

The Algerian Political Crisis: Domestic, Regional and International Repercussions

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Since the 1980s, the Maghreb has undergone an unstable transition, whose conclusion may have important repercussions in the entire North African region and in Europe. The Maghreb region, unquestionably vital to Europe's security — the concept being used here in its broader, multidimensional sense, i.e. one that extends beyond the narrow definition of 'high' politics — entered an era of change in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The 1990s too have undoubtedly witnessed additional consequential changes.¹ Despite the differences that characterise the countries of the Central Maghreb (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia), the predominant problems remain the high levels of unemployment, demographic explosion, huge international debt, lagging economies, the rise of radical Islamism and urban terrorism, bread riots, corruption, the fossilisation of elites, marginalisation of important segments of the population, the youth in particular, and so on. The contention in this paper is that in response to the multifarious crises experienced by these societies, radical Islamism has emerged as the major force of contestation, and has thus represented the major challenge to the existing regimes. The states in this region are all fragile and are suffering from a serious deficit of legitimacy. This can be explained by the traditional aversion of the Maghrebi states, in the

name of national unity, to particularism and to genuine opposition. This partly accounts for the prominent role played by authoritarianism in the institutionalisation of the state. The erection in these countries of huge bureaucratic systems has had the double effect of providing for the needs of many sectors due to family solidarity, while at the same time facilitating the widespread corruption that has helped discredit the state.² The post-independence state in the Maghreb appropriated competence in countless areas, although the challenges to which it has been confronted are formidable in light of the incredible demographic explosion, rural exodus, mass education, economic development, etc. But, corruption, incompetence, dependence on external forces and other domestic and international factors have had the double effect of preventing the state not only from accomplishing the developmental goals it has set for itself in the socio-economic and political realms, but have also resulted in its quasi total de-legitimation. The most obvious consequence of this across-the-board failure has been the rise and growing importance of radical Islamism.

Social, Political and Economic Roots of Political Islam

Similar to other countries in the Middle East and Africa, the current crisis in Algeria has resulted from the evolution of the authoritarian developmentalist regime.³ By the close of the 1980s, it became increasingly indubitable that the regime had not only failed in its modernising tasks, but its rule had led to the impoverishment of the middle class and to the pauperisation of the masses regardless of some significant accomplishments in industrialisation and education. Yet, the widespread corruption, injustice, arbitrary power, nepotism and the clientelism which have pervaded the state since independence could not but backfire. The consequences are dreadful because, in addition to the severe economic crises (inflation, astronomical international debts, high unemployment, etc.), the authoritarian regime in Algeria has been confronted since the late 1980s with an acute crisis of credibility, legitimacy and identity. The

centralisation of power under the leadership of authoritarian elites that have maintained their reign through sheer force, corruption, clientelism, neopatrimonialism, and almost absolute dictatorship failed to preserve their initial mobilising capacity due to their ineptitude to satisfy the ever-increasing demands of the population. The successful Islamo-populist discourse of the past lost all credibility in face of the gloomy, palpable realities. By the mid-1980s, the presumed social contract established between the masses and the leadership following independence from colonial rule had lost whatever legitimacy it might have had.⁴ Clearly, the Algerian elites have been incapable of performing the tasks either of capitalist economic development or revolutionary social transformation.⁵ Today, neither the middle nor the lower classes could assent to the authoritarianism of a state that has failed to fulfil its promises. By the mid-1980s and early 1990s, the internal fragility ("state at war with its own society") and external vulnerability⁶ (especially the international debt) of the authoritarian state in Algeria has neared its apex. This weakness was demonstrated by the forceful new opposition to the single party rule by a multitude of social groups, radical Islamist organisations, in particular, and by the inability of the regime to find a viable political formula to overcome the multifarious crisis. The legitimacy of the regime has been challenged in an irreversible way. The promising, albeit limited, liberalisation and democratisation⁷ introduced by the regime following the October 1988 riots has proved unsuccessful and has opened a Pandora box.

Although many other factors account for its emergence, radical Islamism developed as a response to the marginalisation of huge segments of society and to the chaotic socio-economic policies (including economic liberalisation) pursued by the regimes. The absence of real political participation has unavoidably made the political discourse and message of the Islamist groups, including their most radical factions, more legitimate to sizeable segments of the population. The success of this Islamist discourse is due partly to the delegitimising influence on the ruling elites.

The state in Algeria has always resorted to Islamic symbols to establish and reproduce its legitimacy, whereas certain social movements have used Islam as an ideological weapon to wage their struggle against the successive regimes. Nowadays, radical Islamism, or even Islamism *tout court*, has appeared as the most effective protest movement. Although Islamism in different forms was present in the nationalist movement and became anchored in the post-independent state, its most extreme and violent variant developed only since the late 1970s. The phenomenon took its importance in the wake of what has been defined as the 'disenchantment of the world'⁸ provoked by modernisation. The real detonator of Islamism in Algeria was the disenchantment subsequent to the first twenty years of independence.⁹ In many ways, an Islamist is someone who has become conscious of the acute inequalities, but who is also convinced that the current strategies of development will not succeed in alleviating them, for he will never benefit from the fruits of development. In this case, then, the frustrations are even greater because the expectations are very high.¹⁰ In other words, Islamism is the direct and most evident consequence of anarchic modernity. The transition from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* proceeded without the state offering the newly urbanised, anonymous citizen, any structures that could adequately replace the old, communitarian ones. Charitable Islamist associations, fulfilling the function of spiritual communities, provided such structures,¹¹ thus supplanting — and simultaneously discrediting — the state and undermining its populist discourse. In Islamism, the alienated individual is able to regain a global image of the self within a community of believers who share a similar *Weltanschauung*. This situation is especially true in the Maghreb region which is dominated by youth and where the states have increasingly been incapable of feeding, clothing, educating, housing, and employing their continuously growing populations. Worse still, in Algeria, where the state has established almost total domination over the public sphere, thus hindering the blossoming of the private domain, only the mosque could offer an

existential refuge and a moral substitute for alcohol, drugs and violence which had constituted the main pursuit hitherto. The state ceases to be seen as the provider; instead, society, especially its youth, feels betrayed. Not only does the youth resort to violence as a way of communicating with the state,¹² expressed in the form of cyclical riots, especially under Chadli Bendjedid's rule, but it also rejects all the founding myths and symbols of the Algerian nation. In other words, the state has been totally de-legitimised and has totally lost its *raison d'être* in the eyes of this disenchanted population. The rejection of the nation's symbols has exhausted the legitimacy upon which the state built its authority.

Radical Islamism in Algeria

The recent phenomenon of Islamism as a radical protest movement is, thus, the result of a combination of factors first and foremost of which has been the almost total failure of social, economic, and cultural modernisation, coupled with the consequences of the painful colonial history which continues to have its effects on the evolution of Algerian society. Modernisation in Algeria was understood in its material sense and failed to take into account the necessity for a process of secularisation, which, despite Islamist claims to the contrary, is not necessarily antithetical to Islamic values.¹³ Further, the post-independence FLN regime's ineffective developmental policies and the obstinate refusal of the party's and the state's personnel to openly acknowledge the shortcomings of the overall development programme has led to a complete loss of legitimacy and credibility. The regime failed miserably in its attempt to reconcile a Western model of modernisation, without its democratic principles of course, with a traditional, patriarchal society which, in many ways, it helped perpetuate as a neo-patriarchy,¹⁴ because of the regime's demagogic and equivocal position on religious and cultural issues. The total corruption and inefficiency of the regime, thus inhibiting any effective developmental policies, led

to an intolerable stagnancy. Evidently, the blame for the failure of the developmentalist strategy cannot be put solely on the state, for the demographic explosion contributed a great deal to aggravating the socio-economic problems. Worse still, the trauma that followed the chaotic urbanisation resulting from the dislocation of traditional society debilitated the indecisive modernisation programme, especially in the socio-cultural realm, thus resulting in an identity crisis with disastrous consequences.

By the time the most organised and most potent opposition party, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) made its appearance on the political scene in 1989, this Islamist organisation was already in control of practically all the mosques in the country. These mosques were unquestionably the political forums of the Islamists. They constituted the embryo of a counter-power to the state and, had it not been for the totalitarian conception of the Islamists, could have become the basis of a credible counter-hegemony, in the Gramscian sense.¹⁵

The successive regimes in Algeria all used Islam as part of the state's ideology in order to legitimise their rule. But, the anticipated synthesis between Islam and socialism sought by the FLN state proved its limitations, for the political system continued to generate inequalities, especially under Bendjedid, rather than the discursive egalitarianism trumpeted by the authorities. In many ways, the Islamists were the orphans of Boumediene, for, unlike his successor who lacked any vision, Boumediene succeeded in at least mobilising the youth around a strategy of development that had the advantage of being essentially egalitarian in a relatively triumphant era in which corruption and clientelism never reached the proportions that developed under Bendjedid's reign.

The Islamist movement, which seemed for a time to be part of the emergence of a new type of civil society, was in fact the consequence of the abandonment of the welfare state policies, the pursuit of accelerated economic liberalisation, thus indicating the economic disengagement of the state from many sectors, and the emphasis on profit.

This chaotic liberalisation, coupled with corruption, injustice, and inequalities, led many to seek a moralisation of state and society through a return to conservative Islamic values and to archaic social conceptions.

The FIS was able to bolster what K. Jowitt so aptly calls “movements of rage,” i.e., “violent nativist responses to failure, frustration, and perplexity.”¹⁶ The absence of peaceful means to fulfil their material and social aspirations partly explains the resort to violence, for as put by T. R. Gurr, “only men who are enraged are likely to prefer violence despite the availability of effective non-violent means for satisfying their expectations.”¹⁷ The realities of youth-dominated societies, such as Algeria, subdued by failure and crushed by frustration and despair and in which religion has been dangerously ideologised will certainly continue worsening unless the roots of the frustrations are tackled effectively, i.e. through a radical change of the system and the replacement of Algeria’s old elite and state personnel.

Algerian Islamists’ Ideologies

Although there is some continuity between Islahism (reformism of the salafya movement born in the 1920s) and Islamism in Algeria, the differences are much greater. Islahism was essentially reformist, intellectualist, and non-violent. The movement was led by Ulemas whose patrician social backgrounds differed considerably from those of the plebeians that make up the bulk of the radical Islamist wave today. Whereas Islahism rallies relatively small groups of religious scholars concerned with the moral values of their societies and intent on reforming them, Islamism is a social phenomenon resulting from modernity. Even if the movement seeks to implement the Shari’a (Islamic Law), it is not interested in a return to an archaic past. Rather, Islamism is a revolutionary movement, at least at its initial stages (i.e., before turning into mere “neo-fundamentalism”), that strives to reappropriate society and modern technology through political means,

i.e. seizing power in order to re-Islamise a society allegedly corrupted by Western values.¹⁸ The movement is, therefore, not theological, but essentially sociological. There ensues, at least for important sections of Islamism, an ideologisation of Islam, whereby "Islam is not only a system of religious beliefs, but also a set of principles which should guide the general organisation of the community."¹⁹

The difficulty in studying the Islamist movement in Algeria, especially its revolutionary component incarnated by the FIS, stems from its composite membership and structures. Indeed, since its creation in February 1989 until its ban in March 1992, the FIS comprised a variety of groups and ideological currents. The heterogeneous leadership of the FIS, combining radicalised salafists and new activist militants,²⁰ never really agreed on the means to achieve power, their principal preoccupation, in order to establish a vaguely defined Islamist state. The aspirations of the different groups included in the FIS diverged greatly. Some upheld a millenarian vision in which recourse to violence is an intrinsic part and whose major aim is the dismantling of the nation-state as it currently exists; for others, the objective is limited to a mere substitution of the Islamist elite for the one in charge of the state and which is perceived as having failed in both its modernising tasks and in preserving Islamic values; still others have no clear strategy whatsoever. What is certain, however, is that the main objective is the appropriation of the state by legal (i.e., electoral) means for some or through violence for others. This explains the contradictory statements concerning the necessity or refusal of participating in the electoral process.

Despite the heterogeneous nature of the main Islamist party in Algeria, a dominant ideological discourse did, however, emerge regarding important political and social issues. One must insist, though, that because of the ideologisation of Islam which has inevitably shifted the core of the debate from theological concerns to norms and values of the socio-political domain, the core beliefs of Islam have either retrograded or been entirely cloaked.²¹

A reading of the FIS leaders' pronouncements demonstrates very clearly the influence of Egyptian and Indo-Pakistani Islamists (Al-Banna, Qutb, Al-Mawdudi, Ghazali, etc.). The main commentaries concentrate on the 'evils' that have plagued modern society and are leading to its 'decadence': AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, degeneration of morals, prostitution, mixing of the sexes in education in schools, universities, and workplaces, and contemporary ideologies (liberalism, socialism, communism, feminism, etc.) which have, according to FIS leaders, replaced religion and corrupted societies. All of the evils of the Jahilyia, that is, those aspects that characterised pre-Islamic society, are said to be present in the Western world and have been blindly emulated in Islamic societies. The only solution to all these problems can be found in Islam.²² The state in Islamic societies has not performed its duties, by deviating from the divine commandments, and has, in fact, contributed to the Jahilyia. The regimes in these societies may also be considered as infidels and should, consequently, be fought through a jihad; their killing (qital) is halal (lawful). The other forces which have contributed to the decadence of Muslim societies are, according to leaders of the FIS, Ali Benhadj, in particular: journalists, writers, artists, state's Ulemas (religious functionaries), secularist parties which "militate with unequalled impudence for the separation of State and religion: they are the creatures of colonialism in our country."²³ These groups must be fought because they are opposed to the jihad; in fact, "democracy is against the jihad which it views as a manifestation of violence and interference in public liberties."²⁴ Such pronouncements largely explain the staunch opposition to the Islamists not only by the so-called democrats, but also by important segments of Algerian society. This is why it is safe to assert that the FIS electoral victories in June 1990 and December 1991 were the result of a vote-sanction against the FLN rather than an overwhelming support for the FIS and its ideology. Given that backing for the FIS had dwindled between the two elections of 1990 and 1991, one can surmise that, due to the violence which has characterised the Islamist groups since

1992, the influence of the Islamists is much reduced today. Undoubtedly, the regime has hoped for such a result, without conceding, however, that the population's dwindling support for the Islamists has not led to any endorsement of the regime.

The Algerian State's Perception of Radical Islamism

The Algerian state, which held a quasi monopoly over religious affairs, used Islam not only as a source of legitimacy, but also as an instrument to de-legitimise its political opponents. This was done through the elimination, marginalisation or integration of the *Ulemas*.²⁵ Under Bendjedid's rule, the regime was quite tolerant of the rise of radical Islam, whose members it was able — as was done in Bourguiba's Tunisia — to turn against the regime's leftist and Boumedienist opponents. Radical Islam became an instrument in the struggle among the various clans in the political system. This explains the ambivalent attitude which the regime adopted at various times vis-à-vis the Islamists. Owing to the weakness of the democratic forces, which did not have the capacity nor the space to develop a democratic front, Islamism in Algeria became the most potent force against the regime. Following the riots in October 1988, the regime sought to appease the Islamists by finding a formula which would divide not only the democratic forces, but the Islamist movement itself. Regardless, the FIS became increasingly dangerous to the regime mainly because its leadership astutely appropriated the FLN's own populist discourse, thus de-legitimising the FLN's elites and their *raison d'être*.

In the 1980s, the Islamist movement was already atomised and spanned from very peaceful fundamentalists to quite extremist groups. Yet, except for the Bouyali affair, the regime did not seem to worry about the growth of radical Islamism and continued to either disregard its grievances or, as has often been the case, to make demagogic concessions (e.g., the discriminatory Family Law of 1984) at the expense of important segments of society and even to the type of modernity the

state itself stood for. The regime made compromises by increasing religious programmes, organising international symposia on Islam, and even 'importing' in 1982 an Egyptian fundamentalist from the prestigious Al-Azhar Mosque, Mohammed al-Ghazali, to give televised sermons, and to head from 1984 onwards the Department of Islamic Studies at the University of Constantine (eastern Algeria). This highly visible super Imam, held in very high esteem by Chadli Bendjedid himself, served as an ideological cushion to the religious pretensions of the regime; but, through his ambiguous discourse, he also did much to encourage the growth of Islamism in the country.²⁶ His influence was immense, especially in a country still suffering from cultural schizophrenia — due to 132 years of French brutal colonial rule — and lacking well trained native theologians. The influence of Ghazali and other Islamist figures, however, cannot account for the massive Islamist expansion in Algeria after the events of October 1988. Well before the riots, the Islamists were beginning to 're-appropriate' Islam, i.e. to take it away from the state, thus undermining the latter's legitimacy.

Following the 1988 riots and the subsequent liberalisation campaign initiated by the regime, some authorities thought that the FIS could play a functional role by controlling the youth and at the same time frightening the democratic forces which would have no choice but to rally to the regime which otherwise is their principal enemy. For a time, the regime's priority was to prevent the constitution of a common opposition front. This is the reason why Bendjedid, for instance, cajoled the FIS before the return of Ben Bella from exile in September 1990. Given that the authority of Abbassi Madani over the FIS was uncertain at that time, the regime feared an eventual decision by the FIS to put a charismatic and historic figure as head of the most powerful Islamist party. Another tactic was to exploit the divisions within the Islamist movement itself by co-operating with the so-called moderates which eventually constituted themselves into parties, such as Shaikh Mahfoud Nahnah's Hamas or Shaikh Abdallah Djaballah's

En-Nahda. This tactic was considerably facilitated by the FIS's stubborn opposition to any alliance or reunification with the other Islamist factions.²⁷ The FIS was opposed to alliances not only because of its perceived and actual popular strength, but also because a unification with the other Islamist parties would have greatly reduced the influence of Madani, a leader with presidential ambitions.

Yet another tactic used by the regime consisted of manipulating the Islamists to neutralise the old guard and the crypto-Islamists within the FLN party itself and to prevent their victory at the polls. The hope was to convince public opinion of the bipolarisation of Algerian society and to prove to public opinion, especially the democratic parties, that a renovated FLN, under the leadership of the reformers (the so-called "soft-liners"), was the only force capable of stopping the threat posed by the FIS. However, important factions within the bureaucracy and the military refused the integration of the FIS within the system for fear that it would establish its own hegemony at the expense of the old rulers. Further, the FIS uncompromising position vis-à-vis the latter left no room for genuine negotiation in order to set up a platform before the legislative elections could be held, a fact which greatly accounts for the current violence and stalemate in the country.²⁸

For the regime's old guard, Islam remains a 'constant' of the system, but, Islam must be of the kind that does not threaten the system's long-lasting elites. This is the reason why Hamas, the En-Nahda, and other smaller moderate Islamist parties have become much more acceptable to the regime, for they do not constitute a real threat to the hegemony of the FLN-produced elites. These parties, unlike the FIS, seek integration within the system and its incremental reform without calling for its total replacement. Further, the regime has called upon the leaders of these two parties, Mahfoud Nahmah and Abdallah Djabalah, to mediate with the more radical FIS, a role which they have been eager to play since the interruption of the electoral process in January 1992.

From then on, the successive regimes in Algeria have had to justify the reasons why they have suddenly decided to abruptly halt what

seemed to be a promising democratic evolution. The principal explanation the rulers have given was that the coming to office of a FIS-dominated government would have represented an end to the democratic experiment in Algeria. Although this may carry some validity, the regime has failed to provide a convincing reason why the FIS was recognised in the first place and what accounts for the regime becoming suddenly more “democratic” after decades of authoritarianism.

Today, the *pouvoir* in Algeria continues to depict radical Islamism, in its FIS version, as a serious threat not only to Algeria’s internal stability, but to the country’s neighbours as well. The idea of a domino theory has become a constant in the regime’s political discourse, especially when dealing with Western creditors. The current philosophy expounded by the regime consists of presenting Islamism as essentially the product of socio-economic difficulties and suggesting that the infusion of foreign capital — in the form of foreign aid and investments — would constitute the best means to contain the Islamist wave. From the regime’s perspective, failure to do so would lead to instability not only in the Maghreb, but would also spread to the rest of North Africa and Southern Europe. The *pouvoir* has sought with relative success to elicit the support of other governments in its struggle against the Islamists. Thus, at the Fifth Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) Summit held in Nouakchott in 1992, the five Maghrebi states condemned terrorism, “product of religious fundamentalism,” and pledged to join their efforts to contain it and to eliminate it. In fact, the five declared that “terrorism and extremism constitute the main menace for society and democracy in the Maghreb.”²⁹ Clearly, the regimes in the region have had no other choice than to mend their differences in order to contain their internal opposition, that is, the radical Islamists who use a populist language that tends to discredit them and has a strong appeal among the populations at large, tired of their old rulers. Undoubtedly, the Islamist movement is now perceived not as an internal problem, but as a regional predicament as well.³⁰ Indeed, the fear of a spread of the radical Islamist wave and the subsequent need to find allies in the

struggle against the common enemy are the real motives behind Egypt's wish to join the UMA, as well as the close co-operation between Algeria and Tunisia. In the late 1980s, relations between Algeria and Tunisia were strained because the Algerian regime had broken the promise it made to the Tunisian authorities not to legalise the FIS. Further, in the last two years, Egypt has supplied special materiel to Algeria and shares a great deal of intelligence with the security forces. Similarly to their allies in Tunisia and Egypt, Algerian leaders view Iran and the Sudan as the main supporters of the local Islamists. Therefore, they have collaborated with their Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts on how to best counter the alleged Iranian-Sudanese plan to destabilise the Maghreb and other Arab states.³¹ The Algerian government has made tremendous efforts to convince its Maghrebi partners that the stability and security of each state is contingent upon the others'. Therefore, from the Algerian leaders' perspective, all the Maghrebi states must co-ordinate their efforts in order to guarantee security and stability.³² The Algerian regime is still suspicious of Morocco's and Libya's attitudes towards the Islamists. Algerian officials are convinced that both these states, although to a lesser degree than Iran or the Sudan, have given some support to the Algerian and Tunisian Islamists to destabilise their countries.³³ Yet, some well informed sources have argued that the closing of the Algerian border with Morocco in August 1994 was a ploy orchestrated by the two regimes to break the Islamist connection, whose implantation in the Kingdom had become all too obvious after the terrorist attack in Marrakech.

Algeria has not limited its co-operation to Maghrebi governments and other Arab governments. Indeed, a serious co-operation between the Algerian security services and their European counterparts is about to be institutionalised. There is evidence that the Algerian *Sécurité militaire* has provided valuable information to the French on Islamist activities and has established close ties with the Italian security forces.³⁴ The Algerian security services continue to provide their French counterparts with most of the information concerning the GIA.³⁵ Algerians

have been relatively successful in convincing their European counterparts on the dangers that Islamism may represent for the continent and that destabilisation of North Africa would have dire consequences for Europe, whose concern with Maghrebi immigration has grown steadily. Further, the threat, perceived or real, of an Islamist take-over in several North African countries has brought the European governments' position closer to Algeria's and Tunisia's. Algerian elites have also been relatively successful in convincing their Western counterparts that they are better interlocutors, that is less anti-Western, than the Islamists. The regime has won an important victory with the West in that the latter has now succumbed to the Algerian rulers' view that the solution to Algeria's political crisis is fundamentally economic.

Even the United States, which for a time, at least, differed with some of its European allies over the danger of an Islamist threat, seems to have adopted a less conciliatory attitude toward Algerian and other Middle Eastern Islamists. Unlike the US Department of State, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Pentagon have had a less ambiguous attitude vis-à-vis the Islamist "menace" and have thus advocated support, albeit critical, vis-à-vis the regimes now in place. Although American security policy vis-à-vis Islamist extremism has varied considerably from one country to another and from one period to another, the growing debate in the United States over the issue is producing a dominant position due to the fear that allied regimes, such as Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco may be defeated by Islamist extremism. The predominant position in the US government has been expressed in April 1995 by Rep. Ros-Lehtinen during a House Africa Subcommittee hearing on Islamic extremism. His view and that of many in the government is that "Islamic militancy has emerged as one of the most serious threats to Western security," although he stressed that "Islam and legitimate Moslem fundamentalists are not the cause of our concern."³⁶ Those who subscribe to this view in the United States believe that American policy-makers must contain Islamic extremism by favouring dialogue and co-operation between moderate Islamist parties

and secular/democratic political groups, regardless of whether this may lead to the coming to power via a legal road of Islamist parties. This, of course, runs counter to the argument presented by those like Samuel Huntington who argue that the clash between Islam and the West is inevitable ("clash of civilisations") and that the US government must oppose and prevent by whatever instruments the possibility of the Islamists ever achieving power. Concerning Algeria, and unlike its policy in Egypt, where it basically endorsed the government's repression against the Islamists, the US government exhorted publicly, at least until quite recently, the Algerian military to seek a negotiated settlement with the moderate elements of the banned FIS. Now, US policy which was at odds with France's, is coming closer to the French position of combating the Islamists, especially after the wave of bombings in France.

This combination of events has resulted in the acceptance by Western creditors to re-schedule Algeria's public debt of \$7.5 billion, without apparently any political strings attached to the agreement.³⁷ In other words, the regime compelled the West to support its survival in power. One can surmise that the terrorist wave that shook Europe in the Summer 1995, attributed to the GIA and other armed Islamist factions, will strengthen the support for the Algerian regime. Moreover, in order to continue receiving foreign aid, the regime has pursued religiously the painful economic reforms imposed by the international financial institutions, but also by the regime's decision to opt for economic liberalisation.

There are conflicting views within the regime — and within some opposition groups, such as the RCD, Ettahadi (communist), and various women's organisations — regarding radical Islamism and how to best deal with it. Some see it as a natural consequence of the deficient policies pursued by the previous regimes and hold that the chaotic liberalisation as it was concocted by Chadli Bendjedid had failed and is to blame for Algeria's current impasse. They argue that a radical break with the past is essential and that dialogue with the Islamists is

necessary if civil peace is to be re-established in the country. Aware of the negative consequences of economic liberalisation on the underprivileged segments of society — the main base of support for the FIS — they maintain that reaching a compromise with the FIS leadership and giving it a share of power may help put an end to the existing violence.³⁸ Although the people who hold such a view are said to be gathered around president Liamine Zeroual, it would be a mistake to see them as constituting a homogeneous group. Even some so-called ‘eradicators’ hold, at least partially, a similar view. But, the core of the eradicators believe that radical Islamists are fundamentally dangerous to Algerian society, to the republican constitution, and to modernity. Of course, they perceive radical Islamism as a direct threat to their own lives, privileges, and to the Western values they share. Therefore, they believe that radical Islamists, especially their most extremists factions, must be eradicated without any respite and that any sort of compromise with the Islamists would be futile. The activities of the extremist Islamist factions have strengthened the position of those who hold such a view and have made it difficult for those favourable to continued dialogue and negotiations with the FIS to implement their policies. Yet, it must be noted that negotiations with the FIS emerged mostly as a result of pressure put on the regime by the United States and France.

The atrocities and the economic sabotage committed by various Islamist armed groups, especially the GIA, have given the upper hand to the partisans of “*le tout sécuritaire*,” a policy which has been condemned not only by the opposition parties, especially the signatories of the Sant’Edigio platform, but also by those inside the regime who feel that the banning of the FIS should be offset by an opening of the political space. In other words, they advocate an opening of the political system in which a reformed FIS (with perhaps a different designation), led by “moderates” such as Abbassi Madani, would be allowed to participate. Opponents of the current *pouvoir* have been more critical vis-à-vis the military because they feel that “*le tout sécuritaire*” policy has

been ineffective in eradicating the armed groups. On the other hand, the proponents of the “*tout sécuritaire*” argue that it was the ambivalent policy adopted vis-à-vis the Islamists which has weakened the state authority and has led to a prolonging of the stalemate. The signatories of the Rome platform, especially Hocine Ait Ahmed, leader of the FFS, feel that integrating the Islamists in the political arena would force them to play the game and that should they decide to renege on their commitments they would be totally discredited. Thus, such an integration would be the best way to contain their advance and demonstrate the Islamists’ political limitations.³⁹

Whatever each other’s respective position, the proliferation of autonomous armed groups be they Islamist or state para-military factions or obscure anti-Islamist organisations has complicated matters and prolonged the current, unbearable stand-off.

The Proliferation of Islamist Armed Groups

Even though there is much confusion as to the exact nature of the armed groups committing acts of violence, it is clear that the interruption of the electoral process in January 1992 and the ensuing repression, coupled with the lack of a coherent state strategy, compelled many Islamists to join the ranks of those who had already decided that armed struggle was the only path to seizing state power. As indicated earlier, the Islamist movement in Algeria is not limited to the FIS, Nahda, and Hamas. It also includes a whole collection of smaller groupings with views ranging from the most peaceful to the most fanatic. Although some of them were little known before the October 1988 events, many have existed since the 1970s. The participation of some young Algerians alongside the Afghan *mujahidins* in their war against the Soviets bolstered the prestige of these daring groups whose reputation is equalled only by their ruthlessness. They seem to act as autonomous bands, owing unconditional allegiance to an “Emir.” In the 1970s and 1980s, *Al Muwahiddun*, *Ansar Allah*, *Junud al Allah*, *Da’wa*

of Sidi Bel Abbès (western city in Algeria), *Ahl al Da'wa* of Laghouat (southern city), *al hijra wa al takfir*, and others, targeted bars, breweries, police stations, Soviet citizens and interests in Algeria, etc.⁴⁰ Although only further research will determine the nature of the relationship they have established with the FIS and its armed branches, what is now almost certain is that the GIA and the FIS Islamic Salvation Army (AIS) have strong links despite some differences as to their tactics and targets.⁴¹ This entente, however, should not obscure the major tactical differences between the two groups and their political objectives. There is good reason to believe that the major objective of the AIS's armed tactic is to bring the regime to make concessions and to allow the FIS to re-enter the political arena. For the GIA, the principal goal, if there is really one, is to overthrow the regime and to allegedly establish some mystical "Islamic state" whose main inspiration stems from the writings and recorded speeches of the FIS's fiery leader, Ali Benhadj, imprisoned since July 1991.

The Need for a National Civic Pact

The contention in this article is that neither the 'conciliators' nor the 'eradicators' have had any clear vision or policy beyond seeking to preserve their prerogatives and those of the groups they represent. Despite the rhetoric regarding the republican beliefs, references to Arab-Islamic values, and the new talk about democracy, all seem to continue to cling to the FLN's old ways albeit in a more appealing form. However, the lack of political realism on the part of the Islamists and their recourse to force have complicated the situation and helped intensify the cycle of violence. The absence of a democratic political culture, the lack of genuine democrats, and the non-existence of a sense of compromise have hampered any move towards a political solution. The state, whose legitimacy has been shattered, has resorted to harsh repressive and highly questionable measures (torture, assassinations, etc.) to allegedly establish the foundations for the democratic

system and break with the old one. The truth, however, is that the holders of power in Algeria continue to believe that they still are the legitimate rulers and that they must remain in power. They continuously refuse to open up the political arena for genuine pluralism and political competition because they fear to be overturned by the Islamists, moderate or not, and by more democratic forces. The *pouvoir* is fully aware that the democrats do not constitute a credible force and that only the Islamists have the mobilising capacity. Yet, despite its evident organisational and ideological weaknesses the opposition has not been allowed much room to manoeuvre to help this very same *pouvoir* offset the influence of the radical Islamists. Instead, the rulers seem to believe, quite mistakenly, that by doing some cosmetic work in the political field they could promote the democratisation of the Algerian political system and society. They have, for instance, created recently the National Youth Council; they have also organised presidential elections, held on 16 November 1995, without any genuine debate with the opposition and under the most unfavourable conditions. More revealing in this respect is the acceptance of the current regime to allow the presence of international observers (UN, OAU, Arab League) during the elections, a proposition that would have been inconceivable in independent Algeria heretofore. Moreover, the regime has made great efforts to try to revive nationalist feelings among Algerians. For their part, the Islamists are torn between those who seek a compromise with the regime in order to have access to power and to have a share in the national rent and those who stubbornly reject any type of compromise with the regime and believe that only the elimination of the old elites through violent means would result in the establishment of an Islamist state in which they would play the leading role. In spite of all their attempts, neither the Islamists nor the old ruling elites have succeeded in swaying the majority of the population. The democrats have failed to constitute a common front to neutralise the power of the most conservative segments of the regime and that of the Islamists in order to provide an attractive pole for

the "*majorité silencieuse*." Despite Liamine Zeroual's elections, it is questionable whether the current regime will be able to win over the population, the main victim of the violence, for an indefinite period. The population's support is needed if any governmental programme — regardless of how much foreign aid is coming in or how effective debt re-scheduling may be — has any chance of success. This condition is predicated upon the degree of determination of the current powers in place to fight corruption and to eliminate those individuals who have plundered the country's wealth and have led it to near-bankruptcy and on the capacity of the regime to mobilise society, including the Islamists, around a genuine societal programme and the forging of national consensus. The FIS will probably seek to maintain its understanding with the other two main opposition forces, FLN and FFS, while trying to unify its own forces to have some influence on the regime and force it to include it in future negotiations. The *pouvoir*, or at least its *conciliateurs*, for its part will occasionally initiate dialogue with the imprisoned leaders of the FIS in order to satisfy the demands of some factions within the army and the government; to please national and international public opinion; and, to widen the gap between the armed groups and the political leaders of the FIS.⁴² Liamine Zeroual and his supporters in the military and in the high administration seem to have succeeded in convincing their opponents of the president's policies. In September 1995, he succeeded in forging a consensus within the military hierarchy to be the presidential candidate. According to well informed sources, there was opposition to his candidacy, for fear that once elected, which proved to be the case, he would have free hands in perhaps reaching a compromise with the moderate faction of the FIS, thus destroying the unholy cohesion among the signatories of the Sant'Edigio platform, an unmistakable objective of the regime.

On 16 November 1995, Algerians elected Liamine Zeroual President of the Algerian Republic for a five-year term. The election, albeit controversial, may move the country out of the quasi civil war it has experienced since the cancellation of the legislative elections.

In order to break the stalemate resulting from various failed negotiations between the FIS and the military and from the continuation of the violence which has claimed more than 40,000 lives, presidential elections were called for in which, besides Zeroual, three other candidates competed for office.

It was questionable whether the elections would ever take place and whether anyone would vote in view of the death threat issued by the extreme armed Islamist groups against any one who would go to the polls. To ensure the holding of this election, tens of thousands of troops and reserves were deployed around the polling stations.

The turn-out at the polls was truly stunning. Between 50% to 60% of the 16 million registered voters showed up at the polls. The opposition, which had called for a boycott, contested the figures and declared that this election will do nothing to change the situation. Such an assessment is mistaken, and this election has more implications than the opposition is willing to concede. Moreover, the parties that boycotted it may now be discredited in the eyes of a population wishing for a rapid end to the crisis. What could be the benefits of such an election?

First of all, this was the first pluralist presidential election in independent Algeria. True, the FIS was banned from participating in the election, but one may argue that the party could have chosen a candidate close to its programme to run for office. Second, Liamine Zeroual obtained 62% of the votes only. In a country where electoral results under the FLN's single party rule were always close to the 100% mark, this was a revolution. Although some irregularities may have occurred, objective observers insisted that overall the process was clean. Third, and perhaps the most important observation, the population went to the polls despite the death threats issued by the Islamists and their pledge to disrupt them. Whether it was 75% as claimed by the authorities, or 30% as claimed by the FIS representatives, Algerians did defy the Islamists and cast their vote. They have clearly rejected recourse to violence as a path to power. Fourth, Algerians expressed their desire to

exercise their right as sovereign people and to choose their rulers, even under the most excruciating circumstances. No future regime, short of brutal dictatorship, could ignore this message. Fifth, the fact that the population ignored the boycott called for by the FIS, the FLN, and the FFS may have indicated their dwindling popularity and may marginalise their participation in the phase of national reconciliation. Sixth, the Algerian military is still intact: there were fears that it was on the brink of collapse, an eventuality which would have led to the disintegration of Algeria as a state and as a nation. Clearly, the military, whatever its nature, remains the only centralised and organised force in the country.

The election of Zeroual, however, does not suggest that Algerians have provided him with unconditional legitimacy. They may simply have cast a vote against Islamist extremism and for the re-establishment of peace and security in the country. Under the current conditions, he is probably the only individual that can achieve this goal. Yet, Zeroual is probably aware that the legitimacy bestowed upon him by Algerians is provisional. They have given it to him because he has promised to enter negotiations with all the members of the opposition, FIS included. The 26% of the votes obtained by the moderate Islamist candidate, Mahfoud Nahnah, indicate the attachment to some of the principles brought forth by the banned FIS (social justice, morality in political affairs, attachment to Islamic values, etc.). There is little doubt that some of the votes in favour of Nahnah came from the moderate membership of the banned FIS — although some of the FIS votes may have gone to Zeroual, as well.

Zeroual now enjoys more room, for this vote may untie his hands vis-à-vis the so called “eradicators”, i.e. the hawkish generals and their supporters in the high administration. The domestic and international legitimacy he has obtained can only be withdrawn through a violent act which his opponents are unlikely to carry out because of international public opinion and because the international financial institutions (IMF, World Bank, Paris Club, London Club, etc.) have been watching

very closely. Paradoxically enough, the FIS leadership has not only recognised his legitimacy, but has also called upon him to open negotiations to resolve the crisis. There is no doubt that the opposition which refused to participate in the presidential election has realised that the call for the boycott was a serious miscalculation. Further, one hopes that the legitimacy that Zeroual has obtained from a weary civilian population will not provide the regime with some justification to remain in power and regress to authoritarian politics.

In order for Zeroual to gain the trust of Algerians he needs to work out a national, negotiated, civic pact with the opposition as a whole to determine and reach a consensus on the rules of the political game. The corrupt state personnel responsible for the depletion of the national wealth must be removed from office. The rulers must become accountable to the citizens and show convincingly that they abide by the law. The political space must be open to the political parties and associations. Civil society must be rejuvenated. The press, in particular, must be given more guarantees and should be allowed to exercise its functions freely. In other words, a genuine process of democratisation must be initiated.

Finding a solution to the Algerian crisis will have beneficial domestic, regional, and international repercussions. The message to the region is that extremism is not inherent to the culture of the people living in the area, but people will resort to radical means if necessary to bring down unpopular regimes. A positive evolution of the Algerian situation will generate shock waves in the region by demonstrating to the extremists how futile their efforts are to subdue an entire nation, but it will also show the unpopular rulers how precarious their legitimacy is.

Notes

¹ Two good studies are Bassma Kodmany-Darwish (ed.) *Le Maghreb: les années de transition* (Paris: Masson, 1990), and Claire Spencer, "The Maghreb in the 1990s," *Adelphi Paper*, no. 274 (February 1993).

² A good treatment of this question can be found in Rémy Leveau, *Le Sabre et le turban — l'avenir du Maghreb* (Paris: François Bourin, 1993).

³ These regimes are characterised by their capacity, at least in the past, to promote growth and welfare. "The government is reform oriented and enjoys a high degree of autonomy from vested elite interests. It controls a state apparatus with the bureaucratic, organisational capacity for promoting development and is run by a state elite that is ideologically committed toward boosting economic development in terms of growth as well as welfare." Georg Sorensen, *Democracy and Democratization* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993): 75-76. Overall, Houari Boumediene's regime in the late 1960s and in the 1970s fits this definition.

⁴ On this point, see the excellent discussion in Robert Fatton, Jr., "Liberal Democracy in Africa," *Political Science Quarterly*, 105, 3 (1990), esp. p. 459.

⁵ For a similar point, see Hisham Sharabi. *Neopatriarchy — A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988): 9.

⁶ For a good treatment of these concepts, see Bahgat Korany, Paul Noble, and Rex Brynen, *The Many Faces of National Security in the Arab World* (London: Macmillan, 1993): 11 ff.

⁷ For a definition of these concepts, see Guillermo O'Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter, *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule — Tentative Conclusions about Uncertain Democracies* (Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986): 7 ff.

⁸ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills, *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), esp. pp. 129 ff. For a stimulating discussion of this concept, see "Rationalisation, modernité et avenir de la religion chez Max Weber," *Archives des Sciences sociales des Religions*, 61, 1 (January-March 1986): 127-138.

⁹ Bruno Etienne, *L'Islamisme radical* (Paris: Hachette, 1987): 134.

¹⁰ Jean-François Clément, "Pour une compréhension des mouvements islamistes," *Esprit* (January 1980): 46.

¹¹ Bruno Etienne, *L'Islamisme radical*, *op. cit.*: 135.

¹² For an excellent, more detailed sociological analysis of the espousal of Islamism by the youth in Algeria in the 1980s, see Omar Carlier, "De l'islahisme à l'islamisme: la thérapie politico-religieuse du FIS," *Cahiers d'études africaines*, 32 (2), no. 126 (1992): 185-219. See also, Rémy Leveau, "La culture des jeunes et la montée des mouvements islamistes," Paper presented at the Conference on The Political Role of Islamist Movements in the Contemporary World: Domestic, Regional, and International Dimensions," The Bologna Center — Johns Hopkins University, Bologna, Italy, 26-27 November 1993.

¹³ The most serious attempts to study this question, in my opinion, are those undertaken by the Egyptian Fouad Zakariya, *Laïcité ou islamisme — les Arabes à l'heure du*

choix (Paris and Cairo: La découverte/Al Fiqr, 1989); the Tunisian Mohamed-Cherif Ferjani, *Islamisme, laïcité et droits de l'homme* (Paris: Editions l'Harmattan, 1992); and the French, Olivier Carré, *L'Islam laïque ou le retour à la grande tradition* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1993). See also, Yadh Ben Achour, "Islam et laïcité — Propos sur la recomposition d'un système de normativité," *Pouvoirs*, 62 (1992): 16-30.

¹⁴ This concept is used in the sense given to it by Hisam Sharabi, i.e., modernised patriarchy in which "material modernization... only served to remodel and reorganise patriarchal structures and relations and to reinforce them by giving them 'modern' forms and appearances." Sharabi, *Neopatriarchy op. cit.*: 4.

¹⁵ See Gwyn Williams, "The Concept of 'Egemonia' in the Thought of Antonio Gramsci: Some Notes on Interpretation," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 21 (1960): 593.

¹⁶ Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1992): 275-277.

¹⁷ Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970): 317.

¹⁸ An outstanding discussion of the phenomenon can be found in Olivier Carré, *L'échec de l'Islam politique* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1992).

¹⁹ Ali Merad, "The Ideologisation of Islam in the Contemporary Muslim World," Alexander S. Cudsi and Ali H. Dessouki, eds. *Islam and Power* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981): 38.

²⁰ A very good study of the historical, generation and political differentiation with the FIS is Séverine Labat's, "Islamismes et islamistes en Algérie — Un nouveau militantisme," in Gilles Kepel, ed. *Exils et Royaumes: les appartenances au monde arabo-islamique aujourd'hui. Etudes réunies pour Rémy Leveau* (Paris: Presses de la FNSP, 1994): 41-67. The English version, "Islamism and Islamists: The Emergence of New Types of Politico-Religious Militants," can be found in John Ruedy, ed. *Islamism and Secularism in North Africa* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994): 103-121.

²¹ Merad, "Ideologisation...," *op. cit.*: 37.

²² These points are drawn from Abbassi Madani's *Azmatal-fiqralhadith wa mubarratal-halalislami* (Algiers: Impr. Meziane, 1989); commentaries on this book can be found in Al-Ahnaf, *op. cit.*, pp. 77 ff.; Sheikh Abu a'bd al-Fatah Ali Ben Hadj (Ali Benhadj). *Faslakalalfimuwajibahatzulalhukkam (n.p.: al jabha al-islamiya lil inkkad [FIS], n.d.)*, 310 pages. The book is a gold mine for scholars interested in Benhadj's views. The influence of Qutb and Mawdudi, to whom he refers very frequently, is unmistakable.

²³ Ali Benhadj, "Qui est responsable de la violence?" *El-Mounqid* [FIS's newspaper], no. 9, repr. in Al-Ahnaf et al., *L'Algérie par ses islamistes*: 136.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

²⁵ Mohammed Tozy, "Les tendances de l'islamisme en Algérie," *Confluences*, no. 12 (Fall 1994): 53.

²⁶ For a detailed discussion of Imam Ghazali's role in the rise of Islamism in Algeria, see Ahmed Rouadja, *Les Frères et la Mosquée — Enquête sur le mouvement islamiste en Algérie* (Paris: Karthala, 1990), esp. pp. 197-208.

²⁷ On this point, see Aïssa Khelladi, *Les Islamistes algériens face au pouvoir* (Alger: Alfa, 1992): 178.

²⁸ For an elaboration of this argument, see Yahia H. Zoubir, "Stalled Democratisation of An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Algeria," *Democratization* (London), vol. 2, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 109-139.

²⁹ See the report published in *El Watan* (Algeria), 12 November 1992.

³⁰ An interesting discussion can be found in Fernanda Faria, *Politique de sécurité au Maghreb — Les impératifs de la stabilité intérieure* (Lisbon: Instituto de Estudos Estratégicos e Internacionais, 1994): 36-38.

³¹ *El Moudjahid* (Algeria), 8 December 1992.

³² See the report on the meeting of the UMA's ministers of the interior in *El Watan*, 19 July 1994.

³³ Interviews granted by high-ranking officials to the author in March 1993 in Algeria and in 1994-1995 in Europe.

³⁴ See "Opération Salim," *Jeune Afrique*, no. 1799, 29 June-5 July 1995.

³⁵ See, *Financial Times*, 9-10 September 1995.

³⁶ Cited in *Africa Policy Report*, no. 3 (30 September 1995): 4.

³⁷ *Le Monde*, 23-24 July 1995.

³⁸ An interesting discussion, though questionable on the analysis of the Algerian military, can be found in Hugh Roberts, "Algeria between Eradicators and Conciliators," *Middle East Report* (July-August 1994): 24-27.

³⁹ Author's interview with Ait Ahmed, Lausanne, May 1995.

⁴⁰ For a summary on these groups, see Khelladi, *Les Islamistes algériens...*, *op. cit.*: 117-121.

⁴¹ See *Nouvel observateur*, no. 1608, International Edition, 31 August-6 September 1995.

⁴² Some Islamist leaders claim that the armed Islamic groups have been unified under the command of the AIS leader, Madani Merzak and that the activities of the GIA are those of Algeria's intelligence services orchestrated to discredit the FIS, thus obstructing positive results from FIS dialogue with the faction favorable to compromise with the banned party. See London's *Al-Hayat* (Arabic), 27 August 1995: 6.