The Long Shadow of Algeria on the Arab Autumn

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While Tunisia had its first post-"revolution" election on October 23rd and Egypt will follow on November 28th, an infamous, but relevant, date in Algerian history is also rapidly approaching. January 11th will be the 20th anniversary of the military coup that cancelled elections and Algeria's earlier "Arab Spring" and began the 1990s "bloody decade" of military/Islamist civil war. Though no two contexts will have identical sets and balances of social/political forces, even in a limited geographical area such as North Africa, the dynamics of Algeria's experience of "political liberalization" from two decades ago offer useful lessons for Arab Spring countries of the present.

Indeed, probably the biggest single (but not exclusive) reason why Algeria did not join Tunisia and Egypt during the last few months in escalating large-scale mass challenges to its own authoritarian regime was precisely the fact that Algerians went through an apparently similar process from 1988 to 1991—with a horrendous outcome of violence in the 1990s. Civilians not participating in the military/Islamist civil war suffered by far the greatest casualties out of the estimated total of some 200,000 dead, many tens of thousands wounded and some 20,000 "disappeared." By comparison, such numbers dwarf the casualty rates seen to date in Tunisia, Egypt and even Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria.

Over the summer of 1988, thousands of factory workers in an industrial suburb of Algiers and others across the country went out on anti-austerity strikes, defying the neo-liberal regime itself. Two weeks later, in early October, following the precedent of earlier huge urban insurgencies several years before in Constantine, Setif, Algiers and Oran, young Algerians began massive street challenges with demonstrations and riots in the center of Algeria's capital, Algiers. Motivated by much the same set of factors articulated last Spring in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the Arab world, young people felt completely marginalized by the regime—politically, economically and socially.

The political realm was closed off to meaningful grassroots participation and had been since the early years of independence in 1962. Unemployment among younger people (about 3/4 of Algerians were under 35 years old) was astronomical and the large gap between wealthy leaders/beneficiaries of the military-controlled regime and the great majority without connections was all the more accentuated by austerity measures imposed on Algeria by the IMF and World Bank. Continued scarcity in housing forced youths to remain in tight living quarters with their families, unbearably restricting opportunity for their own social independence. Continual police harassment only added further insult. Algeria was perceived by a large percentage of its youth as a complete dead-end, a constant provocation.

All of this sounds familiar to those who followed closely the grievances of those in the streets of central Tunis or those in Cairo's Tahrir Square. In the Algiers demonstrations of 1988, just as last Spring in Tunis and Cairo, political Islamists joined in within several days and experienced, with non-Islamists, the massacre of hundreds and massive arrests at the hands of the police and military.

Following intense popular outcries against such repression, the Algerian regime of President Chadli

announced major political reforms—apparently aiming to appease the population and further facilitate economic liberalization. From early 1989 through late 1991, Algeria experienced its freest political context since independence—as some now call it, "Algeria's parentheses democracy." A new constitution authorized the legal appearance of old and new political parties to oppose the previous monopoly of the FLN. Also permitted were a variety of new newspapers, publishing houses, autonomous trade unions and other "civil society" organizations.

Even more than the longtime oppositional and popular moderate socialist FFS party, it was a new Islamist party, the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) that benefited the most. Bringing together various strands of Islamist activists—previously banned from open political activity, the FIS articulated and mobilized oppositional momentum through religious appeals and grassroots social support among long-suffering and previously voiceless constituents.

Algerian political Islamism had gradually gained political sophistication and growing strength from the 1960s on—in part because, for many, it seemed the only possible oppositional outlet (after all, mosques could not all be closed). In part, the movement gained as well from the regime's continuous appeasement with measures such as a retrograde Family Code, Arabization in education, the import of hundreds of Muslim teachers from the Middle East and the building of a huge number of new mosques. Political Islamists were also emboldened by Islamist regime changes in Iran and later in Afghanistan. Municipal elections were scheduled for 1990 and national legislative elections for the following year.

This is roughly the point at which both Tunisia and Egypt find themselves today. Following large grassroots insurgencies that forced out long-time dictators and gained promises of political reform (while leaving much of the old regime in place), secular activists now confront growing, newly-legalized Islamist political parties. Elections in Tunisia and Egypt offer a public measure of Islamists' relative strength. In both countries, as earlier in Algeria, rapid organizational momentum assures for Islamists in both countries a major political role—as already demonstrated in their plurality victory in Tunisia.

Similarly, in June 1990, the Algerian Islamist FIS party swept the majority of municipal and regional contests (the FFS did not participate) and immediately set about to administer, within bounds defined by the regime, hundreds of locales, including many municipal governments in and around Algiers itself.

In Tunisia, the revived, well-organized and popular Islamist Ennahda Party has pledged itself to a pluralist liberal democracy, equal rights for women, and civil liberties. In the eyes of some, however, the party's partial funding from Gulf states, recent Salafist street violence, a resurfaced public debate on conservative religious themes (including the right to polygamy) and ambiguities in Ennahda's pre-election messages were not reassuring. Over time, a failure to provide jobs, decent work conditions, more housing and respect from public officials might well lead many younger people away from secular or moderate Islamist alternatives—despite Tunisia's generally more tolerant political culture than elsewhere. Nevertheless, the Tunisian military, secondary to the police under deposed dictator Ben Ali, does not have the continuing decisive controlling role as militaries in Egypt and Algeria.

Egypt's political future seems potentially more explosive. There the large and well-organized Muslim Brotherhood has launched its own Peace and Justice Party and plans to contest up to 50% of the legislative seats. The presence of several other smaller Islamist parties, as well, apparently assures a major, if not decisive, political role in the preparation of a new constitution and formation of a new civilian government. While the Muslim Brotherhood, like the Ennahda of Tunisia, has more recently also declared support for liberal democracy and women's rights, some Salafist elements have

already demonstrated a less tolerant, militant side, as with recent violent attacks on Coptic Christians. Though Islamists at present co-exist well with the military leadership, if the latter decides to slow down or halt the transition to civilian government, the radicalization of large numbers of the Brotherhood and other Islamist groups remains a definite potential.

Two decades ago, the Algerian regime, dominated by the military behind the scenes, sought to control the liberalized political context by playing off the Islamist FIS and a new Berber-based party, the RCD, against the FFS, to the hoped-for benefit of the in-house FLN. Additionally, it now seems apparent that the military security force, the DRS, was also heavily infiltrating the FIS itself, thus to assure that any serious FIS momentum could be channeled and manipulated—either to safe limited roles or, alternatively, to a position of such obvious threat to non-Islamist Algerians that open military intervention would become acceptable. In either case, Algeria's military would preserve its preeminent position—with all the lucrative rewards of material corruption thus permitted.

What followed in Algeria behind the scenes is still mainly hidden. When the Islamist FIS (perhaps guided by military intelligence) sought to force legislative elections in mid-1991 through a general strike, the latter was largely a failure, but nevertheless gave the regime the excuse to arrest FIS leaders and thousands of FIS activists. Though some in the FIS wished to move immediately to armed resistance, the "electoral" wing won the internal debate. With FIS momentum apparently seriously slowed by the summer events, a two-round legislative election was scheduled for December 1991/January 1992. But as the election approached, the energy and organizing ability of the FIS rebounded. That party then largely swept the first round and clearly was en route to a National Assembly majority and significant role in Algeria's governance.

Threatened by the extent of FIS momentum, but also now with ready excuse for explicit intervention, the Algerian military cancelled the January 1992 second round, deposed President Chadli and set up its own State High Committee to officially govern the country. At the same time, the arrests of thousands of FIS activists and the rage of FIS militants and others resulted in the first armed clashes between Islamist guerrillas and the repressive forces of the police and military. Within several months, in addition to the FIS military wing (the AIS), a new radical Islamist guerrilla force, the GIA, was created. Again, from available evidence, it seems that the latter was either largely a product of the military security force or at least significantly infiltrated and partly controlled by the same.

The resulting momentum in Algeria of armed clashes, civilian assassinations, kidnappings and rapes, as well as eventual massacres of whole villages soon followed. While the military infiltrated or manipulated the Islamist guerrilla forces and Islamists infiltrated the military, non-militant civilians were left in between, hopelessly vulnerable and with no apparent relief until, through mutual exhaustion, armed FIS Islamists and the regime arranged a truce in 1997. Other amnesty programs followed in the late 90s and subsequent years—stipulating that both former guerrillas and the military itself were beyond legal recourse by their victims.

While the Algerian scenario seems less likely for Tunisia, it remains a real possibility in Egypt. In the latter, the long-entrenched military has every reason to seek to preserve its power and material privileges through counter-revolutionary measures. To date, the post-Mubarak military continues to send mixed signals. While promising elections, a civilian government and a new constitution, the military continues to jail thousands of protestors through rapid "trials" in military courts and has expanded the state of emergency provisions to crack down further on critical media and hundreds of thousands of workers and students in ongoing strikes. Increasingly, grassroots demonstrators see continuities with the Mubarak regime instead of hoped-for change. In street chanting, "Down with Tantawi" (the military chief and the deposed government's Minister of Defense) has replaced "Down with Mubarak" and the explosive social, economic and political frustrations that led to the latter's downfall could easily re-surface once again. Indeed, though some commentators observe

“demonstration fatigue,” the present huge wave of labor strikes by new independent unions is unprecedented.

At the same time, the rising tide of political Islamism in Egypt is quite apparent—perhaps with roughly the same potential of electoral support for the Freedom and Justice Party as for the FIS in Algeria two decades earlier. Though composed of various strands, as was Algeria’s FIS, at least some Egyptian Islamists appear closer to the regime than a large part of the regime’s secular opposition. And no doubt, as in Algeria, the military has infiltrated Islamist and secular opposition forces extensively. No doubt as well, there are voices in the military who call for manipulating the fragmented civilian political forces (including Coptic Christians vs. Muslims) against each other, as in Algeria, with the same objective of maintaining military rule behind a “democratic” reformist facade. As seen earlier in Algeria, not only does such manipulation contradict the so-called commitment to a liberalized regime, it also is an extremely dangerous enterprise.

In addition to Egyptian grassroots civilians having to confront entrenched repressive forces and the elitist “political class,” they may also eventually find themselves caught in a desperate conflict between the military and armed political Islamists angry at the prospect of their “entitled” political dominance withheld at the threshold of their success. Whether through armed force or not, the prospect of Islamist rule then potentially can be used, as in Algeria, to blackmail most secular forces into accepting a supposed “lesser evil” of continual military rule. And without a doubt, the US and other Western powers will support such a regime, just as they would support military intervention if a populist left coalition should surprisingly emerge to take power.

The power elite strategy of playing off conservative/religious parties against secular reformers, of course, is a model quite familiar to American politics as well. In North Africa, however, where the political polarization can be more extreme and where the role of the military elite is more explicit, overtly manipulated political outcomes by the latter can be, as in Algeria of the 90s, far more explosive and deadly.

A third, longer-range, alternative, of course, would be to reject the fixation on electoral politics in favor of a popular egalitarian insurrection overthrowing the whole manipulative regime, asserting freedom from military, political party, economic and religious elites altogether. Such a potential, far beyond the gains of the Arab Spring, faces huge obstacles in Algeria and elsewhere in the Arab world and would demand both critical social catalysts and significant local-based horizontalist organization to succeed.

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P.S.

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