
Kenneth BROWN

*Lost in Algiers,
Ramadan 1993*

*I told myself,
and they told
me, "go to
Algiers and see
for yourself!"*

I did, went for a week, looked and listened as best I could. But the truth is that I hardly found my bearings. People seemed to be carrying on their lives somehow, despite the difficult circumstances; but I felt continually lost, both in the space of the city and in the complexity of "THE ALGERIAN SITUATION."

Algerians laughed when I said I was lost. Eventually, they assured me, one learns to find one's way around Algiers. As for "THE SITUATION," they consoled me: it's normal to feel lost; there are so many things to be taken into consideration. So much has happened since the October 1988 riots. The possible scenarios for the future are so varied. With patience and kindness, the Algerians I met with gave me directions, guidance. Nonetheless, I felt that they, too, seemed somewhat lost. There was great uncertainty and anxiety about the future. People

seemed to be vacillating between hope and fear.

Most immediately threatening is the battle between the security forces (army and police) and armed groups among the population — the Islamists and perhaps others. A State of Emergency has been in force since February 1992, and a curfew in Algiers and seven other departments since December 1992. There's been a lot of killing, robberies of banks and arms, and thousands of people have been imprisoned. The murderous violence of the militant Islamists of the MIA (Mouvement islamique armé, called "terrorists" by the authorities) has been met with vicious repression by the security forces.

Recently, armed groups have changed tactics from attacks against the security forces to assassinations of figures in the judicial and political system. In early March a car bomb almost killed Major-General Khaled Nezzar, Minister of Defense and one of the five members of the ruling Presidential group. In mid-March, three high government officials were murdered, including a doctor in the Casbah who was a member of the National Consultative Council that had replaced the National Assembly in 1992. The attacks seem to be aimed at breaking through a relatively successful news blackout limiting media discussion of Islamist violence. The objects of these assassinations are easy targets and people seen by the Islamists as ideological enemies.

The attacks are also a response to the pressure the security forces have put on the Islamists and their suspected sympathizers. During the last year, Amnesty International reports that almost 600 people have died in fighting, half of them security forces. More than 9000 men suspected of being Islamic militants or implicated in acts of terrorism have been arrested, without indictment or trial, and imprisoned in camps in the desert. There are reports of violations of human rights and wide-scale practice of torture. Some Algerians speak of a war between the army and the Islamists, as if they were watching from the sidelines. They see the army as rulers, not as part of a state which represents them.

The term "Islamists" is vague; it can refer to those the authorities call "terrorists," or, more generally, to all those who

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think that Algeria should become an Islamic state. Some identify an "Islamist" by his or her appearance: women wearing a modern form of Muslim dress, including the head scarf (*hijab*); men, bearded ("les barbus") and wearing a white garment (*kamis*). Others are so classified because they were among the three million who voted for the Islamic party, the FIS (Front islamique de salut) which won a large majority in the first round of legislative elections in December 1991.

The dramatic chain of events that led to these elections was set off in October 1988, when 600 young demonstrators were killed by the security forces. President Chadli promised political reforms, and by the end of 1989, a new constitution and a law passed by the National Assembly had opened the way to a multi-party system and the freedom to establish associations and publications. The FIS was legalized, and Ait Ahmed, one of the historic leaders of the Algerian revolution who had been in exile for 23 years, returned to lead the FFS (Front de forces socialistes) party. This was the Algerian Spring, a period when democracy seemed a possibility.

This all ended after the FIS victory in 1991. The prospect of a FIS-controlled government led to an initially velvet-gloved coup d'état by the army. President Chadli Bendjedid was forced to resign (11 January 1992), the elections annulled and government passed into the hands of the five-man HCE (Haut Comité d'Etat) created by the army. Mohamed Boudiaf, one of the five historic leaders of the FLN (Front de libération national), was talked into returning to Algeria after 28 years of exile, to become the first president of the HCE.

There was no velvet glove for the FIS. Its leaders were arrested in January 1992 and the party formally dissolved in early March. The two main leaders, Abbassi Madani and 'Ali Belhadj, in prison since June 1991, were tried and sentenced to 12 years imprisonment. The mosques, which had become FIS territory, were taken over by the authorities. FIS newspapers were forbidden. Since then there has been a concerted effort by the security forces to destroy all the organizations of Islamic militants and to isolate them from the population. So far, they have not succeeded in doing so.

The power structure in Algeria can be characterized as a political-military oligarchy which has exercised control since independence in 1962. Radical Islam is not the only problem it faces. Since the mid-1980s, Algeria has been in a deepening economic crisis. Interest on foreign debts absorbs 70% of income from exports, inflation is estimated at 30%, and the rate of unemployment at 25%, most of it among the young. With demographic growth at over 3% per annum, more than half of the population are under the age of 20, and some 250,000 enter a decreasing labour market each year. There are shortages of basic food commodities, and falling per capita consumption.

In late 1987 the government, urged by the IMF, began the dismantling of state capitalism and the move towards a market economy. Subsequently Algerians have been living with a shrinking economy, frozen wages, soaring prices, shortages, growing unemployment and layoffs. At the same time, there was sudden new wealth for those entrepreneurs able to profit from liberalization and the spread of contraband and speculation. Contraband, the sale of goods illegally imported or removed from the normal circuit of trade by theft or otherwise, has reached such a scale that it is virtually a parallel economy.

A few key words in Algerian Arabic: *trabendo* (from "contraband") is the term for this informal commerce. *Houmistes* (from *houma*, "neighbourhood"), means "homeboys," boys from the neighbourhood. *Hittistes* (from *hit* "wall") are the unemployed, school kids, students, and young workers who hang out, leaning against walls. *Houmistes* and *hittistes* who become *trabendistes* will sell anything from knickers to refrigerators. Millions of dollars are exchanged annually in this trade. Thanks to this activity a few young people manage to live better than others. They also become part of a whole network centred on black market activities. The country is bled by these "predators" and their allies within the bureaucracy who refuse to submit to economic controls.

On the airplane back from Algiers to Paris I found myself sitting next to a young Algerian *houmiste* and *ex-hittiste* who had become rich from *trabendo*. He had been born and raised and still lived in Belcourt, one of the harsher inner-city areas of

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Algeria and considered a stronghold of the Islamists. One of nine children, he had been told to leave school at the age of 15 and had begun working the streets buying and selling whatever he could. That was in the early 1980s. Eventually, he made enough to travel abroad buying goods for resale on the local market. He would bring these into the country without paying much in the way of customs duties. His trips have taken him through Morocco, quite a few European countries and to the Far East. Now he has a small clothing factory in which he employs eight workers, and frequently goes to France and Germany to buy cloth. But most of this isn't in fact for his factory. His real profit is in selling cloth on the black market. He has evolved an elaborate scheme of false bookkeeping and bribes for evading customs duties.

My travelling companion produces an enormous wad of checks in French francs and explains to me that he also acts as a bank for Algerian immigrant workers in France. He pays them the black market rate in dinars, about two and a half times greater than the bank rate, and keeps his capital in France. He is going to Paris for 24 hours and has left his Mercedes at the aeroport. He is thirty-two years old, well-dressed, including an expensive tie (it still had its 350 franc price tag) and a fashionable cashmere jacket. Handsome in an Al Pacino sort of way; good dark, intelligent, friendly, cunning eyes; a scar on his cheek—from birth, or a knife fight? A pleasant, smooth fellow and a congenial travelling companion.

He tells me about himself. He has married a school-mate of his sister chosen for him by his mother whose judgement he completely trust. Things are working out very well, it's a good marriage. They've two children, and they want no more. His wife wears European clothes, no veil or head-scarf, but she doesn't work or go out visiting other than to see relatives. They've travelled together to Morocco and spent months at a time in France. He's building a villa up on the heights of Bab Aknoun. He loves his country, and wants to remain in it if it's stable and if people get back their confidence. Just in case, he keeps enough money in France to be able to move and buy a little hotel there. In the meanwhile, he enjoys his little

excursions to Paris where he goes for dinners and movies with a 'gal' who works in a bank. "One has to survive," he tells me.

It's the fast month of Ramadan. My companion tells me that of course he's fasting, because Islam is his religion. But he doesn't like the Islamists — they're hurting business.

Ramadan this year in Algiers began glumly. The curfew was maintained, its extension by a half hour until 11 p.m. almost an insult. After all, wasn't the month of daytime fasting really about enjoying the nights with one's friends and families? Food was ridiculously expensive, merchants were accused of exploiting the situation, it was raining.

At dusk the city came to a standstill. Everyone seemed to be home breaking the day-time fast by tucking into the delicious *chorba*, a traditional soup of meat and vegetables. My friends served me meats cooked with fruit, stews of lamb and artichoke stems, varieties of tasty sweet cakes. But food aside (and I'm sure that few tables were as resplendent as those I attended), it was not a happy time. The front page of *Le Matin* on the first day of Ramadan 1413 captured the mood: "This year is not for celebrating. Too much blood, too many tears, have flowed to allow us to pretend that we have the heart to enjoy ourselves. Nonetheless, life goes on, Ramadan and its soaring prices, the cakes that no house can do without."

A few years ago, during the "Algerian Spring" of 1990, Ramadan nights had been different. Popular at the time was the song *l-'Asima* — the capital — sung by Abdelmadjid Meskoud in the neo-traditional mode of *sha'bi*. This beautiful song in rhymes colloquial Arabic laments the loss of an idealized earlier Algiers. It nostalgically recounts the changes Algiers has seen over the last two generations.

The city has been transformed in the last two generations by massive immigration from the countryside. It's a city of "rurbanity," in which two-thirds of the population come from other places. Urban problems — poor housing and services, the breakdown of the urban infrastructure, unemployment, social tensions, and even Islamism — are often blamed on the new immigrants. "*l-'Asima*" is partly a "reactionary" rejection of new-comers (see Bensalah's translator's note) but it also reminds

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people of idealized forms of urban life, suggesting that there's no inevitability to the realities of the present or future.

It is ironic that the army and the government, supposedly defending urban civilization from rural hordes galvanized by fundamentalism, are themselves often of recent rural origin. Furthermore, many rural immigrants quickly "urbanize," forming deep attachments to urban neighbourhoods and ways of life. The definition of the conflict as a rural/urban one seems illusory; class differences and religious outlooks are more convincing dividing lines. But one is easily lost in Algiers.....

In the Cinemathèque of Algiers I finally see the 1976 prize-winning Algerian film by Merzak Allouache, *Omar Gatlato*. (Some of the scenario appears later in the review.) In 1992 the film, re-broadcast on Algerian TV, still had the power to attract people away from European channels (now widespread due to satellite dish antennas). The name of the film, literally, is "Omar, it slayed him." The "it" is the Algerian version of machismo — *rejla*, manly-virtue or chivalry. One both is and has *rejla*. It means being a city boy, street-wise, belonging to a neighbourhood. It's a way of life, a form of trust, a code of honour. Those who have it avoid evil; they help people in distress. Above all, they possess honour — *nif* ("face," literally "nose"); once they've given someone their word, they hold to it; it's a promise, an oath. One recognizes such a person by his special way of speaking, of smoking out of the corner of the mouth, of dressing with class, and by discreet signs such as a scarf, a twig of mint behind the ear, a way of walking. It's an attitude of respect for every living creature, even an ant. James Dean is a prototype of *rejla*, and that's why Algerians love him. During the Boumediene period, the word was used to refer to Algeria's strength. Now it's the FIS that tries to appropriate the term.

Omar is played in the film to perfection by Bouallem Bennani. Born in the Casbah of Algiers, Bennani was the son of a melomaniac sheikh; both father and son, in real life and in the film, love *sha'bi* music. He retains his impeccable *rejla* appearance, says that his spiritual father is James Dean, but thinks that the real *rejl*as today are the Islamists: "The Omar

Gatlatos of today wear white gowns and spend their time in the mosques because they're fed up with the contempt (*hogra*) with which they're treated by those who hold power. The Islamists flirt with death, thus their slogan—"we live and die by it (the Islamic State)." Bennani says that the Islamists saved his life in the early 1980s when he was addicted to alcohol and drugs and depressed. He retreated into a mosque and later put on several plays in his neighborhood mosque. Last year, he was jailed briefly for his ties with the Islamists, an experience that sobered and frightened him.

At the moment Allouache is casting for his next film, *Bab El-Oued City*. He's going back to the neighbourhood in Algiers where he was brought up, now largely a stronghold of Islamists, to film a love story among young people. He's determined to catch the mood of the times, to let people talk in their own language, the everyday spoken Arabic of Algiers.

So much turns on language in Algeria! The mother tongue of almost all Algerians is either colloquial Maghrebi Arabic or a dialect of Berber—Kabyle or Chaouia. The official language of the country and for most of the educational system is written Arabic. The still incomplete process of Arabization in education has been controversial, some say catastrophic: a generation of Algerians poorly educated by teachers whose main achievement, apparently, was to prepare the ground for Islamism. Meanwhile, French remains the dominant language in government, industry and commerce, and of the political and intellectual elites.

The power of spoken language whether in films, songs or poetry is immense. The Kabyles have a deep attachment to their culture, their language and art. The popularity of the late President Boudiaf (murdered on 29 June 1992) is sometimes explained by his use of Maghrebi dialect in his speeches. He convinced people of his honesty in a language that they understood, rather than in the stiff and boring standard Arabic used by other politicians. Some claim that he signed his death warrant with this "plain talk." The eloquent FIS spokesman 'Ali Belhadj masterfully shifted between Maghrebi dialect and standard Arabic when speaking in the mosque. In Algeria, colloquial speech in public spaces is subversive and dangerous.

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After the cancellation of the 1991 elections, the Islamists launched a campaign against the "Party of France," defined in an editorial of an Islamist weekly *an-Nur* (27 April 1992) as "These so-called people of culture cut off from the social reality of their country as well as the professionals of information who are allergic to the historic truths of their religious community...." As the journalist Aissa Khelladi points out (*Jeudi d'Algérie*, 7 May 1992), Algerians who express themselves in French may be Islamists, Communists, Berberists, even Ba'athist defenders of Arabization. But the basic model of the Islamist discourse is "Algeria=Palestine, French-speakers=Jews."

The term "Party of France" has been around for a while. Before 1988, it included all those opposed to the official line of the FLN. Then in 1980 during an uprising in Tizi Ouzo, the media defined "The Party of France" as a territory — Kabylia — and a people — the Berberists. The fact is that Algerian leaders after independence had no way of administering the country other than by means of the French language. The French administration was, as Kateb Yacine put it, part of the "war booty." French-speakers have been thus associated with state power since independence. When at the beginning of the 1970s challenges from Arabic-speakers became manifest, politicians reacted with rapid Arabization, building mosques, opening Islamic institutes, and employing a political discourse of strong Ba'athist overtones. In the long run, this awakened cultural resistance from the Berberists, and extended the political arena into the domain of religion.

The Islamists, in time, would give the language problem a radical anti-Western ideological dimension, identifying "French-speakers" with the state and the bureaucracy. When the Islamists insisted on the centrality of Arabic and took to wearing the long white gown and the head-scarf they were signifying their protest by differentiating themselves from the elite's "foreign" talk and appearance.

After the popular explosion of October 1988, the elite convinced the military that democratization was essential to maintain power. The democratic process reached a logical conclusion in December 1991 when the elections were won by

the FIS. It then became clear that the elite had to have the support of the army to save the state — or at least to save it for themselves. The army apparently also defines its interests as equivalent to the country's interests, and for the same reasons.

These realities help explain the powerful symbolic appeal of the Islamist model, which pits Islamism against the demonized "party of France." Women play an important symbolic role in this representation of good and evil. For some Islamist men, rage against "modernized" women almost seems to surpass anger against the country's secular political elite. At times, I had the impression that for the Islamists the absolute control of women by men was their primary preoccupation, and that their call for an Islamic state was essentially a means to that end. In any case, the fate of women is certainly one of the stakes in the current political crisis.

Although women participated heroically in the Algerian war of liberation (see Djamila Amrane's article), independence found them again subject to a social imperative to remain subordinate, submissive, and out of public sight. Nonetheless, an increasing number of women have become educated, joined the labor force, and made their voices heard in public life.

I certainly heard the voices of Algerian women—conscious of and concerned with the situation in their country, eloquent, combative. I didn't speak with Islamist women, but there are signs that they are no less motivated and committed to their cause. Secular women's associations and publications have sprouted since 1988, and they have taken an active part in recent political mobilizations. Feminists express strong opposition to the Family Code of 1984, a blend of Islamic and traditional notions that does much to limit women's rights.

Many Algerian women with whom I spoke saw themselves on the front lines. During their recent victorious phases, Islamists have frightened a lot of women. Some of them — activists at demonstrations, women living alone, or just women walking in the street in Western dress — have been threatened, insulted, or physically attacked.

Women experience the impact of grassroots Islamism more powerfully than do men. New rules governing rituals like

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circumcisions, marriages and death ceremonies, are being imposed. The new religious experts are increasingly Islamists with a scripturalist definition of correct practice. Familiar ritual practices which have provided pleasure and comfort are now forbidden. Moreover, as mothers, women feel threatened by an educational system which presents Islamist teachings as the source of all morality. They tell stories of school children forced to conform to strict religious rules, humiliated for their parents "immoral" behaviour, to the point that the children try to impose piety on their parents.

The temptation for many Algerians is to see the present conflict between the state and the Islamists in terms of the lesser evil: between the authoritarianism of the political-military rulers and the totalitarianism of the FIS. After the killings of several leading figures in mid-March, a "National March" was organized and tens of thousands of mostly middle class people marched through the streets of Algiers, Oran and Constantine in protest against terrorism. Some commentators see this as a call to the army to take power openly and to establish an Atatürk-like regime. However, it would be a mistake to underestimate the real desire for democracy in Algeria for at least some of those who marched. True, they do not want democracy to extend to those who refuse the principle of the division of state and religion, but neither do they accept the legitimacy of a state that will not be accountable to society.

In one of his speeches, the late President Boudiaf said: "the need for truth forces me to tell you that I've discovered that our crisis is deeply-rooted, it touches our society in its very depths, in its identity, its values, its institutions, its mode of functioning. A hundred days after my return, I remain convinced as much as I was on the first day that our country needs a radical change — not theatrics or demagoguery, not simply changes of personnel (however necessary). The change awaited by everyone must touch all aspects of our economic, cultural, and social life." Boudiaf was killed, by whom remains a mystery. Some see him as a martyr, some as an innocent, others as an enemy. But all Algerians would probably agree that he spoke the truth.