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## *Algeria 60 years after independence: a miracle always renewed on the shores of disenchantment*



**Sources:** South Wind [Illustration by Sébastien Marchal, 2012]

*In retrospect, it is difficult to realize that Algeria's independence was a utopian political project. In fact, France, which had established itself there for more than a century, had an organic link to its colonial possession. It is enough to recall the words of François Mitterrand before the National Assembly in 1954 in response to the call of the National Liberation Front (FLN): "Algeria is France. And who among you, ladies and gentlemen, would hesitate to use all means to preserve France?" However, the self-denial of an entire*

*people, gathered behind the flag of the FLN, prevailed over one of the fiercest forms of colonialism in history.*

*On the occasion of the 60th anniversary of the proclamation of Algerian independence, we publish this article by Brahim Senouci, An Algerian professor, writer and activist. He is the author of Algérie, une mémoire à vif ou le caméléon albinos (L'Harmattan, 2008) and ¡Viva Argelia libre! (ContreTemps).*

Since its invasion by France, Algeria has been an uninterrupted river of blood. The conquerors, at the head of an army of drunken minions, drunk with violence, disfigured the landscape and relentlessly massacred everything that was alive, everything that was beautiful. They massacred the population systematically; no one aroused compassion in his eyes, no one aroused his pity. They burned the olive trees, orange trees and beautiful villages of Kabylia after having exterminated their inhabitants. They overcame the limits of horror by locking entire tribes in huge caves in which they locked women, men and babies. They crammed the towns of Sétif, Guelma and Kherrata into trucks and poured the contents of their trailers into the chasms surrounding the towns of these towns. They massacred the population of the garden city of Zattcha. The soldiers found there a new game: a kind of dish launcher. This game consisted of throwing the babies into the air and catching them skewering them on the bayonets...

On July 5, 1962, jubilant crowds flooded Algerian cities to celebrate the end of colonial oppression. People looked at each other, recognized each other, incredulous at the miracle. The wildest dreams came true. There were no more shoeshine: everyone went to school. It is worth remembering the *brilliant* legacy of colonization: a society that is unstructured, acculturated and 86% illiteracy. From one day to the next, Algeria encountered the need to manage a huge country, the poverty of the countryside and the need to educate hundreds of thousands of children. Fortunately, the courage and dignity of our compatriots, the emblematic character of their struggle for liberation, made them worthy of enormous affection throughout the world. The struggle for freedom of the Algerian people allowed the country to take its rightful place within the non-aligned movement, which presented itself as an alternative force to the Eastern and Western blocs. This movement, initiated by Gandhi and by great personalities of the Indian subcontinent such as Nehru, was received with immense favor by the disadvantaged populations whose only horizon was a daily life

of hunger, violence and death. Blessed period: the Pan-African Festival organized in Algiers in 1969 attracted revolutionaries from all over the world, popularized by the great figure of Angela Davis. Algeria, still inserted in the midst of the war of national liberation, had a real influence on the world and played a diplomatic role of the first order in supporting the oppressed peoples, in Palestine, in South Africa... After winning the battle for political independence, he made the former colonial power bend for the second time by resolutely nationalizing its oil and mineral wealth. It was a time of lyrical illusion, that of a powerful movement of non-aligned countries confronting the imperialist nations.

In 1962 there were several policy options. The Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) could be renewed with the task of electing a constituent assembly in charge, as the name suggests, of drafting a constitution and submitting its approval to the popular vote. This was the wish of the late Hocine Aït Ahmed. With the fervor of liberation, there is no doubt that the people would have welcomed that initiative and would have responded strongly to the call to the polls. This would have had a double merit: firstly, the consecration of democracy by the people would have strengthened it in the country. Secondly, it would have established a continuity between the war of independence and the war for development, with the people being the main actor in both.

But dissensions among the former brothers-in-arms led to fratricidal struggles. In the 1970s, Boumediene's authoritarian style, whose stature became synonymous with the state, was accepted because it was believed to be the prelude to a better future. On the other hand, it was also the time of scarcity, of deserted market stalls and of clandestine fruit and vegetable markets, the consequence of an internal policy marked by a voluntarism close to obstinacy that presided over a false *industrialization*, the birth of useless projects and that ruined agriculture and prefigured the rentier era. An old Slim cartoon shows a worker at one of the countless national companies of the time telling his boss: "I charge 5,000 dinars a month. How much more do you want me to work?"

After independence, the colonels did not return to their barracks: they strutted around in their brand new uniforms. The era of the maquis is over... An authoritarian power was imposed by telling Algerians that they had no right to interfere in their own affairs.

For a country, independence means the absence of submission to a sovereign or a metropolis. The army that guaranteed the supremacy of colonial France had retreated in 1962, abandoning its Algerian auxiliaries, the Harkis, who had burned their ships, linking their fate to that of their former masters. Overnight, the indigenous Algerians went from being subjects to being... subjects! Yes, our liberators, sorry, the liberators who won the fratricidal struggle for power, certainly found it convenient to manage the affairs of the country without the natives, promoted to the rank of Algerian citizens, interfering more than they did under the colonial regime...

What remains today of the bright prospects for independence? Not much.

What does it mean for a people to form a society? For each of its members it means sharing values, preferring collective organization to the individual system, taking care of the public space, working for the promotion of the general welfare and development of the homeland, being a full member of a community of destiny and, while assuming its freedom, having the feeling of being part of a collectivity that justifies and surpasses each one, that gives meaning to their individual existence.

Undoubtedly, the Algerian people were more *social* during colonization than after independence. The paradox is only apparent. The condition of oppressed and humiliated was the norm and, together with religion and culture, constituted a powerful uniting factor. The euphoria of independence faded as soon as divisions within the national movement, violent power struggles and settling of scores came to light. The establishment of an authoritarian system denied Algerians access to royal citizenship and reduced them to the role of spectators in the shadow theatre of the new power. The premises of the divorce between the political class and the people were there. Cities were transformed due to the exodus of inhabitants from rural areas and slums on the periphery. These cities, built according to the *metropolitan* model, were not intended to accommodate a declassed peasant population. Architecture is not neutral. It transmits symbols, culture and ways of life. Algerians never felt they owned those places that bore so little resemblance to them. They took them as if they were war prizes, without having put in place a mode of operation that guaranteed their maintenance. Thus, they could not define a form of collective organization that would allow them to maintain the common areas, ensure the cleanliness of the staircase or repair the switch. Each managed as best he could, sweeping

right in front of his threshold and treating the common space like a dumping ground. Each person installed a light bulb above their door, just to illuminate their own portal. The insecurity caused the ugly dispute of the bar associations to block any opening to the outside.

Language is the cornerstone, the hard core of a people's identity, the house of its being. In the sense of a common language, today's Algeria simply does not have it. A few decades ago we would have quoted dialectal Arabic, which the late Abdelkader Alloula used in his works, as well as French, Kateb *Yacine's spoils of war*. Kabila was practiced in one part of the country, but its speakers spoke the two languages mentioned above, so dialogue was possible everywhere. Arabization, imposed in the 80s without debate, without organization, without prior training, had two victims: the French and... the Arab! The colonial acculturation campaign had not succeeded in making Arabic disappear as a cultured language, but the Algerian authorities almost succeeded, involuntarily of course... Undoubtedly, they were carried away by the drunkenness of victory, combined with a remarkable intellectual weakness, which allowed the deployment of a revanchist spirit whose ideological imprint carries the policy of forced Arabization.

Since the time of Chadli Bendjedid, successor of Huari Boumedien, the official abandonment of the proclaimed values of Third Worldism, a corollary of the new political realities, has not only had the effect of turning Algerian diplomacy upside down. It has also had an impact on domestic politics. Corruption, which was already present before Bouteflika's enthronement, has become flagrant and rampant. It has developed as a result of the total opening to the world market. Countless *import-export* companies have been created, capturing increasing shares of oil revenue. A fauna of intermediaries also takes advantage of this situation by playing the role of facilitating *stakeholders*.

In a few months colossal riches were accumulated. Budgets are skyrocketing. Algeria has the sad privilege of having built the most expensive highway in the world, and not necessarily the safest. Although its price is three times higher than the international average, after a few years of operation it begins to show defects that presage its durability. Social inequalities are exploding. No sector escapes them. The organization Transparency International, which rates the corruption of States, places Algeria in 100th place of the 175 countries evaluated in the world, in 24 of the 54 countries evaluated in Africa and in 10 of

the 18 countries evaluated in the Arab world, behind Tunisia and Morocco. For the past fifteen years, Algeria has been one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

Corruption doesn't just affect those in power or those who gravitate around it. It corrodes Algerian society as a whole. Not all Algerians are corrupt, but this fact has become so important that it structures social relations. In fact, the most reckless people, the least scrupulous, reproduce the customs of power on the scale of the whole society. Everything is paid: a birth certificate, a job, the exam of a subject, a university degree. Corruption has become a pathological dimension of society. At all levels there are positions that provide rents. National sentiment is receding in favour of feelings of belonging to small structures – region, ethnicity – as no one can live without an affiliation that reassures them. The notion of citizenship does not exist.

That said, the miracle is permanent. Algeria proves it every day. Ordinary people turn out to be full of qualities. They are surprising for their integrity, for their self-denial, as if, beyond the vicissitudes of daily life, that same Algerian tradition of human warmth and generosity persisted. The regime has been unable to help society form. He certainly doesn't want to. An unstructured population is much easier to control and, if necessary, reduce than an organized and united society.

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