

Algeria, or the Desire for a Future

Woman's Day and National Wounds

In Algiers, March 8, 2011, turned into a special day. Hundreds of women workers made the most of a paid but work-free afternoon and invaded the city's public spaces, turning our austere streets into a joyous "celebration of womanhood", while the men – torn between mockery and courtesy – made way for them, offering plastic roses. These few hours, stolen from the harsh conditions in which our women usually live, are the modest but symbolic result of years of women's struggle – dating from the mid-1980s – for equality between the sexes. Legal equality at least, albeit undermined by the Family Code adopted by the National Assembly in 1984 under the auspices of the country's one political party, the National Liberation Front (FLN). But this struggle would soon be overshadowed as Civil War overwhelmed the country – a Civil War lasting from 1992 to 2002, the trauma and misery of which we are no longer permitted to discuss or even mention following the adoption of the National Reconciliation Act. The Act, adopted in February 2006 following a referendum, stipulates that "anybody who, by their declarations, writings or other acts uses or exploits the wounds of national tragedy is liable to incur a serious prison penalty (3-5 years) and a heavy fine."¹

And yet on March 8, the national tragedy still managed to gatecrash the celebrations and defy the ban. On Grand Post Office Square in the centre of Algiers, a modest rally seeks to revive the memories of the Association of Families affected by Terrorism. At first there are only some twenty demonstrators, carrying a modest bouquet of flowers and small posters

on which you can read the names of the victims – all of them women – along with their dates of birth and the places and dates of their murders. They were all so young that these reminders cause a physical feeling of heartsickness, and suddenly this little patch of pavement transforms the light-hearted mood into a sombre one. Bystanders and passers-by stop to read the posters. Voices are raised, foreheads furrowed, while young girls in bloom stop sucking their chocolate ices, taken by surprise by this tragic reminder. The security forces

The Civil War, which we have been ordered to forget, which we may even wish to forget, is still here, still present – and now it is dividing society.

have turned out in large numbers to prevent the rally – after all, not only is it forbidden to recall misfortune, it is also forbidden to demonstrate on the streets of Algiers – and make embarrassed attempts to move the loitering onlookers along. But in vain – this unexpected confrontation between Algerians and the memories of all that happened will last until the end of the afternoon. Meanwhile, a mile and a half away, in May 1 Square, the mothers of the "disappeared", whose children were abducted by the security services during the Civil War, are also improvising a rally. In distress now familiar on the streets of Algiers, in an impossible parody of mourning, they brandish the portraits of the abducted, surrounded in turn by security personnel. A little further away, on Martyrs'



Ghania Mouffok

Ghania Mouffok is a journalist based in Algiers. She serves as correspondent for TV5 MONDE and writes for various journals, including *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the Swiss *La Liberté*, and the Algerian online-journal *Maghreb Emergent*. Among her publications are "Une autre voie pour l'Algérie" (1995), "Être journaliste en Algérie" (1994) and the forthcoming "Vivre ensemble" (2011).

¹ AD 250,000-500,000, equivalent to approx. US\$3,500-7,000.

Square, thousands of patriots are holding a demonstration. Over 100,000 civilians were recruited and armed while the country wallowed in the morass of Civil War, so that they could help the security forces to “combat Islamic terrorism”. Since the adoption of the National Reconciliation Act they live abandoned by the state, and today they want society to tell them what status they can claim now that the war is over. Families affected by terrorism, families of missing persons, patriots – they all spread out across the city like a widening net of memory, a return of the repressed.

Old, New Fears

The Civil War, which we have been ordered to forget, which we may even wish to forget, is still here, still present – and now it is dividing society into those who advocate forgetfulness as a way to end the war, and those who consider that cherishing memories of the departed is the only way to attain lasting peace. But above and beyond these differences of opinion, Algeria between war and peace is still haunted by the Civil War, despite the many attempts to straddle it, treat it as some kind of anomalous break, as some kind of empty black hole. We killed each other, sordidly – beyond policies or ideologies, beyond reason or unreason, we killed each other; Algerian against Algerian, axe against hatchet, in massacres, slaughters, tortures, kidnappings, rapes, looting, destruction, bombings, suicide bombings – a nightmare that lasted more than ten years. Since then, Algerians have learned the price of peace, and live in constant fear that one day this violence might rear up again. It is their single, abiding fear: fear of Civil War. Nothing frightens them so much as themselves.

This partially explains the failure of the CNCD, the National Coordination for Change and Democracy, an organization which came into being after the January riots, representing the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH), small parties like the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) and a number of independent trade unions and individuals. CNCD called for a march on February 12, 2011,

which would make its way from May 1 Square to Martyrs' Square along the edge of Bab El-Oued and the Casbah – three neighborhoods in the capital which have never been short on victims of protest. Enthused first by the “Tunisian Revolution”, then by the “Egyptian Revolution”, the organizers hoped that “the Algerian street” would, in turn, rise up and “overthrow the regime”, although the demands they actually made were less strident and controversial, like lifting the state of emergency. The state of emergency was created by emergency laws passed after the military coup in 1991. It aimed to suppress all institutions after the first multiparty legislative elections held in Algeria were won by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a party that has since been banned. But on the day of the demonstration, the huge numbers of security forces deployed en masse around May 1 Square – reflecting the newfound fear that has taken hold of all oppressive regimes south of the Mediterranean – cannot hide the lack of popular support for the march, or for the demonstrations which follow it.

Adults from the surrounding areas watch the rally as mere spectators, while their children, from 10-year-olds to 20-year-olds, persecute the demonstrators, acting as unexpected allies to the anti-riot forces. With their fiery youth they insinuate themselves into the ranks of the anti-government protesters – all older representatives of the tattered middle classes – and challenge them by asking “Where are

Young anti-demonstrators are expressing their own refusal to become the future cannon fodder for political struggles.

your children?” While we cannot exclude the manipulations of a ruling power that has shown itself – with breathtaking cynicism – to be a past master of the art of setting Algerian against Algerian, it is nevertheless clear that, by repeatedly asking this question, these young

anti-demonstrators are expressing their own refusal to become the future cannon fodder for political struggles about which the organizers did not think it necessary to make them aware. The young people make a mockery of the demonstrators' slogan, turning "ash-shaab yurid isqat al-nizam" (the people wants the fall of the regime) into "ash-shaab yurid zetla batal" (the people want to get high for free). While from the sidelines a mother in her haik² asked her more serious questions: "But what do you want? That the war should begin again? Have you forgotten the days when we were so terrified we didn't dare go out of doors? The days when our blood flowed? What has Bouteflika done to you? He brought back peace, didn't he?"

Institutional Facades

Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika came to power in 1999, as the saviour of the regime, at the request of the army's top brass who, in Algeria, are the ones who really hold the power. Although the election was rigged, President Bouteflika is still credited by certain sections of society as the man who brought back peace with the National Reconciliation Act. And while the Act may only represent the window-dressing of a behind-the-scenes arrangement between Islamist rebels and the army's general staff, it is true that the intensity of the violence diminished once it was passed. Even so, armed groups still occupy the country's waste areas, still create victims, and all of Algeria is still checkered by police and military roadblocks, while in the capital – the centre of power – plain-clothed and uniformed policemen now number in the thousands.

We should add that since Bouteflika came to power the price of oil – the country's main resource – has sky-rocketed, allowing the Algerian regime not only to repay its debts, but also to stash away some 150 billion US dollars in foreign reserves whilst engaging... in a development plan. At international level, we should also mention the events of September 11, 2001 (better known as 9/11). Until then the Algerian regime had been a pariah in the comity

of nations. The security services, previously subject to international tribunals – accused by many, including dissident intelligence services, of sponsoring massacres and crimes against humanity – has since then posed as a pioneer in the fight "against Islamist terrorism", which has now, under the leadership of the United States, become a global cause. Encouraged by this unlooked-for support, the Algerian regime made efforts to become respectable once again – indeed, from accused, it turned into a vociferous plaintiff, accusing the Western world of failing to support it in its fight with extremists.

Further bolstered by global and national economic trends, President Bouteflika – who claimed the presidency as the violence came to an end – managed to avoid becoming a symbol of a regime that is still loathed by the overwhelming majority of the population; even more so because he is known to disagree with a number of senior army generals, including the "janviéristes" (Januaryists) – a French term for the army chiefs who conducted the so-called "fight against terrorism" with an implacable iron first, including Generals Khaled Nezzar and Mohamed Lamari, later sacrificed to save the regime by General Mohamed Mediene, better known as Tewfik, because they knew too much and had become too controversial. Tewfik was a faceless but omnipresent

Algerian society is well aware of the ongoing power struggles behind the scenes, which riddle the regime despite its outward facade of unity.

personality who dominated Algerian politics as head of the DRS, the Directorate of Intelligence and Security, having, it appears, allied himself with the President before in turn becoming embroiled in disputes with the presidential clan. The key to these differences lay in the presidential succession – after three terms as President, Bouteflika knew he was too ill

² Traditional veil.

to continue in power, but wished to appoint his successor himself. Algerian society is well aware of the ongoing power struggles behind the scenes, which riddle the regime despite its outward facade of unity. The people gauge the progress of these hidden battles by observing the succession of appointments to positions of power and influence in the civil service, police and military. Thus the assassination of the Chief of Police in his own office, in a bunker in the

Operating by the consensus of its co-opted members is undoubtedly one of the keys to understanding the strength of the Algerian regime.

heart of the capital, is simply one of the more recent – and implausible – expressions of this turmoil. Crude – more like the machinations in a seraglio – and managed as if it was just a routine news story, this event nevertheless indicates the violent nature of the confrontations between the different power groups.

Nothing is working smoothly any more for this circle of conspirators – a shadowy group of civilians and soldiers which, unfettered by legal constraints, has made and unmade rulers since Algerian independence in 1962. Operating by the consensus of its co-opted members, this complex secret network – where vast fortunes go hand in hand with military and police powers and a sealed-border mentality – is undoubtedly one of the keys to understanding the strength of the Algerian regime. The system is capable of catapulting an individual from a position of ultimate power to the status of a common, retired civil servant without damaging its own integrity – without bringing about the collapse of the entire edifice – precisely because it is not embodied in a single individual, face or name. Each member is constantly watching to make sure that no one person rises higher than his peers – all are ready to sacrifice, by their constantly changing alliances of convenience,

those individuals who threaten the sustainability of the structure as a whole. The Civil War claimed 200,000 lives – horrific massacres took place just yards from army barracks, thousands of people went missing, the financial impact on the country's destroyed infrastructure was huge, the economy brutally disrupted. And yet despite all this, despite the assassination of President Mohamed Boudiaf – a man who embodied the values of November '54 and co-founded the FLN – by a member of his own bodyguard, the army did not implode, with the exception of a few dissenting individuals and a group of officers in exile. This solidarity in spite of apparent chaos is cemented by the black mud of oil money, and by mutual collusion in the repression of all attempts at autonomy in Algerian society.

As for institutional facades, the army is very good at inventing coalitions which, while they fail to confer any legitimacy in the eyes of the overwhelming majority, nevertheless perform an effective balancing act between rigged elections and corruption. The Presidential alliance is based on three parties – the FLN, its clone the RND (presided over by the hated head of government, Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia), and Hamas, an Islamist proxy for the Muslim Brotherhood – and holds the National Assembly and the Senate, while the powerful trade union congress, the UGTA, has effectively become a firefighter, using meaningless promises to assuage workers' demands made in strike after strike. These regime-supporting institutions are accompanied by a number of satellite organizations, including the Muslim Scouts, the Shaheed children's associations of the war of national liberation and various employers' organizations. The entire complex teeters between civil society and client status, negotiating their support for the regime privilege by privilege.

The Social Costs of Liberal Modernity: A Resistance Continued

And yet Algerian society shows an astonishing ability to resist: every ten years or so, a new generation rejects the renunciations. And while the entire Arab world – in Egypt, in Tunisia – is

While the entire Arab world – in Egypt, in Tunisia – is waiting, hoping that the “Algerian street” will join its voice to this extraordinary spring of peoples in revolt, it is also important to understand that Algerians of both sexes are engaged in a different kind of struggle.

waiting, hoping that the “Algerian street” will join its voice to this extraordinary spring of peoples in revolt, it is also important to understand that Algerians of both sexes are engaged in a different kind of struggle. Infuriated by superficial change (they have seen plenty of presidents fall since the assassination of Mohamed Boudiaf, including the figurative assassination of President Chadli Bendjedid in 1991, the overthrow of President Zeroual in 1999 after the latter replaced Ali Kafi in 1994, along with a corresponding merry-go-round of governments), they are now trying to build a bottom-up alternative. Entire segments of excluded society are learning once again to organize themselves as they rebuild social bonds based on genuine debate – they are learning anew how to talk to each other, how to be counted, how to fight in new ways as people who know and acknowledge each other. They are organizing themselves in terms of housing distribution, water distribution, access to schools; by holding daily demonstrations they are forcing the spokespeople of the local authorities – falsely elected mayors, walis representing the central administration – to acknowledge and

answer their questions about the opaque ways in which cities are currently managed. They are building trade-union organizations, based on independent trade unions representing various sectors, including senior teachers, temporary teachers in general education – the country has more than 20,000 of them – as well as doctors, resident physicians, paramedics: in fact, all that remains of the country’s public services in education, transportation and health, wiped out both in terms of their workers’ status and the quality of the service they provide by a barbaric liberalism presented as the prerogative of a modern society. Similarly, it is in the name of this “modern society” and its supposed efficiency that whole swathes of the industrial public sector have been sold off – dismantling workers’ collectives and destroying decades of accumulated expertise by way of mass firings. Today, these collectives are defending themselves, and in strike after strike, they are questioning the industrial and financial decisions made by their firms and challenging their bosses, as at the El Hajar foundry in Annaba – third largest city in the country – which, from being a public-sector property, has turned into private property owned by steel giant Arcelor Mittal. In the universities a powerful student movement has sprung up – to general astonishment – and in a spirit of infectious dynamism students are refusing to be the guinea-pigs for yet another course reform (this time to an American-style system), challenging both the government and society on the best ways to acquire academic knowledge. At the same time, they are positioning themselves as a serious competitor to the existing student union – closely associated with the Islamic authorities of Hamas and widely believed to be unshakable, the UGEL or General Union of Free Students.

Every day the sidewalks outside the Presidency are flooded by yet another group of citizens claiming their rights, in the process transforming an area under heavy police surveillance into the dictatorship’s very own Trafalgar Square. And now – most unprecedented step of all – even the

unemployed are organizing themselves into a national association. Employment and housing are the big social issues in Algeria, and represent

Employment and housing are the big social issues in Algeria, and represent two major problems for this regime.

two major problems for this regime, which has so far proved incapable of dealing with them. Emboldened by these citizens' protests, non-party-political elites are attempting to set up alternative political options, to reflect more openly on the issue of democracy in view of its growing urgency, and rather than taking an activist stance, to learn again how to think constructively about this new country which Algeria has become – to think constructively about it with the aim of transforming it. In a recent address to the President of the Republic, Abdel-Hamid Mehri – resistance fighter against French colonial rule, former Secretary General of the FLN, outspoken opponent of the regime since the annulment of the 1991 elections – gave shape to the process by calling for a review of the past 50 years of independence, and the organization of a collective rethink across the country as a whole. “The issue”, he stated, “is not to change a person or overthrow a system, but to transform the mode of governance” – a point of view shared by the overwhelming majority of the population. From one riot to

the next, from strike to strike, from peaceful demonstration to peaceful demonstration, the Algerian authorities have, thus far, been content to lift the state of emergency, instigate certain populist initiatives by distributing oil money, and contain the protests by sending thousands of new police recruits to box them in, remaining within acceptable bounds by using minimal violence.

The images have become familiar throughout Algeria: peaceful demonstrators confront walls of law enforcement personnel in their Robocop uniforms who, although unarmed, are equipped with clubs and transparent shields. Almost in a clinch, each group takes the other's measure – young people come face to face with young people of the same age, from the same backgrounds. The only question is: who will give way first? An unsustainable situation, while all around the suburbs of the excluded, the shanty-towns of high-risk classes which surround all the country's major towns and cities, threaten to burst into flames if the Algerian regime persists – with the help of Western powers – in refusing to understand this immense uprising of souls filled with a new sense of brotherhood and a genuine desire for a future, as they move away from the fury and furore of the recent past.

Translation from French by Word Gym Ltd.