

Algeria: Behind the Silence

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ALGERIA, FOR THE time being, no longer makes headlines in the world's press, and in the country itself the enthusiasm, the tumultuous crowds and joyous days of 'voluntary socialist work' have been replaced by an ominous silence. What does this silence hide? Is it the 'seriousness and efficiency' promised by Colonel Boumedienne after the coup d'état, allegedly to replace the 'opportunism and publicity socialism' of the Ben Bella administration? Or, on the contrary, is it stagnation and the refusal of the masses to identify themselves with a movement which from the start had placed all their previous revolutionary achievements in question?

Today the new team seems solidly installed in power. They have struck serious blows at the Organization of Popular Resistance by arresting a number of its leaders. By police methods and other pressures they have subdued public opposition in the F.L.N. and other mass organizations. They have also reinforced their control of national and regional administrations and eliminated 'Ben Bellist elements'. Whilst consolidating its power in this way, the 'Council of the Revolution' has continued to restate its fidelity to socialism, its sole aim, so it says, being to 'correct the deviations introduced by "personal power"' (meaning the presidency of Ben Bella).

It will be useful to draw up a balance sheet to see how the declarations and promises of the new regime have been fulfilled in practice.

On June 19th, 1965, Colonel Boumedienne drew up the list of accusations against Ben Bella's administration and also stated the aims of the new team which would 'work to bring about a democratic state administered by laws based on moral principles . . . substitute honesty for the love of luxury, hard work for improvisation, State morality for impulsive reactions—in other words, Socialism in conformity with the realities of the country, as opposed to Socialism of opportunism and loud publicity.'

No reference was made to the 'Charter of Algiers', nor to nationalisation and the carrying out of land reform which had just been approved by the Central Committee of the F.L.N. These omissions confirmed the rightist tendency of the coup d'état which had been immediately welcomed by the most retrograde forces in the country—large landowners fearing land reform; rich traders anxious to increase their

personal wealth from assets acquired more or less legally after the exodus of Europeans; counter-revolutionaries camouflaged under the very convenient banner of the 'Al-Qiyam' organization (nominally 'for the defence of Islamic principles') or the 'Oulemas' (whose late president, Sheikh Brahimi, had condemned socialism as contrary to Islam). The wave of hysterical anti-communism which was launched soon afterwards, further emphasised the reactionary tendencies which came to life with the coup.

After the first few days, during which the forces most hostile to socialism had demonstrated rather imprudently in a sort of counter-revolutionary festival, one had to come back to realities. First of all, it was evident that the Algerian masses, particularly the workers, would not follow along this path. They had been caught off balance by the failure of the F.L.N. to resist the coup, and also by the demagoguery of the 'Council of the Revolution' denouncing certain real weaknesses of the Ben Bella Government. But they were not ready to give up without a struggle the real achievements of the revolution.

Another practical problem very quickly emerged, which was revealed within the Council of the Revolution itself as well as the official F.L.N. Committees and the Government—the class struggle. True the 'Council of the Revolution' is almost entirely composed of soldiers (twenty-three out of twenty-five). Most of the Government members are men of the former A.N.P. (National People's Army). The secretariat of the F.L.N. is controlled by five army officers. But this does not provide a homogeneous ruling group. There is nothing in common between men like Abdelaziz Zerdani, supporter of the Algiers Charter, Ahmed Kaid, who defines socialism as 'a state of the soul', Abdesselam Belaid, advocate of a 'liberal economy', Bouteflika, who is primarily concerned with good relations with the West and is bitterly anti-Communist, and Saout el Arab, who is still deeply involved with the aspirations of the poor peasants and very ill at ease among the new rulers.

Lower in the hierarchy of those who participated in or applauded the putsch, the differences are even more acute. Even if some knew just what they were doing, others among the officers and rank and file are concerned about the revival of reaction, and wonder whether they have not opened the gates to a flood which threatens in due course to overwhelm them too.

Subjected to these contradictory pressures, the new regime is compelled to multiply its declarations in favour of the aims of the revolution (declarations which, thus far, have not convinced the public), while at the same time avoiding any action which would prejudice the conservative forces which constitute its effective base.

DISTRUST AND HOSTILITY

This policy, resulting in a sort of immobility, could be considered a minor evil. But the blows struck against the revolutionary forces have further consequences. According to all reports, it is not the 'seriousness and efficiency' of the official declaration which is the most noticeable feature of Algeria 'free from "personal power"'. On the contrary, if change there has been, it is for the worse. Never has the administration, now left in the hands of the colonialist-trained civil servants, acted with such inefficiency and lack of democracy; never has it been so costly. 'Austerity for all,' was the demagogic slogan of the 'Council of the Revolution', accusing its predecessors of 'squandering public funds'. However it was the former President who got Parliament to adopt the principle of a 'Socialist Maximum Income', to restrain the appetites of top civil servants who awarded themselves scandalously high salaries. This principle has been forgotten. Despite Boumedienne's promise that public expenditure would be curtailed he has approved a new budget providing for increased expenditure (from 3,052 million dinars in 1965 to 3,200 million in 1966). The main increase is the allocation for the Ministry of the Interior, which speaks for itself. As for the army—one is never so well served as by oneself!—it is allocated the sum of 490 million dinars, 15 per cent of the total budget. Not bad for an army whose personnel numbers less than 60,000 men.

However the best test of the aims of the new regime is to examine its attitude towards the socialist sector and the system of self-management. Ben Bella had very clear views on this question. 'I note,' he said, 'that the belittlement of self-management only reflects the hidden ambition of rich Algerians to see a return to private enterprise and its unjust profits. If these designs are realised it means the end of socialism.'*

The 'tough measures and a clear policy to get out of the depression' announced in the 'Council of the Revolution's' proclamation on economic questions could be interpreted as a first attack on workers' self-management. This interpretation was confirmed by Colonel Boumedienne's call for private investment, in his speech opening the Algiers Fair, and also by certain decisions to hand back to their former owners the 'Norcolor' enterprise and lands in the region of Lakhdaria (ex-Palestro). These measures of denationalisation caused such a stir among the workers that Col. Boumedienne was forced to state that he was not against the principle of self-management enterprises, but they had to be run on 'profitable lines'. It remains to be seen what the

*Robert Merle: *Ahmed Ben Bella*, p. 183 (French edition).

State intends to do to help the self-management sector to overcome the teething troubles inevitable in the early stages of all socialist experience. It would appear that the present regime is not protector and ally of the self-management sector against the private sector, but instead, and increasingly, the instrument of the latter.

'The era of paternalistic self-management is over,' writes *Revolution Africaine* amplifying Boumedienne's words. 'No more favours; self-managed enterprises will have to pay company taxes. No more subsidies; they will have to provide for depreciation of plant. In a word: rational management. It is only after this type of experience that we shall be able to pass a definite judgment on self-management.'

This 'tough' attitude is only in one direction. Nothing is said about the obligations of the 'revolutionary' authorities towards the socialist sector. Nor is it confined to words. With unusual efficiency, practical measures were taken by the regime. The government blocked the bank accounts of self-management enterprises which were in arrear with taxes, making it impossible for them to pay out wages. To make matters worse, the government refuses to pay its own debts to those enterprises. Thus the 'timber combine' UDIBA, which groups various enterprises employing 600 workers has not been able to pay wages for two months. The same applies to the metallurgical works 'Cometal' employing 500 workers. Other enterprises which owe no debts to the state, and which are run profitably, get no better treatment. The public works enterprise S.O.T.R.A.B.A. owes nothing to the state. It has during the year fulfilled contracts worth 10 million francs, and has been run on economic lines. It is nevertheless threatened due to lack of contracts from the government. Signed contracts are being cancelled and given to private firms. For example a contract for the construction of a textile factory has been cancelled in favour of a French firm, S.O.P.R.A.F.O.M., which had quoted a higher price.

No doubt these measures have been taken to 'establish confidence' among capitalists, especially French firms; but this is certainly not the way to test the validity of the principle of self-management by the workers. Whatever the true intentions of the new rulers, it is the best way to demonstrate the 'failure' of the system, not only in industrial but also in agricultural self-management enterprises. That the position on self-managing farms is no better was shown by recent strikes of agricultural workers in the Mitidja and Oran districts.

It is hardly surprising, in these circumstances, that despite the tone of the declarations of intention by Colonel Boumedienne, the workers have maintained their attitude of distrust and hostility towards the regime.

SEARCH FOR A DOCTRINE

The difficulties which the new rulers face in maintaining cohesion among their followers were highlighted by the meeting of the 'Council of the Revolution' at the end of 1965. How to reassure the big landowners who were relieved at the ousting of Ben Bella, who was identified with land reform—and also the fellahs who are awaiting the long promised distribution of land? How to avoid clashing with the workers in self-managed enterprises—and at the same time please the capitalists who desire the downfall of these enterprises? How to bring together the men who remain faithful to socialist principles and others who are impatiently waiting for 'total liberalization' of the economy to make huge profits?

The 'Council of the Revolution' has to live with all these contradictions. The new F.L.N. has failed to define a common programme. They declare their dislike for what they call 'the Socialism of Ben Bella'. But in fact what they have rejected is the analysis of Algerian society with its different classes and the definition of Algeria's path to socialism, based on Marxist principles, as reflected in the Charter of Algiers.

One of the charges against Ben Bella most vehemently pressed by Hourari Boumedienne was that he 'divided the people' by defining different classes. Ben Bella had rightly seen that a new stage in the path to socialism had arrived, in which the sacred union of all classes within the nation which existed during the war of liberation could no longer subsist. It was essential to attack the landlords and capitalists and all who had an interest in the maintenance of a system of exploitation. Ben Bella was not the only one to defend this concept. The second Congress of the F.L.N. had formulated it as follows in the Charter of Algiers:

The nature of revolutionary power is to defend the interests of the working classes which constitute its social foundation. They cannot fail to clash with the privileged classes which comprise all those who on one way or another own the means of production and also the bureaucratic bourgeoisie.

The new regime has turned its back on these class conceptions. They even go so far as to deny that there is any basic difference between the war of liberation and the struggle for the transformation of society.

'Personal power (i.e. Ben Bella)', says Colonel Boumedienne, 'had sown dissension in our ranks. He tried to tell us that the struggle for independence was different to the present one being waged for socialism.'

In the name of a 'return to the source', the 'spirit of the First November' is exalted—that is, the union of all classes, as opposed to the 'attempts at division' said to mark the previous administration.

These are not merely theoretical disputes. The forsaking of the class concept has immediate consequences, particularly regarding the social composition of the membership of the F.L.N. It amounts to a rejection of the constitution approved by the Second Congress, which required that 'a member of the Party shall not exploit the labour of another', and stated that 'the Party draws its strength from the peasants and the workers'. Unfortunately there had not been enough time to apply this constitution to create a truly revolutionary party. But it did lay down a general direction, and that is what is being abandoned today. Sherif Belkacem's concept of a party 'open to all', rejected by most conscious militants, has been adopted in practice. It is hard to see how it could be at the same time, as claimed by the authors of the coup, 'a vanguard Party'. The official F.L.N., supervised by the 'Council of the Revolution' which has proclaimed itself 'the supreme organ of the Party' is nothing but an appendage of the military authorities.

Although the new rulers are very lavish in their criticism of 'personal power' and the 'foreign ideologies it had introduced', they are less confident when defining their own 'socialism'. Apart from certain vague slogans such as 'Authentic Algerian Socialism', and 'a revolution which needs the advice of no one', they avoid more precise definitions which could shatter the very fragile unity which can only last as long as confusion persists. But how long can that be? That is why the 'Council of the Revolution' has set up a Commission 'to elaborate an ideological policy'—prudently avoiding any definition of its main objectives.

The long-awaited land reform has also been discreetly referred to by another Commission, in the following terms:

The Council of the Revolution decides to create a Commission under its supervision to prepare the introduction of land reform as from 1966. This Commission will define the land area to come under reform, determine the most economical ways of its introduction and define the methods of administration. The land reform in question will aim at improving the standard of living of the poorer peasants and speeding up agricultural development.

Not a word about the necessity to attack the privileges of the large landowners and feudal landlords; not even a word about the limitation of large estates. The extent of this backward step can be measured when we remember the clearly stated position of the Second F.L.N. Congress:

There are in Algeria 8,500 farms of 100 hectares and 15,000 farms of more than 50 hectares. These 23,000 farms cover nearly 4½ million hectares, leaving 7 million hectares to be divided into 600,000 farms. To carry out a revolution one must not hesitate to attack privileged positions wherever they may be. Therefore our land reform plan will limit the size of farms and will only affect the large landowners and some medium sized farms.

The meeting of the F.L.N. Central Committee in June 1964 defined the procedure for carrying out the Congress decisions:

The next stage of the agrarian revolution must aim at liquidating the large estates. Consequently:

1. It will only affect the very large landowners;
2. It will respect the small and medium estates as well as their livestock;
3. The land reclaimed by the above limitations of large estate shall be dealt with as follows, taking into account the economic and social requirements:
 - Integrated in the socialist sector as self-managed units;
 - Farmed by co-operative organisations;
 - Farmed by individual farmers.

Land reform shall be carried out by the peasants themselves, through the setting up of Communal Committees of poor peasants and landless peasants.

All these decisions seem to have been forgotten, as no more is heard of them and the Commission starts from scratch, as if no prior document was available. One can well imagine in what direction the reactionary forces will try to influence a reappraisal of land reform.

THOSE WHO ARE SATISFIED

In the light of this short analysis of the decisions of the 'Council of the Revolution', its compromises and silence on vital problems, one can agree with the gist of a pamphlet distributed by the underground F.L.N. in Algeria:

The new regime confirms that it has not emerged only to 'correct' the lack of collective leadership of the F.L.N. The new regime seems to be dominated by, and is identified with, the bureaucratic petty bourgeoisie, frightened by the rise of the working class. It has—consciously in some, unconsciously in others—become the instrument of the exploiting classes, in its permanent aims of undermining the socialist core of the Algiers Charter as well as the revolutionary and anti-capitalist element of the Tripoli programme.

If Algerian revolutionaries and the true friends of the Algerian people are disturbed on examining the above 'balance-sheet', the neo-colonialists and international capitalism seem extremely pleased with it. The French Minister for Algerian Affairs, M. de Broglie, addressing the Foreign Relations Committee of the National Assembly, expressed his satisfaction at the 'political situation which we are justified in welcoming'.

His satisfaction is understandable. Dealing with a country with growing economic problems, headed by a government without an ideology and isolated from the people—hence able to offer less resistance—political and economic blackmail becomes much easier. The pressures being exercised by France are well illustrated by the problem of Algerian wine exports. The de Gaulle government not only shows

no sign of responding to urgent Algerian demands for the immediate future, but has not even carried out its commitments for the past year. Twenty million hectolitres (the equivalent of one and a half crops) are waiting in the cellars to be sold; essentially the decision is in the hands of the French government.

Algeria is also tied to France by the necessity for her to request (annually, since the three-year period stipulated in the Evian Agreement has now expired) the renewal of French aid. The amount of aid is not stipulated in advance; the purse strings can be tightened in accordance with the goodwill or otherwise of the creditor, who has moreover to approve the way the funds shall be used. A very large part of this aid (120 million francs out of the 480 million promised for 1966) must be used for the purchase of industrial equipment in France.

Following the oil agreement negotiated by the Boumedienne government, new French-Algerian negotiations are taking place. Their subject will be Algerian requests that French aid should be stipulated for several years to allow for long-term planning. They will also deal with the role of the 'Organization of Industrial Co-operation', a French-Algerian Committee which will play a part in planning of the industrial development of Algeria. In the expert hands of powerful financiers it can become an ideal instrument of neo-colonialism. Unfortunately, one must note that the present Algerian team is not as well equipped as the previous one to meet these dangers, and put to Algerian advantage the positive aspects of the 'co-operation agreements'. To carry out a policy of 'progressive disengagement from the sphere of imperialism', as laid down in the Charter of Algiers, requires a government with the solid support of the masses of people and in close co-operation with the socialist countries.

AND NOW ?

And now, where is Algeria going? It is still too early to see what will be the final outcome of the contradictory tendencies within the 'Council of the Revolution'. It is also too early to discern what forms will be taken by the struggle between the revolutionary masses and the privileged classes; between the believers in true socialism and those who want a return to the past. What is certain is that this struggle is already developing and is having repercussions even within the ranks of those who carried out or welcomed the coup. We can already note that, in spite of the possibilities of reaction, the forces most hostile to socialism have not been able to attain their aim of the total destruction of the achievements of the revolution. They have scored points, but have to work behind the scenes.

As regards foreign policy we can even note that these forces have

been forced to retreat, as well illustrated by Boumedienne's visit to Moscow. In the first weeks of the new administration (whose birth had been warmly welcomed in Washington and Bonn, men who had played an important role in the putsch, such as Bouteflika, Minister of Foreign Affairs and Kaid Ahmed, the new Finance Minister, did not hide their desire to alter the foreign policy of Algeria in favour of closer relations with the United States and West Germany. Friendly messages were exchanged with Dean Rusk at a time when the U.S. was intensifying the bombing of North Vietnam. At the same time representatives of liberation movements in Algeria were asked to slow down their activities. However, now the rulers of the 'Council of the Revolution' are once again emphasising their continuation of the anti-imperialist policy of the previous regime. It is notable that the joint Soviet-Algerian statement signed by Colonel Boumedienne on behalf of his government strongly condemns American aggression in Vietnam, attacks imperialist intrigues in Africa and elsewhere, and pays tribute to the disinterested assistance of the U.S.S.R. Colonel Boumedienne also stressed the historic significance of the October Revolution for national liberation struggles and reaffirmed that Algeria remained faithful to socialism.

When we analyse this visit and the above declaration, it is clear that Boumedienne had gone to Moscow in search of the 'revolutionary' stamp of approval which he is unable to attain in Algiers. This 'stamp' was politely withheld by the Soviet authorities, who kept the talks at government level, not at Party level. Kosygin formally 'noted with satisfaction the declaration according to which Algeria intends to adhere strictly to her policy as proclaimed in 1962 . . . that the choice of the Algerian people for socialism is irrevocable'. At the same time *Pravda* published an article on the morning of the visitors' arrival, in which they were reminded that it is impossible to work for socialism by persecuting revolutionaries, and by preaching and practising anti-communism.

Whatever its motives, it is clear that the visit to Moscow, and the resulting agreement, marked one of the first defeats for the retrograde elements within the government. These first changes are partly due to differences of opinion within the leadership and the realization by certain of its members of the dangers to independence which would follow a rupture of established alliances with the socialist countries. But they are essentially due to the resistance of the masses. This resistance expresses itself in various forms—passively, in refusal to support a policy different from that which had accounted for Ben Bella's popularity; actively, when it explodes in unsuspected demonstrations. For example, during the making of the film 'Battle of Algiers'

the Italian producer Pontecorvo recruited 'extras' from the Casbah and asked them to march down the streets as they had done in 1961, shouting 'Algeria Algerienne!' That was how it started, but suddenly a new slogan, more up to date, won the day—the cry of 'YAHIA BEN BELLA!' This brought the police into action and resulted in a number of arrests. Similarly a demonstration of students which began, with official permission, as a demonstration against the Ben Barka kidnapping affair, took an unexpected turn when the students spontaneously developed it into a demonstration for Ben Bella and against the coup. This ended with further arrests and the suspension of the main branch of the students' union.

Resistance is also seen among the workers who are strongly defending self-management and trade union rights by numerous strikes against newly-arrogant employers, and against the attempts of the official F.L.N. to control the Algerian Trade Union Congress by appointing officials from above. Resistance is also developing among women's organizations; on International Women's Day a speech by Boumedienne was booed.

Such opposition can only increase the doubts and anxiety in the minds of those revolutionaries, both civilians and military, who though they applauded or were passive during the putsch have since seen nothing but gains by the privileged classes and bureaucratic bourgeoisie. It is not inconceivable that these revolutionaries will now realize that the only enemies of socialism are those on the right wing. It is in the light of this factor that one must read the call of the Underground F.L.N. addressed to 'all revolutionaries', wherever they may be. The call proposes the following aims for unity and action—Release of all political detainees and an end to repression; respect of the liberties guaranteed by the Constitution; free expression of all points of view and the restoration of legality.

The future political development of Algeria depends on the capacity of these progressive forces to organize themselves rapidly and to aim new blows against reaction. In the future, these forces will have to ensure new revolutionary conquests.

The struggle in Algeria is by no means finished!