

Women's Struggle against Muslim Fundamentalism in Algeria: Strategies or a Lesson for Survival?

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Introduction

Since 11 September 2001, the world, and particularly the United States, seem to have suddenly realised that Muslim fundamentalism, in its extreme form of terrorism, is a real threat. It is only now that the US and many European countries recognise that they have to build strategies across the world to 'fight terrorism'. Many of us cannot help feeling bitter about such a new attitude, for we have fought fundamentalism and terrorism in isolation with our bare hands for a good number of years, while those fundamentalists who committed the most atrocious crimes in our countries were getting support from the same governments that are now dictating to the rest of the world how to 'fight terrorism'. Whatever the real reasons behind such a world policy, [\[1\]](#) we need to understand as women that we have to build our own capacities to promote changes that would deconstruct the repressive patriarchy that is the basis for all fundamentalisms.

For us, religious fundamentalism is a form of terrorism against women. Its manifestations are varied but its purpose is the same everywhere: the control of women and therefore the refusal to recognise them as autonomous human beings and citizens.

This paper discusses the 'strategies' that have been devised by women in Algeria to alert public opinion and the government about the threat of religious fundamentalism, not only to women, but to the whole society.

We need to note here that the term 'strategy' is not always appropriate because often, as will be shown later in this paper, women have had to take emergency action faced with threats from terrorist religious fundamentalists, acting more for survival than from a carefully planned strategy.

To understand women's responses to religious fundamentalism in Algeria, we need to bear in mind the context in which it developed.

Historical background

After independence from French colonial occupation in 1962, the Algerian state chose the socialist model of development and was run by a one-party system. Up to 1989 the country was ruled by the

National Liberation Front (FLN). It was only after the tragic street riots of October 1988, when hundreds of young people who were protesting against impoverishing social and economic policies, lack of freedom of speech, and corruption, were killed, that the state decided to amend the constitution and allow a multi-party parliamentary system.

It is within this context that, together with other parties, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was created. In the 1991 local elections, the FIS won 54% of the seats: most people who voted for them were showing their rejection of the corrupted FLN. The FIS had promised to fight against injustice and corruption and provide people with jobs and housing. Very quickly they started to bring changes to the boroughs they were in charge of: they imposed the *hijab* (veil) on women employees, they organised separate offices for men and women, they threatened to stop cultural activities which were 'against the principles of Islam'. They ordered people to get rid of the satellite dishes which allowed them to have access to foreign television channels, perceived by the fundamentalists as a source of evil and depravity. In the societal model they wanted to enforce in Algeria, women clearly were the losers. Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, then the two main FIS leaders, were quite explicit. In one of his speeches, Ali Belhadj said he didn't believe in democracy because 'the only source of power is God through the Qur'an and not the people'; therefore if people voted against the law of God they had to be killed, since they are not allowed to substitute their own authority for that of God.

When national parliamentary elections took place in December 1991, the FIS won the first round. This came as a real shock to many of us. Such an unexpected result was questioned by many people, particularly the left-wing parties. As the FIS seemed likely to win the majority for the second electoral round, the government decided to cancel the elections, and declared the FIS illegal in 1992. Whether this was the right decision to take or not is an issue for debate. However, what one needs to bear in mind is that the agenda of the FIS was to install an Islamic state and undermine all the vested rights that women had acquired since independence. Subsequently, the FIS went into hiding and waged war not only against all representatives of the Algerian regime, but also against the civilian population.

Since 1992 the armed groups, the Islamic Army of Salvation (AIS), the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), and other appendices of the FIS, have carried out a series of bombings, killings, slaughterings, abductions, rapes, village massacres, beheadings etc. Thousands of people have been killed. In the first years of the conflict, armed groups of Muslim fundamentalists targeted people who symbolised the state, like members of the police, the army and the 'gendarmerie'. They then targeted intellectuals, heads of schools, teachers, journalists, artists - all symbols of thought. Later, they started to kill people on a large scale and resorted to urban terrorism. Up to now there are still massacres in villages.

This conflict, that has been going on since the early nineties, cannot be defined outside a social order. It is neither an ethnic nor a religious conflict. The Muslim fundamentalists are fighting for a social order based on theocracy and patriarchy. It is also important to note that it is not a conflict between Muslim fundamentalists and secular forces in civil society, as it has often been described by the media. In fact Muslim fundamentalists have long had influence in decision-making spheres. One only has to recall the national conference on education and reform which took place in 1989: conservatives within the FLN colluded with Islamists to introduce measures against the emancipation of women, for instance more religious education in primary schools; making sports not compulsory for girls; and so on.

Many factors contributed to the rise and development of Muslim fundamentalism.

The one-party state co-opted conservatives, and, later, Muslim fundamentalists, to safeguard their

interests and stay in power. Various governments have many times made compromises and sacrificed women's rights and safety to keep peace with the fundamentalists. One of the most telling examples is the Personal Status Law (Family Code), passed in 1984, which sets the legal basis for inequality between men and women and establishes patriarchal control over women.

Furthermore, severe restrictions on any form of criticism of the government and its policies since independence, and the lack of democracy, have favoured violence rather than dialogue and negotiation to reach consensus. Since the late 1970s and early 1980s, Muslim fundamentalists have used people's discontent to promote their ideas and offer a so-called alternative. Indeed Algerian people were very critical of the corrupt government and its unjust system, and have suffered greatly in the economic crisis that resulted from the IMF-imposed shift from a state-supported to a neo-liberal economy. During the 1970s and 1980s this resulted in further unemployment of young people, and impoverishment of the lower middle class.

With the complicity of the FLN, the educational system in Algeria has always been the preserve of conservatives and fundamentalists. The growth of FIS meant many more of their supporters became teachers, shaping young people's minds to accept very conservative ideas.

The patriarchal system was strengthened by the passing of the Family Law in 1984. For most women's rights activists, the Family Code represents institutional violence. No wonder that, with this sort of sanction from the state, Muslim fundamentalists found it legitimate to control the lives of women and use violence against them if they appeared to be defying *their* social order.

Gendered fundamentalist violence

We need to bear in mind here that violence against women did not start with the terrorism of the early 1990s that followed the cancellation of the elections. Women were targeted by Muslim fundamentalists long before that.

In the early 1980s, when Muslim fundamentalism was already gaining momentum, the first victims of religious and political violence were women. Vociferous Friday sermons at the mosque focused on women and their bodies, describing them as prostitutes if they wore lipstick or 'western clothes'. Young male Muslim fundamentalists attacked female students on university campuses with the tacit approval of the police, who did not intervene to protect women. In some towns, like Blida for example, they organised campaigns to control public space: in buses, for instance, a space was reserved for women, and they were not allowed outside it. At school, little girls were separated from little boys; they were not allowed to sit or play together. Pressure was put on women to wear *hijab*. In Ouargla (a town in the south of Algeria) in June 1989, a group of fundamentalists set fire to the house of a divorced woman who lived alone with her children; her three-year-old son was burnt to death. Women's groups subsequently organised one of the first demonstrations in the streets of Algiers to denounce the crime, but also to warn public opinion and the authorities that this was a clear sign of creeping fascism.

As early as the 1980s, women were warning that although Muslim fundamentalists were targeting them first, this violence would soon reach men too if nothing was done. Yet the secular state did not do anything to protect women. In any case, conservatives and Muslim fundamentalists were sitting together in the National Assembly, and in the early 1980s, one of their debates involved the length of the stick men should be allowed to use to beat their wives. The silence and complicity of the state comforted and even encouraged Muslim fundamentalists in their virulent attacks against women.

Since 1992, thousands of people have been killed, and women were not spared. The first woman to

be murdered was Karima Belhadj, who was working as a secretary in the General Office of National Security. There were many cases of women teachers shot dead in their classrooms in front of the children. Some women journalists were killed. [2] Political activists were targeted: Nabila Djahnine, the president of a women's organisation, was killed in the streets of Tizi Ouzou. Women were also targeted because they were hairdressers, owners of Turkish baths, seamstresses - all symbols related to the beauty of women. Muslim fundamentalists also attacked women who lived on their own (i.e. without adult males), whether they were widows, single or divorced. A good number of women were killed because they refused to wear the *hijab*; this was the case of Katia Bengana, a sixteen-year-old girl who was shot dead in the street on her way back from school.

Later the terrorists massacred whole populations in villages and remote areas. The crimes that were committed were just shocking. Women were attacked in their homes, brutally beaten, abducted, raped, taken as temporary wives of the 'emirs', or as slaves. They were shot dead, torn apart when they were pregnant and their fetuses smashed on the walls. These horrors are well documented in *Moi, Nadia, femme d'un émir du GIA* by Baya Gacemi. [3]

The list of atrocities is long and gloomy. The aim behind the description of such manifestations of violence is to show how gender is in fact at the core of the issue of Muslim fundamentalism. Their main objective is to control women through control of their bodies.

When the first woman was murdered, it came as a real shock to us women and to public opinion at large. How could women be targeted?

This hatred and violence were justified by the fact that women represented a subversion of the social order of the Muslim fundamentalists. They were defying a sacred patriarchal order by raising the issues of equality and civil laws.

What were women's responses and strategies to counter fundamentalism?

Strategies against fundamentalism

When fundamentalist terrorists started to sow death everywhere, to threaten women in order to impose their social and religious order, there was not much choice left to women. They needed to be able to survive in an extremely hostile and dangerous environment. Women's 'strategies' against fundamentalism were twofold. On the one hand they had to find immediate responses, in order to be able to carry on living their everyday lives. On the other hand, many women's rights activists tried to build a long term strategy to counteract fundamentalism.

During the most terrifying period of fundamentalist terrorism, women tried to live their everyday lives as they used to. Even if they were threatened with death if they went to work or if they refused to wear the hijab, for example, they resisted these violent pressures; most of them carried on going to work and sending their children to school in spite of the bombings in schools and colleges. Many women continued to go to Turkish baths, to seamstresses or hairdressers; they also celebrated weddings.

While we can consider such an attitude a 'survival reaction', we should also consider it a resistance strategy, since it was challenging the diktat of the fundamentalists.

In spite of the flyers and posters threatening women with death if they didn't wear the hijab, some women refused to wear it. Others who lived in dangerous areas used stratagems; for instance, they wore what was humorously called *le foulard décapotable* (the convertible scarf), which they could

pull into place when it was necessary. In the same way, when teachers and students were asked not to resume school in 1994, many of them still went to college and university, but they would carry their books in plastic bags instead of using satchels and schoolbags. These means of everyday survival were also defying social pressures.

Women's rights activists tried simultaneously to build more planned strategies to counteract fundamentalism. At the national level, they carried on producing a counter-discourse at a time when everybody was just terrorised by the fundamentalists. In a very hostile environment, and in defiance of fundamentalist terrorists, women's groups occupied the streets and organised public meetings and demonstrations against terrorism, carrying photographs of people who had been killed and shouting anti-fundamentalist slogans. These were powerful moments of solidarity which gave courage to women to continue their fight against fundamentalism. Because they were public, they showed women's determination not to yield to fundamentalism.

The first women's public meeting during that period was organised by the Gathering of Algerian Democratic Women (RAFD) in March 1993. To celebrate March 8 (International Women's Day), they organised a mock tribunal against terrorism. They also organised cultural activities: a play about the issue of violence and the Family Code was performed, at a time when there was a lot of pressure to put a ban on cultural activities.

In 1999, the RAFD instituted an annual prize for resistance against fundamentalism, which is symbolically very significant and powerful. This prize, awarded every March on Women's Day, has so far gone posthumously to Katia Bengana, the 16-year old murdered because she refused to wear *hijab*; to the young women workers of an electronics factory in Sidi Bel Abbes who were the targets of a terrorist attack; to Yemma Zahra, whose son was killed by fundamentalists and who decided to take arms and fight back; amongst others. [4]

Women's groups consolidated their links and organised many events together, which gave more strength to their actions. They continue to document cases of rape, killings, abductions and similar offences, to raise awareness about the dangers of fundamentalism. They used personal contacts in the media, especially newspapers, to inform people and win support for their actions. They also organised signature campaigns to denounce fundamentalist violence.

Such strategies at the national level were reinforced by other strategies at the international level. In the early and mid 1990s, the most important objective for women's rights activists was to change public opinion in the western world. Most foreign media portrayed the Muslim fundamentalists - who had started a war against the Algerian population - as victims, because their likely victory in the 1992 elections had been stolen from them. What was most important for Algerian women was to inform international public opinion about the atrocities committed by Muslim fundamentalists - who were being supported by the American administration as well as by most European governments in the name of democracy. Through personal contacts and networking, women activists participated in round tables, radio and television programmes, TV documentaries, interviews in newspapers (particularly in countries that were harbouring FIS leaders such as the US, the UK, Germany and France) and campaigns. They also wrote about violent crimes committed by fundamentalists in the international media. Women activists spoke out in meetings organised by human rights NGOs and the UN.

A women's rights organisation filed a complaint against one of the main leaders of the FIS, Anouar Haddam, who was seeking political asylum in the US. For that purpose they worked closely with a group of American women lawyers who were very supportive of their action.

Women's groups or feminist leaders, thanks to their links with women's NGOs abroad, often

succeeded in getting important media coverage.

Ironically, the fundamentalists had managed to get support from the west because they knew how to use the international media, how to use the language of human rights and how to portray themselves as victims of repression by an undemocratic government. While the women's media campaign contributed towards making people in the west more aware of the danger of fundamentalism (particularly when it started to reach them), at the same time it helped the Algerian government, which was under a lot of criticism because they had stopped the elections in 1992 and because they had decided to fight the armed groups of fundamentalists.

What are the lessons to be learnt? What are the gains and losses for women in their fight against fundamentalism?

Some women would say there was a setback for the women's movement because, during all those years, most women's organisations focused all their energies on the fight against fundamentalist terrorism to save the country from fascism, rather than gender-specific issues. Others think this shift was necessary, and that if they had not done so, women would have found themselves in the same situation as that of Iranian or Sudanese women; in fact one of the women's mottoes in their demonstration was 'No Iran, No Sudan, Algeria is Algerian'.

It seems to us also that fundamentalist terrorism has taught us a political lesson. Interestingly enough, it is fundamentalist violence against women that has helped us reveal and write about a topic that has always been taboo: domestic violence. Now we see the link between the violence of these past few years, and the endemic violence that always existed in society and yet was not being addressed by women's organisations.

Women's groups have developed new strategies today. Some have chosen to focus on the rehabilitation of women survivors of terrorism. They started to network with doctors, psychologists, social workers and lawyers to help women. Some are doing more grassroots work and set up shelters for women (e.g. *Darna* and *SOS Femmes en Détresse*).

Furthermore, there is more action-research on the theme of violence. Many seminars have been organised by women's groups: SOS Femmes en Détresse has organised a seminar on rape and violence, RAJD and the groupe interassociatif have organised a seminar on violence and the Family Code. RACHDA5 has organised a workshop on violence against women and shelters for women. Violence against women is documented in various publications such as: the booklet produced by a research group that works with the National Institute of Public Health (INSP), the book produced by Maghreb Egalité on violence in the three North African countries, and the recent Livre Blanc which contains around seventy testimonies concerning violence against women and children, produced by a network called *Réseau Wassila*.

There is also an effort on the part of women's groups to work more closely together because they have realised how important it is to network if they want to be more effective.

Conclusion

Silence means death.

If you speak out, they will kill you.

If you keep silent, they will kill you.

So, speak out and die.

Tahar Djaout

Woman journalist, murdered by Muslim fundamentalists in May 1993.

P.S.

* From WLUMML Publications, Warning Signs of Fundamentalisms, December 2004:
<http://www.wluml.org/sites/wluml.org/files/import/english/pubs/pdf/wsf/14.pdf>

Footnotes

[1] And we are sceptical about the use of anti-terrorism ideology and accusations to attack all whose rule is disliked by the USA, as in the war against Iraq.

[2] They include Rachida and Houria Hamadi, Yasmina Drissi, Naima Hamouda, Malika Sabour, Yasmina Brikh, Raja Brahimi, Saida Djebaili, Khedidja Dahmani, Naima Illoul, Dalila Drideche, Farida Bouziane and Zoubida Berkane.

[3] Published 1998 by Le Seuil, Paris.

[4] In March 2004 the RAFD prize was awarded to Louiza Ighil Ahrez, a famous veteran of the liberation war against France, who recently spoke up about the rape she endured at the hands of French soldiers; and Louiza Sid Ammi, a young photographer who remained active during the years of terror.