

## **Algeria: one century of crisis**

**Algeria is misunderstood in France and raises memories that would rather be forgotten. The article aims to fill the gap in understanding about Algeria in France.**

As a contemporary witness of the "Algerian War," which I followed very closely by studying its causes, I can attest to the significant importance of France for Algeria. This is evident not only because a portion of Algeria's population is straddling the Mediterranean—residents in France often visit "the homeland," while Algerian residents frequently travel to France for professional or family reasons—but also due to the many who wish to settle there but are unable to do so due to visa restrictions.

For France, the importance of Algeria may be less apparent, and I have often noted an ignorance of the recent past that hinders understanding of this important neighbor.

France landed in Algeria in 1830, and the conquest lasted about twenty years, with sporadic unrest continuing until 1870.

Then came a period of calm under an original legal regime: "French Algeria," with the same laws as in France, except for the denial of voting rights to Muslims, which were reserved for the 10 to 20% (depending on the period) of Pieds-noirs (French citizens of European descent living in Algeria).

However, problems began to accumulate from the 1930s onwards.

Since independence in 1962, Algeria has faced crisis after crisis: economic, cultural, and political.

The curse of oil explains most of the problems.

### **The roots of independence**

Historically, the National Liberation Front (FLN) was formed by a Francophone elite whose members had been disillusioned by the refusal of equal rights with the Pieds-noirs (French citizens of European descent living in Algeria).

I personally have photocopies of their archives, which have been published in Algeria: they are in French, and the tone could resemble that of a Western political party.

The career of the nationalist leader Ferhat Abbas is exemplary: he initially demanded equality, meaning practical assimilation, but the refusal of any reform by the Pieds-noirs, who were well represented in Paris, pushed him towards nationalism, and he became the first president of independent Algeria.

Indeed, this Algerian elite endured a series of setbacks during the 20 years before the insurgency:

- The failure in 1936 of the Blum-Violette reform, which proposed a very gradual granting of full French citizenship to Muslim elites.
- The loyalty of Maghreb soldiers to their French leader during World War II, in an atmosphere of equality among soldiers, an equality lost upon their return home.
- The massacres of Sétif in 1945 in retaliation for a nationalist demonstration.
- The rigging of the 1947 elections, with the first government of De Gaulle granting limited voting rights to Muslims...

The insurgency was launched in 1954, initially with instructions not to harm Europeans. However, it quickly became apparent that in order to gain the support of the masses, it was necessary to brandish the flag of Islam and Arab identity, and to use terrorism against both Muslims and "Europeans."

This term was used to refer to the Pieds-noirs, predominantly "Mediterranean," often of French nationality for only two generations, with origins from Spain, Malta, or indigenous Jews who became French thanks to the "Crémieux Decree" of 1870.

## **The independence and the role of the army**

During the war for independence, a new factor emerged that would transform future Algeria: the discovery of significant oil deposits in the Sahara.

I use the term "war for independence," which is neutral, rather than the official Algerian term "war of liberation," as some Algerians believe they still lack political freedom since the military has effectively been in power since independence.

General De Gaulle, not wanting to leave Algeria on a military defeat, had committed resources to winning the war, which was achieved in 1961.

This led to the generals' coup of April 21, 1961, also known as the Algiers putsch: why grant independence when we have won the war?

Today, the staunchest supporters of "French Algeria" are forced to admit that if we had kept Algeria within the French nation, the population of France, thus enlarged, would be predominantly Muslim.

The war was militarily won, and a ceasefire became honorable. This historical fact is little known, with most of my interlocutors saying, "if France left Algeria, it's because it was defeated."

But the FLN took advantage of the ceasefire to politically control the country, even if it meant resorting to terror.

And the Pieds-noirs, feeling betrayed by De Gaulle, engaged in terrorist actions of the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète (OAS), indiscriminately killing Muslims as well as "Gaullist traitors sent by Paris," making it impossible for them to remain in independent Algeria.

However, the negotiation of the Evian Accords aimed at providing them with guarantees for their future in Algeria.

## **The economic crisis behind the oil prosperity**

Independent Algeria pursued socialism for several reasons. Firstly, it was somewhat fashionable globally in the 1960s. Additionally, the USSR had been a significant ally during the war against France.

One of the government's initial actions was to establish a national industry, modeled after the heavy industry of the USSR. This required importing both equipment and labor. Ultimately, however, this industry never became competitive.

Similarly, the nationalization of agriculture led to the need to import food. It was even said at the time, "since the Sahara became socialist, we've had to import sand."

Fortunately, oil and gas revenues covered up these mistakes. A retired minister once told me, "Morocco develops better than us because it cannot afford to make mistakes, whereas we have oil money to pay for ours."

However, after a series of errors, Algeria was forced to turn to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in 1994, which provided the necessary loans on the condition that the country abandon socialism. This transition occurred very slowly and partially.

Some of the massacres between Islamists and civilian populations after this date were allegedly related to rivalries over land to be privatized.

For those in power, particularly the top military brass, it's crucial to maintain control over import licenses and oil revenues.

In essence, the ideal for the government is an economy limited to the distribution of imports, which is widely known.

Consequently, a significant portion of Algeria's economy boils down to paying for imports with oil money. In times of low oil prices, the country can face insolvency within a few months, although prices have typically rebounded in time.

Since the war in Ukraine, Algeria has even presented itself as a "bridge" (official term) for delivering gas to Europe, partially replacing Russian gas.

## **The political crisis and the Hirak**

We have seen that at the time of the ceasefire in 1962, there were practically no more independence forces left within Algeria.

At independence, it was therefore the "army of the borders," which had been stationed in Tunisia and Morocco for years without being able to enter Algeria and thus never having fought, that arrived and imposed military rule.

I will skip over the events that could have triggered a democratic evolution but all failed.

This is a psychologically fundamental point: this army, having not fought, had no legitimacy.

It attempted to acquire one, which is now official: "we represent the fighters who liberated the country, and we must always fight against France."

From 1999 to 2019, power was officially in the hands of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who became increasingly ill and weakened.

The echoes of the Arab Spring in 2010 and the president's illness triggered a series of massive protests, known as "the Hirak."

The president eventually resigned, and the army organized presidential and legislative elections, which resulted in Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a former Prime Minister under Bouteflika, being elected as president.

The Hirak was interrupted by the Covid-19 and did not resume afterward. Many of its leaders are currently imprisoned.

## **Cultural issues have been manipulated for political purposes**

Algeria's official language is Arabic, specifically Modern Standard Arabic, which is not quite the same as literary Arabic and even further from Quranic Arabic, but it is not the mother tongue of anyone.

A portion of the social elite speaks French, while the rest of the population speaks Darija (colloquial Arabic) or Berber languages, with Kabyle being the most significant.

I have sometimes heard the slogan "a French speaker is a traitor, a Berber speaker is a separatist."

The official religion being Islam, and the Quran being valid only in Arabic, this language is not only official but also religious and to some extent sacred.

English is gaining increasing importance, partly as is the case worldwide and for similar reasons, and partly because the state promotes it to reduce the influence of French.

French remains widely used in both public and private enterprises, in written form and to a lesser extent orally. The linguistic issue adds to the economic organization to limit the country's development.

So far, oil revenues have masked the underdevelopment, but it is likely that the economic truth will eventually come to light, one way or another.

The question of Berber languages, especially Kabyle, has recently evolved. It is very irritating for the authorities that French is the second language of Kabyles.

Like Morocco, a sleight of hand has been employed, which can be summarized as follows: "Berber languages become official (without specifying which one), they will be transcribed not in Latin characters as in Kabylie nor in Arabic characters, but in an alphabet that was unknown a few years ago, the Tifinagh script" (see the second part of my article on Kabylie).

To illustrate this, official inscriptions, such as road signs and administrative buildings' facades, are written in Tifinagh alongside Arabic and Latin characters.

This measure, which is supposed to cater to Berber speakers, does not at all protect their language: what matters is learning in primary school using standard, Latin characters in Kabylie and Arabic characters elsewhere.

This would require a massive teacher training program, which as far as I know, has not really been initiated, while it would have been much simpler to use the significant corpus of Kabyle texts in Latin characters.

In short, the policy of Arabization of the Kabyles continues. Hence the regular disturbances in this region, such as the Berber Spring in 1980.

All of this is therefore not conducive to French-Algerian reconciliation, which is also not desired in Algiers.

To illustrate, I will cite Algeria54, which presents itself as an "Algerian electronic newspaper covering Algerian and international news" and does not hesitate to call our president a "would-be dictator", accuses him of racism for wanting to boost the fertility of "whites", all accompanied by numerous negative or aggressive comments. Notice in passing the very name of this newspaper which refers to the 1954 uprising. We always come back to the same topic.

## **Some efforts of reconciliation on the French side**

Emmanuel Macron dreams of a trip to Algeria accompanied by great popular success, as Jacques Chirac did in his time. But first, reconciliation is needed, which is necessary anyway, if only because of the importance of the Algerian-origin community in France.

Administratively, in France, Algerian citizens number around 900,000, to which must be added several hundred thousand from the second generation. Seen from Algiers, they are more than 5 million because "one cannot lose Algerian nationality."

It would be interesting to know how many feel French or Algerian, but how? A few decades ago, the French right pointed to requests for exemption from French military service on the pretext "I will do it in Algeria," which would have proved a prior attachment to that country.

But in fact, for various reasons, they did not do it in Algeria either (where it was longer and harder than in France), so it proved nothing.

Other reasons to have a good relationship with Algeria are to limit damage to the French language and economic relations that are no longer very important.

In this spirit, France has undertaken symbolic gestures. Despite the seemingly good intentions of President Teboune, nothing comes to fruition due to the weight of the army, opposed to reconciliation.

## **The contrast with Morocco is striking**

To conclude, I will draw a parallel with its neighbor, Morocco, where I have been going often and for a long time, just like in Algeria.

For many foreigners, Morocco is seen as a kind of poor Algeria, lacking in oil. Whenever oil prices rise, Algeria gets richer, and Morocco gets poorer.

The same linguistic questions (Darija, French, Berber languages) arise in both countries.

But the reality is different:

- Firstly, the political atmosphere, while not excellent, is much better than in Algeria, especially regarding freedom of national and foreign information, with less influence from Islamists.
- Moroccans have maintained good relations with French companies, unlike Algeria. They produce and export a wide range of products, from automobiles to off-season fruits, and thus live off their work rather than the oil windfall like Algerians.

Moreover, Moroccans and Algerians are almost at war over the Western Sahara, most of which is de facto attached to Morocco, while Algeria maintains an army of Sahrawi independence fighters. By striving to remain neutral in this conflict, France has angered both countries.

Very recently, seeing the great difficulty in relations with Algeria, France has started to lean towards Morocco and settle the (in my opinion, very minor) dispute with this country.

The Moroccan example thus shows that the Algerian evolution could have been much better.

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