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Thoughts for Independent Algeria's 50th Birthday

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July 5, 2012 will mark Algeria's 50th anniversary of national independence from 132 years of the French colonial regime. At the heavy price of a bitter eight-year armed struggle, marked by 300,000-1,000,000 Algerian deaths, large-scale repression, torture and military removal of millions from their homes, this forceful rejection of French control was an immense accomplishment. Algeria's example of courage, will and sacrifice to gain national liberation from a major Western power was one of the most inspiring and dynamic political models of mid-20th century Third World struggle, well-publicized for many in North America by the writings of Frantz Fanon. Commemorating this achievement at the 50th anniversary is important.

Yet, paradoxically, for most Algerians, it is hard to celebrate. Algerian filmmakers have proposed nearly 150 specific projects to present various aspects of the wartime struggle. But expensive film projects require substantial government funding. As well, a new Algerian law requires government approval of any film on wartime themes in order to "safeguard national memory." Thus, Algeria's regime has the last say. Given the potential to dramatically portray Algeria's struggle, outsiders might view such decisions as simple, subject only to criteria of cost and artistic talent.

While such factors are important, heavy political stakes are also at play. Much of the evolution of the national liberation movement, before and during the war, was marked by bitter personal, clan and ideological rivalries deeply implicating many of the chief figures in the Algerian regime (and opposition) from 1962 to the present. As well, the war also involved threats and violence against Algerians not supporting the FLN and attacks by some Algerians against unarmed European civilians. Such issues raise challenges to past and present political legitimacy and to full and honest interpretations of the national liberation revolution itself. It is still contested terrain that the regime, in school textbooks and research authorizations, refuses permission to explore. But how can a people celebrate in unity a national struggle against French colonialism that by now, despite such censorship, is well known also to include, beyond heroism, internal political assassinations, purges, betrayals, attacks on unarmed civilians and manipulations of the base? Similar contradictions, of course, exist in most if not all revolutions, not the least in the American colonies' struggle for independence from Britain.

Aside from this still bitter politics of history is the fact that the great majority of presentday Algerians were born well after 1962, so have no deep and direct personal identity with that struggle or the wartime dreams that accompanied it. While young Algerians generally share an abstract national pride—witness the delirious grassroots celebrations when Algeria qualified for World Cup championship soccer competition over Egypt in 2010—quite understandably their focus centers on immediate economic, social and political contexts.

Here also the question is posed: what is there to celebrate when 50 years of Algerian regimes have continuously repressed the population, engorged themselves and their political clienteles through massive corruption, failed badly to assure adequate jobs and housing despite huge state petrochemical revenues, imposed a mandatory Arabization educational and linguistic policy and adopted Islamist-appeasing social measures such as the notorious retrograde Family Code? What is there to celebrate when only 20 years ago, the military moved from the background to the fore with a coup d'état cancelling elections and quickly leading to a decade of horrendous civil war between the military and Islamists, causing the deaths of some 200,000 and heavy psychological scars in the population still close to the surface today?

When I arrived in Algeria in 1965 to carry out field research for an American graduate degree, I was shocked when the first worker I spoke with at the student housing complex told me that if he had known that Algerian independence would turn out as it had to that date, he would never have taken part in the revolution. This deep alienation and de-politicization affecting millions of Algerians because of the post-independence regime continues to the present, producing a constant stream of exiles abroad. For Algerian society, it is a huge and tragic loss of vitality and talent.

Concerning these negatives in the Algerian liberation movement and post-independence experience, the colonial role of France and neo-colonial policies of France and the U.S. must not be ignored. Colonial rule encouraged the fracturing of Algerian society and identity and exploited the land and its people for the economic benefit of a European settler elite and metropolitan France. Despite a pretence that Algeria was not a colony but a set of three départements, as the rest of France, the deep racism and violence at the base of the colonial project constantly violated Algerians' social, economic and political dignity and well-being, as so well described by Fanon. They led directly as well to the vicious military repression and to the terrorism by many pieds-noirs from 1954 to 1962 that left much of the economy in shambles, encouraged a militarized Algerian leadership and produced a wounded and traumatized population.

In turn, to the present, French and increasingly U.S. (especially after 9/11) governments have provided crucial international support and legitimacy to Algerian rulers, thus greater latitude and stability for the latter's authoritarianism, corruption and social neglect domestically. As well, for many of those willfully neglected and insulted by the regime at the grassroots, political Islamism seemed increasingly the only viable alternative to the regime. But Islamists' self-serving use of religion for personal and political power, their increasingly violent threats and actions toward secular opponents and toward women greatly contributed over the years—especially during the 1990s—to a polarization of Algerian society which the military, in turn, opportunistically used to justify its own continued rule.

Nevertheless, from a different perspective, Algeria has much to celebrate about the 50 years since independence. From 1962 to the present, many grassroots Algerians have steadily resisted, in a variety of ways, the greed, power schemes and repression from above while simultaneously doing what they could to contribute positively to their society with the limited resources at hand. In the first year of independence and after, thousands of Algerian workers spontaneously and with the encouragement of the nationalist trade union took over operation of modern farms and units in industrial and other realms abandoned by Europeans fleeing to France and set to work to self-manage the grassroots re-booting of the national economy. Though opposed and sabotaged by the military, bureaucrats and the bourgeoisie who resented this growing horizontalist sector of hundreds of thousands and the general challenge to elite power and privileges it represented, many self-management workers struggled for several years to maintain and embrace this attempt at socialism from below.

In 1980 emerged a largely spontaneous wave of massive protest and resistance among the proud Berbers of Kabylia, based on long-standing grievances against regime authoritarianism, its disdain for rich Berber linguistic and cultural identity as well as its neglect of the region's economy. This "Berber Spring" was the first large-scale political challenge to the regime since the early 60s, inspiring a decade of continuing activism and independent cultural expression by the Berber Cultural Movement and similar upheavals among alienated and oppressed urban residents, especially young people, in Constantine, Sétif, Ghardaïa, Oran, and other locales.

In turn, a similar but larger protest by thousands of young people took place in the capital, Algiers, in October 1988—without an explicit political program, but demonstrating through their choice of targets (government and FLN party offices and opulent retail stores) their contempt for political and economic elites prospering at the expense of most Algerians. This explosion of massive street demonstrations over several days was then repressed by gunfire, arrests and torture and used by the regime to justify and manipulate a partial liberalization of politics and economic policy. In this brief moment of what some referred to as Algeria's "parentheses democracy," like the recent Arab Spring, many hoped for a genuine multiparty pluralist political system with respect for free expression and human rights.

A new outspoken human rights league developed in this period along with new media, independent women's rights groups and autonomous trade unions separate from the regime's long-standing and largely submissive UGTA union federation. In the end, however, the combination of a growing and increasingly confident and demagogic Islamist movement, including a strong radical component, and manipulation by the dominant military to block genuine

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democratization culminated in a cancelled legislative electoral process (about to be won by Islamists) in January 1992. What followed was a long nightmare decade of repression, massacres, tortures, assassinations, “disappearances” and rapes committed by both sides.

In 1999, the military selected Abdelaziz Bouteflika, a previously long-standing high regime official, to be president as the regime’s civilian face. Along with a policy of “reconciliation” with disarming Islamists and enforced silence about crimes of both sides, the military (led by the secret police, the DRS) sponsored a new phase of democratic façade. Over the next decade, it permitted periodic local and national elections, a variety of political parties, newspapers, and civil society organizations and limited public critiques of the regime. But elections are notoriously manipulated, while newspapers and parties and other organizations are infiltrated and pressured from above or purposefully multiplied so as to confuse and divert political opposition. Typically public meetings and demonstrations are tightly controlled or banned altogether.

Nevertheless, the human rights league, autonomous trade unions, women’s rights groups and other grassroots organizations continue to survive and to take strong political stands. Elections are boycotted by large numbers, most recently a month ago for the national assembly. In this latter case, the political stakes were especially high after unprecedented strong government appeals through radio, TV, social messaging and supportive imams calling for massive voter participation, thus to demonstrate regime legitimacy and deter “Arab Spring”-type challenges and potential Western intervention. However, the continued habit of boycotts by alienated voters and further appeals for abstention by opposition figures produced another humiliating grassroots rejection of the system. While the regime claimed a 42% participation rate of eligible voters, the lack of transparency in vote-counting and other traditional forms of electoral manipulation led critics to suggest a much lower rate and fraudulent victories. As well, even among those who voted, admitted the government, about 22% of cast ballots were faulty or blank.

The earlier Kabyle insurrection of April 2001, followed by mass demonstrations and a widespread horizontalist “assemblies movement,” also showed a large-scale rejection of the regime. Responding to long-standing grievances against the government and to local gendarmes’ murder of a young student and deadly attacks on demonstrators, virtually the entire region of Kabylia rose up in defiant protest, besieging police stations with rocks and fire bombs while also burning government and political party offices. Other Kabyles formed local grassroots councils based on centuries-old Kabyle horizontalist principles and confederated together from the bottom up. As well, a million protestors marched on Algiers demanding trials and punishments for the gendarmes, compensation for the hundreds of wounded, acquittal for demonstrators, programs for social and economic development and a system of genuine democratic accountability.

This rising massive defiance and spontaneous self-organization threatened to spread elsewhere in Algeria and to mobilize a national uprising against the regime. But events happened too quickly to develop a coordinated national insurrection and the regime repressed marchers before they could reach the center of Algiers. Nevertheless, the self-organized assemblies movement persisted for several years, while mostly refusing and denouncing contact with the unresponsive regime.

During this past decade and across the country, each year sees thousands of more-or-less spontaneous local demonstrations, riots and confrontations with police, frequently marked by rock throwing, burning cars, attacks on public buildings, and roadway blockades. As many Algerians have observed, it is the only way aggrieved young people can gain “dialogue” with oppressive and insulting local officials. More recently, dozens of people have committed protest suicides when persistently blocked by the system from any semblance of decent living conditions and dignity.

All told, Algerians since 1962 continued a post-colonial “national liberation struggle” in many forms. Defiance and resistance to oppression are traditional to Algerians, dating long before (as well as throughout) French colonialism.

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As Chawki Amari suggested two years ago in *El Watan*, a leading Algiers newspaper, Algerians are by nature anarchists that Bakunin would have no trouble recognizing. Whether at the level of local daily life or in periodic broader social movements, as described above, large numbers of grassroots Algerians over the past five decades have refused to accept the authoritarian and corrupt regime imposed since independence. It is this variegated and continuous “national liberation” movement for grassroots self-determination—against the national bourgeoisie and its foreign supporters—that, as Fanon predicted, continues the struggle begun against the French. It is this struggle which can and should be celebrated. Inevitably, it will continue for years to come—hopefully, with more concrete victories along the way.

Every substantial political upheaval is rooted in millions of individual rebellious attitudes and behaviors nourished anonymously over generations in local and sometimes broader social contexts until the right conjuncture of economic and political factors permits explosive breaks through existing bonds of oppression. Despite numerous setbacks, the continuous struggle of Algerians for dignity, decent living conditions, solidarity and self-determination, like similar popular struggles throughout the world, is something we can all join in celebrating.

Post-scriptum :

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