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## THE REFERENDUM IN ALGERIA

A Letter from Charles F. Gallagher

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PHILLIPS TALBOT  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

During three long, tense days from Friday, September 26, to Sunday, September 28, more than four million electors in Algeria -- Muslim and European civilians, and the French military -- were called to the polls throughout this country. They went in the midst of a revolutionary guerrilla war which has been waged in Algeria since November 1, 1954, and they voted under the psychological weight of a barrage of French propaganda urging a "Yes" vote for the adoption of a new constitution for France and all its overseas territories, and threats of deadly reprisal from the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN), which has recently raised itself to the status of a Provisional Government for the Algerian Republic (GPRA), for any Muslim who took part in the balloting.

To the seemingly simple question asked in the referendum: "Do you approve of the new constitution of the French Republic," the voters of Algeria responded with a seemingly overwhelming voice of approval, expressed in the three official languages used in the voting: French (Oui), Arabic (Na'am), and Berber (Ih).

These are the official figures:

Registered Voters	4,335,009
Voted	3,445,060
Valid Votes	3,416,088
Yes	3,299,908
	(96.5 per cent)
No	115,791*
	( 3.5 per cent)

\* The total of "Yes" and "No" votes does not quite agree with the total valid votes, but this remains a mystery of the official figures.

Percentage of Voters Among Those  
Registered: (79.4 per cent).

In fact the question was not a simple one for Algeria to answer, and the results most certainly do not mean what some observers, especially among the ultrapatriotic groups here and the local press, have assumed they mean: a massive desire among the Muslim population of Algeria to be forever French. In frankness there is almost no one who knows exactly what the vote does mean, although there are suppositions that can be made from it; and there is hardly anyone bold enough to predict concretely what will be the political effects of last week's election on the shape of future relations between France and Algeria. The most that can be done is to offer some comments on the nature and conduct of the referendum, and to scrutinize it as closely as possible. To do this, I have answered some of the principal questions which I put to myself, and to every qualified observer I could find, during and after the polling of the past few days.

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#### Who were the voters?

The grand total of registered voters (4,335,009) has not been broken down by groups. But by careful estimate it includes at least 600,000 Europeans, based on the fact that 65 per cent of the slightly more than one million European-classified segment of the population is over 20 years of age. It also includes 200,000-plus soldiers, that part of the approximately 500,000 French troops here of voting age.

Most observers assume with logic that this group of more than 800,000 Europeans and military voted en masse and voted "Yes," although it is possible that from 10-20 per cent of the "No" vote came from left- and right-wing European extremists (Communists, Progressists, and Poujadists) and the personally disgruntled. This leaves the Muslim voters roughly as follows:

Registered Muslim voters	3,500,000
Muslims actually voting	2,650,000
Muslim "Yes"	2,550,000
Muslim "No"	100,000
Muslim abstentions	850,000.

Thus, one out of four Muslims, approximately 24 per cent, abstained.

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Another category needs treatment, however: those Muslims who, in spite of a high-pressure registration campaign conducted by the military authority responsible for the elections, were not on the registration lists. The Muslim population of Algeria, census of 1954, was 8,600,000, increasing at a rate of around 250,000 a year. This would give about 9,600,000 as the present population, less perhaps 100,000 dead in the rebellion, and 100,000 refugees in Tunisia and Morocco. Assuming a figure of 9,400,000, of which slightly more than 50 per cent is under twenty years of age, the number of potential adult Muslim voters is 4,600,000. (The age group 20-21 contains only around 100,000, owing to the much lower birth rate two decades ago.) This leaves 1,100,000 unregistered Muslims -- unregistered for one of two reasons: (a) they voluntarily followed or were forced to follow FLN orders not to register, or (b) they were in those regions, such as the Collo Peninsula, the Ouarsenis mountain chain, and parts of Kabylie, where French military presence is not strong enough to compel obedience and where, conversely, the FLN consignes are law.

There is really then a two-part breakdown:

(a) Muslims who voted "Yes"	2,550,000
(b) Muslims who did not vote "Yes"	2,050,000
i.e., (1) unregistered	
(2) abstained	1,100,000
(3) voted "No"	850,000
	100,000

Was the referendum a free electoral consultation?

This is the key question and one which can be answered only with considerable reservations. One might say first, to the credit of the military authorities -- who themselves felt that the honor of the French Army was at stake -- that neither I nor anyone I have talked to has seen or heard of any direct physical pressure put on the Muslim population by those in charge of the referendum. Nearly three hundred French and foreign correspondents observed the voting and were free to go anywhere they pleased without prior notification. (This concession had to be fought for, since the Army originally asked for 24-hours' advance notice for visits to some of the more remote areas; but seeing the potential bad publicity on the issue, the Information Office acceded to press demands.)

The attestation of results, presided over by a Control Commission brought from metropolitan France, seemed likewise valid. Indeed, M. Hoppenot, Chief of the Control Commission, specifically asked one French journalist whom I know well -- and who had been arrested in May by the military regime here as "too liberal" -- to look for specific instances of fraud. One possible device feared by the Commission stemmed from the fact that electors' cards were not distributed to the Muslim population, for fear that FLN agents would demand them from terrified Muslims and destroy them just before election day; instead the cards were kept at the polls and had to be claimed by the voter when he presented himself. At the end of the voting day, many poll clerks sat with unused cards (of those abstaining) on their left, ballots (white for yes, purple for no) on their right, and the ballot box in the center. The temptation may have been great for some of them -- one cannot say it was succumbed to -- to stamp the cards, slip a white ballot into an envelope and put it in the box, and so on. M. Hoppenot requested journalists to stay to the end at various polling booths, for he himself had only 1,000 observers for 8,000 booths.

But, as was pointed out to him, if someone were watching the temptation would probably be resisted. Who will ever know?

Although there was no physical constraint, there remains the question of psychological pressure, and of this there was considerable. From the white-washed crosses of Lorraine which dotted the hillsides in the Constantinois to the blinking red-white-and-blue "Oui" neon signs in the harbor of Algiers, the Army went all out in a campaign for a favorable vote. As the correspondent of Le Monde wrote in describing the first day's balloting in Kabylie, "The villagers voted in general as the Army suggested." One wonders if the same organization that is politicking can run a free election.

Eyewitness accounts in some of the remote back-country mechtas of Kabylie, the heart of the rebellion in many ways, were revealing. At Mekla, where the rebels had warned the inhabitants the night before, only four individuals out of five thousand voted. At Djemaa Saharij nearby, the men of the village sat together in uneasy silence in the main square, each waiting for the others to make the first move toward the polls. Word was sent surreptitiously to the officer in charge that if he sent for the villagers they would come to vote. That is, if he would give them an excuse, so that they could tell the fellagha when they returned some future night that they had been forced to vote, they would come. But he refused to do this, saying that his instructions clearly forbade him to interfere in any way. And no one voted.

There is also the touchy issue of indirect pressure outside the election area itself. Does freedom begin in the isolation booth or must it be integral in the society? Two stories suggest the kind of threat that hung over most Muslims. One was the story of ten young Muslims working in Algiers who went back home to vote in the mountains where they were registered. They were anxiously begging a ride from passing army trucks to get to their village in time, because they wanted to bring back proof they had voted. Perhaps they had not been ordered by their employers to bring back proof, but they knew it would be better for their job security, and all around, if they had a stamped card in their wallet. (The stamping of electors' cards is an obvious necessity to prevent double voting, but many Muslims look upon it as a means for the authorities to keep a permanent check on those who voted and those who didn't.)

Another example of the dilemma many Algerians faced was expressed by the teletype operator of a news agency who returned to the office trembling with rage and fear after casting his ballot. An absent-minded clerk had by error stamped his carte d'identité instead of his carte d'électeur. It was like a permanent branding mark on his face, for the difficulties of getting a new identity card are quite something, especially in wartime Algiers. "If I hadn't voted the French would have taken it out on me, and now that I'm marked this way the FLN will find out and cut my throat some day," was the way he summed up his freedom of choice.

Clearly the question is whether, in spite of the most honest efforts by the military -- who did succeed in holding an election far more honest than any Algeria ever saw under previous civilian control -- anything like free elections can be held in Algeria under present circumstances. When two sides are locked in a bloody and desperate battle in the field, the ballot box becomes simply another arena of the struggle, and might prevails over right in one as in the other.

One further consideration is whether the elections were intellectually free in the sense of being fully understood by the participants. What did the vote mean to the voters?

It seems that it had almost as many meanings as there were electors. To the Europeans, of course, in their vast majority, it meant their passionate longing for integration and their desire to find security in the mass of forty-four million Frenchmen at home. To some Muslims, voting for the first time in a collège unique where their vote stood for as much as that of a European, waiting in the queue with the Europeans meant a new equality and dignity.

For many of the Muslim women, who were voting for the first time, the event was the greatest of their lives. They stood, dressed in their Friday best, laughing and chattering outside the polls, only to give way to a stiltedly serious air when they stepped inside the precincts. Most of them had no idea of what to do; some would hold the envelope in one hand and the ballots in the other, clearly wanting to put the "right" color in the envelope in front of the clerk, but, being illiterate, not knowing which to choose. To others in the Sahara, where the level of comprehension was even more primitive, bulletins were given out in at least one case as "For de Gaulle" and "For the fellagha." It would have taken a brave individual to vote for the fellagha under those conditions. At another place in the Sahara the doctor's office served as the election booth and the voting was accompanied by a few nose drops and medical advice for the women; it was the only place to which they had ever gone among the Europeans, and the only place to which they could be persuaded to go without fear.

Finally, it is impossible not to be touched by the story, told me by a French correspondent friend, of seeing two Mzabite women -- the Mzabites are a heretical, fiercely traditional and puritanical Muslim subgroup in the Sahara -- who burst into tears at the polls. They had been girlhood friends and had not seen each other for fifteen years, since their respective marriages. For Mzabite women never leave their husbands' homes and this was the first time they had set foot outside in all that time.

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What, then, are the tentative conclusions that can be drawn from the referendum?

The most important single fact is that the FLN is now weak, much weaker than many suspected, and that the French Army is more respected, or more feared, than the rebels in most cases. The FLN had threatened that it would disrupt the elections, which it failed to do -- there was no unusual activity during the three days of voting -- and it had claimed the power to force a boycott by the Muslims, which it also failed to do. And in this country of ephemeral passions with a strong tendency to bandwagonism, there is a good chance that this show of strength by the French will result in more strength, and that the FLN will lose even more ground as a concomitant of its declined prestige.

The pattern of abstentions seemed to run clearly along lines of force, but it should be mentioned in passing that the abstentions do not always indicate by any means that the abstainers would have said "No" in a truly free

election. It simply meant that there were, in all, around two million Muslims sufficiently under rebel control to be afraid to take part in the referendum.

In the same way the "Yes" vote cannot be taken for granted. All observers of long experience here agree that four years of rebellion, with terror and exactions from one side and fierce repression from the other, have produced a feeling of despair and disgust among large segments of the Muslim population, especially in the urban middle-classes and the artisan and commercial groups which have suffered the most. A majority of the affirmative votes seem to have been an expression of the general feeling: Give us peace at any cost; if de Gaulle can somehow do this (and we suspect he can), then let him go ahead and act as he thinks best.

There are two additional long-range implications for the future of Algeria which appear in the voting.

One is the new bond of honor which has been forged between the French Army and the two and one-half million Muslims who voted "Yes." In deliberately inviting this vote and assuring the Muslims of its protection, the Army has in effect drawn up a contract with them -- counting families, they represent probably half the population of Algeria -- which will be almost impossible to break in the foreseeable future. The FLN, let it be remembered, has put itself on record that it will exercise reprisals against these voters and the Army is obliged to defend them. Thus if there were an attempt on the part of a Paris government to negotiate ever so slightly with the rebels, there is a strong likelihood that the Army would move to protect its honor, just as it did on May 13.

The other is the capital importance of the feminine vote. Apart from the vignettes described above, which lent a certain charm to an otherwise grim election, there is no doubt that voting for the Muslim women was the first step toward an emancipation which they have shown every sign of wanting since some of the first feminist demonstrations connected with the May 13 coup. It will not be so easy from now on to keep them locked up at home, and the maternalistic campaign now being directed by the wives of high army officers to bring Muslim women out into the modern world is playing another part in the strange friendship between the military and the indigenous population. It is always difficult for authorities of one society or religion to make changes in the inner social morale of another group by dictate, but there are many signs that the veil, now beginning to be dropped quietly in numerous individual cases, may come tumbling down with a rush, and that new laws on polygamy -- which would have to be demanded by the Muslim women themselves -- will follow.

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The effect of the referendum on the ultimate outcome of the Algerian revolution, in an operational sense, is problematical; it does not yet appear to have influenced anything. The Europeans should theoretically have been given a boost by it, but they have so far reacted with apathy. The only attempt at a demonstration during the two days following Sunday's voting came to nothing, and the invitation to show the flag for the General's visit has produced nothing like the hysteria of May. Perhaps they feel, as do most observers, that nothing has really been settled.

One need only glance at the newspapers the day after the referendum to see that. The guerrilla actions go on in the maquis, and there is the usual sprinkling of bombs and grenades in the smaller towns. To be sure, rebel activity is much reduced now from what it was two years ago, or even one year ago. Militarily the French position becomes a bit better every day and one sometimes has the feeling that the French are close to crushing the rebellion by force, just as the paratroopers with their much-discussed methods of extreme brutality have made Algiers a safe city once more. But the hard core of the rebellion remains; the end, like an ever-receding infinity, is not quite in sight, and one wonders whether the guard can ever be let down. How safe would Algiers be if there were not paratroop patrols on all the main streets, a midnight curfew, protective grills on all windows, and searches for entry into all public buildings?

General de Gaulle arrives here Thursday in recognition of the fact that Algeria is still France's cancer. Exhortations are being multiplied on all sides for him to pronounce the magic word "Integration," which has acquired as great a mystique for the Europeans here as "Independence" has for most of the rest of the world. It is reported that the General will be told firmly by some of the highest military authorities that nothing less than integration will do. To most of the civilian Europeans this means political integration with France and equality of rights. To the Muslims it stands for a standard of living and economic opportunities equal to that of the European minority. And the Army, without saying much, has given signs of favoring the Muslim conception as the only way to permanent understanding.

When, without even considering the thirty thousand rebels who still abound in the mountains and forests, or those of the two million who said "No" or nothing, there are such widespread differences in the interpretation of a basic word like "Yes," the prospects for an early solution to the Algerian problem cannot be considered good.

Charles F Gallagher