

Travelling Theorist: Mehdi Ben Barka and Morocco from Anticolonial Nationalism to the Tricontinental

Abstract

This chapter recovers the key contribution of the Moroccan revolutionary Mehdi Ben Barka – while touching upon other Arab militants, movements and states – in building the tricontinental coalition and framework for action. By emphasising the transformative role of political practice upon the development of Ben Barka's thought over several distinct conjunctures, it uses his political evolution to illustrate the historical trajectory of global anti-colonialism from national independence movements that drew upon liberal political traditions into national liberation revolutions operating in a dense internationalist and socialist framework, the framework of tricontinentalism. Central to both of these themes is Ben Barka's role in defining the concept of neocolonialism, institutionalising it within tricontinentalist milieux, and organising revolutionary action to overcome it. Finally, it also recovers the dialectical relationship between revolution and counterrevolution, absent in many accounts of the radical left, and how the relationships between these antithetical forces shaped one another. In sum, it argues that Ben Barka was pivotal in building a workable tricontinentalism that – for a brief yet crucial period – co-ordinated many of the anti-colonial forces of Africa, Asia and Latin America.

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Book

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It is hard to imagine language more alarming to European and American imperialists and their allies than the terms Mehdi Ben Barka used to describe the conference he was organising. In May 1965, the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation elected the exiled Moroccan dissident to chair the preparatory committee for the upcoming 'First Conference of Solidarity of the Peoples of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.' Better known simply as 'the Tricontinental,' the conference was the first set to bring Latin America into the framework of Afro-Asian anticolonial summitry. In conversation with the Havana press on 30 September 1965, Ben Barka pinpointed the forces that converged to make the 1960s a moment pregnant with global revolutionary possibilities:

[The Conference] is historic because of its composition, because the two great contemporary currents of the World Revolution will be represented in this Conference: the current which started with the October Revolution in the Soviet Union, and which is the current of socialist revolution, and the parallel current of the revolution for national liberation....

This Conference is also historic because it takes place in Cuba; because the Cuban Revolution is in effect the concretisation of the union of these two historic currents of the World Revolution; because Cuba has known her revolution for national liberation and is now accomplishing her socialist revolution; therefore, it was the best choice for the celebration of this meeting.¹

Less than one month after making this link between the traditions of socialist and national liberation revolutions, Ben Barka was abducted off the streets of Paris, never to be seen again. His disappearance sparked an international scandal, leading to a highly publicised

I thank Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, Nathan Citino, Ussama Makdisi, and Derek Ide for their insightful comments.

¹ This quotation is an edited composite of two translations (one in English, one in Spanish) of a speech given in French, of which no record was found. Executive Secretariat of OSPAAAL, 'First Solidarity Conference,' 4; Ben Barka, 'Estrategia Global.'

trial and a break in diplomatic relations between France and Morocco.² While the question of who was behind the 'Ben Barka Affair' has been an international mystery leading to intense speculation for decades, a recent confession by an Israeli Mossad agent involved in his assassination has shed light on many uncertainties. On 29 October 1965, French police kidnapped Ben Barka off the streets of Paris, Moroccan intelligence officers tortured him to death, and agents of the Mossad doused his body with acid and buried him in a forest on the outskirts of Paris.³

Despite his grisly fate, Ben Barka's vision for the Tricontinental was briefly realised during the first two weeks of January 1966, when 512 delegates from 83 states or movements, 64 observers, 77 guests, and 129 members of the foreign press convened in Havana for the last major international conference of the Third World project during its peak years of struggle against Euroamerican imperialism and colonialism.⁴ Designing a framework and bringing together this universe of peoples and organisations was no easy task. Amongst the many involved, the labour and thought of Mehdi Ben Barka stands out as a key link in executing the tricontinental idea.

Yet Ben Barka's role is hardly recognised outside of a niche francophone literature, read mostly in France and Morocco. By emphasising the transformative role of political practice

² Ben Barka's assassination inspired numerous articles, books, and films. CIA involvement has been alleged but not proven. See for instance Guérin, *Les Assassins*.

³ See the interview with Mossad agent Rafi Eitan on the Israeli TV program *Uvda*, 1 December 2014, <http://www.mako.co.il/tv-ilana_dayan/2015-75230c07c760a410/Article-92ac6ecd0960a41006.htm> (last accessed 14 May 2019. I thank Leena Dallasheh for her translation from Hebrew); and Bergman and Nakdimon, 'Ghosts of Saint-Germain Forest.'

⁴ Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 'Tricontinental Conference,' 47. See also Faligot, *Tricontinentale*.

upon the development of his thought over several distinct conjunctures, this chapter seeks to recover the key contribution of Ben Barka—along with other the Arab militants, movements, and states—in building the tricontinental coalition and framework for action, a contribution that is still too often elided or dimly understood. Secondly, the political evolution of Ben Barka illustrates well the historical trajectory of global anticolonialism and its transformation from national independence movements that drew upon liberal political traditions into national liberation revolutions operating in a dense internationalist and socialist framework, the framework of tricontinentalism.⁵ Central to both of these themes is Ben Barka’s role in defining the concept of neocolonialism, institutionalising it within tricontinentalist milieus, and organising revolutionary opposition. Thirdly, it also recovers the dialectical relationship between revolution and counterrevolution, absent in many accounts of the radical left, and how the relationships between these antithetical forces shaped one another.

The Education of Mehdi Ben Barka

As much as anyone, the Ben Barka family was well schooled in the harsh reality of underdevelopment. Born in Sidi Fettah, a popular quarter of Rabat, in 1920, Ben Barka’s home was shared by the families of his maternal uncle and paternal aunt. The three families had neither running water nor electricity.⁶ Ben Barka’s father Ahmed was a *faqih* and a secretary for a successful Tangiers merchant trading in sugar, tea, and olives. His mother Fattouma worked as a seamstress in her home, alongside raising her seven children. Ben Barka’s intelligence was noted from a young age and, after attending a neighbourhood Qur’an school, nationalists in

⁵ See Young, *Postcolonialism*.

⁶ For biographical details, this chapter relies on Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*.

Rabat paid for his education in elite French colonial schools, viewing the young boy as full of promise. At fourteen, he joined his first political organisation, the Moroccan Action Committee (MAC), whose literature he read, copied, and distributed.

Ben Barka's famed international travels and multinational organising work began with his higher education. The outbreak of the Second World War in September 1939 prevented Ben Barka from pursuing his studies in metropolitan France. Instead, he enrolled in the University of Algiers. Wartime colonial Algiers exposed Ben Barka to an intriguing network of international militants in a period marked by the struggle against fascism and colonialism. Upon arrival, he entered a student political milieu that included French *pied noirs*, Algerians, Tunisians, and Moroccans. Ben Barka consorted with members of the radical populist Algerian People's Party (PPA), led by Messali Hadj, as well as Habib Bourguiba's Neo-Destour Party.⁷ This budding Maghribi student activist group was rounded out by a few anti-colonial colons, such as Albert-Paul Lentin, future journalist and attendee of the Havana Tricontinental. Amidst this crowd, Ben Barka became the vice president of the influential Association of North African Muslim Students, which was founded in 1927 and graduated numerous leading Maghribi nationalists.⁸ From Algiers, Ben Barka organised conferences on Moroccan and international topics while he reconstituted cells of the Moroccan National Party, which like the PPA suffered following a wave of protests and French repression in 1937. After earning his *licence* in mathematics in 1942, Ben Barka returned to Morocco. While setting up nationalist cells, he taught maths at several schools. These included the Collège Imperial, where one of his students was fourteen-

⁷ On Messali Hadj and the emergence of the PPA see McDougall, *History of Algeria*, 166–78.

⁸ Ageron, 'L'Association,' 28.

year-old crown prince Moulay Hassan, who, as king, probably ordered Ben Barka's assassination in 1965.

Independence: 'A form in need of content'

Ben Barka was the youngest signatory of the Independence Manifesto of 11 January 1944, the document that publicly announced the appearance of the Hizb al-Istiqlal (Independence Party). Istiqlal's primary objective was to eject the French and restore deposed sultan Mohammed ben Youssef to the throne of an independent, constitutional monarchy.⁹ This bold declaration earned him his first prison sentence. His political activity as one of the leading organisers of Istiqlal caused him to spend years in colonial prison and internal exile.

The alliance of Istiqlal to the monarchy, which enjoyed popular legitimacy due to its symbolism as a locally rooted sovereign in opposition to the French colonial administration, would prove to be both its road to power and its fatal mistake.¹⁰ Istiqlal's ties to the figure of the king only increased after he was exiled by the French to colonial Madagascar and replaced by a puppet monarch in 1953.¹¹ Restoring the 'legitimate' sovereign then proved to be the most effective rallying cry, and Istiqlal exploited it fully. As chairman of Istiqlal's executive committee, Ben Barka played a key role in the nationalist underground between the end of the Second

⁹ For the full text of the Istiqlal manifesto, see Halstead, *Rebirth*, 281–5.

¹⁰ For the turn of the nationalists toward the sultan, which was consolidated in 1934, see Halstead, *Rebirth*, 203–5; Joffé, 'Moroccan'. Unlike the Khedive in Egypt or the Beylicate in Tunisia, Morocco's 'Alawite dynasty was not ethnically distinct from its subjects. And unlike the Hashemite kingdoms of Jordan and Iraq, founded in the 1920s with British assistance, the Moroccan dynasty possessed some 300 years of local history. See Hudson, *Arab Politics*, 221; Joffe, 'Morocco.'

¹¹ The disposition of the sultan incensed Maghribi nationalists beyond Morocco. The second anniversary of the sultan's removal was the occasion for an FLN-led mass uprising in northern Algeria in August 1955. McDougall, *History of Algeria*, 200–2.

World War in 1945 and official Moroccan independence in 1956. His contributions included organising cells, training cadres, editing the party journal, establishing and maintaining relations with the newly organised armed resistance movement centred in the Rif, and negotiating the treaty for independence at Aix-Les-Bains in September 1955.¹²

The internal struggle over the structure of political power began immediately after independence in March 1956, inaugurating a contest between the palace and Istiqlal.¹³ When the newly crowned King Mohammad V created a powerless National Consultative Assembly, it overwhelmingly elected Ben Barka its president. In this position, Ben Barka became intimately familiar with the problems facing the newly independent country and the options available to redress them. While the early 1950s saw an economic boom, development stagnated after independence. European investment disappeared, the richest agricultural lands continued to be owned by a small concentration of French settlers, and Moroccan landlords withheld their own capital from productive investment.¹⁴ In the realm of security, the same French-trained men who policed the nationalist movement now worked for the king, while French and American military bases remained.

In his newfound position as statesman, Ben Barka began traveling internationally, studying different models of development. He met with Nasser, Bourguiba, Ho Chi Minh, Mao Tse-Tung, and even visited the Tennessee Valley Authority.¹⁵ He returned inspired and began a

¹² Ashford, *Political Change*, 61; Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 93–153.

¹³ See Pennell, *Morocco*, 163–70.

¹⁴ Amin, *Maghreb*, 164–80.

¹⁵ Evins, 'Distinguished World Visitors.'

crusade for economic and social development in Morocco, initially sponsored by the king. Like many mid-century modernisers, Ben Barka developed a passion for infrastructure. But he combined public works with mass participation, viewing development as a process for national mobilisation. In the summer of 1957, he linked the two by founding a public works corps that constructed the ‘Road to Unity,’ the first road joining the former areas of the colonial protectorates, the French north and the Spanish south. But by the final meeting of the assembly in April 1959, he had reached the limit of reformism in a monarchical system committed to economic liberalism.

Neither the King nor the much of leadership of Istiqlal had the desire to enact the radical changes Ben Barka deemed necessary and saw underway in Egypt, Vietnam, or China: land reform, mass literacy campaigns, the modernisation of infrastructure, nationalisation of industry, and the expulsion of foreign military bases. The limitations of the Istiqlal coalition of the king, the party, and the old social classes (the *makhzen*) became unbearable, as did the establishment’s continued reliance on France. This experience led Ben Barka to later conclude that ‘independence by itself is nothing more than a form in need of content.’¹⁶

From Nationalism to Tricontinentalism: The UNFP

After attempts to hold together the fracturing Istiqlal movement proved futile, Ben Barka joined with the left opposition to create a new party, the National Union of Popular Forces (UNFP). These forces included Mohammed ‘Fqih’ al-Basri, a leader of armed struggle against the French in the early 1950s; Istiqlal veterans Abdallah Ibrahim, Abderrahim Bouabid,

¹⁶ Ben Barka, ‘Africa After Independence,’ 166.

and Abderrahmane Youssoufi; Mahjoub Bin Siddiq, leader of the Moroccan Labour Union (UMT); the National Union of Moroccan Students; and a number of Istiqlal cadres, including the future intellectual giant Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, who edited the UNFP newspaper.¹⁷ The new formation essentially split Istiqlal supporters along the lines of class and generation, with the established bourgeois—in both the material and ideological sense—and elder elements staying within the Istiqlal.¹⁸ At its foundational meeting in a Casablanca cinema in September 1959, the UNFP unveiled its program. Domestically it called for ‘real democracy’ under a constitutional monarchy, land reform, full employment, industrial planning, nationalisation of key economic sectors, and a modern educational system.¹⁹ Foreign affairs were equally stressed. The party called for the evacuation of the remaining US and French military bases, pledged support for the Algerian people and all others waging liberation struggles, called for a ‘unified Maghreb built on Arab brotherhood and African solidarity,’ and supported diplomatic non-alignment and ‘the consolidation of international peace.’ With the founding of the UNFP, Ben Barka had entered a fully tricontinental agenda.

At first, the monarchy welcomed the brewing split in Istiqlal, which it encouraged in December 1958 by naming the leftist Abdallah Ibrahim as prime minister and allowing him to form a government—sans Ben Barka.²⁰ After weakening Istiqlal, Mohammed V launched his first wave of repression against the UNFP. The king finally dismissed the government in May

¹⁷ Aksikas, *Arab Modernities*, 62–3.

¹⁸ For a detailed analysis of the causes and consequences of the split—if somewhat marred by an Orientalist framework—see Waterbury, *Commander*, 169–232.

¹⁹ For the full program, see National Union of Popular Forces, ‘Charter,’ 77–9.

²⁰ Prime Minister Ibrahim and Minister of National Economy Bouabid even drew up a practical Five Year Plan for industrialisation covering the years 1960–4. It was never implemented. Amin, *Maghreb*, 180–7.

1960, taking it over himself. Ben Barka fled to Paris in February 1960, where he organised much of the Moroccan opposition from his apartment.

Afro-Asian Horizons

In April 1960, Ben Barka was elected to join the executive committee of Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organisation (AAPSO) at its meeting in Conakry, Guinea. Ben Barka became known for his great capacity to organise, the clarity of his interventions, and his ability to reconcile opposing viewpoints. His political location was agreeable to many agendas. On the one hand, anticolonial conservatives could not question his status as a veteran of the Moroccan national movement who had chaired the National Consultative Assembly. Neither could he be seen as an 'agent' of any particular radical regime. On the other, revolutionaries understood he was cast into exile by a monarch intent on maintaining ties with the colonial powers. He espoused a socialism acceptable to nationalists and a nationalism acceptable to Marxists. In the age of the Sino-Soviet split, both communist powers could only look upon him favourably because his framework was clearly socialist, yet he did not represent a declared Marxist-Leninist party aligned with either side. He linked two regionalisms by advocating African causes to Arabs, and Arab causes to Africans. As his Algerian comrade Mohamed Harbi recounted, 'the international conjuncture was in favour of Mehdi Ben Barka.'²¹ His extensive travels in Afro-Asian lands both widened his horizons and made him a practical and subjective link in the relations of solidarity. His profile and that of the UNFP—which was now accepted as the legitimate representatives of Morocco in these forums—rose steeply.

²¹ Harbi, 'Ben Barka et Les Nationalistes Arabes,' 139.

In September 1961, Nasser called on Ben Barka's organisational skills to mediate between Egypt and Syria upon the dissolution of the United Arab Republic. Nasser would tap Ben Barka again to negotiate the prospective but ill-fated unity between Nasser and the new Syrian and Iraqi Ba'ath governments in June 1963.²² Though unable to bridge the gap, his selection as favoured mediator between Arab nationalist governments reveals the level of regional respect he obtained. His proximity to Nasser would only increase. Representing both the UNFP and AAPSO, he attended the inaugural conference of the Nasser-inspired Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade in 1961, taking keen interest in Yugoslavia's path of development.

Defining Neocolonialism

Intellectually and functionally, Ben Barka played a major role in defining the theory of neocolonialism. While often credited to Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah, who published a book outlining the theory in 1965, the term was institutionalised into the Afro-Asian lexicon at the third and final All-African Peoples Conference (AAPC) held in Cairo in March 1961.²³ Ben Barka formed and presided over the committee on neocolonialism and the United Nations.²⁴ This committee established one of the earliest working definitions of the term, which was strongly influenced by the unfolding crisis in the Congo. The resolution defined neocolonialism most simply as 'the survival of the colonial system in spite of formal recognition of political independence.'²⁵ The means, it stressed, were often indirect and came in the guise of unequal trade, technical, military and economic agreements, or even under UN auspices. Its goal was

²² Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 288.

²³ On the AAPC, see Wallerstein, *Africa*, 33–5, 38–9, 51–3.

²⁴ Central Intelligence Agency, 'All Africa Peoples Conference in 1961.'

²⁵ All-African Peoples Conference, 'Statement on Neocolonialism.'

‘the balkanisation of newly-independent States’ and ‘systematic division’ of the anticolonial coalition. The ‘perpetrators’ were identified as ‘such countries as the United States, Federal Germany, Israel, Britain, Belgium, Holland, South Africa and France.’ The colonial powers, the resolution warned—and the January assassination of Patrice Lumumba in the Congo exposed—would escalate into open intervention if indirect subversion did not work. Ben Barka’s skilful chairmanship of the committee was able to resolve differences amongst the conservative and revolutionary African states in order to produce this unity.²⁶ As if to illustrate their theory, one month later, the CIA sent an army of Cuban counterrevolutionary exiles to overthrow the island’s revolutionary government in the failed Bay of Pigs invasion.

The concept of neocolonialism was the prerequisite for linking Latin America to the Afro-Asian anticolonial framework. But it was also significantly shaped by Ben Barka’s engagement with Latin American history. Later, at the Third Conference of AAPSO held in Moshi, Tanganyika in February 1963, he argued that precedents for the neocolonial order could be found in two examples: British interwar imperialism, and Latin America under US hegemony. British colonial authorities granted formal independence to Egypt in 1922 and Iraq in 1932 to promote what Lord Curzon called ‘an Arab façade’ to mask their own decisive political leverage.²⁷ But Ben Barka argued that what was once an ‘infrequent’ phenomenon was now ‘converted into a clear, systematically-applied policy’ in the neocolonial era.²⁸ As he saw it,

²⁶ Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 259–60; Wallerstein, *Africa*, 52–3.

²⁷ British Foreign Secretary Lord Curzon sought to create an ‘Arab façade ruled and administered under British guidance and controlled by a native Mohammedan and, as far as possible, by an Arab staff.’ Eastern Committee Fifth Minutes, 24 April 1918, CAB 27/24. Cited in Stivers, *Supremacy*, 28–9.

²⁸ Ben Barka, ‘Present Problems,’ 152.

political decolonisation became the favoured strategy for the imperial powers following the reconfiguration of western capitalist structures around US interests after World War II. The American-led reconstruction of Western Europe made it ‘inevitable that [Europe] should similarly adopt US modes of relations with the New World, in other words, that it create its own “Latin America.”’²⁹ He called for increased attention to the ‘problem of power’: was independence earned by victory over the coloniser or in collaboration with him? Was state control vested in hereditary interests or a popular national liberation movement? ‘The time when independence was something progressive has passed,’ he concluded. ‘Today only the political and economic content of that independence has progressive meaning.’³⁰ At Moshi, Ben Barka was elected secretary of coordination and a member of the executive committee devoted to enlarging AAPSO to include Latin America.³¹

The ‘Revolutionary Option’

Armed with his extensive international experience and stature, over the winter of 1961–62 Ben Barka prepared a wide-ranging assessment of the course of the Moroccan national movement for the UNFP’s second party congress. He discussed his report, complete with a proscriptive plan of action, in his Geneva apartment with Mohamed Harbi of the FLN and Abdallah Laroui, one of Morocco’s leading intellectuals.³² Report in hand, he returned to Morocco in May 1962 to attend the party conference. Ben Barka’s country was now under the austere reign of his former student, Hassan II, after the latter’s father died unexpectedly during

²⁹ Ben Barka, ‘Present Problems,’ 153.

³⁰ Ben Barka, ‘Present Problems,’ 153.

³¹ Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 284.

³² Harbi, ‘L’Option Révolutionnaire,’ 53.

surgery. Titled ‘Revolutionary Option in Morocco,’ it was published only posthumously alongside other writings by Maspero in Paris, Dar al-Tali’a in Beirut, and OSPAAAL in Havana.³³ It remains one of his most significant written works.

For Ben Barka internationalist consciousness was not merely a slogan or a distant ideal, but a fundamental prerequisite for social transformation. Tellingly, ‘Revolutionary Option’ did not open with an analysis of the internal conditions favourable to revolution, but with a position on the international setting: ‘The most important phenomenon is without any doubt the accelerated development of the liberation of the colonised peoples. Our horizons, as the party of a recently liberated country, have broadened considerably.’³⁴ Between 1958 and 1962 most of Africa achieved political independence from European masters, with the glaring exceptions of the Portuguese colonies and apartheid South Africa, where liberation movements were quickly gathering steam. To Ben Barka, this newfound independence was ‘unquestionably of capital importance [...] because it already introduces a sure change in the international strategic and political balance.’³⁵ For Moroccans, he argued, no revolution was more important than Algeria’s, which at the time of his writing was on the verge of total victory. However, noting the momentum generated by the victories of anticolonial struggles did not mean that he believed the forward march of the revolution was unstoppable. Ben Barka contextualised the achievement of independence by warning of the immediate challenge neocolonial interests and instruments posed to the newly liberated states.

³³ Bin Baraka, *al-Ikhtiyar al-Thawri fi al-Maghrib*; Ben Barka, *Political Thought*.

³⁴ Ben Barka, ‘Revolutionary Option in Morocco,’ 27.

³⁵ Ben Barka, 28.

In order to combat the alliance of the monarchy, the landowners, and the elements of the bourgeoisie dependent upon French capital and markets, Ben Barka proposed a counter-alliance of the working class, the peasantry, the intellectuals and the progressive bourgeoisie, united in a revolutionary party under a clearly delineated program. The UNFP must become the ‘instrument’ of their aims, and this relied on careful cultivation of cadres and cells at the party’s base. ‘The daily fulfilment of the most humble tasks by the militants,’ he clarified, is ‘the best school for cadres, the best training for a spirit of fight and sacrifice for the cause of the people.’³⁶ In keeping with this spirit of grassroots organisation, he called for the creation of specific mass organisations catering to the diverse needs of Moroccans. He particularly called for a women’s organisation and for ensuring the continued politicisation of trade unions.³⁷ A clear declaration of war on the Moroccan power structure, ‘Revolutionary Option’ was an ambitious and audacious plan of action. However, the expansive international references were unfamiliar to some other members of the leadership, who were focused on more straightforward internal politics.³⁸ The report itself was shelved, though Ben Barka advanced many of its theses during the conference, which were enthusiastically received.

The Counterrevolutionary Road

While the UNFP did not officially choose the ‘revolutionary option,’ the increasingly radical posture of the party was noticed by interested observers, most notably the palace. The UNFP’s clamouring for the promulgation of a constitution was met with a counter-proposal

³⁶ Ben Barka, 71.

³⁷ Ben Barka, 72–4.

³⁸ Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 275.

from King Hassan, who announced his own constitution enshrining his vast powers in November 1962. The day after the UNFP called for a boycott of the referendum, unknown assailants rammed Ben Barka's car off the road. He survived this first attempt on his life with only a neck injury. Istiqlal lent its support to the constitution and the UNFP's boycott failed. The first parliamentary elections followed in spring 1963. The king's royalist party, recently formed to combat Istiqlal and the UNFP, the Front for the Defence of Constitutional Institutions, won a plurality of seats, yet their share was matched by those of the divided Istiqlal and the UNFP.³⁹ Ben Barka himself scored an overwhelming victory in his Casablanca district. This pretence of democracy did not last long. In mid-July, King Hassan launched a campaign against the UNFP. Hundreds of party members and a number of top cadres were arrested, jailed, sometimes tried.⁴⁰ On 26 July the government announced the UNFP was plotting to overthrow the monarchy. As Ben Barka was meeting with Nasser in Cairo, police ransacked his apartment. In the process they carted away the archive he amassed during his time in Istiqlal and the UNFP in two trucks.⁴¹ Accused of receiving weapons and funding from Algeria, Ben Barka was charged with undermining state security and the attempted assassination of the king. The king severed all communication with Algeria. In March 1964, Ben Barka was sentenced to death in absentia, the second death sentence he would receive in a span of four months. He would never return to Morocco.

³⁹ See Schaar, 'King.'

⁴⁰ American journalist John Cooley was present at the UNFP headquarters in Casablanca during a mass arrest. 'Morocco Arrests.'

⁴¹ Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 289.

The dilemmas of decolonisation as well as Ben Barka's internationalist evolution were perhaps most starkly revealed after the Moroccan army invaded Algeria in late September 1963. A nervous King Hassan, worried about the consolidation of a revolutionary regime on his western border—one that aided the UNFP and commanded their respect—seized several border towns inside Algeria with the intention of expanding his frontiers. Meanwhile, Algerian president Ahmad Ben Bella was in the midst of putting down an armed rebellion of ex-FLN supporters in the Kabylia region, an uprising he suspected King Hassan of supporting.⁴² Speaking on the airwaves of Cairo's *Voice of the Arabs* on 16 October, Ben Barka issued a statement strongly denouncing Morocco's 'grave treason, not only to the dynamic Algerian Revolution, but, in general, to all Arab revolutions in favour of liberty, socialism and unity, and to the world national liberation movement in its entirety.'⁴³ He called instead for Moroccans to '[paralyse] the criminal hands that have appropriated power and that are armed, financed and led by the imperialists.'⁴⁴ Internationally, he asked 'the popular masses of Africa and Asia' to apply pressure for peaceful negotiations under the auspices of the Organisation of African Unity. Rather than provoking revolutionary sentiment in Morocco, the statement backfired and evoked wide hostility. The king did not hesitate to denounce the 'traitors.' By contrast, Istiqlal leader Allal el-Fassi was the leading champion of 'Greater Morocco' expansionism, while the Party of Liberation and Socialism, the successor to the Moroccan Communist Party, also supported the king's position in the war.⁴⁵

⁴² Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions*, 39.

⁴³ Ben Barka, 'Appeal,' 183.

⁴⁴ Ben Barka, 185.

⁴⁵ Reyner, 'Morocco's International Boundaries'; Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 303.

On 22 October the stakes escalated considerably when, at Ben Bella's request, hundreds of Cuban troops, tanks, and artillery landed in Oran to train and fight alongside the Algerians.⁴⁶ Egypt sent men and heavy weapons shortly thereafter, while the Soviets supplied MiG fighter jets.⁴⁷ When the better equipped King Hassan appealed to the US for arms, Washington's deliveries were more limited. The Kennedy administration was wary of intensifying the already spiralling Cold War polarisation. Instead Hassan summoned the head of the Mossad, Meir Amit, to Marrakech. Amit provided Hassan with weapons, surveillance equipment, and advanced training—as well as intelligence on Ben Barka and the Moroccan opposition in Cairo and Algiers.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, neither the Arab League nor the Organisation of African Unity were persuaded by the king, who was clearly viewed as the aggressor setting a dangerous precedent for war over colonial borders. Faced with his isolation from tricontinentalist powers, and assured of only lukewarm support from Washington, King Hassan backed off. An anti-imperialist alliance had defeated an important counterrevolutionary challenge.

However, the Mossad's support for Hassan was richly rewarded by significantly—albeit still covertly—upgrading the two countries' relations. The Mossad was allowed the ability to establish a permanent station in Rabat, Israel began selling Morocco used French tanks, and Moroccan General Mohammed Oufkir traveled to Israel for security training in 1964.⁴⁹ On 9 November, a military court convicted Ben Barka of 'high treason' and sentenced him to death. Ben Barka, who had done so much to organise the Moroccan nationalist movement and to rally

⁴⁶ Gleijeses, *Conflicting*, 45.

⁴⁷ Byrne, *Mecca*, 218–9.

⁴⁸ Segev and Shumacher, 'Israel-Morocco,' 52–3.

⁴⁹ Alpher, *Periphery*, 26.

support around the monarchy, now called for its abolition, and vocally sided with his socialist neighbour. The nationalist had transcended his nation.

Traveling Theorist

Condemned to death and exile, Ben Barka spent a great deal of time in Cairo and Algiers, where he became something of an advisor to presidents Ben Bella and Nasser.⁵⁰ ‘In a way, he was like my second Minister of Foreign Affairs,’ Ben Bella recalled years later. ‘In fact, he was my real Minister of Foreign Affairs.’⁵¹ Traveling on an Algerian passport, Ben Barka used the two revolutionary capitals as hubs for different purposes. In Cairo, the site of the permanent secretariat of AAPSO, Ben Barka could throw himself into his international organising on the state level. Nasser put him into action on the Congo file, where both Egypt and Algeria were heavily invested, tasking him with supporting the successors of Lumumba in the Congo, the Simbas.⁵² In Algiers, he mixed with the emerging vanguard of global revolutionary forces then gravitating toward the nascent republic: Che Guevara, Frantz Fanon, Henri Curiel, militants from the African National Congress and the Portuguese colonies, and a host of radical students, exiles, journalists, interlopers.⁵³ From Algiers, he envisioned creating a school to train cadres and a research centre and journal devoted to the issues of national liberation, a prototype for Havana’s *Tricontinental*.

⁵⁰ For an example of a report written by Ben Barka for Ben Bella, see Youssoufi, ‘Rapport,’ 141–9.

⁵¹ Bitton, *Ben Barka*, 66:03.

⁵² Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 306.

⁵³ On internationalist Algeria, see Simon, *Algérie*; Byrne, *Mecca*; Mokhtefi, *Algiers*.

During this second exile, Ben Barka reflected more seriously on the limitations of decolonisation. Ben Barka clarified his views on the content of independence in an unpublished article written in December 1963. The tasks were ideological as well as material. ‘We must from the start give the word *development* the emotional content that the word *independence* has had,’ he insisted. ‘It is necessary that the mystique of the latter replace that of the other, or more exactly, it is necessary to show that the profound truth, hidden up to now, but essential to independence, is development.’⁵⁴ Ben Barka emphatically opposed a simply quantitative approach. The extent of development could not be understood by measuring per capita income, foreign investment, tourist infrastructure, educational enrolment, or the delusions of success within a monocultural economy. Instead, Ben Barka offered another focus: ‘*The objective basis of development is none other than the productivity of human labour in a given society.*’⁵⁵ Only an effective mobilisation of labour could solve the problem of capital accumulation facing most newly independent states.⁵⁶ This mobilisation could occur only if ‘the masses’ are organised and educated, and if the state was the democratic representative of working class interests and not imperial capital and its local compradors.⁵⁷ This formula is what Ben Barka refers to as ‘the content of socialism,’ and represents what he learned from the development of the People’s Republic of China, the Soviet Union, Cuba, Ghana, Algeria, and Egypt after 1961.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Emphasis in original. Ben Barka, ‘Africa,’ 163.

⁵⁵ Emphasis in original. Ben Barka, ‘Africa,’ 164.

⁵⁶ At the time of this writing, he was revisiting the works of Marx and Rosa Luxemburg, whose influence can be seen by this emphasis on the problem of capital accumulation. Daoud and Monjib, *Ben Barka*, 309.

⁵⁷ Ben Barka, ‘Africa,’ 170.

⁵⁸ Ben Barka, ‘Africa,’ 166–71.

Endings: 1965

The last months of Ben Barka's life were packed with important developments that punctuated the end of the Bandung decade. In March 1965, thousands of US troops landed in South Vietnam to shore up the faltering anticommunist regime, marking a dramatic escalation of the struggle for power in southeast Asia. On the last day of April, US Marines also landed in the capital of the Dominican Republic to counter the advance of revolutionary forces. In May, AAPSO met in Winneba, Ghana. In Ben Barka's estimation, the consolidation of the strength of a homogenous bloc of national liberation governments was able to finally overcome the tensions produced by the Sino-Soviet split in order to recentre discussions around the struggle against colonialism.⁵⁹ He urged the delegates not to succumb to either defeatism or maximalism when he argued that 'the struggle against imperialism is a long fight' which must be pursued even under conditions of peaceful coexistence.⁶⁰ His revolutionary realism helped to bridge tensions between the diverse states (PRC-USSR, India-Pakistan, Malaysia-Indonesia) and movements (in southern Africa, for instance). After delegates elected him to lead the preparatory committee for the Tricontinental, Ben Barka worked hard to ensure both Moscow and Beijing would both attend, travelling to both communist capitals to personally ensure their participation.

The forward motion did not last long. Following Morocco's largest urban demonstrations and strikes in March 1965—which the army only suppressed by killing hundreds—King Hassan declared a state of emergency, shut down parliament, and dismissed

⁵⁹ Youssoufi, 'Rapport.'

⁶⁰ Quoted in Wallerstein, *Africa*, 96.

the prime minister on 7 June. The pretences of democratic governance in the country had ended. Soon after on 19 June, Ben Barka's key ally and outspoken tricontinentalist leader, Algerian president Ahmad Ben Bella, was overthrown in a military coup. Algeria's new leaders, a more conservative wing of the FLN, promptly cancelled the Second Summit of Afro-Asian Heads of State, the direct sequel of the famous Bandung conference, slated to be held in Algiers just days later.⁶¹ On 30 September, events began leading to the overthrow of Indonesian president Sukarno and the slaughter of communists and their suspected supporters, destroying another pillar of the Third World project. Ben Barka's assassination in October must be seen as part of this global counterrevolutionary offensive.

Conclusion

The Tricontinental was held in Havana as scheduled in January 1966. It met only once. While Nasser called for the second conference to be held in Cairo in 1968, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of AAPSO's first meeting, Israel's crushing victory over Egypt, Syria, and Jordan in June 1967 resulted in the conference's cancellation.⁶² As Ben Barka had warned, the Zionist state played an important role in suppressing Third World aspirations, and not just those of the Arabs.

This chapter has traced the evolution of Mehdi Ben Barka from his humble origins to his role as a leading organiser for Morocco's national independence and his move into the vanguard of tricontinental struggle. Neither simply a politician nor an intellectual, his most

⁶¹ Byrne, *Mecca*, 230–1; McDougall, *History of Algeria*, 249–53.

⁶² Organization of American States, *Report*, 93.

distinctive contribution was arguably his understanding of the powerful interactions between the local, national, regional, and international political scales, and the necessity of coordination at all levels. His education in colonial Algiers exposed him to an international milieu of political organising that was at once nationalist, regionalist, internationalist, and leftist. As a main organiser of the Istiqlal underground during the struggle for independence, he was instrumental in formulating the demand for the return of the monarch as the principal objective of the anticolonial movement. But he soon realised deeper social transformation was necessary to achieve a sovereign, democratic, and just society. His reflections on these problems made him a spearhead in defining and institutionalising neocolonialism as a concept in the anticolonial political arsenal. In sum, Ben Barka was pivotal in building a workable tricontinentalism that—for a brief yet crucial period—coordinated many of the anticolonial forces of Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

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