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Political Liberalisation and Party Radicalisation in Algeria: The Case of the Islamic Front of Salvation

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POLITICAL PARTY SYSTEMS IN AFRICA PROJECT

This project investigates the processes, structures and challenges facing countries in consolidating their transitions to democracy in post-independence Africa. The current area of study is specifically the evolution of political party systems. This project examines factors affecting political contestation and political parties in Africa, and analyses how these influence the crystallisation and consolidation of democracy as a whole. More specifically, the project examines case studies of political party formation in Africa.

ABSTRACT

Starting in the late 1980s the Algerian political system underwent important changes. In 1989 Algeria moved from a one-party system to multipartyism. The Islamic parties were the biggest beneficiaries of the country's political liberalisation. The most potent political party was the Islamic Front of Salvation (FIS), which won the first ballot of the 1991 parliamentary elections. In 1992 the military cancelled the parliamentary elections, fearing the consequences of a victory by a religious party. The victory of the FIS and the massive defeat of the ruling party, the National Liberation Front (FLN) was partly explained by the major social grievances against the existing system and the lack of safeguards against the abuse of new political freedom. The failure of Algeria's initial multiparty experiment owed much to the nature of the parties that had emerged and the new party system, which reflected the characteristics of the political system itself.

This paper examines the overall impact of the FIS — both before and after it was banned — and the significance of political parties in Algeria today in general.

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INTRODUCTION

The end of the Cold War brought hope for positive changes around the world and stimulated tangible political progress in some developing countries, but Africa seems to have remained relatively unaffected. While some important social and economic mutations have taken place on the continent in the last 15 years, the political and economic systems have been very slow at adapting to them. The globalisation phenomenon and the latest wave of democratisation do not seem to have affected the region positively. In many countries, entirely new generations are governed by out-of-touch elites that are experiencing increasing difficulty in maintaining the internal status quo and containing the forces of change. Economic reforms have failed to overhaul most economic structures and the state still exercises an unchallenged hegemony over society and the economy. The political systems have remained essentially unchanged, in spite of some movement toward political liberalisation.[1] Politically empowered civil society remains as elusive as democracy, and state power remains in the hand of powerful groups, civilian–military coalitions and conservative bureaucrats. In many African countries, power is still largely exercised in authoritarian, neo-patrimonial and populist ways, and the official discourse continues to only pay lip service to the notions of free elections and democracy. A token moderate opposition may be allowed to thrive here and there, but any serious challenge to the status quo is usually met with swift and harsh repression.

However, these general observations do not mean that Africa has been unmoved by internal and external pressures. Change has occurred, but it has been less positive than it could be, and less dramatic than it would have been if the policy choices made were better informed and if the regional and international environments were more encouraging and less restraining.

The case of Algeria is a good illustration of these observations. Important changes in the political system did take place, starting in the late 1980s, and constituted a marked departure from the traditional authoritarian model of governance. However, they have not amounted to a regime change.[2] The move in 1989 from a single-party system to multipartyism and open, multi-candidate elections; the birth of an independent press; and the revival of representative institutions were important institutional changes, but not a true democratic shift.

In Algeria, as elsewhere in North Africa and the Middle East, the biggest beneficiaries from the country's political liberalisation were the Islamist parties that were allowed to enter politics legitimately by way of elections and to garner a respectable status in the political system, as has happened in Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine. This development made analysts wonder whether the best hope for durable change in certain countries lies in the hands of Islamist parties, since they have proven to be the only force capable of effectively challenging the status quo. At both the theoretical and empirical levels, the debate on the relationship between Islam and democracy has just begun.

In the early years of political liberalisation in Algeria (1988–91), the Islamists took full advantage of new laws allowing, for the first time, independent parties and associations; and they created the most potent political party, the Islamic Front of Salvation (FIS). However, when the FIS later seemed likely to unseat the governing elite via sweeping electoral victories, the military stopped its momentum by banning it, jailing its leaders

and supporters, and cancelling the parliamentary election in 1992. In spite of these drastic measures taken by the state against the most important opposition force it had faced since independence, the impact of the FIS on the Algerian political landscape was profound.

This paper examines the overall impact of the FIS — both before and after it was banned — and the significance of political parties in Algeria today in general. This will be done by tackling the following questions:

1 What distinguished the FIS structure and organisation from other political formations in Algeria and facilitated its short-lived political success?
2 Was the radicalisation of the FIS, after it was banned, inherent to the party itself or caused by the state's reaction to it?
3 What relationships, if any, did the FIS have with regional or multinational organisations with common interests, and with what effect?
4 What impact did the FIS-led violent rebellion have on the country and its political system?
5 To what extent was the FIS a factor for, or an obstacle to, political liberalisation in Algeria?
6 How has the conflict affected the new multiparty system in general and the Islamist parties in particular?
7 What are the limits of the new party system in the current Algerian political context?
8 What lessons can be learned by other societies faced with political movements that are prone to radicalisation?

Before tackling these specific questions, it is necessary to give a general overview of the political, economic and social landscape of Algeria at the time of the rise of political Islam and to examine the crisis that helped the FIS become the most popular political movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

The rise of political Islam in Algeria in the late 1980s and its armed rebellion throughout the 1990s have had a profound effect on the country. The Islamists mobilised a substantial part of society for political action and challenged the order that had existed since independence. Even though they did not succeed in overthrowing the existing system, they contributed to changing some of its fundamental attributes, something that the secular opposition had failed to do since independence.

The armed Islamist rebellion, which followed a peaceful and persistent call for change, was partly stimulated by the exclusion of popular Islam from politics. In the end, after a violent decade, grassroots Islam entered the political system thanks to a variety of reforms and policies that allowed moderate, non-violent religious parties to win seats in Parliament and control several ministerial posts by the early 2000s. Today, these parties are an integral part of the political system and their influence on public policy has been increasing markedly, notably because of the strategic place they have acquired in governing coalitions. This major shift in the relationship between state and society and between the state and political Islam has resulted from a series of developments, the first of which was the birth and growth of the FIS as a mass political party driven by religion and by popular grievances against the state and its leadership.

THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE AND THE RISE OF THE FIS

Since Algeria's independence from France in 1962, no grassroots movement has captured the masses like the Islamists did in the 1980s and 1990s. Before then, the Islamists were critical of government policies, but unable to stimulate a mass movement for two main reasons: (1) the state's social policies satisfied the needs of most people; and (2) the authoritarian rule exercised by the government did not tolerate opposition of any kind — religious or secular — and repressed it harshly. When the economic development strategy started failing in the late 1970s and a crisis set in during the 1980s, the Islamists were at the forefront of the opposition.

The economic crisis

After independence, Algeria opted for a socialist model of development that gave the state primary responsibility for production, employment, services, welfare and social protection. After its initial success in getting economic development under way and basic social needs satisfied, the development strategy based on heavy industries and agrarian reform started showing signs of limitation and exhaustion. By the late 1970s the state-centred development strategy, which was based almost exclusively on oil rents, started showing its shortcomings. These included a bloated and inefficient state bureaucracy, distribution bottlenecks, inflation, poor agricultural performance, food scarcity, urban migration and growing income inequality. Because of the nature of the system in place, society had grown dependent on the state's distributive function without being required to be productive.

In the early 1980s a series of ill-conceived economic reforms tried to shift development efforts away from heavy industry toward agriculture, light industry and consumer goods. State enterprises were broken up into smaller units and several small state-owned firms were privatised, subsidies were reduced and price controls were lifted. The government also opened up the economy to limited foreign investment and tried to expand the small private sector. However, the reforms failed to halt the decline, and socio-economic conditions worsened, the already high unemployment rate rose further and industrial output dropped. The price of basic consumer goods sharply increased and the purchasing power of most people fell substantially. Whereas the small upper class profited from this botched economic liberalisation, the economic cost of reform fell mostly on the masses. The situation became critical when world oil prices fell by 40% in 1986. By 1988 industrial output had dramatically declined and public enterprises had a total deficit of $18.5 billion.[3] The state was almost bankrupt and social inequality had increased to a point where 5% of the population earned 45% of the national income, while 50% shared less than 22% of that income.[4] Inflation rose to 42%, and 22% of the workforce became unemployed.

It was in this context that in October 1988 Algeria experienced the worst riots since independence. The state responded to them, firstly, with harsh repression that killed 500 people within a week, and, secondly, with sudden and sweeping political liberalisation that ended the rule of the one-party system and allowed people to create parties, associations and an independent press. The period between 1989 and 1992 was an era of unprecedented freedom of association and expression.

Political crisis and the birth of the multiparty system

A tremendous energy emanating from society was unleashed by the sudden political liberalisation as people sought to take full advantage of the new political freedoms and of the relative vulnerability of the regime. Sixty-two new parties and numerous associations were created and a new independent press was born.

Even though this unprecedented political opening did not amount to a regime change, it nevertheless carried the seeds of change for the future and transformed Algeria's political map substantially. Civic associations proliferated and became a vibrant part of political life. Many organisations — mainly associations of journalists, women and human rights advocates — played a significant role in the first years of political liberalisation. In spite of setbacks in the 1990s as a result of political assassinations by Islamist groups and state repression, they have become a permanent fixture of Algeria's political environment.

The political opening also brought to the fore political formations that were able to mobilise the masses around a host of issues, including regime change. However, only two of these formations — the ethno-cultural Berber movement and the Islamists — proved to be powerful, resilient and persistent.

The secular Berber-based organisations included associations and parties that called for democracy, justice, economic reforms, recognition of the Berber language as a national and official language, and the redefinition of national identity to include the Amazigh (Berber) character of Algeria. These demands were articulated by the Front des Forces Socialistes (Front of Socialist Forces — FFS — a party formed in the 1960s, but illegal until 1989), the *Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie* (Rally for Culture and Democracy — RCD — a party formed in 1989), and the *Mouvement Culturel Berbère* (Berber Cultural Movement — MCB — an association formed in 1980). These organisations were hindered from the start by their limited social base, which consisted of Berber-speaking militants and a constituency mostly in Kabylie, a small region east of the capital, Algiers. They were also weakened by major divisions in their ranks. In 2001 a non-partisan popular movement in Kabylie known as the 'citizen movement' injected new life into the weakening ethno-political movement; however, it too lost momentum after obtaining a few concessions from the state. The government agreed to make Tamazight (Berber) a national language, which would be taught in schools; it also recognised the Amazigh culture as part of the national cultural make-up. Furthermore, in response to one of the key demands, the state withdrew the *Gendarmerie* (paramilitary forces) from its barracks in Kabylie, where it was accused of killing a youth in its custody in April 2001. However, the bulk of the demands, which were social, economic and political in nature, have remained unfulfilled.[5]

The Islamist organisations proved to be more powerful because of their much wider appeal and their seeming unity in the early years. Using Islam as an instrument and popular grievances as slogans, the religious opposition took full advantage of the political opening and increased its unrelenting challenge to the existing political regime.

The FIS won overwhelmingly in the first multiparty local elections of June 1990, thereby upstaging the ruling party, the National Liberation Front (FLN), which was the sole legal party from independence in 1962 until 1989. In the wake of this electoral victory and with rising popularity, the Islamists demanded immediate and free presidential and parliamentary elections. They expressed these demands in the summer of 1991 through a wide sit-in for many days in Algiers, which was finally, and violently, broken up by the

police; the two leaders of the FIS were arrested and later sentenced to 12-year jail terms.

In the first round of parliamentary elections held on 26 December 1991 the FIS secured 188 out of 430 parliamentary seats, with 47.28% of all votes; the Berber-based FFS won 26 seats; and the FLN obtained only 15 seats.

Fearing an Islamist-controlled Parliament, the military pushed President Chadli Bendjedid to resign in January 1992, cancelled the electoral results, banned the FIS and arrested thousands of its militants. The government's reneging on its promise of political liberalisation led the Islamist opposition to go underground and resume the failed strategy of political violence that had been initiated in the early 1980s by Mustapha Bouyali.[6]

These developments undermined the promised political opening and weakened the likelihood of an end to the authoritarian system. The wide-scale political violence contributed to a drastic economic decline by causing a substantial destruction of social and economic infrastructure and by isolating the country from its economic partners. The social situation reached a crucial low point when more and more workers were laid off. By 1991 some 125 000 were laid off in the public sector alone,[7] and 500 000 more after the start of the structural adjustment programme in 1994. External debt reached $26.557 billion the same year, with an export-earning ratio of 193% and a debt-servicing ratio of 73.7%.[8]

Due to the initial economic reforms and a drastic shortfall in financial resources, the state retreated from some economic and social service areas and a black market developed, along with illegal activities, high crime rates and corruption across state institutions. The war waged by the Islamists in the 1990s slowed down the non-oil economic sectors and threw more people into poverty because of the destruction of infrastructure and massive displacement of the population in several hotbeds of the rebellion. More than one million people were displaced. A large majority of these remain displaced today.[9]

Political violence was directed not only against the state, but also against civilians opposing the religious groups or suspected by them of collaborating with the state, and against foreigners. The government's response to the Islamist violence was brutal; it left scores of people dead, jailed or unaccounted for. By 2000 close to 200 000 people had been killed, hundreds of women were kidnapped and raped and entire villages were emptied following massacres. According to reports by international organisations, the Islamists, especially the notorious Armed Islamist Groups (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), accounted for most of the killings and destruction, but the Islamic Army of Salvation (AIS), the armed wing of the FIS, was responsible for much of the violence in the western part of Algeria. Government security forces were also blamed for abusing human rights and failing to protect civilians from attacks, especially when these attacks took place just yards from their barracks.

Since 1992 several prime ministers and four presidents — Mohamed Boudiaf (who was assassinated in June 1992), Ali Kafi, Liamine Zeroual (who resigned before his term ended) and Abdelaziz Bouteflika — attempted to solve the multidimensional crisis facing Algeria. In 1997 hope for an end to the tragedy finally appeared when the government brokered an amnesty deal with the AIS. The AIS unilaterally halted its operation until a formal deal was made in 1999 and President Bouteflika enacted a National Concord law that granted amnesty to thousands of armed rebels. However, the GIA and the GSPC refused to surrender and continued their violent attacks.

POLITICAL REFORMS AND THE PARTIES

Several political changes and reforms since the mid-1990s were aimed at diffusing the Islamist rebellion. They included a major constitutional amendment in 1996; three multiparty presidential elections between 1995 and 2004; parliamentary and municipal elections in 1997, 2002 and 2007; and two amnesty programmes in 1999 and 2005 for the armed rebels who surrendered.

The 1996 constitutional reform declared Islam the state's religion and prohibited the creation of parties on a 'religious, linguistic, racial, gender, corporatist or regional' basis and the use of these elements for partisan propaganda. The reform also created a second parliamentary chamber, the Council of the Nation. A third of the members of the chamber are appointed by the president and the rest elected by indirect suffrage. The powers of the president were reinforced over those of parliament and the prime minister.

Parliament was reinstated after elections in 1997 and two moderate Islamist parties were allowed to field candidates. *Harakat Mujtam'a al-Silm* (Movement of Society for Peace — MSP) and *Harakat Ennahda* (Movement for Renaissance, known as Ennahda) won 69 and 34 seats, respectively, out of 380. They were given seven ministerial posts in the government. The MSP joined a coalition government that included both the conservative FLN (62 seats with 16.1% of the votes) and a new pro-establishment party, the National Democratic Rally (RND); this party, which was created a few months before the vote in order to lend support to President Zeroual, managed to win 156 seats with 38.1% of votes (see Table 3 on page 10). This coalition of convenience became known as the 'Islamo-Conservative' alliance.

By 1999 the Islamist rebellion had failed to achieve its objective and its crude violence negatively affected the standing of religious movements in people's minds. In the 2002 parliamentary elections the Islamist parties lost some electoral support. MSP lost 31 of its 69 seats and Ennahda kept only one of its 34 seats (see Tables 1 and 3 on page 10). However, a new Islamist breakaway party from Ennahda, *Harakat al-islah al-Watani* (Movement for National Reform — MRN — known as Islah), obtained 43 seats. Overall, the number of seats controlled by the Islamists declined from 103 to 82. To the surprise of many observers, the FLN came out as the biggest winner in these elections, with 199 seats, up from 69 in 1997 and 15 only in the first ballot of the 1991 elections.

In the elections of 17 May 2007 the Islamists lost more seats, holding on to 60 seats only from the 82 they had won in 2002; the pro-government FLN and RND parties came out 49 seats short of the 2002 results, mostly due to FLN losses, but they remained the two dominant formations (see Tables 2 and 3 on page 10). As will be discussed later, in the 2002 election the process had come full circle, with the FLN back in control of Parliament and supportive of the executive branch headed by President Bouteflika.

Table 1: Party results of the parliamentary elections of 30 May 2002

Party	Number of votes	% of valid votes	Number of seats
FLN	2 618 003	35.27	199
MRN	705 319	9.5	43
RND	610 461	8.23	47
MSP	523 464	7.05	38
Independents	365 594	4.92	30
PT (*Parti des Travailleurs*)	246 770	3.3	21
FNA (*Front National Algerien*)	113 700	1.53	8
Ennahda	48 132	0.65	1
PRA (*Parti du Renouveau Algerien*)	19 813	0.27	1
MEN (*Mouvement de l'Entente Nationale*)	14 465	0.19	1
Total valid votes	**7 420867**		

Source: Constitutional Council, 3 June 2002, <http://www.mae.dz> & <http://www.elwatan.com>.

Table 2: Partial list of party results of the parliamentary elections of 17 May 2007

Party	Votes	Seats
FLN	1 315 686	136
RND	591 310	61
MSP	552 104	52
Independents	562 986	33
PT	291 312	26
FNA	239 563	13
Ennahda	194 067	5
PRA	103 328	4
MRN	144 880	3

Source: Algérie Press Service, <http://www.aps.dz/fr/legislatives2.asp>

Table 3: Results of the 1997, 2002 and 2007 parliamentary elections

Parties	1997 % of votes	1997 Seats	2002 % of votes	2002 Seats	2007 Seats
FLN	16.1	69	35.27	199	136
RND	38.1	156	8.23	47	61
MRN	–	–	9.5	43	3
MSP	16.7	69	7.05	38	52
Independents	5	11	4.92	30	33
PT	2.1	4	3.33	21	26
Ennahda	9.9	34	0.65	1	5
FFS	5.7	20	–	–	–
RCD	4.8	19	–	–	19
Total		**380**		**389**	

Note for Table 3: The MRN was created in 1998, and the FFS and RCD boycotted the 2002 elections. The FFS also boycotted the 2007 vote.

Sources: <http://www.mae.dz>; <http://electionworld.org/election/algeria.htm>; Algérie Press Service, <http://www.aps.dz/fr/legislatives2.asp>

At the executive level, the most important shift took place in 1995 when Algeria had its first multiparty presidential election. Liamine Zeroual — a candidate promoted by the military — won, but resigned three years later when faced with strong resistance from the regime's hard-liners who opposed his discreet dialogue with the jailed FIS leaders for a solution to the crisis. When new elections were called, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, former foreign minister under Boumediene, became the candidate favoured by the military, who have always been the de facto kingmakers in Algeria. After six other candidates withdrew from the race, claiming electoral irregularities, Bouteflika, the sole candidate, won 73.79% of the votes. In 2004 he was re-elected for a further term in another controversial election. In 2008, at age 72, he sought a third term, and through his supporters in the regime he managed to have his term limit dropped through a constitutional amendment; he ran almost unopposed in a presidential election on 9 April 2009. According to official results, he was re-elected with 90.24% of the votes. Due to poor health, this third term may be his last (if he is able to complete it).

The hallmark of Bouteflika's presidency was the amnesty extended to the rebels willing to give up the fight. It was done in two phases: the National Concord — approved by referendum in 1999 — and the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation — approved also by referendum in 2005. Many Islamists surrendered and others were released from jail, but a small number remains active and still commits occasional violence. The two amnesty programmes had wide popular support because of the peace and security they promised. They were also criticised because they not only prevented the prosecution of rebels who had committed grave crimes against civilians, but also absolved state agents responsible for similar offences. Bouteflika is also known for having been the first incumbent president to question the hegemonic power of the military over Algeria's political system since the first military coup d'état in 1965.

From the start, he expressed the wish to use all the powers granted by the Constitution to his office. After years of tense relations with the military establishment, he managed to push high officers into retirement, reassign others and begin the twin processes of the professionalisation and de-politicisation of the army. Although this endeavour is difficult and may not succeed fully, it is important to note that, formerly, no important government decision in Algeria was taken without the consent of the military, with several key policies actually being drawn up by the military rather than the civilian authorities. As the traditional kingmakers, the military appointed and dismissed civilian leaders at will.

The professionalisation of the army entails a return to the barracks, a major cut in the number of conscripts, and the modernisation of training and education for professional soldiers. Also, the political role of the military establishment has to be curtailed in order to limit its intervention in areas reserved for the civilian authorities. Such a major undertaking will only become feasible once power and legitimacy are vested in the ballot box and the Constitution, rather than in emotive historical factors such as the war of independence. Until then, the formal political processes and institutions will continue to

have limited relevance, because most state decisions are made in informal circles led by important civilian and military individuals and groups who are accountable to no one.

The liberalisation process that began in 1989 and the multiparty system it gave birth to do not amount to a regime change, but may be a mere survival strategy for a state and a leadership that suddenly found itself besieged by angry masses led by religious forces whose ultimate aim was the destruction of the prevailing system and the establishment of an Islamic order guided by a religious leadership.

THE NEW PARTY SYSTEM

From independence to early 1989 Algeria did not have a party system — it only had one party, the FLN, and no autonomous political formations were allowed. The party controlled all civic and professional associations in a way that resembled the corporatist model. However, the FLN was not as powerful as many had thought. It served merely as an instrument in the hands of the government and the military to control and mobilise society for development tasks and to provide the state with legitimacy. Consequently, the FLN became the key symbol of the political regime and the state. As a result, whenever the system failed to live up to its promises or did not respond to people's needs, the FLN was blamed and attacked. In fact, many observers believed that the overwhelming vote for the FIS in 1990 and 1991 was in fact a punishment vote against the FLN rather than a rational choice for a better alternative.

The FIS, as the first opposition party to be legalised, took advantage of these circumstances and used people's resentment against the FLN as a rallying cry in a successful political campaign that adopted a vernacular redolent with religious verses.

Sixty-one additional parties were legalised after the FIS, each with a given ideological orientation and a set of objectives. However, only four parties won sufficient votes to put a meaningful number of elected officers into national and local offices. These were the FIS, the RCD, the FFS and the FLN. Of these, the FIS became the most popular party, despite its hegemonic tendencies, which aimed at replacing the FLN and imposing a new order from above. Only the FIS promised to deliver the radical change that people were yearning for.

The multitude of new parties in a sense comforted the FLN, which hoped that such a plethora would disperse any potential opposition bloc that might threaten its privileged position. But that did not happen. Even subsequent gerrymandering and revisions of electoral laws could not prevent the rise and success of the FIS in both the first municipal elections of 1990 and the first ballot of the 1991 parliamentary elections. Since there were no safeguards to limit the potentially negative consequences of victory by a religious party, FIS control of the government could possibly have thrown the country into a crisis similar to that experienced after the 1992 cancellation of the Islamist electoral victory.

The overwhelming victory of the FIS and the massive defeat of the FLN in the first election is partly explained by the combination of major social grievances against the existing system, the lack of a priori institutional safeguards against the abuse or misuse of new political freedom, and the unwillingness of the government to enforce the constitutional prohibition of religious parties.

Multiparty democracy is more than just a multitude of registered and active parties. It is a system of interaction — through representation — of society with the institutions

and leaders governing it. Multipartyism requires a clear set of laws regulating the party system itself, including the necessary commitment of all parties to respect the principles of democratic rule and human, civil and political rights.

Algeria's multiparty system failed at the start partly because these rules were not in place — or were ignored — on the eve of the first multiparty elections and thereafter. Even though the law prohibited parties based on religion, President Bendjedid allowed such parties, hoping that they would counter-balance the FLN conservatives who were resisting his liberal reforms.

The failure of Algeria's initial multiparty experiment was also due to the nature of the parties themselves and the new party system, which exhibited characteristics mirroring those of the political system itself.

The new parties were relatively young and politically immature, except for the FLN; but the latter had little experience in a competitive environment and has not yet shed its hegemonic tendencies. The structure of political power in Algeria remains highly centralised. The country's leader is still more important than all the parties — he ignores or uses them as needed — and fiercely resents partisan dissent, as was shown when the FLN split into two camps during the 2004 electoral campaign because one side supported the candidacy of former Prime Minister Ali Benflis and the other supported Bouteflika. Personal rivalries and clashes among the leaders often substitute for legitimate political discourse and competition, and personal loyalties tend to better serve political ambitions than do political programmes and opinions. Furthermore, party leaders have the tendency to reign supreme over the rank and file and to be out of touch with their constituencies. This has led to the disillusionment and dissatisfaction of constituencies and to their apathy in recent elections.

The weakness and powerlessness of institutions of popular representation reduce the relevance of political parties, as they have very little impact on major public policies. Parliament rarely debates important issues or opposes governmental programmes, let alone investigates improper policies or acts of government. Finally, the military remain kingmakers, in spite of what was has been done and said about their imminent exit from politics. Party candidates who do not get the military's tacit approval have virtually no chance of winning election to high office.

Given the shortcomings of the current party system, mainly the parties' lack of proficiency as structures of representation and governance, one can only hope that some accumulated experience will ready the various parties for the time when the regime finally changes. In the meantime, they merely serve to legitimise the existing political order by reflecting a semblance of electoral democracy. These parties co-opt challengers to the regime and help mobilise support for (or mute resistance to) policies of the incumbent government, while individuals use parties to acquire privileges for themselves and for friends and relatives: behaviour probably widely condoned primarily because it helps to dull the opposition's potency.

The main political parties

In recent years, several parties have acquired seats in Parliament and have been participating in government. Out of the long list of officially registered parties, only the following have some relevance.

- The FLN was the sole legal party from 1962 to 1989. After a series of electoral defeats following the birth of the multiparty system, it made a successful comeback in the 2002 parliamentary elections, winning 199 of the 389 seats in the National Assembly (lower house). In December 2006 it won 28 of the 48 seats in the Council of the Nation (upper house), and in the 2007 lower house elections it lost 63 seats, but remained the principal party with 136 seats. It is led by Abdelaziz Belkhadem, a former foreign minister. It is nationalist and conservative.

- The RND was created in 1995 to support President Liamine Zeroual. It is led by former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia and is half-rival and half-partner of the FLN in the current pro-government coalition. Its share of parliamentary seats has dwindled from 156 in 1995 to 47 in 2002 and 61 in 2007. It is nationalist and conservative.

- The MSP, formerly known as Hamas, was established in 1989 and is led by Bouguerra Soltani. Its founder and former leader, Mahfoud Nahnah, a moderate Islamist, died of illness in 2003. It espouses a moderate Islamic tendency and is willing to work within the existing system. The party aims to establish an Islamic regime through a moderate and gradualist approach; it attracts many professionals and academics. It is part of the pro-government coalition (FLN–RND–MSP) and holds several ministerial posts. In government and parliament, the MSP acts as a watchdog over what does or does not conform to Islam. Since the governing elite uses the party as both a tolerated public conduit for venting Islamist sentiments and as a means of legitimising the regime, the MSP exercises influence on policies pertaining to matters such as personal status laws and the status of the Arabic language. As indicated in Table 3 (page 10), in the 1997 parliamentary elections it won 69 seats in Parliament, and then lost almost half of them in 2002. In 2007 its numbers grew from 38 to 52 seats. This fluctuation is due to a series of factors, some linked to voter apathy — even toward Islamist parties — while others include state intervention that appears to engineer voting results according to the needs of the moment through the distribution of seat quotas to parties. On the eve of the 2009 presidential election — which maintained the incumbent president in office — Soltani announced that he would be resigning from the government in order to focus on his party, which was splitting as rival leader Abdelamadjid Menasra announced the creation of a splinter party, the Movement for Preaching and Change.

- The FFS emerged in the 1960s and was illegal until 1989. It is led by Hocine Ait-Ahmed, a hero of the anti-colonial war, who lives in France. It is secular, relatively liberal and a vocal opponent of the current regime. Its constituency is limited to ethnic Berberophones in the Kabylie region and Algiers. Almost since its legalisation, it has been torn by an internal conflict over leadership and direction. It participated only in the 1997 parliamentary election and obtained 20 seats. It boycotted all the other national elections and even withdrew its representatives from Parliament after 2001. This was all due to its unwillingness to compromise and work within the existing system and its rules. Not all its leaders agree on this course and on other issues, leading the organisation into a deep internal crisis in 2006–07.

- The RCD was created in 1989 as a secular and essentially ethnic party that focuses on the Berber language and culture. It is relatively conservative and has supported the government in its fight against the Islamist rebellion. It is led by Said Saadi, who was close to the government, at least until the party withdrew its 19 representatives from Parliament in the wake of the Kabylie crisis in the early 2000s. It boycotted the 2002 parliamentary election and the 2004 presidential election in an effort to regain credibility among its constituency in the Kabylie region. After winning 19 seats in 2007, it resumed its participation in Parliament.

- Ennahda was created by Abdellah Djaballah, who was ousted from it in 1998. It subsequently came under the control of Lahbib Adami. As a relatively conservative Islamist party, it is willing to work within the existing system. It believes that the Islamic state will be realised through a gradual transition at the societal level brought about by preaching and political action. Its strategy emphasises persuasion over coercion. It made a relatively good showing in the 1997 elections, winning 34 seats. However, its leadership crisis has taken a profound toll on it. In 2002 it won only one seat and performed only slightly better in 2007, winning five.

- The MRN is led by Abdallah Djaballah, who founded it in 1998 after he was ousted from Ennahda. It is a small and relatively conservative Islamist party that competes with the MSP and Ennahda and, like the latter, aims at winning over society before capturing the state. The party won 43 seats in 2002, but retained only three after the 2007 vote, for the same reasons of problematic leadership as Ennahda.

As indicated in Table 2 (page 10), the dominant parties today are the FLN and RND, which, in alliance with the MSP, form a powerful conservative-religious, pro-government bloc in Parliament. Their tri-party co-operation and control was extended in the 29 November 2007 municipal and county elections . The FLN was victorious in these local elections, which had a higher voter turnout than the May 2007 legislative elections-that is 44.09% in the provincial election as compared to the parliamentary 36.6% voter turnout. The FLN won with 30% of the seats in local assemblies, the RND was second, with 24.5% of seats, and the MSP was fourth with 10.69% of the seats, being beaten by the FNA which won 11.29% of the votes.

The failure of the multiparty system

The 2002 and 2007 parliamentary elections reflected a growing public apathy toward the political process in general and political parties in particular, whether they were religious or secular. Participation in the vote was 46% in 2002 and 36.6% in 2007, the lowest since independence: 'The discrediting of the electoral process and the pettiness of political bargaining, as well as the government's manipulation to exclude activist elements, result in a political culture of passivity and apathy.'[10]

People's disapproval of political parties is largely attributed to their internal dissension and their marginalisation in the political process. Several opposition leaders were co-opted by way of election to Parliament — which provides personal privileges and a hefty salary — or by being appointed to high government office. This substantially curtailed

their ability to oppose the regime and diminished their popular appeal. Also, political imperatives led some of these parties into unnatural alliances, such as those between the communist *Parti des Travailleurs* (PT), the MSP and the RCD; and that between the RCD and the regime.

Furthermore, the parties have generally been divided in line with their opposition to the government (i.e. the FFS) or support for it (i.e. the FLN, RND, MSP and RCD), and whether they favour an all-inclusive political compromise among all non-violent forces (the position of the FFS and PT), or the exclusion of the Islamists from the formal political processes (RCD).

The Berber protest that began in 2001 in Kabylie after the killing of a young demonstrator in the custody of the security forces created another fissure between people and political parties. The protest movement in Kabylie, which had called for a boycott of the 2002 parliamentary and the 2004 presidential elections, reflected the public's widespread disillusionment with the electoral process in particular and the political elite in general. The Berber-based political parties, the RCD, FFS and MCB, have lost much of their popular appeal since 2001. During the Kabylie crisis they became trapped in the dilemma of how to maintain a national appeal while at the same time being responsive to their main, but limited, constituency, the Berberophones of Kabylie. The RCD was discredited for being too close to the regime and not being active enough in the Berber political struggle. The FFS, whose political platform is essentially civic rather than ethnic, was unable to lend tangible support to the essentially ethnic Kabylie movement. Furthermore, neither of these two parties nor the MCB seemed to know how best to handle the 'citizen movement', which had highlighted their irrelevance in people's daily struggle for change. Fearing a massive loss of support, the RCD and FFS withdrew their elected representatives from Parliament and boycotted the 2002 legislative elections. These moves did not make any difference to the Kabylie grassroots movement, and the two parties lost on two counts: constituency support and representation in state institutions.

Public apathy and rejection of political parties have hampered efforts at political liberalisation. Parties have lost touch with their constituencies and failed to articulate people's interests and grievances, especially when most citizens face financial hardship, despite the unprecedented high national income from the sale of oil and natural gas. Opposition parties have seen their popular support and legitimacy dwindle, and the incumbent elite — including the dominant FLN party — once again enjoy the comfort of not being held accountable for their actions or inaction.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that even if opposition parties performed their functions adequately, they would be unable to deliver on their promises because of the nature of the political system in general, and the power structure in particular, as discussed above. To enable political parties to perform their functions will require a major overhaul of the political system and the political culture and practices that accompany it.

THE FIS: FROM POLITICAL ACTION TO ARMED REBELLION

An Islamist tendency existed in Algeria long before the crisis of the 1990s. In the 1960s and 1970s it focused primarily on the negative impact that rapid economic modernisation had on faith, morality and traditional social institutions. Islamists could scarcely attack

the state, because the vast majority of Algerians were then benefitting from its generous welfare policies.

When Islamism took on a political tone in the 1970s, the government cracked down on it. After the crackdown failed to silence it, the state began to acquiesce to some of its demands, such as making Friday the weekly day of rest instead of Sunday, promoting religious education in schools and adopting a conservative family code in 1984. When the socio-economic conditions began deteriorating in the 1980s, the Islamists gathered momentum and some among them opted for armed struggle through the radical association *Tekfir wal-Hidjra* and the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA) of Mustapha Bouyali.[11] However, all early armed rebellion attempts failed.

The social explosion of October 1988 provided an excellent opportunity for the Islamist movement to capitalise on the spontaneous popular unrest. It was in that context that the FIS was born and began mobilising people against a state that had lost the economic means to pacify society. The party's rapid growth was helped by a network of independent mosques where the Islamist discourse constantly criticised the state's policies and even the foundations of its legitimacy. The FIS leaders called for the establishment of a *dawla Islamyyia* (Islamic state), failing which they demanded more political freedom and the outlawing of 'un-Islamic' social values and practices through the adoption of a new personal value structure based on Islam.

To bring about change, the FIS called for political liberalisation and welcomed the changes enacted in 1989 and thereafter for that purpose. It accepted the terms of the electoral game set out by the ruling party and won handsomely in both local and national elections. However, the FIS was denied the fruits of its victory, and it was banned following the arrest of its leaders in 1991, after they called for a mutiny in the army and the cancellation of parliamentary elections in 1992. From then on, most of the FIS leadership opted for an openly radical strategy and called on society to engage in an armed *jihad* against the state.

There were many domestic factors that contributed to the rise of the FIS as a religious and political organisation. These included the precarious socio-economic conditions of the late 1980s; a marked weakness of the secular opposition as a result of the state's repression; an ideological vacuum after the exhaustion of anti-colonial nationalism and the failure of socialism; the government's manipulation of cultural and religious symbols and groups; pseudo-nationalism based on cultural and religious identity in the face of Western dominance and interference; increased authoritarianism at a time when it was in retreat elsewhere in the world; and the greater availability of human and material resources for political mobilisation and action.

External factors also contributed to the rise of the FIS. Among them were ideological influences from politically active organisations such as Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, and from prominent foreign Islamist thinkers such as the Egyptians Hassan al-Banna and Sayyedd Qutb and the Indian scholar Sayyid Abul Ala Al-Mawdudi; the 1979 Iranian revolution; the fall of authoritarianism in the former socialist bloc; the war against Soviet occupation in Afghanistan; the Gulf War of 1991; international economic shocks; and Western calls for democratisation. Moreover, much of the party's earlier financial resources came from Saudi Arabia. After the 1991 Gulf War, during which the FIS supported Iraq, Saudi support was replaced by Iranian, Libyan and domestic financial resources.

The FIS was driven by two leaders with distinct functions and styles. Ali Belhadj was a young, fiery ideologue whose preaching attracted thousands of youth yearning for change and willing to do anything to bring it about. Abassi Madani was a middle-aged politician who was very familiar with the Algerian governing elite and political dynamics. The former exhibited the uncompromising dogmatism of a religious movement, while the latter represented the pragmatism of a political organisation. Their combined and complementary efforts led the FIS to the overwhelming victories over the FLN in the early 1990s. However, repression and the government's retraction of political liberalisation in 1992 pushed the Islamist opposition underground and towards the resumption of the political violence initiated by Bouyali a decade earlier.

It fell to Abdelkader Chebouti, a former companion of the earlier Islamist rebel Bouyali and an FIS militant, to reactivate the MIA, which ushered in the deadly Islamist violence in 1991. It later split into two factions, one of which contributed to the creation in 1992 of FIS's armed wing, the AIS. The AIS concentrated its actions mostly in north-western Algeria, while other independent groups focused on the north-central part of the country. In the late 1990s the AIS became independent of the FIS because of the absence of the key FIS leaders — Belhadj and Madani, who were in jail — and also because of difference with the remaining political leadership over the strategy and means of the rebellion. In 1997 the AIS agreed to a ceasefire following secret negotiations with the security services under President Liamine Zeroual.

Organisation, leadership and goals of the FIS

The FIS, which recruited members among university students, the middle class and the poor urban class, was led at the national level by the *Majlis al-Shura* (Consultative Council) with around 35 members and an executive council of seven members headed by a president (originally Madani). Consultative and executive councils existed also at the provincial *(wilayat)* and municipal level. Below these, the FIS had informal groupings of neighbourhood mosques and committees *(comités de quartier)*, which helped mobilise, recruit and inform.

The national structures worked through a series of commissions handling different aspects of the party's activities, such as education, social affairs and planning.[12] The councils, whose members were theoretically elected, made their decisions by consensus or majority vote. The rank and file did not have a formal mechanism for input in the National Council's decisions, except during the national congress, which took place once in Algeria and twice overseas (after the FIS was banned in Algeria), each time with very limited participation from the grassroots.

After it was banned in 1992 the FIS lost its organisational structure and much of its social base. Its remaining command structures — the parliamentary delegation, the *Instance Executive du FIS a l'Etranger* (Overseas Executive Authority of the FIS) headed by Rabah Kébir in Germany and the Co-ordination Council — were dissolved at the fourth congress held in Europe in August 2002. A single unified command structure (abroad) was re-established and Mourad Dhina was made its president.[13] Madani and Belhadj were released in July 2003 after serving 12-year jail terms. The former went to live in the Arab Gulf, while the latter stayed in Algeria. All former officers of the FIS were granted

amnesty, but prohibited from engaging in political activity in Algeria and from making public statements of a political nature.

Stated purpose and policy of the FIS

From its inception in 1989 the FIS dedicated itself to getting rid of the existing system of government, initially by peaceful means and with wide popular support. It declared its intention to establish an Islamic state governed primarily according to religious rules and traditions. Of course, many interpreted this intention as a desire to establish a totalitarian system characterised by uniformity of social mores, cultural norms and political thought, and where opposition would be severely limited.

Early, overwhelming support for the Islamist movement, headed by the FIS, encouraged the party to bluntly articulate such a design. This contributed to the growing resistance it faced in the early 1990s from the state and most of the secular elite, which supported ending the momentum of a threatening political Islam.

After a decade of violence that pitted the Islamists against both the state and parts of society that ceased to support them, both sides seem to have learned something from the conflict. On the one hand, the state learned to live with the Islamist sentiment well entrenched and represented in the depth of its institutions; on the other hand, the Islamists made some adjustments so as to appear less threatening and more willing to work within the established rules and institutions, at least for the time being.

The 1989 statutes of the party were amended at the 2002 congress held abroad, probably in order to reflect some of the adjustments that the leadership judged necessary to revive the organisation in Algeria. The new text of Article 3 on 'Methods' states that the party will implement its goals by way of

> seeking full agreement with the will of the people (clearly and freely expressed), by taking into consideration its general interest, and by safeguarding its values, its identity components, its unity, its freedom and its strength. This will be done in the context of the consolidation of the Arabic and Islamic Maghrebi unity, the strengthening of regional and international co-operation for justice and peace, and the promotion of exchange of material and intellectual production between peoples, without prejudice to their respective cultural principles and while taking into account the existence of their distinct social and economic circumstances and conditions.[14]

Article 4 of the statutes deals directly with the fears inspired by past FIS behaviour and discourse and tries to dispel them by stating:

> The FIS acts with gentleness and team spirit while following the middle of the road (wassatiya). It rejects extremism and division; it associates the balanced use of popular demands with struggle in the context of the Islamic Law; and it is committed to respecting the public order, supporting the rights of others, and defending the freedoms permitted by Islamic Law.

In the chapter on 'Objectives', the FIS set the following goals for itself:

- to implement an Islamic societal project (as defined) based on giving back to Islam its rightful place in Algeria (article 7);
- to propose a comprehensive Islamic project that is adapted to time, place and people, a project that will advance the state, society, the family and the individual (article 8); and
- to end all civilisational dominance by guaranteeing national unity around solid elements: Islam, the Arabic language and the general unity that had cemented the Amazigh [Berber] and Arab communities in Algeria (article 9).

Article 10 lists other objectives under the heading 'Strengthening of National and Territorial Unity', such as:

- the diffusion among the nation of knowledge and practices that educate it in perfecting the performance of its religious obligations;
- the freeing of man [sic.] from all submission, except that to God, and from all oppression by leaders;
- the protection of man's vital needs; and
- the defence of the rights of man, which were given to him by God and which all nations are committed to respect.

While some of the other elements of the party's statute appear technically similar to those of other parties, the prevalence of religious references is very marked. Of course, this should not be surprising, since the FIS is at its root a religious party. However, this characteristic seems to clash directly with the constitutional prohibition (1996 amendment) on political organisations based on a 'religious, linguistic, racial, gender, corporatist or regional' basis and the use of partisan propaganda based on these elements (article 42 of the Constitution, as amended in 1996 by referendum). In fact, even the name of the party would not be permitted under the Constitution. That was why, for example, the Movement of the Islamic Society had to change its name to the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) in order to conform to the new law or face prohibition altogether.

Although the FIS has been banned in Algeria since 1992, its current statutes seem to defy the current Constitution directly. It is worth noting that even when it was created in 1989, the Constitution did not allow for such a party. However, the government of Chadli Bendjedid permitted it and other religious parties to exist as a counterbalance to the opposition he faced from the secular left and the conservative orthodoxy.

With regard to social and economic issues, the FIS has always exhibited vagueness and ambiguity. Sometimes its leaders, when pressed in interviews, responded simply by promising an answer in due course or that the answer was to be found in the Holy Book. In its 1990 preliminary political programme, the FIS presented a very general economic plan for Algeria based on free-market principles in trade, industry and agriculture. The programme reiterated the prevailing Islamist criticism of state planning in industry, which it saw as the cause of economic failure; and it called for the creation of a strong industrial base and military industries, without, however, indicating whether these will be private or state owned. The FIS programme also supported the development of private entrepreneurial initiatives as the main source of wealth in society and a merit-based land distribution programme coupled with an infusion of capital into the agricultural sector so as to eliminate

dependency on food imports. The programme called for the creation of a system of Islamic banks so as to adhere to the key tenets of Islamic law in the financial sector.[15]

With regard to foreign investment, Abassi Madani indicated in an interview that foreign investors and multinational corporations would be invited to work in the country, provided that they respect Algerian sovereignty and its economic and political choices.[16]

In the social area, the FIS programme called for state assistance to the elderly and paid maternity leave for women. It also proposed to increase the education budget and to extend the duration of mandatory schooling.[17]

The Salafist and the Algerianist tendencies of the FIS

The FIS at its inception was not a homogeneous organisation: it was diverse in its ranks and strategy. The only issue that commanded consensus among its key figures was the belief that the existing regime had to be replaced by an Islamic elite working to bring about an orthodox Islamic order in Algeria.

There were two main schools of thought within the FIS leadership. The Salafist tendency had an internationalist and radical outlook: it sought to establish, even by violent means, an *Islamic Umma* (a united and sovereign Islamic community) across and above the Muslim states. For this faction, winning over Algeria was just a stepping-stone in achieving this objective. Some of the members holding this view broke away from the FIS in the early 1990s and joined or supported radical Salafist groups, such as the GIA, that used armed struggle as the sole means of attaining the political goal. The second school of thought, *al-Djaza'ra* (the Algerianist tendency), believed that the primary objective of the struggle was the establishment of genuine Islamic rule in Algeria based on indigenous traditions and history. This tendency became the dominant one among the rump of the FIS, both overseas and underground in Algeria.

It is worth noting here that the FIS has expressed no special allegiance to any foreign Islamist movement or government. Its leaders and members acknowledged drawing their inspiration from the writings of famous Islamist thinkers and activists in the Middle East (mainly Egypt) and Asia (mainly Pakistan), such as Sayyedd Qutb, Hassan al-Banna and al-Mawdudi. Furthermore, some of the early financial support for the Algerian Islamists came from Saudi Arabia, although this did not seem to translate into an automatic adherence to the Saudi kingdom's Wahhabist doctrine. Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood, as a school and an organisation, appears to have been the most influential foreign element on Algerian Islamists, mainly among part of the FIS and most of the MSP, Ennahda and MRN.

The FIS and the question of democracy

Before engaging in its campaign of violence, the FIS accepted that political liberalisation and democracy could provide opportunities and become instruments for capturing the state and establishing an Islamic order. Its leader, Abassi Madani, declared democracy compatible with Islam to some extent, but indicated that once in power, the FIS would reject anything judged incompatible with the *Shari'a*. In other words, the elements of Western democracy that would be accepted must be subordinated to the *Shari'a*: 'Everything that goes against the *Shari'a* is and will be unacceptable.'[18]

This instrumentalist view of democracy focused mainly on the idea that the FIS should win power through popular will alone. The FIS leaders were often ambiguous on the issues of political and religious freedom, tolerance of the opposition and accountability after attaining power. Before he was arrested in June 1991, Madani appeared willing to accept the result of elections in the event that the Islamists did not win, but he reserved the right to challenge those elected if their behaviour and policies went against the *Shari'a*. He stated:

> No matter what the results are, we will respect the majority even if it is only made up of one lone vote. We consider, in effect, that he who has been elected by the people reflects the will of the people. In contrast, what we will not accept is this elected person not acting in the interests of the people. He must not be in contradiction with the *Shari'a*, its doctrine, its values. He cannot make war on Islam. He who is the enemy of Islam is the enemy of the people.[19]

Madani reflected the FIS's political side, which promoted those elements of political liberalisation that would permit his party to attain power. However, his co-leader, Ali Belhadj, who represented the ideological and dogmatic side of the party, declared that Islam and democracy were incompatible; he used a radical, but popular, discourse in the mosques to call for mass action.

As indicated above, the FIS had elements of both political moderation (when it accepted the electoral process) and radicalism (when it called for the overthrow of the existing system). Its propensity to use violence was present before 1992, notably because of the radical ideology that guided it and because its cadres included individuals who favoured violent action as the only way to bring about a new order.

ISLAMISM AFTER THE FAILED REBELLION

The 1990s were a painful time for Algerians and the country will require many years to recover from the violence, destruction and social dislocation it experienced. It was also a decade of learning and adjustment. While the ruling elite discovered ways to stay in power by slightly opening the political space to opposition forces, the Islamists also learned that confronting the state head-on was a losing strategy. They learned to phrase their political ambitions in terms that did not overtly conflict with what have become almost universal norms of democratic governance and respect for human and civil rights.

Like the bulk of Algerian Islamists, the FIS leadership has changed its style and discourse and seems to have given up on revolutionary change by violence. It reverted to the reformist strategy (MRN) and today appears willing to work within the confines of the state and the limits of the Constitution. This was clearly indicated by Madani Mezrag,[20] the 'repenting' leader of the AIS who benefitted from the amnesty laws, and by Rabah Kébir,[21] the official representative of the FIS abroad, who in September 2006 returned to Algeria from self-imposed exile in Germany. The FIS leadership appears to have reconciled itself with the principles of democracy, political tolerance and the inclusion of women. However, it remains to be seen whether this is just a refurbished version of their former instrumentalist strategy or a genuine transformation. The amnestied FIS leadership hopes

that the state will lift all legal prohibitions on the party, or at least allow its former leaders to engage again in political activities.

Beyond the banned FIS, a small outlawed Salafist faction, which holds ultra-conservative and revolutionary views, still seeks radical change through violence. This tendency is represented mainly by the GSPC, which is still active and engages in occasional violent attacks. Probably as a survival strategy, in 2006 the GSPC officially declared its allegiance to Al-Qaeda, and in January 2007 became part of that network, renaming itself Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Land of the Maghreb. Early in the same year, this organisation conducted several violent attacks in Algeria against foreign personnel and a series of bombings in the capital city, Algiers, which killed more than 30 people. Other violent actions attributed to it took place in Morocco and Tunisia.

Violent and non-violent political Islam played a substantial role in somewhat weakening authoritarian rule in Algeria. Alongside weak secular formations, its actions prompted institutional changes and political liberalisation. However, it failed to accept political diversity and dissent within its own ranks and in the secular opposition. The Islamists, especially the FIS, antagonised potential secular allies in the fight against the forces of authoritarianism. They assassinated scores of journalists, intellectuals and students, even though these victims shared their opposition to the regime. Many vocal advocates of tolerance and diversity were marginalised or pushed into exile, fearing for their lives and those of their relatives.

A wide alliance with the secular opposition (intellectuals, Marxists, feminists and Berberists) could have provided the FIS with a much more successful social movement in opposition to the authoritarian state. At a meeting in Rome in 1995, where most opposition movements gathered, the FIS finally tried to bring such a coalition together. The meeting agreed on a platform for a solution to the crisis.[22] However, the tactical Rome Platform came too late: by then the rift was too deep.[23] This experience served as a lesson to the moderate Islamist parties, which nowadays reach out to the secular opposition (even the Communist Party) for tactical reasons and mutual gains.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the gravity of its recent violent experience, Algeria does not yet seem to have produced a long-term plan for its peaceful transition to stability and prosperity. Even though political violence has drastically diminished since the late 1990s, the multidimensional crisis is still unresolved and socio-economic conditions have not improved. The important financial gains made in recent years from the sale of hydrocarbons (which brought the country $150 billion in hard currency reserves in 2008) have not trickled down to the masses, whose living conditions have worsened in the last two decades. The UN Development Programme's (UNDP) *Human Development Report 2007/08* ranked Algeria 104 out of 177 countries in terms of development.[24] Recent windfalls from oil sales have not yet been invested in a comprehensive plan of development for the non-hydrocarbon sectors. Oil and gas still provide 97% of Algeria's export earnings, leaving the country as vulnerable now as it was in the late 1980s to the potentially grave consequences of a major drop in international energy prices.

At the political level, the reforms and liberalisation undertaken in the last 15 years have widened the political field to include new players, but they have not done away with the fundamentals of authoritarian rule; nor has the power structure changed substantially. Important constitutional questions remain unresolved, such as the role of the military in politics, the wide-ranging presidential prerogatives and the lack of judicial independence. More generally, the challenge persists of establishing a government that is bound by the country's laws.

On the positive side, the resumption of parliamentary life and electoral processes has brought back some sense of normality. The supremacy of the military in political and economic affairs has diminished after the resignation of army chief of staff General Mohamed Lamari in August 2004. This event may act as a catalyst for the process of professionalising the military and usher in the transfer of real power from the army to civilian institutions. If they are to succeed, however, these actions should be accompanied by the growth of representative civil society institutions and mature political parties that are able to play a proper part in public policy-making, serving as true aggregators and articulators of people's demands and concerns. In turn, this would require responsive state institutions and leadership, within a system of checks and balances.

For example, for Parliament to truly exercise its constitutional prerogatives, it should be able to check the extensive powers of the executive branch, something it has never done. On the contrary, the current pro-government coalition (the FLN, RND and MSP), which overwhelmingly dominates Parliament, supports most governmental initiatives primarily because all those involved benefit from this arrangement. Dissent within the coalition is strongly discouraged in the name of restoring political stability and foiling the ambitions of radical Islamists and Berberists. Under these conditions, both Parliament and the party system fail in their duty and constitute a sizeable obstacle to the transition to democracy. A genuine transition requires a balance between the powers of the executive branch and those of the legislature. The excessive concentration of power in the hands of central state institutions must give way to decentralisation and the devolution of power to allow for swift solutions to the many local problems faced by people. The judiciary, which is currently subservient to the executive branch, also needs to be independent and impartial. Finally, independent civic associations representing differentiated interests in society must be enabled to have a say in public policy-making, and not exist simply as a showcase.

Algeria has changed in major ways in the past two decades. A new generation is in the process of replacing the post-independence one. Today's society will not be pacified by oil-rent subsidies and generous welfare programmes such as those employed in the 1970s and part of the 1980s by an authoritarian government that drew its legitimacy from the war of independence and a distributive policy. Neoliberal economic reforms, following the grave fiscal crisis of the early 1990s, drastically cut the subsidies and welfare benefits. At the same time, society lost its docility, and authoritarian rule retreated slightly in the face of serious domestic and external challenges.

The Islamists played a major part in effecting this latter change after 1988. They helped ordinary people become politically active and understand that change required public involvement. Unfortunately, when that involvement shifted from *Da'wa* (preaching), charitable work and peaceful street protest to armed rebellion, the Islamist movement offered the authorities a pretext to respond with violence and to impose limits on the

newly acquired political freedoms. In the clash that ensued, everyone lost out: the state, the Islamists, the secular opposition and the country.

Political Islam is now part of Algeria's new political reality and is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The political system must embrace solid safeguards against the hegemonic tendencies of both the Islamist groups and the FLN or its stepchild, the RND.

Looking into the future while learning from the past, it can be said that for meaningful and positive change to happen in Algeria, a broad and persistent democratic front is vital. Of course, this requires a consensus among most forces about basic norms such as respect for constitutional order, the rule of law, tolerance of opposing views, regular changes in leadership through elections and the public accountability of office holders. The current leadership of the country needs to respond in a timely fashion to demands and grievances that are emanating from society, whether through peaceful protests or violent outbursts, in many towns and villages around the country. The marginalisation of the secular opposition parties should also end, as they may help to balance an increasing Islamist trend and thus broaden the legitimacy of state institutions and leaders. The current inclusion of some opposition forces in the political process is one positive move in this direction, even if it has not yet yielded significant dividends. However, reversing such inclusion will incur a heavy price and indeed may no longer be an option: the very low voter turnout in the 2007 parliamentary election represented a protest against meaningless multiparty structures and the token inclusion of some opposition representatives. Political parties must be allowed to play their proper role if they are to regain the confidence of their constituencies and serve as participative channels in the determination of policies affecting the electorate. If this is not done, and if the economic and social crises persist, people may revert to open rebellion as the only option for change. If anything, the message of the 2007 parliamentary election is that things can get worse in a society already riven by many socio-economic problems and lacking institutional representation and responsiveness.

ENDNOTES

1   Political liberalisation is a process that gradually allows political freedoms and establishes some safeguards against the arbitrary action of the state. It precedes democratisation and democracy itself.

2   'Political regime' is defined here as a given distribution of power among the governing institutions and between them and society. An authoritarian regime is characterised by a concentration of power in a single institution or leader and such power is usually unchallengeable. In a democratic regime, power is spread across many institutions and is limited by a system of checks and balances and by the ability of societal forces to challenge and affect public policy.

3   Charef A, *Octobre*. Algiers: Laphomic Editions, 1990, p. 16.

4   *El Moudjahid* (Algiers), 29 January 1990.

5   The full list of 15 demands is known as the '*Plate-forme d'El-Kseur*', <http://www.algeria-watch.org/farticle/kabylie/revendications.htm>.

6   The Islamist violence began well before the cancellation of the 1992 elections, from the time of the Bouyali actions in the 1980s, to the attack in November 1991 against border guards

in Guemmar, near the Tunisian border, by a group of 'Afghans' (the name given to Algerian veterans of the war in Afghanistan).

7 Daoud Z, '*L'Economie du Maghreb en difficulté*', *Le Monde Diplomatique*, June 1991, p. 26.

8 World Bank, *World Bank Report 1993*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993.

9 Norwegian Refugee Council, 'Profile of internal displacement: Algeria', 4 March 2004 & 18 March 2005 and 'Return continues amid improved security', 4 July 2006; reports compiled from the Global Internally Displaced Populations Database, <http://www.idpproject.org>, accessed on 7 December 2006.

10 Korany B, 'Monarchical Islam with a democratic veneer: Morocco', in Brynen R & P Noble (eds), *Political Liberalization and Democratization in the Arab World, Volume II: Comparative Experiences*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998, p. 172.

11 The MIA began its armed attacks in November 1982 and included individuals who were going to lead some of the armed groups of the 1990s, such as Abdelkader Chebouti, Abderrahmane Hattab and Mansouri Meliani. See Boumezbar A & D Azine, *L'Islamisme Algérien: De la Genèse au Terrorisme*. Algiers: Chihab Editions, 2002, p. 68.

12 The 1999 FIS Manifesto can be found at <http://ccfis.fisweb.org/doct/manif_fr.pdf>; other FIS documents on the Internet are at <http://ccfis.fisweb.org/ and http://info.fisweb.org/>, accessed 2 January 2007.

13 The congress's final document (in French) can be found at <http://fisweb.fisweb.org/moutamar/french.html>, accessed on 2 January 2007.

14 Statutes of the FIS as amended in 2002; <http://ccfis.fisweb.org/>, accessed on 24 June 2007; author's translation. The subsequent references are to the same source.

15 FIS, *Preliminary Project of the Political Program of the Islamic Front of Salvation*, February 1990.

16 Abassi Madani, FIS president, interview conducted by Abdelkader Haireche, Algiers, June 1990. For more, see Layachi A & A Haireche, 'National development and political protest: Islamists in the Maghreb countries', *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 14, 2/3, Spring/Summer 1992, pp. 69–92.

17 FIS, *op. cit*.

18 Abassi Madani, interview by Slimane Zeghidour in *Politique Internationale*, 44, Autumn 1990, p. 189.

19 Interview with Abassi Madani, cited in Burgat F & W Dowell, *The Islamic Movement in North Africa*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993, p. 131.

20 Meddi A, '*L'ex-chef terroriste appuie la charte pour la paix*', *El Watan* (Algiers), 24 August 2005, <http://www.elwatan.com>.

21 Meddi A, '*Rabah Kebir n'est plus poursuivi par la justice: "Nous ne renoncerons pas a nos droits politiques"*', *El Watan* (Algiers), 19 September 2006, <http://www.elwatan.com>.

22 The meeting was organised under the auspices of the Saint Egidio Community in Rome and the final document became known as the Rome Platform.

23 Layachi A, 'Political liberalisation and the Islamists in Algeria', in Bonner M, Reif M & M Tessler (eds), *Islam, Democracy and the State in Algeria*. New York: Routledge, 2005, pp. 60–61.

24 UNDP, '*Human Development Report 2007/2008: Country fact sheets — Algeria*', <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_DZA.html>.