



ALGERIA: THE MILITARY VERSUS THE MOSQUE

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What had widely been described as the Arab world's most ambitious experiment in electoral politics came to an abrupt end on 11 January, when the High Security Council of Algeria cancelled the second round of parliamentary elections which were due to be held on the 16 January. The announcement that the electoral process would be suspended until the "necessary conditions were achieved for the normal functioning of institutions", together with the sudden resignation of President Bendjedid, can be seen as reactions to the remarkable election victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in the first round of voting which took place in December. The FIS needed only to obtain a further 28 seats in the second round to win control of parliament, having won 188 of the 232 seats contested in the December election. The military high-command, fearing such a result would usher in the introduction of an Islamic state and believing that Bendjedid and much of the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) were acquiescing in fundamentalist demands, resorted to what amounts to a coup d'etat, which forced Bendjedid into retirement and placed the government firmly under military authority.

ROOTS OF THE CURRENT CRISIS

The rapid rise of Islam in Algeria can be attributed largely to the weakening Algerian economy and to the age gap between the very young Algerian population and the aging FLN elite. The economic crisis resulted from the fact that oil and gas provided 98% of the country's total export earnings. In the years following the 1973 oil price hike, the government had adequate funds to utilise on social upliftment programmes and heavy industry. With the considerable revenue available to the government, bureaucratic waste and inefficiency were high and centralised agricultural production fell 53% between 1963 and 1984. The real extent of the socialist government's mismanagement of the economy only began to emerge in the 1980s, however, after the oil price began to drop. The government no longer had the capital to pay for its heavy industry and social upliftment programmes, as well as for food imports. In addition, it had to create new job opportunities for one of the fastest growing

populations in the world, where approximately 200 000 young people enter the labour market every year. The government response was to borrow heavily and to conserve foreign exchange reserves by slashing imports.

To young Algerians whose economic expectations had been raised during the 1970s, the shortage of basic consumer goods was an unacceptable phenomenon. Not having the revolutionary background of their parents' generation, they did not see the FLN as a liberation movement but as an élite siphoning of the nation's wealth in order to amass personal fortunes (a fact later confirmed by the former Prime Minister Abdel Brahim who stated that bureaucrats had pocketed a staggering \$26 billion in kickbacks on foreign contracts). By 1989 only 10% of those under the age of 30, who constituted 60% of the population, were FLN members.

The crisis came out into the open in 1988, when consumer shortages, together with the abandonment of a toy allowance for industrial workers' children, led to spontaneous riots in major centres. After a military crackdown in which almost 200 people were killed, the Bendjedid government embarked on a major programme of political reform. Bendjedid, who had already begun economic liberalisation measures, such as the selling-off of petro-chemical plants and drilling rights to foreign investors and the privatisation of agricultural land, used the riots as an excuse also to introduce his political reform programme which had previously been thwarted by FLN hardliners in 1986. Political reforms were also justified on the grounds that many foreign creditors were insisting on political liberalisation as a condition for further loans.

Once the need for reform was broadly accepted, Bendjedid moved quickly, starting with the alterations to the constitution which made the Prime Minister responsible to Parliament rather than to the FLN, and followed by the legalisation of political parties, the liberalisation of the press and the calling of municipal and regional elections which would not only have FLN candidates on the election roll. The results of the June 1990 ballot severely shocked the FLN establishment, as they had not counted on the FIS taking a 55% share of the vote. The FIS victory was largely a result of their promises to rectify the Algerian economy, and due to their active involvement in relief work after the country suffered an earthquake in 1989.

After this, reform efforts slowed somewhat and in 1991, after Parliamentary elections were first called for, the Prime Minister, Hamrouche, announced a re-delimitation of constituencies which would have weighted pro-FLN rural areas to such an extent that no other party could have hoped to defeat them. By this stage, however, the FIS had clearly gained the political initiative and when they protested, Bendjedid was forced to fire Hamrouche and to abandon the plan, also giving the other parties more time to prepare for the

election by postponing it until December 1991. Bendjedid, having witnessed the demise of the East European dictators, believed that if elections went ahead the FLN *might* lose power, but if they did not go ahead, power *would certainly* fall into the hands of the fundamentalists.

THE CURRENT SITUATION

Now Bendjedid has been forced out of office, and the once mighty FLN is in disarray after winning only 16 seats in the first round of the Parliamentary elections. On the surface at least it would appear as if the military has total control of the state: political activity in mosques has been banned and a twelve month state of emergency imposed. Below the surface this does not appear to be the case – the generals appear to be unsure of the legality of their actions and have formed three different governments since the coup to try and legitimise their rule in the face of popular scepticism. The generals also fear that the largely conscript rank and file soldiers will heed the alleged FIS call for a mutiny. The Boudiaf government with its lack of popular legitimacy is unlikely to be able to address the country's economic problems, and as such, only serves to increase the popularity of the FIS, which pledges to improve the lot of the average Algerian.

THE ISLAMIC POSITION

The big question being asked is: If the FIS had won the second round of the parliamentary elections, or if the State Council's rule becomes so tenuous that they would agree to elections, and the FIS comes in with a majority, would Algeria become another Iran? The jailed leader of the FIS, Madani has stated "we are Muslims, not fundamentalists", and Hachani has promised to preserve all liberties including the tolerance of other political and religious views. The FIS leaders have also asserted their commitment to a market orientated economy with an emphasis on small privately owned industries. Critics, however, argue that the moment the FIS comes to power women will be forced out of the workplace, schools will be segregated and Sharia law will be introduced. There is some evidence to back this view, as in FIS-controlled regions religious fervour has already forced the closing of many bars, and hotel managers have been pressured into submitting their registers for regular scrutiny to make sure that couples staying in the hotels are indeed married. This Islamic fervour could increase under a FIS government, but while Algeria is dependent on foreign credit, no government is likely to seek isolation from the international community. Moderates in the party are also scared of isolating non-religious supporters, who merely supported the FIS as a means of overthrowing the FLN government. The FIS is, however, increasingly being challenged by more

militant groups including some with Shi'ite sympathies and others who are veterans of the Afghan war. An FIS government today with Saudi funding and its mixed constituency is likely to be more moderate than the Iranian government. But while the government continues to restrict Mosque activity and while Madani and Hachani remain in jail, there is the distinct possibility that the moderates in the FIS will lose control to more radical Islamicists.

THE INTERNATIONAL RAMIFICATIONS

Except for the denunciation of the coup by Iran, international condemnation has been minimal – the United States and France have both argued that it is not up to them to pronounce judgement on its constitutionality, while Tunisia has even praised the coup as "a last minute change of direction by a train heading towards the abyss". Clearly the international community was fearful of an FIS victory. Algeria's immediate neighbours, especially Tunisia with its strong indigenous Islamic movement, feared the spread of Islamic politics which could topple their shaky authoritarian rule. France for its part, is worried that an FIS government in Algeria would cause thousands of Algerians to emigrate to France, thereby worsening the country's unemployment problem. The Mitterand government also feared that it would strengthen the support for the French right-wing under Le Pen. The United States, which enjoys favourable economic relations with Algeria, was scared not only of another fundamentalist state emerging, but of losing many lucrative commercial transactions. What all these states have failed to realise is that by supporting a military coup against a possible democratically elected Islamic government, they have strengthened the hand of militant Islamic movements. This can clearly be seen in Mali where, following the Algerian coup, Islamic groups refused to take part in constitutional negotiations.

For the average Algerian, though, the situation is much simpler. For the first time since 1962 they were able to go to the polls in a democratic fashion to elect Parliamentary representatives, but when the military elite did not like their choice the elections were cancelled. For the moment, the military has triumphed over the Mosque, but in this economically troubled land, the tables could be reversed at any time. The international community will sooner or later have to face up to the reality of possibly having to deal with a popular Islamic government in Algeria. The coup may have merely delayed an inevitable process as the Boudiaf government lacks the legitimacy to hold on to the reigns of power indefinitely, unless it can somehow dramatically turn the economy around, a feat it is unlikely to be able to achieve.

Jan Smuts House
February 1992