

WHY DID ALGERIA NOT KNOW ITS OWN ARAB SPRING? THE ISLAMIC HYPOTHESIS

By Mehdi Lazar and*
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ACCORDING TO A SURVEY conducted in 2012 by the Arab Barometer, 84.5% of Algerians are not interested in politics and 52% do not have faith in the political system¹. Such lack of confidence might suggest that Algeria is ready to engage in its own Arab Spring. However, almost a year and a half has passed since the young Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia, sparking a broad movement of revolts in several countries. However, despite some sporadic riots, Algeria remains a long way from emulating the revolts seen in Tunisia, Syria, Libya or Bahrain. This seems paradoxical in a country that was one of the leaders of the decolonization movement.

Factors that could lead to a major revolt have nonetheless long been present in Algerian society. In October 1988, for instance, a large anarchic protest movement led to the fall of the country's single party system. The civil war that followed, however, neutralized the effects of the opening, and the long political hibernation that ensued has failed to resolve the structural problems in Algeria, nor indeed to reconfigure the political field and depose the elite class. During the last decade, the general population has become deeply detached from the power, while the revival of Islam in Algerian society has become an essential component of Algerian political identity. Finally, the civil war rejustified the state in the fight against terrorism. In this context, political Islam could appear both as a factor in the failure of the export of the Arab Spring, but also as a vehicle for changing the Algerian regime.



A STRONGLY DESTABILIZED SOCIETY THAT HAS RECENTLY UNDERGONE A MAJOR REVOLT

In the 1980s, population growth, the oil glut and the lack of economic and political reforms discredited the single-ruling party and led to the war of liberation. Obsolescence of its ideology translated, very procosiously in the Maghreb, into the major riots of October 1988 in which the malaise of society sought to regain control of its freedoms. Following the riots, effective Islamist discourse on inequality and injustice suffered by the people has served to delegitimize the FLN. The transition to a multiparty system, the emergence of a new press and the democratic openness that followed, also operated without discernment, led to what could be called an early "Arab Spring."

However, the Islamists came to power in 1990, and the FIS victory in the legislative elections of 1991 triggered a "coup" carried out by the army, which was designed to block political alternation. From December 1991, Algeria experienced a wave of violence that degenerated, between 1992 and 1998, into a kind of civil war. This conflict arose between the military-backed regime and a complex network of covert Islamist opposition. According to unofficial figures, 60,000 people were killed during this period². In April 1999, a



page was turned with the election of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, military candidate and foreign minister under President Boumediene from 1963 to 1979. This election raised great hopes. The president quickly declared an amnesty limited to those responsible for the violence - the law on civil concord - and promised to implement fundamental reforms to halt the violent crisis that shook the country since 1992. Ironically, the FLN again became the first political force to align themselves with Islamist parties.

However, crisis factors remain: violence and corruption³ are high in Algerian society, and the gross inequalities felt by many social groups translate into a "contempt" of the government. The division between the elites and the rest of the population has not resolved since 1988 despite the emergence of democratic and peaceful elections. In addition, with the absence of political plurality, violence could always be regarded as a last resort to a change in political power structures. This tendency is fueled by unemployment and poor housing, especially among younger people who are mostly skeptical about the "official ideology."

Still, due to the fatigue of a decade of violence, the return of historical violence in the hands of the state - which is legitimized by the fight against terrorism - and the absence of a figure that could centralize discontent significantly reduces Algeria's possibilities of a new popular uprising. Moreover, increased oil revenues since the beginning of the Arab Spring have enabled the Algerian state to buy social peace under these favorable economic conditions.

THE ABILITY OF POWER TO PREVENT MASS MOVEMENT AND THE ROLE OF THE CIVIL WAR

The beginning of the civil war in Algeria in 1992 coincided with the appearance of two phenomena which contribute to preventing the



emergence of a movement similar to the Arab uprisings. On the one hand, because of the violence and the collapse of business, more than 4000 executives and academics have left the country leading to a great brain-drain. On the other hand, the atomization of society into various interest groups seeking protection from the state have exacerbated social segmentation and prevented the emergence of alternative political projects.

This social segmentation is coupled with a generalized sense of fatigue from the years of recent conflict, as the Arab Barometer survey described. Indeed, since 1998, the decline in violence in the country was accompanied by a strong depoliticization of public space and aspiration of the people to a normalization of the political and social situation. The public space Islamized in a more traditional way - especially since the accession to power of President Bouteflika, who relies on a strong network of religious brotherhoods such as Zawiya Tidjania - while political Islam returned to normal. There has also been a strong national discontent – a *décitoyenneté* movement – in the behavior of Algerians.

In addition, with terrorist threats still real and valid in Algeria, intelligence services are paying very close attentive to any social movement. Other countries in the region are also considered, rightly so, as "police states" or "authoritarian states," but none, before the Arab revolts, were based on such knowledge and on a territorial and societal network as dense as Algeria's. The terrorism of the 1990s provided both legitimate violence in the hands of the government but also developed security skills to counter the terrorist threats posed by AQIM and defused the crisis' that shook the country in Kabylia and elsewhere. The persistence of news linked to Al-Qaeda's

presence in Algeria continues to question the legitimacy of the Algerian government in their fight against terrorism, and has helped justify the blockage of internal and external policies and maintained a state of national emergency.

With this effective device, the Algerian government carefully watched any propagation of Arab uprisings in the country. When calls for demonstrations appeared in January and February 2011, including the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (NCCD - bringing together opposition parties, representatives of civil society and trade union non-officials) who wanted a "system change," the government reacted quickly. It firmly outlined its

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desires to grant some progress. This was the case for the announcement of the lifting of the state of emergency (in force for more than 19 years) and measures in favor of employment and housing, especially for young people. Oil revenues clearly served to buy social peace. As recalled by the researcher Luis Martinez⁴, the annuity provided the Algerian regime with comfortable foreign exchange reserves. Recently, the IMF urged Algeria to increase its financial participation in terms of cash acquired due to the soaring prices of oil and gas.

The appearance of a democratic regime also prevents this or that politician from being the target of any mass demonstrations (as was the case with Ben Ali in Tunisia). With the authorization of the creation of sixty political



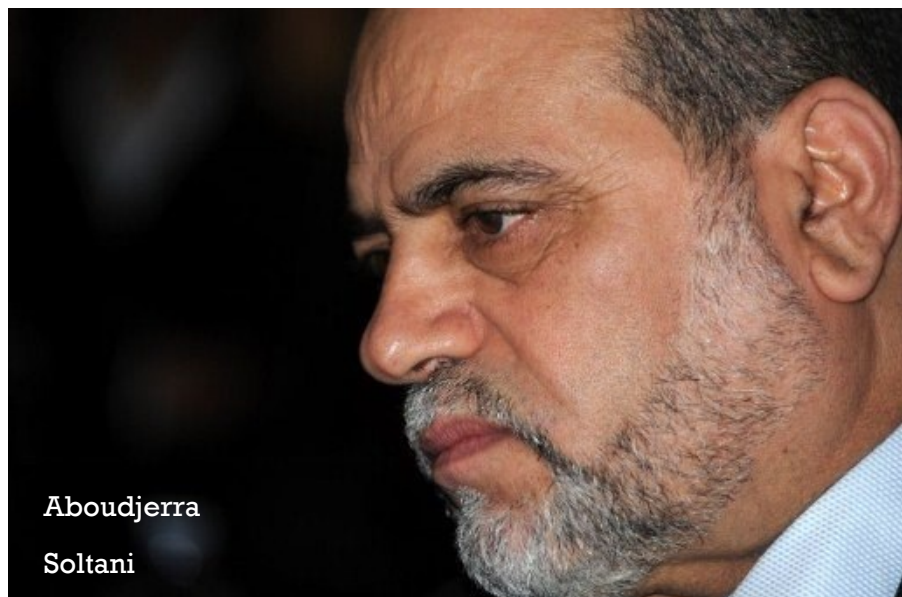
parties, power has been parceled out to the political field which has been given more of a democratic face. In addition, many parties did not call for demonstrations. This difference is significant because other revolutions have occurred outside of a political party, through social networks and the massive presence of young people in the streets and symbolic sites. In Algeria, the ban on demonstrations and the harsh dispelling of small mobilizations stand out alongside the political movement growing in neighboring countries. Finally, the regime survives the chronic instability of a power split into rival clans due to the existence of an unofficial "red line" that the rival clans will not cross if it could potentially weaken the system. This has long been true for Islamist parties but political realignments in the wake of the end of President Bouteflika's reign could change that.

ISLAM AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL PEACE AND POTENTIAL POLITICAL ALTERNATIVE

Islam has become an essential component of political and cultural Algeria. Still, according to the Arab Barometer, 47.02% of respondents believe that the laws in Algeria should be inspired by Islamic Shari'a. This factor was indeed taken into account early on by the Algerian government. The regime has compromised with Islamist parties for several years: Abdelaziz Belkhadem, general secretary of the National Liberation Front (FLN) and former Prime Minister (2008-2010) has long supported the Islamists. President

Bouteflika has also embarked on the construction of the Great Mosque, the third largest religious building in the world (after those in Mecca and Medina) at a cost exceeding one billion dollars. The Islamization of power is also illustrated by the growing number of convictions for proselytism against Catholic missionaries or, in the summer of 2011, the conviction of two construction workers for non-observance of fasting during the month of Ramadan.

A recent trend of empowering Islamist parties is increasing due to the prospect of the end of Bouteflika's presidency. Three parties affiliated with the Islamist movement officially came together on March 7, 2012 to give birth to the Green Algeria Alliance in view of the parliamentary elections on May 10, 2012. The party is under the aegis of Aboudjerra Soltani, president of MSP (Society Movement and peace represented by four ministers in the government), Hamlaoui Akouchi, Secretary General of El Islah movement and Fateh Rebai, secretary general of Ennahda. The coalition aimed to lead the government from the May 2012 legislative elections, imitating the examples of Morocco, Tunisia and Libya. The MSP has also broken its



Aboudjerra
Soltani



commitment in the coalition alongside the FLN and RND in order to henceforth integrate itself with the broader Islamic movement, similar to what the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan did with the AKP. The results were not the one anticipated but the coalition tries the long run.

CONCLUSION

The fiftieth anniversary of Algerian independence in July 2012 resembled other anniversaries in terms of who governs the country. Several factors may explain this inertia experienced in Algeria when compared to recent events in Tunisia and Egypt. Algeria offers the ultimate image of a fully domesticated political climate whose politics are excluded, directly or indirectly, from those who still continue to question the system change. Aboubekr Benbouzid Minister has thus been minister of Higher Education and National Education since 1994.

The legacy of the 1990s, as well as the fragility and the discrediting of parties in a closed political system, has led to a profound disaffection of citizens towards politics, as well as a situation that favors short-and medium-term preservation of the established order. In addition, the volatility of the Sahel and the grip of the Islamists in northern Mali finally confirms the fact that Western powers will not support overly brutal or violent reform movements. Europe in particular is fearful of this scenario.

It remains that socially, Algeria is sitting on a volcano, and many people including those within the regime, fear an explosion: 70% of the Algerian population is under 30 years of age. Under the impact of the clash of generations, medium and long term change is inevitable. The lack of structure in Algerian society for independent political parties to defend their programs and projects in an open and competitive system poses

a risk for the country to again pave the way for Islamism. The end of radical Islam⁵, as announced by some scholars was warmly celebrated by the Algerian press. Yet, if radical Islamism has thus far failed to take power and has suffered the effects of the terrorist drift of its radical fringe, it may eventually, amid social crisis and authoritarianism, represent again an outstanding alternative to changing the system.

NOTES:

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1. Report from the Arab Barometer on Algeria. Available at: [<http://www.arabbarometer.org/reports/countryreports/algeriareport.pdf>]
2. According to figures from Monty Marshall and Ted Robert Gurr (Minorities at Risk program of the University of Maryland at College Park). See the website of the University of Sherbrooke: [<http://perspective.usherbrooke.ca/bilan/servlet/BMListeConflits?type=CW>].
3. See the Index of Corruption Perceptions 2011 from Transparency International : [http://www.transparence-france.org/e_upload/pdf/classement_ipc_2011.pdf].
4. Luis Martinez, « Algérie : les illusions de la richesse pétrolière », in *Les études du CERI*, n° 168, September 2010.
5. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad, expansion et déclin de l'islamisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1997.