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Aḥmad II Bey

Aḥmad II Bey (1862–1942) was Ḥusaynid bey of Tunisia (1929–42) under the French protectorate. His reign is generally seen as a period of courtly intrigues and submission to colonial rule, but his goal upon ascending to the throne was to regain real political power. Despite a character weakened by illness and the malign influence of his advisers, he discreetly resisted French rule, independent of Destour, the Constitutional Liberal Party, whose political views he did not share.

Born on 13 April 1862, a son of ‘Alī (III) Bey of Tunis (r. 1882–1902), probably raised in the palace and unable to leave it, he was named heir to the throne by his cousin al-Ḥabīb Bey (r. 1922–9) in 1928. After acceding to the throne on 11 February 1929, he attempted to free himself of the restrictions imposed on him by the colonial authorities: he wished to visit the shrine of Sīdī Ṣāhib (d. 34/654–5) in al-Qayrawān, an important pilgrimage site, and to move freely amongst his people.

Aḥmad Bey was, however, detached from both the Tunisian people and the nationalist movement. The state of isolation in which he had been raised was exploited by the French to silence him. In the first months of his reign, he was affected by two events: a haemorrhagic stroke, and the rise to power at the court of Sālīm Jazīrī, the director of protocol, whom he eventually made master of the harem and who diverted financial resources for personal gain.

The ruler nevertheless discreetly resisted the protectorate. He was active in religious affairs, favouring the Ḥanafī school of law, which was observed by the elite beys and families of Ottoman-Turkish origin, in opposition to the Mālīkī school of law, which was followed by the majority of Tunisians and preferred by the French. He supported Ḥanafī dignitaries against al-Ṭāhir b. ‘Āshūr (1879–1973), the rector of the Great Mosque of Tunis, al-Zaytūna, who wanted to open Zaytūna University to educational reforms. He similarly opposed the attempts to reorganise the Muslim judicial authorities (*qāḍīs*) undertaken by his minister of justice, Ṭāhir Bāshā Khayr al-Dīn (1875–1937). By refusing to sign relevant decrees, he frustrated all attempts to reform the justice system and Islamic education in acts of resistance that may have been motivated equally by personal interests and conservative conviction. He displayed his independent spirit by naming as his heir al-Ṭāhir Bey (d. 1941), son of Bey Muḥammad al-Hādī (r. 1902–6), a prince disliked by the French.

The resistance of Aḥmad Bey, disconnected from the political actions of Destour, met with little success against the colonial authorities, who downplayed its importance. The national movement accused him of passivity in the face of colonial aggression. In 1933, he did not oppose the violent repression of popular protests against the burial in Muslim cemeteries of Tunisians who had adopted French citizenship (sometimes still Muslims but considered by some religious judges as de facto apostates, as they had moved outside the jurisdiction of the

qādī), nor did he oppose the similarly violent repression of nationalist demonstrations in April 1938.

Aḥmad Bey visited France twice, in 1931 and 1934. During his second trip, the longest foreign journey ever taken by a bey, he celebrated with various French officials the “friendship” between France and Tunisia. He requested that his historiographer, Muḥammad al-Miqdād al-Wartānī (d. 1950), record this journey in a narrative that is one of the rare official chronicles of the beys under the protectorate. Aḥmad Bey died on 19 June 1942, leaving a negative image in the nationalist memory of Ḥusaynid rule in the colonial period, especially as compared to his successor, al-Munṣif Bey (r. 1942–3).

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