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The Evolving Moroccan Political Scene:

**BEN BARKA AND THE NATIONAL UNION**

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Tangier

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Phillips Talbot  
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The birth of the National Union of Popular Forces, a new political grouping which insists that it is not a political party, is likely the most important single internal event in Moroccan politics since independence. Astutely arranged to steal the show from a historic but dull session of the Arab League, the announcement of the formation of the National Union in a mass rally held in a Casablanca movie theater underlined the evolving political situation of this country to the assembled statesmen of the Arab world and, simultaneously, took advantage of the presence of international press correspondents who gave it an initial coverage unlikely at another time.

In the words of Mehdi ben Barka, principle speaker at the rally, the National Union is:

"...the regrouping of all the vital forces of the nation in a new association which is neither a political party in the traditional sense of this term nor a national front. [The NUPF] constitutes an effort toward a national renaissance in all domains...the founders of this movement having abandoned their political labels in consideration of the public interest."

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These not too revealing phrases on the structure of the new group complement its idealistically vague principles of operations: "Collective direction, discussion at the base, and the extension of national responsibilities to all levels of the population." But perhaps the key statement of Ben Barka was that which stressed that "the NUPF marks the changeover from organizations centered around personalities to those based on ideologies." There is little doubt about that, but what is the ideology and who is its promoter? It is at first glance easier to describe who the NUPF is rather than what it is.

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Political parties in Morocco have since their inception in the early '40's been distinguished by three leading traits: 1) formation and growth around a nucleus of personalities; 2) lack of a well-defined program particularly in respect to social and economic problems; and 3) an indiscriminate appeal to widely disparate classes under catchall slogans of anticolonialism and liberation. This make-up was inevitable in the context of the revolutionary struggle which Morocco lived through for a decade or more; it still applies to organizations in other parts of the Arab world--the FLN, even the National Union in Egypt--and in a good many other parts of the ex-colonial world as well.

The Istiqlal Party, which was until it split in two this January the majority party in Morocco, was described in 1956 by this writer as:

". . . a league of intellectuals. . . and it was designed to be at its beginning a machine for propoganda and protest rather than an organization for political action."

Since then the Istiqlal has suffered the ravages of time and success. It has not so much changed as the society has changed away from it. And the comfortable headiness which coming to power fostered in some of its leaders was not conducive to thinking out new goals to replace those already attained. The same problems beset the rival minority parties--to a lesser degree because opportunities are fewer for those out of power.

But the Istiqlal was the classic example of a heteroclite group divided against itself. It was headed by an often fire-eating traditionalist leader, Allal al Fassi; it contained businessmen like Mohammed Laraki and Hajj Omar Sebti; Westernized upper bourgeois royalists such as Ahmed Balafrej and M'hammed Douiri; and it sheltered on its left wing men like Ben Barka and Abdallah Ibrahim who had staked their claims on youth and labor movements. It wasn't to be expected that men representing, if only in their own eyes at times, such diverse social forces could for long hold together.

As late as the fall of 1957 the Istiqlal presented an outward picture of party harmony. I remember in particular one reception where photographs

of most of the party leaders and their children were being taken in the atmosphere of a happy family party. But tensions were latent underneath, pushed by the party "progressives" who significantly had not been in the snapshots.

Finally in January of this year came the break, and the formation of a dissident neo-Istiqlal group called the Confederation of the Istiqlal Party, and headed by Ben Barka. [Cf. Summer Stock (CFG-2-'59), an AUFS publication.] But the Confederation was not a resounding success in its seven months of existence. For public taste it was a splinter group of an already pretty discredited party; and the open fighting that broke out between partisans of one or the other tendency convinced many that there was no good behind any of the bickering. Physical control of party headquarters and records was a problem, and the name of the neo-Istiqlal alone was against it. Old or new the Istiqlal was a tired horse for most Moroccans and the very word "party" had an unattractive connotation, a fact which the organizers of the new "union" have been careful to exploit.

Another important consideration which led to the decision to form the National Union was the disenchantment which some of the younger political figures were finding in their own parties. The opportunity was presented to a skilful organizer of grouping a number of defectors together in an undertaking vague enough to shelter anyone who wanted to be considered "progressive" and new sounding enough to rekindle a jaded public opinion. And there are plenty of these. In the Democratic Independence Party, for example, younger leaders like Bensouda and Boutaleb were estranged from the original top leadership because of what they felt was its lack of vision, and the Popular Movement was torn between addressing itself to the countryside as a kind of farmer-rural labor party or considering itself in fact as well as in slogan a socialist party. Naturally in this game of musical parties there is an element of opportunism, the chance to get perhaps a higher ranking and more prestige, as well. But it is also true that Moroccan society seems now ready for the first time for a class movement which would play upon the fact that the former national interests of sharecroppers, freehold farmers, artisans, businessmen, and city workers are no longer cohesive, and would make capital of the slowness of the socio-economic reforms so far undertaken by the various governments since 1956.

The specific timing of the announcement, one day after the promulgation of a royal decree calling for communal elections within six months, indicated that the founders of the National Union believed this and had decided to throw everything into the scales in an attempt to get a firm foothold throughout the country at grassroots level. Whether it can accomplish this in such a short time with a highly unsophisticated and still rather politically apathetic rural population remains to be seen. In large measure it will depend on the theory and tactics of its guiding spirit (even though in the official listing of the National Union he appears only in the number three slot), Mehdi ben Barka. To understand what the National Union is about one must understand him and his outlook.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mehdi ben Barka is not yet forty. He was born, one of seven children, in a humble Rabat family in 1920--his father was a policeman. His education has been a compound of traditional and Western learning: Quranic school, followed by a French lycée and the University of Algiers, but his laicism in a highly devout country has been used against him tellingly by his adversaries. At twenty-three he was already a high-school mathematics teacher and the following year he was one of the signers of the Istiqlal Manifesto of 1944, the Moroccan Declaration of Independence. Arrested and exiled at different times between then and 1955, he served on the Executive Committee of the Istiqlal and later as the party's administrative secretary. In the last years of the protectorate, while in forced residence in the southern desert regions he became a key figure in co-ordinating party activities with the resistance organizations.

Freed in the spring of 1955, he took part in the Aix-les-Bains conference of August which arranged for the return of the King, then in exile in Madagascar. After teaching in the Faculty of Sciences at the Institute of Higher Moroccan Studies, he was named president of the National Consultative Assembly in the fall of 1956 and continued in this post for two years. At the same time he took over editorship of the party's French-language weekly, Al Istiqlal, which moved steadily under his guidance toward the left and into an extreme position of conflict with the moderate wing of the party. With control of the party's regional inspectors in his capacity as Assistant Secretary General of the Istiqlal, Ben Barka then held three strategic weapons in his hands: a powerful instrument of publicity in a language in which more Moroccan intellectuals and students are literate than in their own Arabic; trusted men stationed throughout the country; and speakership of the only, albeit modest, instrument of parliamentary expression. The circle was completed with a flourish when, as a spokesman for Moroccan youth, he organized the "Unity Road" operation, a project which brought together young persons (selected by Barkiste party inspectors) for a summer of road building, work in the morning and political indoctrination in the afternoon, the trainees to return to their native regions and serve there as "nuclei of democracy and social progress."

Ben Barka has been an acquaintance of mine for more than four years. I met him first just after his return from residence surveillee in the south. It was a semiclandestine rendezvous for dinner in a home in Sale. The French police carefully noted my license number but I was not otherwise inconvenienced. I was struck then, as everyone is, by his energy, precision, and verbal brilliance. Small, agile, impassioned about politics on all levels, he uses words as only an Arab educated in Cartesian traditions can--with the spice of Marxist overtones, it has often been charged. He is at his best in a small gathering with friends, fellow-dialecticians, or intellectual companions, often European. Then his hands move expressively and his bushy eyebrows and

piercing brown eyes express a simultaneous intelligence and touch of malice tempered by a suddenly bouncy good-humor. Much of his charm does not come through in public or with strangers and this, combined with his heavily Europeanized background may well prove an unovercomeable stumbling block in the mass hypnosis that would seem to be necessary in making an electoral appeal here.

I was impressed on first meeting by the gap between his theoretical and practical knowledge. His groundwork of philosophy, economics, and the sciences was and is extraordinary for any political figure, let alone one formed in the cloistered police-state that protectorate Morocco was, but he had little knowledge of the outside world. The conversation the first evening lingered long on Israel, from which a French guest had recently returned. Ben Barka listened wide-eyed to an objective description of the balance of power in the Middle East, one which accurately predicted what would happen the next year in the Sinai Peninsula. Whether this had any thing to do with shaping his attitude toward Middle Eastern Arab states is impossible to say, but he is the Moroccan leader most offhand in his dismissal of the social and political evolution in that part of the world. As he said recently, "Although the national movement in countries like Egypt and Iraq. . .has been the expression of a bourgeois elite, the Moroccan or Guinean national movement is one which was born from popular forces."

In any case I have followed the enlargement of his horizons since then, and his criticism has become, if anything, sharper. On his return from a visit to the United States two years ago, in answer to my asking him his impressions of the country, he said bluntly: "America is not equal to its international responsibilities." He has also managed to write a short volume recently in which he discusses the economic and political problems of Morocco, the Algerian question and possible Maghrebian unification, and the entire issue of the underdeveloped world without once mentioning the United States in substance.

It was shortly after that 1957 visit that he took his first long step in foreign policy questions, using one of the power levers described above. Just before the King left on an official visit to the United States, Ben Barka prodded the National Assembly into issuing its first foreign policy statement, calling for a policy of "nondependence" and evacuation of all foreign forces and bases in the country. It was generally considered at the time a subtle reminder that the visit was to have no more than protocolary significance, and it is a measure of Ben Barka's political acumen that this line has now become so completely accepted that no one, not even the King himself, would raise a voice in favor of continuing the American base system. And while the ruler was traveling through America, Al Istiqlal buried his trip in small print while it played up the new approach designed by Ben Barka.

Ben Barka has not been so sparing of publicity to other countries and blocs, however. After his sojourn in Yugoslavia last year there was a good

deal of friendly comment by him on its progress, and in writing this summer on development problems he said:

" . . . China is seen as the country which had the greatest similarity with ours in the past, in the immense gap which it had to make up, and also in the errors made just after its liberation . . . . It is certain that the conditions in which the leap forward of China was carried out deserve to be fully analyzed--and that is not our subject here--but the economic and social, cultural and technical development of such a country plants the same problems as we have: problems of leadership, of planning, of democratic association of the masses concerned with production, and also the problem of foreign aid which China receives from 'the great brotherly country which is the USSR.'"

One of the most noteworthy aspects of Ben Barka's career during all this period is that he has never participated in the direct exercise of power at governmental level. His Assembly post was, although crucial, without any responsibility other than advisory, and he has been careful (looking to the future) not to take part in any postindependence Cabinet. Apart from freeing him for organizational work, this has given him an air of a power behind the scene. He has also been able to preserve a position apart and aloof, from which he has been able to theorize and synthesize the problems facing Morocco and the Maghreb at more detached range.

The "Problems of Edification" which he has just written reveal him in this role, in parts not too flatteringly because of the haste with which, he proudly admits, the book was written. But in spite of some hasty generalizations, it is a welcome contribution to the almost nonexistent political literature of modern North Africa.

The Barkiste philosophy which emerges from the somewhat disjointed propos of this work is a fairly well-known "socialism of underdevelopment." The backward nation can move ahead only if all the "vital forces" are engaged in construction--and by "vital forces" Ben Barka has said on other occasions that he means the masses, the unions, the resistance (presumably a temporary phenomenon), and the party, or the leading group, suitably purged. In Morocco he feels that, in spite of some success--Operation Labor, a co-operative-collective farm project, and his own Unity Road idea--efforts have been much too timid. Ownership of the key industries remains in the hands of capitalists who are overwhelmingly foreigners and thus have no interest in the country; thus, nationalization (to an unspecified extent) is called for, although at the same time "planning" must take into account the needs of the country for foreign capital. Self-help can perhaps not do the job itself, but he notes that ". . . even countries which have chosen [this solution] do not renounce aid from countries of a similar regime."

The question arises often as to whether Ben Barka is a Communist. The answer is almost certainly no in the formal sense, but in his famous triptych of "leadership, planning, and democratic association" he arrives at an idealistic Marxism which excludes the possibility of capitalism playing a part in long-range development schemes in backward countries. If the line between communism and socialism, or even between different kinds of communism, is the alif-like hair that separates persuasion from compulsion, he says:

"The leadership must be of an irreproachable rectitude and integrity, and also of a strictness in every test, whether it be a question of governmental leadership or direction at the echelon of popular political, syndical, and professional organizations."

Then, in other statements, he has insisted upon the need to "reconvert" the political and social system of the country through persuasive explanation and reasoning.

This righteous leadership, he suggests, will carry out a double planning program, one over the long haul to bring the nation out of its backward state, the other a short-term affair which will bring into being enough "secondary accomplishments" to give the masses patience and an understanding of the goal to which they are heading. And he adds that the third precondition

". . .that of the democratic association of the people is the indispensable corrective to the first condition, because the leadership is in danger of going off into adventure if it does not bind the interested masses closely to the work undertaken, from the planning stage on through execution--something which needs the enthusiastic mobilization of all energies."

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In a recent report this correspondent questioned whether the seeming tranquillity in Morocco early this summer was a pause between acts or would be a phenomenon of some duration. Events since then are tending to make the former much more likely.

The immediate antecedent of the present tenseness was the annual conference of Moroccan students held in Agadir late in August. As last year, this violently politized body passed a series of resolutions on everything from Formosa to women's rights; they were generally considered to have been ghostwritten by Ben Barka and were given considerable publicity in the neo-Istiqlal paper At Tahrir. The crucial resolution (not published in Morocco) was one attacking the Royal Army as an antinational institution, and calling for a purge of so-called traitors from the officers ranks plus transfer of control of the armed forces to civilian hands. The reaction of the military, and of the Crown Prince who is Chief of Staff, was sharp; a delegation visited the

palace and protested vehemently. The King issued a statement castigating those who tried to disrupt the national unity. The army captain who held the Posts and Telegraph portfolio resigned, and stories circulated that many close to the military favored direct action against the offenders.

The pressure has been so persistent that the nominally apolitical Cabinet, installed as technicians but in reality quite friendly to the neo-Istiqlal group, was forced to bring At Tahrir and its director, Muhammad Basri, into court under the terms of a newly-extended libel law dealing with the defamation of public officials. Early in the month there was expectation of some sort of showdown--the question was whether the present Government would topple or be toppled and if so, whether the unions would be called out to back it by strikes or any other means.

It was in this uncertain climate that the announcement of the NUPF was made and there was immediate speculation that the step was taken on the one hand as a quiet warning against any untoward action to bring down the Government (the NUPF had very kind words for it in its inaugural statement), and on the other an unspoken undertaking to engage in valid political activity under the newly-promulgated charter of public liberties. One could even surmise that the announcement took advantage not only of the presence in Casablanca of correspondents and Arab diplomats as a sounding board for publicity, but as a shield against possible recrimination or more. It would have been embarrassing, to say the least, to have to spank the children while the house was full of guests.

Since then the freeze has clearly set in between the ever more coalescing right and left. The palace recognizes a serious situation when it sees it, and a certain amount of mild preventive action has taken place. The trial of At Tahrir is one indication; Ben Barka was stripped of his official car and residence which he had kept since his Assembly days, and police surrounded the Assembly building for unknown reasons for several days. (There was no session under way.) The Moroccan Communist Party has been temporarily suspended as contrary to the ethic of an Islamic state, a suspension considered the forerunner of a permanent outlawing. But everything so far has been completely legal and coolly polite. The stakes are too high for anyone to want to violate the coexistence which seems to be tacitly agreed to. And the truce is more easily kept at long range, perhaps. Ben Barka has gone off on a vacation planned two years ago but abandoned then because it was considered as marking him in too spectacular a way. Now he has decided to carry it out and strengthen another kind of coexistence by flying to Peking where he is a guest at the tenth anniversary ceremonies of the Chinese People's Republic, and where yesterday he was received by Mao Tse-tung.

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