

M/E - STAGE-MANAGED CONGRESS FOR LEBANESE COMMUNISTS

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F-101

The Third Congress of the Lebanese Communist Party (LCP), in Beirut from January 7 to 10, was intended to demonstrate the unity and strength of pro-Soviet forces in the Middle East and thus to rebuff Chinese aspirations of improving their standing in the region. The Soviet Union and Arab Communists needed a morale-boosting exercise after last year's events in Sudan - where Communist cadres have been imprisoned or driven underground - and as a response to the anti-Communist line of the Libyan régime. The full resources of the Soviet Union and the Communist movement were therefore mobilised in Beirut to ensure a public success.

Moscow does not appear to take a deep interest in Lebanon's internal affairs, and the LCP (membership estimated at 2,000-3,000) is a relatively insignificant political force. But since being licensed in 1970, it has become the only legal Communist Party in the Arab world, and its third congress was the first of any Arab Communist Party to be held in public. The opportunity thus presented of a public demonstration of solidarity with Arab Communists was seized by nearly 30 delegations of Communist Parties from all parts of the world and from other "progressive" movements. The leader of the Italian Communist delegation declared that the congress represented "a significant success for the Communists and the progressives in this part of the world and in Europe", and the Soviet delegation leader predicted that the "work of the congress will be of great importance not only to the Communists and workers of Lebanon, but also to the world Communist movement, including the Soviet Communists".

The question of China provided the main theme and the most outspoken comment at the congress. Although Lebanon recognised China last November, and a Chinese delegation arrived in Beirut around the time of the congress to arrange for the establishment of an embassy, no Chinese or Albanians were invited to the meeting, which took a firmly anti-Chinese line.

The LCP Central Committee report, the principal document for debate, described China as "moving into the US orbit", and the party's General Secretary, Nicola Shawi, claimed that "the danger of the Chinese subversive rôle has increased after China's entry to the United Nations". This theme was stressed in Soviet and East European reports on the congress. The

(PTO)

Soviet news agency, Tass, said on January 10 that the line taken by the Chinese leaders was "a great service to world imperialism" and "grist to the mill of reaction". A writer in the Beirut newspaper, L'Orient-Le Jour, had suggested on January 7 that one of the main aims of the congress would be to "bar the way to any Chinese gains in the region", while journalist Edouard Saab, in the same newspaper four days later, concluded that "all Arab progressivism was reduced to the key question: for or against the USSR?"

"Rightist trends" attacked

The congress made an open attack on the Libyan and Sudanese Governments. Resolutions condemned "rightist trends" in certain Arab régimes, and Shawi, in his opening address, denounced "the positions adopted by Libya which supports the interests of the Arab Right within the Federation (of Arab Republics)". In an interview with L'Orient-Le Jour (January 1 to 7 supplement), however, Shawi made it clear that Arab Communists could not expect Soviet support in dealing with anti-Communist governments. The Soviet Union might aid such régimes, he said, because such aid "weakens imperialism". "If certain Arab régimes which benefit from this aid adopt a negative attitude towards democratic freedoms, this is very regrettable", he said, but it was up to the Arab Communist Parties concerned, "as well as for other progressive forces, to act to change this state of affairs".

In contrast with these criticisms, the congress was generally cautious in discussing the internal affairs of other Arab States, and similar caution was shown in dealing with the question of the Palestinian guerrillas. Before the congress, one Palestinian source reported that certain East European delegates had privately described the Palestinian movement as "counter-productive", and the issue of Soviet support for the UN Security Council resolution of November, 1967, remains a source of friction between Communists and Palestinians. But the LCP, like the Soviet Union, showed signs of wishing to compromise with the guerrillas. Al Nahar, the LCP newspaper, said that the congress statement on the Palestinians had been drafted after consultation with al-Fatah: it did not mention the Security Council resolution, though Gennadiy Sizov, leader of the Soviet delegation, described this resolution as the only way to settle the Middle East conflict. The Arab Communist Parties are regretting their failure to gain greater influence over the guerrillas, and the LCP Central Committee report, while criticising the Palestinians for "flirting with leftists", also mentioned the failure of Arab Communists to play a more "positive" rôle in the guerrilla movement. The most outspoken criticism of the Palestinians came from the leader of the Syrian Ba'ath Party delegation, who claimed that while the Syrians were intervening in Jordan on behalf of the guerrillas in September, 1970, certain Palestinian leaders were enjoying themselves in the cafés of Beirut.

Among notable absentees from the congress were Khalid Bikdash, leader of the Syrian Communist Party, and Fuad Nassar, the Jordanian Communist leader: both men are barred from Lebanon under an order imposed

(MORE)

F-103

in 1960. The Moroccan Communists' Parti de la Libération et du Socialisme (PLS), was represented, but a PLS Secretary, Abdesslam Bourkia, was arrested at Casablanca airport on January 6 and charged with trying to revive a banned party and distributing leaflets liable to cause a breach of the peace: he was about to leave on "a private visit to Beirut".

Rebuff for Algerians

The appearance at the congress of members of the Algerian Communist Parti de l'Avant-Garde Socialiste (PAGS), was a serious slight to the Algerian Government. No representative of Algeria's ruling Front de Libération Nationale took part, though the "progressive" ruling parties of Egypt, Syria and Iraq were invited.

PAGS was also given representation on the preparatory committee for a major conference of "progressive" parties and forces in the Arab world. In such groupings the Algerian FLN has previously been a leading participant. Although the decision to prepare for this conference was seen as one of the main results of the congress, Edouard Saab, writing in Le Monde (Paris) on January 12, said that it seemed "to have no other aim than to keep the region protected against Chinese influence". The list of parties in the preparatory committee suggests that the LCP and the other Arab Communist Parties intend to keep the conference firmly under their control, and probably hope to use it to improve their relations with the Palestinian guerrilla organisations.

The LCP Central Committee and other organs survived the party congress unchanged. But Shawi announced that in future congresses will be held every four years, and the LCP confirmed its decision to participate in the Lebanese elections in March-April, 1972, and to form electoral alliances with other left-wing parties aimed chiefly at the defeat of the Phalangists and the Liberals.

Party background

The LCP is one of the oldest Arab Communist Parties and until the early 1950s was united with the Syrian Communist Party (SCP) and dominated by Khalid Bikdash. When Bikdash opposed Nasser and the popular "Nasserist" movement in the Arab countries, the LCP followed suit - a policy which Shawi now regrets, admitting that "we lost the masses who had lost confidence in us".

Relations between the two parties were strained from the 1940s both for reasons of policy and because of personality clashes. In 1948 a leading LCP member, Farajallah Helou, believed that the SCP-LCP should declare against the partition of Palestine, but Bikdash, loyal to the Soviet line, disagreed. The conflict developed into a feeling of deep mistrust between the two men, with Shawi tending to side with Bikdash. In 1959, Helou visited Syria, apparently to close down a party branch in Damascus that was cooperating with the Syrian Government. He was arrested and died under torture.

The debate over subservience to Soviet policies continued, and the LCP has suffered at least two major splits. One involved the creation of
(PTD)

F-104

a pro-Chinese group, which has since sub-divided into two minute and ineffectual factions. More serious was the formation in 1968 of the Lebanese Communist Union, composed of party members who believed in a more "Arab" line, together with neutrality in the Sino-Soviet split.

Shawi, while remaining totally committed to Moscow, has tried to maintain party unity. His chief potential rival is George Hawi, who, at 32, has the support of many younger members. Hawi was once accused of being an agent of the American CIA, but a party investigation cleared him.

The LCP third congress marks the party's integration into the Lebanese parliamentary system, and Shawi no doubt hopes for substantial reinforcement of his personal prestige as a result of the meeting. Interviewed by Moscow Radio's Arabic Service on January 19, Gennadiy Sizov, leader of the Soviet delegation, described the congress as "an important event in the country's political life" and said that the legalisation of the LCP was "a great success for the Communists and the democratic forces of Lebanon". But Shawi will still have to face a challenge from the Left of his party as well as from those Communist dissidents in Lebanon who will be disappointed by the congress' stage-managed attacks on the Chinese leaders. Moreover, the Arab Communist movement as a whole is unlikely to overcome the suspicion of the Palestinians, despite the care taken by the LCP Central Committee to skirt round the contradictions between their position and that of the Palestinian guerrilla organisations on the Middle East question.

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