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## AUTOPSY OF A REVOLT - THE OCTOBER RIOTS IN ALGERIA

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Dear Peter,

It was only someone familiar with the city who could pinpoint the damage. Rue Didouche Mourad - the commercial thoroughfare that snakes down from the surrounding hills to the harbor of Algiers - looked almost as I saw it a few months ago. The boutiques had opened up again, the terraces were full of people drinking coffee and enjoying the last warm days of the year.

But there were subtle differences. The lines of people waiting for busses had grown a little longer - many had been destroyed. Suddenly there were no more shortages of pasta or butter in the government supermarkets - they had been restocked overnight. And here and there I observed some small lingering signs of destruction: a few telephone booths without glass windowpanes near the university, the Swiss Air office window carefully taped shut, the Polisario bureau boarded up and abandoned.

Algeria was trying to recover from the first serious riots since its independence in 1962. Even the carefully controlled government daily El Moudjahid was forced to admit that "things will never be as they were before." The official death toll stood at 176; unofficial estimates ranged from 500 to 1,000. When the bloody ten day conflict was over Algeria's youth had profoundly - and irrevocably - shaken the government. President Benjedid had offered his resignation within the Politburo. His taped national address on the sixth day of the riots had been edited to mask his emotional breakdown in front of the cameras.

A number of carefully nurtured myths died alongside the young demonstrators. The mystique of the National Liberation Army (ALN) that had once led the war of liberation (1954-1962) against France evaporated as soon as its recruits shot - with clear commands to kill - at the protesters in the streets. "The Algerian army is no longer the people's army as it pretends," a young university student told me, "it belongs to the rich and to the FLN fatcats." After the horror of that earlier war against the colonial power, some well-documented cases of torture (I saw a couple of its victims at a university meeting) brought a national nightmare back to life. A mujahida (freedom fighter) who lost both legs in a bombing incident during the war had difficulty restraining herself while recounting during lunch how one young man from Belcourt

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

had been abused by the security police in the same building where the french tortured his father. She asked rhetorically, "Was all I did for nothing?"

How could a government known and respected for its skillful international diplomacy react in such brutal fashion against its own young people? It was with this question in mind that I returned to Algiers immediately after the events.

A few centuries ago Ibn Khaldun, the North African sociologist/historian, described the rise and decline of states in a three generation cycle. The first builds the new state, the second consolidates or consumes the gains that were made; the decline of the state completes itself in the third generation. It is clear that this almost mechanistic explanation should not be taken too literally. But the underlying dynamic is difficult to refute. A country's leadership must somehow convince the succeeding generation of the legitimacy of its political system. Only then can some form of consolidation take place.

It is now clear, twenty-five years after independence, that Algeria's rulers have not succeeded in doing so. President Benjedid and the men around him have always linked the raison d'etre for the country's political and economic structure to the War of Independence, now a quarter of a century old. They were confronted this month by a new generation for whom that conflict means little. These young people - 60% are younger than 21 - no longer ask their elders what they did during the war. To them the war is a two hour weekly history lesson. They want to know, as one student bitterly stated during a conversation near the Basilique de Notre Dame d'Afrique, why more than half of them are jobless "while we earn billions per year from natural gas, and Messaadia [the former head of the FLN, the country's only political party] lives like a king?"

There is a very reasonable answer to the first part of the question. After independence Algeria adopted state capitalism, an economic strategy that necessitated internal austerity in order to channel most earnings and savings toward heavy industry. The country's leaders at the time hoped that this economic strategy would lead to a highly diversified economy, producing not only all the goods needed by the Algerian people, but also adequate housing and full employment.

The debate on that initial strategy still rages on. When the economic policy was finally abandoned in the wake of Houari Boumedienne's death, [Algeria's president from 1965 to 1978] two camps emerged. The so-called nationalists considered the economic liberalization under his successor, Chadli Benjedid, a sell-out to international capitalism and treasonous to the egalitarian ideals of the revolution. Chadli and his supporters maintained that the state capitalist model had become outdated, was extremely inefficient and could no longer serve the Algerian people under the changing economic circumstances of the late 1970s and 1980s.

Not surprising, both explanations contain some truth. In the years since Benjedid became president certain groups in the country have profited extraordinarily from the economic privatization. It is this perception that angers many Algerians. A taxidriver echoed what many older Algerians told me informally: he preferred Boumedienne's austerity when "things were tough, but at least we had equal chances." At the other end of the spectrum stand the young who are equally dissatisfied with the economic policies of the current government - paradoxically for the same reasons.

The young student's reference to Mohamed Sherif Messaadia was no coincidence. Together with a number of other FLN officials and ALN officers, he is seen as someone whose close connection to the country's so-called popular institutions netted him a considerable fortune. Most nationalists argue that Benjedid fits squarely within that category. At best, they contend, he represents the interests of those around him. The nationalists consider privatization a ploy to make the rich even richer. The political ouverture that accompanies the economic strategy is seen as an elaborate cover to hoodwink those left out in the financial cold.

The internationalists (as I call them) point out that state capitalism during the 1970s had outlived its usefulness. It had become inefficient, they argue, and could no longer provide the economic services and goods needed by the people. Especially after 1980 when Algeria's income from natural gas started to decline, the only alternative was to let the private sector take over some economic tasks. In the end, they contend, this strategy will lead to greater welfare for a greater number of people.

In a period of relative economic decline, this debate within Algeria is particularly vexing. On all public buildings, the country's official slogan - "From The People, To The People" - is prominently displayed. For a quarter of a century this underlying philosophy of egalitarianism provided, at least in official language, a powerful link of solidarity among the country's citizens. But widening cracks developed in this seemingly smooth facade - and many were linked to the arrogance and hypocrisy of some of the country's officials. While boasting about the country's hospitals and doctors, the three top leaders in 1986 all flew to European countries to have

relatively minor surgery performed: While Messaadia ritually intoned egalitarianism, the opulence of his daughter's marriage was commented on in some of Algeria's upper circles. And the belt of expensive villas at the edge of Algiers are a sign of incredible privilege to the average family in the capital where, according to official statistics, nine people are cramped in small, badly maintained apartments.

When the bifurcation between myth and reality becomes clearly visible even to the man in the street, the government stands to lose some of its legitimacy. Most longtime observers knew that this legitimacy in Algeria was artificially kept in place and severely flawed. As in Tunisia during the Bourguiba era, it masked a growing unease with the pretensions of an authoritarian government. As opposed to Tunisia, however, dissent in Algeria was carefully but ruthlessly suppressed. The FLN officially remained the sole representative of the people, but its significance to most Algerians was as limited as that of the rubberstamping National Assembly. They were both institutions that left no voice to those groups who increasingly clamored for a stake in the country's future: the young, the workers, the Islamists.

How the government handled the riots and its aftermath gives us some clues as to the future of Algerian politics. It was strange, and telling, to see that Algerians were informing themselves about the riots by listening to Radio Monte Carlo, France Inter, the BBC, and by pulling in European TV channels through satellite dishes that have become a common sight in Algiers - despite the fact that the government levies a 300% import tax on already expensive equipment.

During and after the riots, the official Algerian newspapers waged a vicious verbal war against the foreign press and its so-called collaborators inside the country. The argument was all too familiar: "backward social elements" had fomented the riots; Algeria's old enemies - "the neo-colonialists" - had profited from the difficulties to discredit the FLN, "the only institution able to preserve the country's unity." A month after the riots, during the second week of November when the FLN regional congresses were preparing the national congress, party militants were applauded when they demanded the removal of those journalists who do not believe in the "Parti unique." When Kasdi Merbah, the new Prime Minister, talked to the National Assembly at the anniversary of the revolution on 1 November 1987, several delegates made the same demand.

In reality the foreign correspondents - and later a part of the national press corps - reported courageously and conscientiously on the riots. Their task was made extremely difficult by the government's "langue de bois" and by the half-truths and outright lies of some of its representatives. In one notorious case the government issued a statement claiming that Algiers was completely back to normal while in Bab el-Oued, a poor district of the capital, the most murderous confrontation of the entire riots took place between the Army and demonstrators.

Algérie Actualité, a weekly published in french by the Information Ministry, eventually published a number of critical articles. The only question was: why were they only published after the bloody riots? Why had the government completely ignored the complaints about systematic censorship that local journalists had submitted to Bachir Rouis, then Minister of Information, several months before the riots? And why were letters to Algérie Actualité carefully clipped to avoid certain information? (I was able to compare some letters sent by a group of university professors, the organization of mujahidat and from some student groups to their published version.)

Beyond these questions of press coverage loom more crucial issues: why did the government wait until after the riots to introduce changes in the country's political system? Do the new arrangements that followed in the wake of the FLN Congress in December 1988 really hold a promise for a more open - democratic? - political system?

The official answer to the first question is that infighting within the FLN and among those supporting and opposing President Benjedid's economic policies prevented real change; the riots tipped the balance of power in favor of Benjedid's most powerful supporters, allowing the Algerian president to press forward with the much needed reforms.

I think the answer is in essence correct. For years the government had been hobbled by competing factions that stalled reforms. Several supporters of the old-style FLN and of the socialist economic experiment were finally shunted aside, perhaps best demonstrated by the removal of Messaadia and a number of top army brass on two different occasions in November 1988.

But what do these changes mean? Do they imply, as a New York Times editorial would have it, that Algeria has resolutely turned toward a perestroika that deserves the unqualified support of the West? I think we should be a little more discriminating. For a number of reasons Algeria fully deserves our support: its diplomatic record alone (which includes a crucial role in the liberation of the US hostages in Iran) warrants sympathy for the troubles it now

experiences. The Benjedid government has provided cautious and increasingly pragmatic leadership in the Maghreb. Although its image has been somewhat tarnished by the riots, Algeria will remain a key player for diplomatic initiatives in sub-Saharan Africa. It will be the most powerful member of any potential Maghrebi union.

The country will need substantial amounts of financial resources before its new economic strategy starts to pay off. For a number of reasons, the European countries are particularly worried about the economic future of Algeria and the Maghreb. Perhaps most important among these considerations is the haunting specter of North Africa's rapid population growth matched with poorly performing economies. If the Maghrebi economies cannot be turned around and provide local employment, more unemployment and even greater emigration toward the Continent seems unavoidable. With close links to its former colony, France has already extended more than a billion dollars in aid this year. It is the largest single amount ever offered by the Mitterand government and hints at how serious the French government considers the situation.

The difficulties Benjedid faces are immense. He wants to extricate the country from an outdated economic system without riding roughshod over the feelings of those who remember the Boumedienne era as one of idealism and of dedication to the country's revolutionary history. At the same time he hopes to convince a cynical and apolitical young generation to believe in the new economic strategy he advocates.

His monumental task is only slightly ameliorated by the removal of some of the remaining opponents to the country's new economic direction. A crucial aspect of possible success will be the perception among the population that the new economic policies will benefit everyone - and not just a tiny group at the top. Without it labor unrest and popular dissatisfaction, expressed through groups as the Islamists, will continue. The riots, and the promises of political reform that followed in their wake, have further raised the consciousness and the political expectations that Algerians now have of their political system - in a way that will be hard to satisfy. If the government seriously attempts political ouverture it will be most vulnerable until this double gap between political and economic expectations on the one hand and the ability of the country's political system and economy to deliver the goods on the other hand, is closed.

Can Algeria's perestroika work? Perhaps. The intensified privatization strategy will bring with it an even greater struggle over who gets what in Algeria. The country faces an inherent dilemma between the necessity of liberalizing its economy while straightening out its public finances through a policy of reform. This will leave little room for social give-aways. The recent FLN Congress, and the attendant pious declarations and recantations of a new egalitarianism, did not clarify the rights and obligations of all those who will participate - in the trenches or on the sidelines - in that struggle. Whether the recent changes are just another settlement in the "guerre des clans" to get rid of the remnant of Boumedienne's supporters or an eventual real move toward political and economic liberalization remains at this point unclear.

And we should also be aware of this: the recent political moves have clearly shown that it is still the military in Algeria that controls the country's direction. With those members from its ranks gone that were opposed to an Algerian infitah, all those now present have an interest in seeing the privatization succeed. If new measures do not have the expected outcome the military may have no choice but to intervene to make an increasingly far-reaching privatization possible.

A long-time lawyer friend was guardedly and pragmatically optimistic as I prepared to leave. "The government will change," he said, "perhaps not because it really wants to, but, after all that happened, because it has no other choice." He has already been proven right by the most recent national FLN Congress. But are those changes far-reaching enough to convince an apathetic young generation? Will the institutional changes - the adjustment of the rules of the game - effectively translate into political participation? Has there really been some form of structural change - a change of power or access to power - in Algeria? My own evaluation is a little more pessimistic than my friend's. The FLN may decline in importance, some adjustments may be made; but the power behind the institutional facade - the army and a supporting group of economic elites - is perhaps more than ever firmly in control and now has a firm interest in seeing the economic experiment succeed at all cost.

All the best,



Dirk Vandewalle