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EDITORIALS

- Algeria without Heroes 1015
Prescriptions, Spurious and Dangerous 1016

WEEKLY NOTES

- Spinning Out the Soul of India—
Oil Imports and Exchange
Waste—Legalising Abortions—
Hope in Kutch—AIR Musical
Chairs—Yields Slightly Higher 1017

FROM THE LONDON END

- Wilson's Not Disinterested Move 1021

CAPITAL VIEW

- An Ill-Fated Conference
— Romesh Thapar 1022

CALCUTTA DIARY

- A State of Darkness 1023

LETTER FROM SOUTH

- Crosscurrents in Tamilnad 1024

BOOK REVIEW

- Bureaucratic Discretion and
Economic Development
— Arthagnani 1025

SPECIAL ARTICLES

- The Personality Factor in Local
Politics: A Study of the Cal-
cutta Municipal Election
— Robi Chakravorty 1027
Taxation and Profits of Foreign
Companies in India
— Anant Negandhi 1031
Problems of Gramdan: A Study
in Rajasthan
— T K Oommen 1035

FROM THE CHAIR

- Alembic Chemical Works
Company Limited 1041

AROUND BOMBAY MARKETS

- Dalal Street Forges Ahead 1042

BUSINESS NOTES

- Textile Machinery Corporation—
Simtools—Travancore Rayon—
Elphinstone Mills—Lufthansa 1044

CURRENT STATISTICS 1046

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Algeria without Heroes

THE night was not kindly, and Achmed Ben Bella's removal was not brought about with any particular gentleness. With the Afro-Asian Conference barely a week away, it was an embarrassing moment to undertake the coup. But Hourri Boumedienne did not wait for the passing of the prestigious Conference before striking. One possible interpretation is that he was apprehensive that Ben Bella might use the Afro-Asian Conference to strengthen his domestic position. Other conjectures are equally in order* For example, last week's putsch could have been organised to forestall a rapprochement between Ait Ahmed, languishing in prison, and Ben Bella, or simply because Boumedienne was exasperated by Ben Bella's consistent down-playing of domestic interests and obsession with winning friends and influence abroad. The deadly game of capturing power in a one-party State ends with the winner taking all, and therefore even history from now on will tend to follow closely Hourri Boumedienne's version of this murky affair. The rest will be oblique inferences and dark innuendoes.

What fills one with awe — and also a little bit of sadness, — is the abruptness with which Ben Bella was dethroned. True, the denouement was somewhat less distasteful than a typical Middle Eastern coup d'etat, with its invariable concomitant of a lot of bloodshed. But it did not quite resemble the quasi-civilised manner in which regimes are nowadays made to topple in socialist countries either. Even in the East European countries, when it is decided to do away with a leader, at least the Central Committee of the Party is called to make the formal decision: Boumedienne did not care to call in the Committee of the FIN, possibly because, even at this stage, his followers do not constitute the majority there. Once he decided that the brother President needed to be eliminated, he had the strength to move into action immediately, and could ignore the Central Committee. No doubt the Committee too is now being purged.

The Algerian coup leaves a bitter but significant lesson behind. Once a revolution is completed, the heroes do not really matter, and sooner or later the commissars take over. Ben Bella provided the charisma of the Revolution; his was the romantic image of the movement. But it was Boumedienne who rallied the peasants and the workers during the turbulent years of 1955-61, and hammered out the militia. While every revolution needs a hero, it also needs a leader; the respective attributes *do* not always coincide in the same individual. Achmed Ben Bella was the hero, but Boumedienne led and made the Revolution. He was the planner, the organiser, the builder of the army, and also the man who gave the movement a positive and coherent socio-economic content. The Army of National Liberation was from the beginning completely under his control; if anything, it is more so today. It is possible to infer that he has seen to it that by now the civil administration too is adequately infiltrated by his men, Ben Bella, the crowd-charmer, was thus, in the aftermath of the Revolution, in many respects the redundant head of the movement, somewhat without a profession, somewhat miscast. Unlike the other heroes of the Revolution, he nevertheless lingered, for Boumedienne still had need for him in the difficult early days following Independence. Conceivably, he also trusted Ben Bella a little bit more than he trusted the others: after all, Brother Ben Bella is from his own *wilaya* and comes from the same peasant stock.

It looked like an ideal diumvirate: Boumedienne was the quiet consolidator of the Revolution, re-organising agriculture, charting industrial growth, pacifying the countryside, and generally looking after domestic stability. Ben Bella, on the other hand, was the man with the aura of fame, whom the outside world could look at and admire, whom the intellectuals and the urban bourgeoisie could worship—the perfect romantic foil to the desiccated realism of the army chief.

Like all beautiful understandings, this one too did not last. Perhaps Boumedienne had come to suspect some latent bourgeois deviation in Ben