and elsewhere, a disciplined and articulate political machine was built. By the time Hached was assassinated in 1952 the nationalists had the power to paralyze the economic life of Tunisia, not only by calling out the mob in the old style; but by efficiently organized political strikes. In effect, the Tunisian leaders had stolen Communist methods and dispensed with the Communists.

It was the strength of the nationalist political machine which forced France, after a long struggle, to grant Tunisia "internal autonomy" in 1955. Bourguiba convinced his party that it was better to take limited autonomy immediately than to fight to the finish for independence, and his judgment was confirmed by events. After a year of negotiation the French were pressed to extend "internal autonomy" to independence, and on March 20, 1956, Tunisia became an independent state. At the same time Bourguiba, who had returned from exile in the preceding year, was made Prime Minister.