Fundamental Problems

The recent events which saw the victory of a Muslim fundamentalist party (the Islamic Salvation Front or FIS) in Algeria’s first open elections, followed closely by a military coup and martial law cannot be understood simply in the context of a world-wide Islamic revival. It is yet another example of the failure of liberal politics in the Third World—a failure whose seeds, however, were already sown at independence. Dwelling on the inherently Muslim nature of fundamentalist bogeymen and the threat to democracy they pose, obscures the more complex social processes at work in Algeria today.

Algeria gained independence from France in 1962 after a protracted and bloody Independence War. The Liberation Army split into the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Popular Army (ANP) which together installed an ‘Islamic Socialist Republic’ with a single party system (the FLN) and a president for life chosen from among the ranking military (Colonel Boumediene, replaced upon his death in 1978 by Colonel Chadli Bendjedid). The Boumediene government adopted the Soviet path to development: a planned economy, an emphasis on heavy industry and the collectivisation of much of agriculture. Whatever problems such an approach brought, they were masked by oil revenues which allowed the government to parcel out sufficient jobs and services to make people accept the FLN monopoly of power, and its growing corruption.

However, this state of affairs took a turn for the worse with the fall of oil revenues so that, by 1986, economic troubles were apparent—a scarcity of jobs, housing, services and even goods: the kind of troubles which also affected youth in the poor quarters of Algiers. The FLN had expected to be returned to power by a resentful population whose growing anti-FLN sentiments were captured by the emerging Islamic Front (FIS), a movement so well organised and resourceful it could offer better practical help than the government. Its predominantly urban base is especially strong among the disaffected youth in the poor quarters of Algiers.

Meanwhile, political reforms saw the advent of multiparty democracy (February 1989) followed by the legalisation of a plethora of political parties. In the first multiparty elections, the Islamic FIS gained a majority of votes (54%) and thus the control of some 800 local councils. The FLN had to submit to a humiliating defeat, and the only other political formations with a modicum of strength were the ethnically based ‘Kabyle’ (non-Arab) parties, the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD).

In the wake of the FLN defeat, President Chadli Bendjedid announced legislative elections for 1991 (later rescheduled to December 1991 and January 1992). Meanwhile, in a classic example of gerrymandering, the parliament (voted in under the single-party regime) reorganised electoral Institutions. This was a reference to the previously annulled elections in January 1990 and the ranking military, acting in concert with the ex-prime minister Sid Ahmed Ghozali. The news was generally greeted with a prudent silence masking discreet relief by other Arab countries and in the West.

The Algerian opposition voiced timid protests. Though the FIS took some care not to give the military a pretext for repression, they did not succeed; most of its remaining leadership was arrested and its headquarters raided. From then on, incidents and confrontations with armed forces multiplied, usually starting around mosques after the Friday prayers, despite or maybe because of the fact that mosques are packed at these times. This state of affairs degenerated sufficiently for martial law to be declared and the FIS...
Tension mounts in front of the mosques

to be made illegal by 11 February. However, the protest from the armed fringe of the FIS remains such as to allow commentators to speak of "the beginning of an urban guerrilla movement".

What is remarkable is the similarity of this chain of events with others in non-Muslim Third World countries, especially in Africa. The sequence of events is now well known: independence, a single party system, nepotism, bureaucratisation, the corruption of Westernised elites who monopolise goods and services, the bankruptcy of the state following indiscriminate borrowing. The West and its international institutions of course share a large measure of responsibility for the predictable pattern of events.

The results of this process continue to be that long-suffering populations turn to indigenous ideologies and seek to get rid of Westernised elites and the social models they associate with them. Most attempts at liberalising such regimes come too late and are followed by explosions of popular resentment: hardly a favourable environment for democracy, as the example of the late Soviet Union shows. The crystallisation in Algeria of popular protest around a Muslim fundamentalist movement is not a sign of a turn to mysticism, however. On the contrary, the leaders and activists of this movement are often educated, mostly in the 'hard' sciences, and advocate a return to the sacred texts to an audience literate for the first time. That a religious society in time of crisis turns to a fundamentalist reappraisal of its religious ideology, for the first time accessible to the majority, is hardly surprising. In the case of Algeria, it is all the more inevitable since Islam had been at the core of the resistance against Gallicisation during 130 years of colonisation.

Certainly, the FIS leaders made no secret of their opposition to democratic ideals which they described as "foreign ideology". Their whole campaign was directed around the inherent rightness of the Muslim way, and the inadequacy and perversity of other ways—amply demonstrated, they felt, by the failures their audience knows only too well. Such seductive logic masks the absence of any concrete proposals and programs among the revivalists except in the domain of the social mores. It was sufficient to get them elected, but once in power they would have experienced profound difficulties.

Such a test of power would have either discredited them in front of an Algerian population sufficiently critical not to be hoodwinked by ideological discourses of which they have had their fill, or forced them to accommodation with practical realities. In the latter case, this would have provided the first real opportunity for an Arab-Muslim country to come to terms with modernity and democracy. Instead, military repression provides the FIS with an escape from such a harsh confrontation with reality and reinforces its position as cultural critic by discrediting the idea of democracy. This is a political mistake which adds to the FIS's charismatic appeal by making martyrs of its militants. Meanwhile, the gap is further widening between the everyday realities of unemployment and penury and the aspirations to (democratic) peace and plenty represented on the French TV channels that millions of Algerians watch every day. The hatred and resentment which are building up do not augur well for the future.

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