

president. President Ben Ali was the only candidate and received more than ninety-nine percent of the vote. The Legislative Assembly remained unchanged – all 141 seats went to the party in power, the Democratic Constitutional Assembly (*Rassemblement constitutionnel démocratique*). The opposition parties criticized the way the elections were conducted and although these organizations are now legal, until they can elect representatives to the Chamber, Tunisia will be a multi-party state in name only.

WHILE TUNISIA SUCCEEDED IN CHANGING ITS political structure without bloodshed, the same cannot be said for Algeria. Algerians did indeed get a new constitution in February 1989, but at considerable cost. They will not soon forget the riots of October 1988, nor the violence with which the government tried to suppress these demonstrations; there were arbitrary arrests, beatings, and torture. The reaction both inside and outside the country was one of stupefaction. How could the Front de libération nationale (FLN), the party which had led the nation to independence, act in such a repressive fashion?

The riots could have been foreseen; the Soviet-style one party state was going nowhere. By concentrating on heavy industry, based on hydrocarbon production, and making this sector the state's major source of income (ninety-five percent) the FLN had done the country more harm than good; when the price of crude oil fell in 1986 economic chaos was inevitable. The few reforms the government introduced proved useless. Algerians, two-thirds of whom were born since independence in 1962, were going hungry and were desperate for a change; they gave vent to a deep-seated anger that went well beyond mere discontent with the economic troubles.

In the face of this, President Chadli made a prudent choice: he promised to listen to the voices of discontent and the population re-elected him as president of the country in December 1988. A new constitution was drawn up and adopted by referendum in February 1989. Responding to the widespread desire for change and renewal,

references to socialism were deleted, the monopoly of the FLN gave way to a multi-party system, and the role of the army was reduced. Many observers have suggested, however, that the Algerian government has so much to do solving its own internal problems that it will neglect the Maghreb Union.

In Tunisia, the birth of the Union was greeted on 18 February 1989 with a huge headline in the Tunis *La Presse* proclaiming: "A United Maghreb." For President Ben Ali it was "a political choice of the utmost importance." But what had the heads of state agreed to? First of all, the act of Union strengthens the desire of the leaders to cooperate and gives concrete expression to longstanding diplomatic initiatives. The official declaration describes the Union as "welded together" in a way which will "contribute positively to international dialogue." The UMA will, according to the declaration, help to "protect the independence of the Maghreb countries and to safeguard what they have acquired." It should also "help the international community to promote a world order in which justice, dignity, freedom and respect for human rights predominate and where there is genuine cooperation and mutual respect."

The Union has been given a mandate to pursue joint policies in various areas in order to enhance industrial, agricultural, commercial, and social development in its member countries. The Union is a real organization, with its own structures, committees and councils. The presidency of the Union will be filled by each of the five heads of state in turn, for six-month periods; King Hassan II is the first president.

DESPITE THEIR ENTHUSIASM, HOWEVER, THE Maghreb leaders have not yet accomplished very much. Many problems remain unresolved, some of which could threaten the survival of the new organization.

First, the major conflict over the Western Sahara continues. Morocco laid claim to the territory in 1976 and has been engaged in a war with the Polisario Front ever since then. Recently Morocco's King Hassan agreed to

meet the Polisario leaders, and has endorsed the holding of a referendum, first proposed by the United Nations in 1976, which would allow the people of the Sahara to decide their own fate. When asked by the French weekly *Le Point* (30 January 1989) what he would do if he lost the referendum, the President of the Polisario's Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, Mohammed Abdelaziz, replied, "If the vote is conducted freely we will accept the verdict of the people of the Sahara and we will go to the Moroccan authorities and say to them: 'We are Moroccans, do with us what you will.'"

However, even if this is a step in the right direction, the dispute in the Sahara is not over. Polisario will accept the results of the referendum only if it feels it has been conducted fairly.

At the time of writing there has been no further negotiations between the two and the date of the referendum has not been announced.

Second, if the member governments were to find themselves unable to maintain social stability in their respective countries, they might then be obliged to concentrate on internal problems and neglect the UMA.

Finally there is the danger that the Union will not succeed in "putting couscous on every table," to use the words of *The Economist*. Unless the Union manages to improve the living standards of the people of the Maghreb, it will be regarded as a failure. One of the factors which persuaded the Maghreb leaders to unite was the threat to their economies which they will face when the European Common Market becomes fully effective in 1992. The Union needs to show that it can operate as a viable economic partner with the EC and with other economic groupings. On a promising note for commercial relations: the members of the Arab Cooperative Council, an organization formed this year in Baghdad and which includes Iraq, Egypt, Jordan and North Yemen, expressed its intention to work cooperatively with the UMA.

The Arab Maghreb Union embodies great hopes for peace, harmony and cooperation in the area – and many promises have been made. In view of the increasing poverty, unemployment and hunger in all these countries, this new organization is indeed fragile and keeping it afloat will be a formidable challenge. □

