

Algeria's unending tragedy

Africa

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IT IS painful to be a witness to Algeria's tragedy. More than 60,000, mostly innocent Algerians, have been killed since 1992 when the military government annulled the outcome of the first run of the elections that had yielded a governing majority to FIS, acronym for the Islamic Salvation Front, and war began between the army and the Islamists.

A lame justification was offered for annulling the election results. It was alleged that the Islamic Front sought an authoritarian system of government; its leaders had openly expressed contempt for democracy as a western import. The allegation was correct insofar as the Islamic Front's leaders held ambivalent and opportunistic attitude toward parliamentary government. But the Algerian establishment's suppression of the election results, a move welcomed by the governments of France and the United States, was itself undemocratic, and most undesirable both morally and politically.

To begin with, Algeria's authoritarian ruling establishment is not a credible defender of democracy. Moreover, the Islamic Front could not transform Algeria into a theocracy. If it had formed the government in 1992, the Front would have wielded power, partially at best. Secular forces will have remained in control of the state apparatus. The bureaucracy is largely secular in outlook and by training.

The army retains ultimate mastery over the state. Algeria's economy is linked to France. In brief, the government of the Islamic Salvation Front would have resembled in 1992 the prematurely dissolved government of the Islamic Welfare Party in Turkey. Had the Algerian establishment been wiser than the Turkish army and permitted the Islamic Front to run its course in government, it is most likely to have stumbled miserably out of political prominence. Instead, the Islamic Front was denied a nearly certain opportunity to fail. Jihad ensued.

The violence has grown increasingly worse. Radical, hawkish factions have gained an upper hand in the army no less than in the Islamic movement. Neither side shows mercy even toward the innocent people who are used as pawns in their savage warfare. Each side appears determined to punish people for their views, and to push citizens — by force if necessary — into its camp. Singers have been silenced, writers and journalists are murdered, and unveiled women's faces have been slashed and disfigured by militants of the Islamic movement.

On its part, the government imprisons and tortures with cruel impunity. Lately, a new horror has appeared: masked men arrive and massacre entire villages — men, women and children. On August 20, they massacred 100

caught between the devil and the deep sea — the so-called Islamists and the militarists. The roots of this tragedy lie in the history that immediately followed the long war of Algerian liberation. When France withdrew in July 1962, an ugly struggle for power ensued among Algerian nationalists. The winners — Ahmed Ben Bella supported by Colonel Houari Boumedienne and his troops — favoured one-party, authoritarian and populist rule which was then in vogue from Egypt to Ghana. The democratic option was thus closed to Algeria at the moment of its liberation, and the stage was set for the establishment of a military-bureaucratic oligarchy which rules the country to this day.

At the time of independence power was unequally distributed among four groups. First, there was the GPRA — Provisional Government of the Algerian Revolution. This government in exile, based in Tunis since 1958, was responsible for directing the armed struggle inside Algeria, procurement of armaments, care of refugees and families of cadres and conduct of international relations. GPRA officials conducted the negotiations with France leading to Algeria's independence. As the representative body of the revolution it commanded legitimacy both internationally and among Algerians. Yet, as we shall

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national army. The ALN (Armée de Liberation National) wielded force more than any other group; but it lacked legitimacy, and a significant constituency in Algeria.

Fourth, there were the prison people. Some 250,000 Algerians experienced incarceration of one sort or another during those seven years of armed struggle. There is hardly a family in Algeria that did not suffer the loss of a son / daughter, and barely one that did not have one in prison. In 1956, when the French Air Force 'airjacked' a plane capturing four "historic chiefs" of the revolution — Ahmed Ben Bella, Mohammed Boudiaf, Ait Ahmed, and Rabah Bitat — the prisoners gained international attention. Although Boudiaf has had stronger revolutionary credentials and had commanded a large following among Algerian workers, Ben Bella emerged as the most visible among the imprisoned leaders.

He had the makings of a popular hero. Of good boyish look, he had been a soccer player, photogenic, prone to seek publicity, and favoured by circumstances. With Ait Ahmed he had robbed the post office which — so legend had it — provided the revolution's initial funding. Above all, he was a friend of Abdel Nasser. As if Sawt-al-Arab's daily references to him were not proof enough, the French radio and television, which were keen to project the Algerian revolution as inspired, aided, and controlled by Cairo, projected him as Algeria's central revolutionary figure. By 1960, prisoner Ben Bella was the most celebrated of the 'historic chiefs', a symbol of the resistance and also of Algeria's suffering. He had legitimacy, a national following, and no power.

Ahmed Ben Bella's ambition overwhelmed the commitment he had formally made to collective leadership, a precept to which the FLN (Front de Liberation National) leaders — by no means angels, they — had adhered with some consistency, and to the benefit of Algeria's struggle for liberation. Released from prison in the summer of 1962 he coalesced with Colonel Boumedienne to prevent the GPRA from forming a government of independent Algeria. A military formation had found a viable political ally.

Krim Belkacem, one of the most gifted guerilla commanders of the 20th century, was effectively leading the GPRA. A Berber with long experience of living in the maquis, he was inclined to confront Ben Bella's challenge. As the crisis grew and the opposing forces faced each other outside Algiers, an awesome event occurred. Hundreds of thousands of citizens poured into the streets, many of them weeping, others red hot angry, and all shouting: Enough! Seven years were enough. Yakfi! Sab'a Snin Yakfi. "Le dur", the hard man of the Algerian revolution, wept that day, as did Ben Khedda, then the President of GPRA. They won't fight. An agreement was reached, and honoured in the breach.

entire villages — men, women and children. On August 29, they massacred 98 persons in Reis, a village in southern Algeria. A week later, the killers arrived in Beni Messous, a village close to military barracks, just a few miles from Algiers, the capital city, and massacred a hundred children, women, and men.

Who are these killers? The government blames the Islamists. Mohammed Deidni, a leader of FIS, accuses the government. No one can be sure. They could be from either side. Some observers believe these massacres are organized by hawks in the armed forces. Senior military officers are said to be divided between "eliminationists", i.e. those who advocate total elimination of the Islamic movement, and the "accommodationists" who favour negotiation with FIS moderates. The release on July 15 of FIS leader, Abbasi Madani, is reported to have increased the tension inside the ruling Junta.

As a compromise, Mr Madani has now been placed in house arrest. Speculation is that the massacres were aimed at discrediting the moderate army leaders led by General Mohammed Bechine, former Director of Military Security. Mohammed Lamari, the army chief is said to favour the hardline. There is also a counter-speculation: the Islamists committed the latest atrocities in order to sabotage election which are scheduled for October 23, La Arifll-la-Allah!

Victims of both sides, Algeria's people are

presently see, in the course of that long and harsh struggle it had also incurred political and psychological liabilities.

Second, there were the five Wilayas under military commanders inside Algeria. They were respected by the people among whom they had lived through the hard years of resistance and French reprisals. Since mid-1959, when the French effectively closed the Tunisian frontier with electrified, barbed fences, they had suffered especially from shortages of arms supplies, and nourished resentments of their leaders in exile. In 1962, they led forces that were deeply wearied of warfare.

Third, there was the 'frontier army' based on the Tunisian and Moroccan side of the border under the command of the austere Colonel Houari Boumedienne. It was organized like a conventional army, with heavy arms, including tank and armoured battalions. It had been created by the GPRA leaders in the expectation that, like the Vietminh forces in Indo-China, the Algerian National Army shall one day engage its adversary in set-piece battles. That opportunity was denied it by, among other factors, the electrified boundary wall, the Morice, and Challe lines. So in Ghardimou and Oujda its units trained, exercised, received political indoctrination, awaiting an opportunity for combat, and to become the elite of independent Algeria's

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In power, Ben Bella proceeded to subdue recalcitrant Wilaya Commanders, to tame one of the finest trade union federations in the Third World, to take control of a Worker's Self-Management Movement that was quite unique in world history, and to turn the FLN — a remarkable political organization — into an instrument of personal power. All of these disintegrated rather rapidly. Two years later, he was making gestures to revive the FLN, permit a modicum of autonomy to UGTA, the labour federation, breathe some life into the strangled Self-Management Movement, and create a popular militia, obviously to loosen the ALN's stranglehold.

On June 19, 1965, at 1.30 a.m. Colonel Tahar Zbiri ushered Ben Bella into a military jeep, and drove into darkness. The coup d'etat was bloodless. Militarism was entrenched in Algeria. Like Ahmed Ben Bella, Colonel Boumedienne was an authentic revolutionary, ambitious for Algeria. Both men failed to comprehend that authoritarian rule kills creativity, breeds corruption, and distorts society. After seven years of a very costly struggle Algeria had progressed from the colonial politics of repression to nearly total repression of politics. I last returned to Algeria in 1967. "How do you find it?" president Houari Boumedienne had inquired. He appeared displeased with my response: *Algerie est mal parti!*