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Algeria's tragic contradictions

Lahouari ADDI

Lahouari Addi, a native of Algeria, is visiting professor of political science at the University of Lyon II in Lyon, France, and the author of *L'Algérie et la démocratie: Pouvoir et crise de la politique dans l'Algérie contemporaine* (1995). His essay "Religion and Modernity in Algeria" appeared in the October 1992 issue of the *Journal of Democracy*. Like the previous one, the present essay was translated from the French by Philip Costopoulos.

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Texte intégral

Democratization is the order of the day in the Third World, but aside from certain Latin American countries where it seems to have succeeded, it is everywhere running into difficulties. These challenges need to be analyzed in relation to the history of each country, taking into account specific political, cultural, and ideological circumstances. There is assuredly no universal model of democratic transition that one can recommend to all Third World countries, which is why we must evaluate obstacles to democratization on a case-by-case basis.

Algeria is an interesting case precisely because in February 1989, just months after the October 1988 riots that cost nearly a thousand lives, the ruling National liberation Front (FLN) embarked on a series of reforms, changing the Constitution to allow multipartism and alternation in power by means of elections. Yet the legalization of multipartism mainly benefited the Islamists organized into the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which carried both the June 1990 local elections and the first round of the December 1991 national legislative races. The military suspended the process and nullified the first-round results in January 1992. Next, it forced President Chadli Benjedid to resign. Since then, Algeria has plunged into murderous strife that already has claimed more than 60,000 lives.^[1]

In January 1995, six groups (including the three major contenders—the FLN, the FIS, and the Socialist Forces Front or FFS) met in Rome to sign a pact aimed at ending the crisis.^[2] The military rejected this Rome Platform and ordered a presidential election for November 1995. This vote, which capped the first contested presidential election since Algeria gained its independence from France in 1962, went ahead as scheduled on November 16. Even though the principal opposition parties (most notably the FIS and the FFS) refused to participate, the balloting raised high expectations among voters, who hoped that incumbent president Liamine Zeroual (a retired general and the army's designated candidate) would emerge with strengthened legitimacy and be able to make the military accept a political solution similar to the one outlined in the Rome Platform.

On election day, three-quarters of the country's 16 million eligible voters turned out, and Zeroual won a 61 percent majority. Although widely hailed as a success, this election actually has solved nothing. Zeroual has not been able to assert control over the army, the national dialogue that he promised has broken down, and deadly violence continues to rage. In May 1996, the president promised legislative elections for early 1997, but the opposition parties dismissed his announcement as a maneuver to buy time.

In this essay, I will first explain the inner logic of Algeria's political system by examining its structure and the crisis in which it is currently embroiled, and then look at the dynamics of the various oppositions it has set in motion: 1) the internal opposition within the regime, 2) the Islamist opposition, and 3) the democratic opposition.

The Logic of the Regime

To comprehend what is happening today in Algeria, one must consider the historical and ideological foundations of the power of the state as it emerged from the war of national liberation, which made the army the country's legitimacy-granting authority. The contradiction that has led the regime toward the current violence is its inability to endow itself with legitimate leadership—an inability that has propelled the Islamists into the resulting gap, which has existed ever since the death of President Houari Boumedienne in 1978.

The legitimacy upon which any system of power rests is a principle that is forged in the history of each country. In Algeria, it is inseparable from the struggle that the national liberation movement waged against French colonial domination in the 1950s and early 1960s. The army holds the key to political legitimacy by virtue of the very fact that national sovereignty was wrested from France by the Army of National liberation, whose heir was the National Popular Army. This situation brought about a splitting of the state's power that would have deleterious consequences for the state's provision of services and the efficiency of its decision making. From that time on, there has been, on the one hand, the power of legitimation retained by the army, and on the other, the executive power that the army mandates to run the administration and handle the rents from energy exports. The government's everyday doings are hampered by the clientelistic practices of networks that enjoy the support of high-ranking army officers. A prefect, even a minister of state, has real authority in the discharge of his official responsibilities only insofar as he maintains a privileged individual relationship with a member of the military hierarchy. Relationships within the state, as well as those between state personnel and individuals in society, are particularistic rather than universalistic, whether they are based on family or tribal bonds or on common material interests. The state, then, exists in two dimensions: in one, it is visible, official, obedient to rules; in the other, it is obscure, hidden from public view, guided by a changing balance of forces that only initiates can discern.

Reinforcing this two-dimensional structure is the lack of institutionalization that characterizes the army's legitimating power. Hence the gap between the institutions that formalize the relationships of authority and subordination within the state administration and the capacity of informal networks to influence the decisions of various parts of this administration. Individual military men are among the first to deplore the inefficiency and ineptitude of state officials, but few soldiers make the connection between such incompetence and the double structure of state power. Every high-ranking officer considers it as normal as breathing that the military

hierarchy should have the final say in forming the government and the right to approve all the key civilian officials who would be part of it.^[3] In these officers' eyes, the army has the right and duty to act as the source of legitimacy for the governing authorities, since the state's constitution originated with the army. In view of the traditions inherited from the anticolonial struggle, the army would be loath to install an actual military regime. The Algerian system, despite the key place that the army occupies within it, is not a military regime, and still less a military dictatorship. It is an authoritarian civilian regime in which the state draws its legitimacy and strength from the army, which in turn entrusts it with the mission of preventing the emergence of a civil society independent of state power—the idea being to avoid having to institutionalize conflict in the public sphere.

The authoritarianism of the Algerian state flows not from its military origins, but from the populist ideology that the army champions. It is as if the army has been asking the administration since 1962 to create a new society whose members are socially and economically equal. This equality is to be guaranteed by the state; all will depend on the state for subsistence. This is the vantage point from which the historical legitimacy embodied by the army must be understood, for it is not an ideological justification for a military aristocracy. Rather, it is the political reserve or resource that authorizes the army to intervene, directly or indirectly, in political affairs in order to guide the government's actions, in keeping with the mission that the former has entrusted to the latter. It was in the name of historical legitimacy that then-Defense Minister Houari Boumedienne in June 1965 deposed Ahmed Ben Bella, who had been elected president just a scant two years before.^[4]

The absence of leadership left a void that helped give rise to the bloody crisis that has engulfed Algeria.

Yet Boumedienne, fearing that he in turn would be overthrown by his successor at the Defense Ministry, resolved the contradiction of the double structure of state power by institutionalizing historical legitimacy through the fiction of the Council of the Revolution that he headed, and above all by fusing the two powers in his own person. Upon his death, however, the military men had no wish to renew the arrangement, which they thought had worked to their disadvantage. They then named to the presidency Chadli Benjedid, a military-district commander who lacked Boumedienne's forceful personality. Benjedid was not able to impose his will on his peers or to embody legitimating authority while exercising executive power; the regime entered a period of crisis that culminated in a paralysis that the Islamists would use to their advantage. In order to perpetuate itself, the regime needs the charismatic authority of a chief, a leader who can ground his legitimacy in populist discourse. The intrinsic personal qualities of such a chief are vital for the reproduction of the system: he must be a tribune and must have a passion for his job, which will involve many hours of hard work every day. When it came to such qualities, Boumedienne far outshone his successor. It is true that Benjedid had to govern during a difficult time. For one thing, the model that his predecessor had put in place had reached its limits; moreover, the bottom fell out of world oil prices in 1985-86. The government began reforms to make the productive apparatus profitable, but the army rejected them as too liberal, choosing to bank instead on a future upturn in the oil market.

At bottom, a political regime can rest on the charisma of a leader, on institutions that regulate the distribution of power, or on both. In the 1980s, however, the regime had neither a leader with whom the citizens could identify, nor institutions capable of truly regulating power relations. The absence of leadership, then, left a void that helped give rise to the bloody crisis

that has engulfed Algeria. There were, to be sure, institutional reforms designed to cover up the contradiction between the two powers. The Council of the Revolution was suppressed and replaced by an elected assembly that was made the formal depository of national sovereignty. In reality, legitimacy continued to be embodied by the army, acting through the expedient of the presidential office, whose holder is chosen by universal suffrage—at the end of an election campaign featuring a single party running a single candidate. Constitutionally, therefore, the president derives his authority from the electorate, which allows him to form the government and put it to work on the political and social goals that he has promised to pursue. Yet this picture is false, since the president is chosen by the military hierarchy, whose candidate the voters merely ratify; hence the president's dependence on this hierarchy. He can play one faction against another and can choose his own collaborators, yet his room to maneuver remains limited, for he cannot deprive the army of its legitimating power. Hence also the peculiar relations between the presidency and the Ministry of Defense, with personnel and policy flowing from the latter to the former.

In this scheme, the choice of the president is important for the stability of the regime, for overly strong tensions must not be allowed to arise between the presidency and the military hierarchy. Moreover, stability demands not only that the president be a military man, but that he be committed to respecting the army's preeminence in making important political decisions for the regime as a whole. Hence the difficulties that surround the naming of a defense minister, who may threaten to eclipse the president. Under President Bournedienne, the post went unfilled, and it was only in 1990 that President Benjedid named Khaled Nezzar to assume the position. The latter's successor, Liamine Zeroual, became chief of state and has been very careful not to name anyone to his former position. The question now is whether the election of 16 November 1995 will mark a rupture with this arrangement or will reproduce it. Will the elections resolve the contradiction between the two powers, and give to the regime the electoral legitimacy that it has been lacking? Time will tell whether President Zeroual will act in the name of the electorate from which his formal mandate comes, and whether he, like President Bournedienne, will succeed in uniting the two powers in his own person.

The Turn Toward Competition

Democratization, begun by the Constitution ratified in February 1989, has run up against the double structure of state power that the military men have been trying to preserve. They agreed to open up the political system by introducing multipartism, electoral competition, and freedom of the press in order to limit corruption and give the regime more efficacy and credibility. Multipartism, they calculated, would be bound to reinvigorate the FLN by subjecting it to competition. Thus the goal of democratization has been a kind of institutional reorganization during which the executive power is supposed to face electoral testing, but without any question being raised about the regime's great unwritten law: The army is the source of power. The military men had no fear of elections, since they expected that the FLN would end up forming an understanding with the FIS in the National Assembly, the upshot being a coalition government that would respect the legitimating power of the army. The victory of any single party aside from the FLN would raise doubts about the political preeminence of the army, since if such a party enjoyed a majority in the Assembly it could form a government without the army's go-ahead and, above all, could threaten to select a defense minister from its own ranks, which would put an end to the double structure of state power along with the army's political preeminence. It would, in short, mean the beginning of a new regime.

For unique historical reasons, the Algerian regime is built around the splitting—and the confusion—of the legitimating power and the executive power, and is organized into an administrative state in which, unlike the situation that obtains in a state under law, sovereignty is neither formally affirmed nor institutionally localized. The legitimating power is hidden by institutions that do not correspond to political reality; it takes cover behind them in order to keep the nation from becoming aware that it possesses sovereignty. This power fears public exposure not out of cynicism or Machiavellianism, but because the political sphere, which is not independent of the religious and social spheres, is not differentiated from them. The military hierarchy, the purveyor of legitimacy, is not even aware that it is substituting itself for the electorate, retaining sovereignty in place of that electorate, which in turn does not question whether the military is making good use of that sovereignty. In its rare ideological statements, the army invokes the national sovereignty that it embodies and has the mission of defending against foreign foes. The military identifies itself with the nation and not with the electorate—which does not exist in the military's eyes because political conflicts among Algerians are presumed not to exist. Rather, there are political conflicts between Algerians and foreigners, or between Algerian patriots and Algerian traitors. But this type of conflict must not be institutionalized, for traitors are to be physically exterminated. Hence the bloody nature of the current crisis. The adversaries see each other, respectively, as traitors to the nation or traitors to Islam (which, for the Islamists, defines the nation). Neither side can acknowledge such modern categories as "the electorate" or "popular sovereignty," because these categories presuppose the political liberty of the individual and, above all, the idea of a minority that can legally oppose a majority.

The body politic does not think of itself as sovereign and accepts, to a certain extent, that the army holds the power of legitimation; hence there can be no rule of law, for popular sovereignty is the source of modern law. This explains the willingness and indeed the zeal with which officials violate the juridical rules that they have made and that, in theory, have the force of law for everyone. Sundry contending factions and clientelistic groups flaunt their ability to violate the law with impunity; it is a way of showing their strength. In sum, whether the law made by the administrative state applies or does not apply at any given moment depends on the balance of forces among various factions at that time. As for anyone among the ruled who belongs to no faction and is delivered up to the arbitrariness of the Hobbesian state of nature, he must pay in order to benefit from laws that accord him certain rights, and must also pay to avoid laws that would impose upon him some burden or duty. This is why in Algeria officials have exorbitant power; they can make the law pay by applying it or not applying it, whichever is to their own advantage.

Corruption is the general rule, involving not just individuals but whole networks that reach up to the very highest levels of the state and are tough to dismantle.

To defeat the factions and neutralize the pressure groups that manipulate the bureaucracy and the economy would require an independent judicial establishment that could enforce the law against people who abuse the public trust for private gain. Yet the notion of the autonomy of justice flows from the institutional distinction between the sovereign power and the executive power. As soon as the sovereign power fails to assert itself as such, the judicial power becomes limited to carrying out the orders of the executive power, which is precisely what permits those who hold this latter type of power to abuse it. The autonomy of the judge is conceivable and feasible only if the sovereign power—and the awareness that the various actors have of it—is institutionally affirmed. If the sovereign power remains indefinitely in the hands of one group, if it is not the expression of the will of the majority of voters, justice

will remain subordinated to the executive power, which will demand that it look solely to the executive's interests. And the interests of Algeria's executive power today lie in gaining loyalists, and securing allegiance at any cost so as to hide its chronic deficit of legitimacy from the rising generations who are not old enough to remember the war of national liberation.

Here, precisely, resides one of the Algerian regime's major contradictions and the very source, moreover, of the dynamic that has given rise to violence. The administrative state is being ambushed by officials who abuse their power, and by the corruption to which they are drawn. This arbitrariness and corruption are not so much results of individual greed and wickedness as the unavoidable byproducts of a political regime whose functionaries wield powers that are very broad and frequently open to abuse. Corruption is the general rule, involving not just individuals but whole networks that reach up to the very highest levels of the state and are tough to dismantle. As long as an official does not question the basic rule of the regime—that is, the political preeminence of the army—he will not be disturbed even if he neglects his job, misuses public funds, and lives far beyond his means. If he is relatively discreet and does nothing to arouse the enmity of competing networks that are more powerful than his own, this official will have nothing to fear from the law and may even climb up through the career ranks. Over the years, corruption became pervasive as a means of access to wealth; the struggle to acquire strategic government posts became a key part of the process of accumulating a private fortune. In the absence of the independent administration of justice, the bureaucracy has divided society up into predatory fiefdoms, with the citizenry as an inexhaustible resource. These fiefdoms form a strife-ridden system that draws its homogeneity and coherence from the regime's constitutive principle. The Algerian regime, in its operation no less than in its structure, does not have the means to protect itself against the corruption that is eating away at its administrative capacity.

The various clientelistic and kinship networks often come to an agreement over economic spoils. When they do clash, their battles can extend to the highest levels of the state. Compulsory retirement, a posting abroad, a transfer to a less important department—all these can temporarily put an end to such conflicts, with the settlement sealed by such personnel reshufflings. Officials are rarely prosecuted for incompetent management, misuse of funds, or corruption; when they are brought to book, it is invariably for political reasons. Formally, the charges are mismanagement or corruption, but the real motive is political score-settling. It may seem as though the factions and interest groups give the regime its logic and its dynamic. In truth, however, those factions are but an effect of the political regime; they appear and form thanks to the regime. Groups and factions that thwart the regime's logic are eliminated; those that enjoy the regime's favor perpetuate themselves by reinforcing its logic, accumulating riches and allies in the process.[\[5\]](#)

The contradiction of democratization in Algeria is that the leaders have sought to introduce, alongside the historical legitimacy embodied by the army, a principle of electoral legitimacy intended to sanction the government alone. Their aim was to make the two legitimacies converge, rendering the regime more popular while decreasing corruption and increasing the efficiency of its administration of the country's affairs. The problem is that any given system can have only one principle of legitimacy, and can obey only one source of power. Seeking to solve the problem of corruption, the military exposed the regime to a contradiction that would have proved fatal. Instead of shoring up the system, the constitutional reforms of February 1989 precipitated its decay and confronted it with the violent crisis from which it is still trying to extricate itself. As currently constituted, the regime is incompatible with freedom of

expression, free electoral competition, and the independence of the judiciary. Meanwhile, the reforming regime has unleashed a play of opposing forces that will be difficult to stop unless radical changes are made.

Three Oppositions

Opposition to the regime appeared as a reaction to disillusionment with the post-independence state, an entity in which Algerians had placed a heavy emotional investment after many years of hardship and sacrifice under colonial rule. Corresponding less and less as the years went by to the Utopian hopes that had attended its birth, this regime was rejected because a majority of Algerians found that they could no longer identify with it. Some, who belong to the regime even while calling themselves oppositionists, think that they can reform it from within by changing its leadership. There are others, the Islamists, who want to refound the regime on the basis of a religiously based ideology that they believe will keep the regime true to its mission. Finally, there are the democrats, who want the regime to obey the institutionalized rules of free government. These are Algeria's three currents of opposition: the internal opposition, led by figures who disagree with the policy that has been adopted in the face of the present crisis; the Islamists, who give voice to the aspirations of the common people and as such enjoy the largest number of supporters; and the democrats, who are vigorous enough but on the wrong side of current political circumstances.

The internal opposition. Represented by figures who have been more or less discredited by their past participation in the running of the country, the internal opposition is the least credible and the least important in terms of its impact on the people at large. It is the expression of conflicts of interest among the regime's personnel and of power struggles among various factions and clienteles. The feuds among clienteles and factions become public through the forming of parties that exist exclusively on the basis of communiqués that are obligingly published by the press. The different interest groups, even while being very critical, seek either to consolidate the regime by keeping its essence intact, to strengthen their own positions by denigrating competing groups, or to improve the efficiency of administration in order to raise the people's estimation of the regime while promising to limit corruption as much as possible and reorganize the economy. Obviously, these groups, whatever their degree of activism and their criticisms of past policies, are not really in the opposition. The true opposition is one that seeks not merely to replace one set of officials with another, but to change the institutional forms according to which the state is structured and its power is exercised. Consequently, "the opposition" can mean only those persons or groups who publicly declare that they oppose the constitutive principle of the regime—the army's exercise of sovereign authority—and oppose it no matter what institutional artifices are used to conceal it. If we start with this definition, we are left with two main currents of opposition: the Islamists and the democrats.

The Islamists. As expressed by the FIS, the political ideology of the Islamists corresponds to the political culture and ideas of the average Algerian, who blames the regime for its inability to fight corruption. He perceives this inability without understanding that it inheres in and helps to constitute the regime itself. As he sees it, the government is incapable of improving the conditions of everyday life (jobs, housing, transportation, and so on) and is dominated by people who seek only to enrich themselves and their relatives. He does not understand why the army upholds the government, and concludes that some senior officers must have been bribed. Without realizing that the army retains the legitimating power, he wants to put

institutions on a new footing by entrusting sovereignty to God. Without ever putting it clearly in so many words, he is questioning the institutional bases of the postindependence state. At any rate, he tells himself, sovereignty belongs to God, and to Him it must return. If those in power fear God and obey Holy Writ, they will not become corrupt. This reasoning is shared by a majority of Algerians, who wish for neither fascism nor theocracy, but appeal to God in order to limit the arrogance and arbitrariness of the current government. From this point of view, the islamists are a populist authoritarian movement and not a totalitarian movement.

In any case, this desire for divine sovereignty, which is said to be linked inextricably to the cultural essence of Muslim peoples, would not be expressed with so much force if human sovereignty—whether popular or oligarchic—had been institutionally established from the beginning. The popular appeal of divine sovereignty, like the votes that millions of Algerians cast for the Islamists, signified a desire to name the sovereign power, to draw it out of the state of anonymity in which the army keeps it, and to abolish the "doubleness" of a power that formally resides in the institutions of the state but actually is retained by the military and exercised through hidden methods. The divine conception of sovereignty drew as many supporters as it did only because the sovereignty of the army created a zone of obscurity and the voters wanted to put a face on a method of decision making that conceals itself and those who operate through it. There is also a demand for charismatic leadership that the army has not satisfied, and which the Islamists propose to satisfy by putting forward figures like Abbassi Madani and Ali Belhadj. These citizens discern a concrete political problem and offer what they see as the best solution: entrust sovereignty to God in order to turn officials away from corrupt practices. To tell them that this is contrary to the separation of religion from politics, which is basic to democracy in the West, is to misunderstand their concerns—which are earthly—and to lead the debate up a blind alley. This seems especially misguided given that, in the Algerian collective memory, secularism was a feature of a colonial system that was far from democratic for the people it referred to as natives.

It must be noted, however, that the regime and the Islamists offer not two opposing positive conceptions of sovereignty, but rather two different negations of popular sovereignty. It is true that when power is held in the name of God, its holder, since he is not anonymous, is accountable for his actions and responsible to the voters-believers; moreover, the exercise of power in God's name permits any believer whatsoever to claim it, while only the highest-ranking officers can act in the name of the army. In the one case, sovereignty belongs formally to the people but is embodied by the army; in the other, it belongs to God but is wielded by men acting in His name. In both cases, the source of power is located outside of popular sovereignty. Fundamentally, and as paradoxical as it may seem, it is likely that if the Islamist opposition takes power, it will establish a regime identical to the one that it is now fighting against, except that sovereign authority will be held by a charismatic leader who will declare that God has called him to govern the nation. As in the current regime, the judiciary will not be independent of the executive power. The Islamist opposition seeks to put in place a regime with the very same architecture as the one it is now fighting; the only change would be one of personnel. At bottom, then, the Islamists too represent a kind of internal opposition to the regime. The true opposition is the one mounted by the democrats, who are trying to further the project of removing legitimating power from the hands of the army and founding a system run according to the principle of alternation in power by means of elections.

The democrats. Although numerous enough, the democrats have been frowned upon by circumstances, in particular the unfolding of the conflict that has led to the present violent confrontation between the army and the Islamists. Recognizing themselves neither is the

army, which seeks to use them in order to boost its credibility abroad, nor in the ranks of the Islamists, who suspect them of being potential allies of Islamism's foes, the democrats found their position weakening as the conflict intensified. They also split over the question of whom to regard as the main adversary. Some thought it necessary to neutralize the Islamists first; they were willing to play the regime's game for a short while, considering democracy to be a set of political and ideological values on which consensus can be built in society. For others, it was necessary above all to secure the mechanism of alternation in power through elections, even if at first it would benefit the Islamists. Thus the former defined democracy in terms of the *values* that were needed to ground it, while the latter saw it as a *mechanism* whose working would in time cause democratic values to emerge and win society's acceptance. This debate, which began in January 1992, became moot with respect to influencing the actual course of events, since the military halted the election process and the Islamists turned to armed struggle.

A democrat cannot kill in the name of human rights and his democratic convictions without denying these very things. Revolutions that occur through the shedding of blood have never instituted democracy.

In January 1992, the democrats were not strong enough to stop the *nomenklatura*'s decision to repress those whom it sensed at the threat, nor could they prevent the Islamists from hurling themselves into a campaign of terrorism. Both of these groups had profound motivations, for each believed, that is physical survival was at stake. The *nomenklatura*, hunched behind the army, refused to bear the costs of changing the regime and saw the ominous electoral victory of the Islamists as a sign that it was time to resort to repression. The democrats were not able to prevent the ratcheting up of violence because the elections had not been preceded by a pact guaranteeing individual rights to life and honor and guaranteeing the right of opposition in the event of an Islamist victory. With the dynamic of conflict having gotten the upper hand, the democrats ceased to constitute a political force, becoming instead a collection of individuals whose stands on the issues, whatever those stands might be, were bound to serve one of two armed camps. Crippled and divided, their abstract talk about respect for human rights and freedom of expression and their moral condemnation of terrorism were, only so many pious utterances in the midst of murderous turmoil and gave them the air of helpless or guilty bystanders in the drift toward bloodshed.

To this one must add that a democrat, by definition, rejects violence, while the regime and the Islamists alike assert their existence through it. Democratic ideology is not a belief that demands, for its realization, the killing of one's opponents; nor does it demand that its adherents sacrifice their own lives for it. The Islamist is ready to kill in the name of a millenarian utopianism that conceives of the individual as a terrestrial means toward a heavenly end. In essence, he is ready to kill for a better world as deduced from his politico-religious convictions. The *nomenklatura*, meanwhile, commanding the force of the state and shielding itself behind the bulwark of legality, kills for the sake of physical survival, drawing energy from its desire to avoid having to answer to the tribunals that a new regime would almost surely set up to punish mismanagement and corruption. Yet a democrat cannot kill in the name of human rights and his democratic convictions without denying these very things. Revolutions that occur through the shedding of blood have never instituted democracy, and nowhere has democracy been erected on a foundation of murdered adversaries. This is why Algeria's democratic opposition is weak in this situation of violent conflict.

Yet before they can hope to wield the power of the state, the democrats must fight to be considered a legal political opposition. The current regime is structured in such a way that it functions simultaneously as both government and opposition. In fact, it tolerates only opposition that, no matter how critical it may be, has no means to change anything. For if one looks closely at what was at stake in the 1995 presidential election, it is apparent that the opposition candidate was President Zeroual, who refused to be content with the exercise of merely potential power. Also, with the opposition embodied by figures who belong or wish to belong to the regime, the regime represses any political current that is not already recognized as legitimate opposition. In the eyes of the democratic opposition, the army's retention of legitimating power is similar to the privatization of power, in the rulers' eyes, however, it is a guarantee of national unity. That is why the question of legitimacy does not even come up for the rulers; for the democratic opposition, by contrast, it is an issue. For the regime, the army's mission of guaranteeing national unity and defending the borders gives it a legitimacy that it does not need to seek from the voters. Moreover, the opposition must attract the support of the electorate in order to exercise executive power, on the condition that it does not question the army's preeminence. Executive power is the object of negotiations and quiet bargains: hence the incessant and indefatigable attempts to co-opt opposition leaders through the offer of government posts, regardless of their past records and former political activity. The bargaining is made even easier by the "doubleness" of the power structure, which means that the proffered offices are typically positions with purely notional powers, with no consequence for the real structuring of power within the regime.

The democratic oppositionists are now at an impasse. On one side they face a regime that does not want to change and that wants to use them in order to perpetuate itself. On the other they face islamists who want to create their own version of a one-party state. The democrats cannot join forces with the regime, and still less with the Islamists. Yet paradoxically, the victory of one or the other camp will leave the democrats even weaker. For if the regime neutralizes the Islamists militarily, it will necessarily have done so by strengthening and accentuating its own authoritarian characteristics. If the Islamists succeed in their armed struggle, however, they will have created their own legitimacy, good for at least 20 years. Thus the interest of the democrats lies in a return to the ballot box; this will strengthen electoral legitimacy, which must be accompanied by freedom of expression, independent administration of justice, and a minimal consensus negotiated among all political currents, including the Islamists. Yet for this consensus to be credible, it must be guaranteed by the army, which in turn presupposes that the army will have renounced any role as the source of power and confirmed its institutional respect for the principle of alternation in government through free elections—whoever the winners may be. Through the accords signed at Rome, the FIS has shown its willingness to accept the rules of electoral competition that the democratic oppositionists have proposed. Still, these accords will mean something only if the army can be brought to see that they are not part of some antimilitary plot, and they will bring about peace only if the army offers its guarantee that they will be respected. The problem is that the army does not react as one; rather, it is itself divided by different understandings of these accords and different visions of the future.

Notes

[1] Robert Mortimer, "Islamists, Soldiers, and Democrats: The Second Algerian War," *Middle East Journal* 50 (Winter 1996): 18-39.

[2] Besides the FUN, the FIS, and the FFS (a party ideologically akin to the social democratic parties of Europe that was started on the morrow of independence in 1963 by FLN cofounder Hocine Aït-Ahmed), the groups meeting at Rome- included The Movement for Democracy in Algeria led by former president Ahmed Ben Bella, the Workers' Party, and the Algerian League for Human Rights. In the Rome pact, each of the signatories pledged that should it take power through the upcoming elections, it would respect the principles of universal suffrage, peaceful alternation in power, human rights, equality between men and women, and freedom of expression. The signatories also called on the other political forces in the country—especially the government—to join in these pledges

[3] It is nowhere written that the army forms the government. On the contrary, in all the various Constitutions (of 1963, 1974 and 1989) it is stipulated that the president is commander in chief of the armed forces, and that these must therefore obey the government that he directs

[4] The declaration of 19 June 1965 enumerated the criticisms addressed to Ahmed Ben Bella that were used to justify the coup d'état

[5] Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche, a product of the regime, was forced from office in 1991 because he contradicted the logic of the regime as a whole by seeking to undo the predatory rentier system through the introduction of market-based reforms