

With less than a month to go for the scheduled June 5 parliamentary elections in Algeria – the first since 1992 – conservative and Islamic parties look set to dominate the fractious ‘democrats’. As violence hits a ‘new high’ and as bomb blasts, killings and arrests become the order of the day, in the political scene, it is extremely unlikely that the elections are going to be a ‘peaceful affair’, despite President Liamine Zeroul’s appeal to make the polls a success in order to ‘restore the damaged trust and offer Algeria a recovered hope’. For a little over five years now, when the election results were annulled by the military after it had become clear that the popular Islamic Salvation Front (FIS or the Front Islamique du Sault) was heading for a landslide victory, the unrest and strife has claimed more than 60,000 lives in the country.

Algeria, a predominantly Muslim country of North Africa with a population of 22,817,000, became independent on July 3, 1962, after winning what is known as the Savage War. Algeria was a French colony since 1842 and its occupation by France had been an annexed area, part of the metropolitan France, under which the indigenous Islamic culture had been submerged. The French discouraged the native language and ‘denationalised’ the indigenous culture. This policy of ‘cultural cleansing’ was later on to give rise to a revival of long-suppressed Islamic identity. It was in this background that in 1954, the Front Libération Nationale (FLN) started a civil war for independence that claimed the lives of a million Algerians and heavy losses to the Front.

In 1962, General de Gaulle, President of France, declared independence for Algeria despite internal opposition. During the French rule two million or so immigrants in France had come into contact with an open society and free press. Further, the continuing dominance of the French culture and the spread of education had brought an elite into

Crisis and turmoil in Algeria

The insurgency and militant ‘outburst’ are in fact a case of cultural re-assertion, writes AHSON SAEED HASAN

the power structure which was essentially Westernised in character. This situation led to a reaction from the grass roots level and the best tool of mobilisation against the existing elite became the religious and cultural identity. In 1985, protests began to be voiced and the first to rise were the Berbers of the Kabyle region, who nursed a long-standing grievance of being suppressed along with their culture and language. The government, enjoying the backing and support of the French, responded to this trend by merciless suppression and to invite the wrath of the public, labelled the insurgents as ‘extremist’ Muslims. The excessive use of army to force activists out of their hideouts bore grim consequences for the regime. Most serious was the killing of Mustapha Bouiali and several other members of the Islamic fundamentalist group. Aiming at political reforms, the army was withdrawn and on July 2, 1989, Algeria became a multi-party polity and the major rival party to the ruling FLN – the FIS – was formed.

Capitalising upon the socio-political demands of the masses with an Islamic solution, the FIS swept the local bodies polls in 1990, and later showed its muscle by staging a big pro-Iraq demonstration in the wake of the Gulf War.

In the January 1992 elections, the FIS won 188 in the 400-seat parliament. It needed only 28 seats more in the January 16, 1992, second round to gain majority. However, the military coup, in order to forestall the formation of a FIS government, forced President Chadli Benjedid to resign and in-

stalled Ahmad Boudief as the President. Election results were annulled. Professor Madni Abbasi and his deputy, the foremost leaders of FIS were imprisoned and a ruthless suppression of the party activists followed. In reprisal President Boudief was killed in January 1992. The new regime, obviously backed by the army, continued to rule in an absolutely arbitrary fashion.

The army coup of January 11, 1992, claimed hundreds of lives of Muslims sent to firing squads without a trial. More than 70,000 were imprisoned or exiled. Since then violence has continued unabated with not only the FIS taking an active part in the insurgency but the period has also seen the surfacing of another militant group – the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) – which is accused of being behind much of the disturbance and disorder in the recent months.

The developments by which the FIS could win parliamentary seats, coming out of nowhere, indicate the popularity of Islamic figures and forces among the Algerians and lack of people’s confidence in the ruling forces.

Algeria’s case has undoubtedly shown that the West’s commitment to democracy, human rights and rule of law is nothing but ‘high-sounding nonsense’ and holds good only when its own interests are involved. Although the late French President Francois Mitterrand was initially not in favour of cancellation of election results and even after their annulment did make some efforts to pacify the Islamists, his successor, Jacques Chirac, apprehensive of the growing popu-

larity of Islam in the region has favoured crushing of the FIS and other Islamic parties with an iron hand.

Close observers of the developments have different approaches to the Algerian crisis. Most agree that the insurgency and militant ‘outburst’ are in fact a case of cultural re-assertion, an outrage of local culturists against the suppression of national language and other symbols by the long French rule and later the perpetuation of the Western way of life by the post-independence regimes. The West looks at the upheaval as the rise of another Iran, the quest for power of the radical Islamists to implement the Islamic order through militarising against the West. The alleged Iran-FIS link has been propagated by the Western media. The regional Arab monarchies and conservative regimes take it as a challenge aiming at swaying the existing setup and some others as merely an outcry of the educated class against a secularist and rotten social set up purely for socio-economic reasons. Another view is that it is the consequence of an interplay of national and transnational factors – redundant socio-economic system and the assertion of radical movements in other Islamic countries, which is evident in most of regional and extra-regional Muslim countries, especially in Egypt and Sudan. Prima facie, each of these arguments holds water, although not in toto.

Most agree that it is more a case of cultural re-assertion and support for FIS and other Islamic groups and is a vote against the denationalisation of the identity of Algeria

which the people believed had been short changed by its rulers. First the Ottomans, then the French and in the post-independence era military with its Western orientation and secularistic outlook had relegated the true Islamic identity into obscurity. However, the *modus operandi* of the FIS to seize power through the democratic process reflects the assertion of orthodoxy and not Iranian style fundamentalism, and this brand of orthodoxy has been described by the FIS as a recipe to solve the growing economic problems of the people and not to create a purely Islamic order aimed at political maximisation of seizure of power by the mullahs. Whatever the reasons behind the crisis, the movement for revivalism in Algeria has alarmed the Western world of growing trend towards reverting to the policy of Islamisation of the Islamic societies by the radical elements. Furthermore, it has, for regional countries, added threats from below until they introduce a real and genuine process of democratisation of their own political systems.

Algeria’s present regime is involved in a desperate fight at the behest of France and the West against the so-called Islamic terrorism (fundamentalism). Having banned the FIS from taking part in the forthcoming elections they have perhaps made a Himalayan blunder. If things go as they are, the country, already under a debt of \$ 26 billion and with the IMF and other donor agencies refusing further help, is bound to face hard times ahead. It is time that the West, instead of advocating oppression and suppression of the Islamists, backing the illegitimate government of Zeroul, a stooge of the West and holding polls amidst guns and blood just to show that democracy is ‘alive and kicking’ in Algeria, should and must encourage negotiation and dialogue and let the popular will prevail. Anything contrary to that is bound not only to disrupt the June elections but may also result in disintegration of the country.