

---

**Mohammed HARBI**

*Politics in Other Guises*

*Algeria 1980-1988*

translated from French by

Hannah DAVIS

# Three decades after independence, Algeria

faces the same problem that it did in 1962 : there is no political or social force able to propose a model of society acceptable to all. Certain problems inherited from the past, including the cultural problem, have become inextricably entangled. The educational system, in ruins, serves mainly to swell the ranks of the marginalized. An Islam colored by romantic regression and benefitting from its historic identification with national culture seeks to bend reality to its wishes. At the heart of all of this is the structural crisis of bureaucratic capitalism and, along with it, of the whole of society. The FLN monopoly seems to be broken, but this has resolved nothing.

With the monetary crisis, the clientalist state found itself brutally confronted with a long-term problem: the necessity of passing from a rentier economy to a productive economy. To do this the power structure would have had to confront all of those living off unearned incomes, salaries, and rents, at every social level; to reform political and administrative apparatuses rotten

---

**Mohammed HARBI**

*Politics in Other Guises*

*Algeria 1980-1988*

translated from French by

Hannah DAVIS

from bribery and corruption; and, to curb their lifestyles and rethink their relationships to society. But there was neither the means nor the will to do this. For one thing, there was no force capable of imposing such solutions; furthermore, the social base of the power structure, the army, had no notion of the extent of the economic catastrophe and wanted to avoid any direct confrontation with the population.

The system was founded on the coopting of "elites," the absence of juridical recourse against the arbitrary use of force, and a confusion of powers that prevented any autonomous action by groups, such as businesses, administrative associations, cultural institutions, and the media.

After October 1988, it was obvious that something had to give. During the first years of Chadli Benjedid's government there was a renewed repression of any autonomous expression. Colonel Boumedienne had come to an understanding with the Communist opposition, which had been coopted by his regime and eventually legitimated it. President Chadli, however, made it clear that he wouldn't be needing such services. Thus, the Avant-garde Socialist Party was thrown back into the opposition, where it joined the followers of Ait Ahmed (FFS), Ben Bella (MDA) and all the extreme left groups that it had combatted while allied with Boumedienne. Outside of the ephemeral reconciliation between Ait Ahmed and Ben Bella (the London Agreement, December 1985), the adversaries of the regime, whether in exile or in Algeria itself, did not present much of a threat nor much of an alternative. Society itself, however, had begun to come out of the shadows. The first manifestations of discontent were passive resistance, work stoppages, and derision towards the values of Algerian socialism. The problems of society rose to the surface, carried by new generations.

**1. The women's movement** was formed to work against discrimination between the sexes. Their first action, in 1981, was to protest against a police decision forbidding women to leave the territory without the authorization of husband, father, or guardian. From 1983 on, the women's movement was active against the Family Code (adopted in 1984) which set up a

system of subjugation of women inspired by the *shari'a* (Muslim law) and enforcing the most repressive notions of morality. It must be emphasized that even before the adoption of this code, many judges pronounced their decisions according to Koranic norms rather than according to the laws on the books. The Family Code consecrated what was already widespread practice. As is the case in other Muslim societies, the status of women is the keystone of intellectual and moral reform and a criteria marking the capacity of Algerian movements to confront the problems of modernity and citizenship. (...)

The "woman question" is first and foremost a question of men, of morality, and of sexuality. For Algeria's reactionaries, it is the central problem, defining their attempt to rebuild what has been transformed by previous generations.

If one wants to understand sexism, more important than looking at the Koran is looking at the new phenomenon of female employment. Women today have become heads of households (1/10th of the total in Algeria), but work has added to their responsibilities without adding to their freedoms. Thus, to social conflict is added competition between the sexes — competition which erodes traditional values. Remember that prior to November 1954, in Algeria, nationalist union activists recommended in the face of unemployment one job per household, which was a way of saying that the positions freed up by departing European women would be occupied by Algerian men. (...)

In the 1970s, Algerian leaders claimed to be leading a truly "cultural revolution." (...) If by this one means an aspiration to rebuild society and to introduce new ways of thinking and living, we can see, now that the dust has cleared, that they were wrong. Their discourse was nothing but mystification, a retreat into a dream world in order to avoid facing reality. (...) Participation of women in the War of Independence has not succeeded in shaking traditional conceptions of the family and of the moral order. (...)

"Participation of women in war" does not equal "women's liberation." (...) This sophism has allowed Algerian leaders to shirk the problems raised by a real examination of the rapport

---

**Mohammed HARBI**

*Politics in Other Guises*

*Algeria 1980-1988*

translated from French by

Hannah DAVIS

between the sexes, and to prevent, with the support of the left, the construction of the flourishing of a feminism based on total equality.

In spite of their scorn for femininity, the Islamists have an appeal for women in Algeria. This proves that whatever changes in sex roles have occurred, they have taken place in the context of a profound social and familial conservatism of which masculine society is the primary support. Another barrier to a rapid growth of Algerian feminism is the sharp division between women of the elite and women of the masses.

2. **The Berber cultural movement** in the Kabylie, long repressed, came to the fore after 1962 in a reaction against the universalization of the Arabic language and the ban on any official expression in Berber. It developed thanks to the activities of the writer Mouloud Mammeri, in Algeria, and those of the former resistance fighter Bessaoud Mohand-Arab, in Paris. An infrastructure came into being with the formation of the "Berber Academy" in 1966 and the "Vincennes Group," and the emigration to France of a large number of militant activists. This movement, whose ends were not specifically political, nonetheless played a political role. It was a major force in the reanimation, starting in 1978, of the Front des Forces Socialistes of Ait Ahmed, whose leaders (...) found themselves under such strict police surveillance, even in Paris, that they were unable to emerge from their isolation.

The prohibition, in spring 1980, of a lecture by Mouloud Mammeri at the University of Tizi-Ouzou, provoked large demonstrations and helped carve out a space of political socialization distinct from the FLN and its organs. Those who founded the Rassemblement Cultural Démocratique (RCD) (...) after October 1988 served their political apprenticeship in the cultural movement. Their impact on university and high school youth was such that even before the change in the regime, they had tacit recognition and were able to organize a seminar in Yakouren on identity and culture.

3. Berber culturalism has its roots in a linguistic community, but **the movement for human rights**, which emerged only in 1983, was built around three communities:

around independent personalities linked to the regime (...), around Berber culturalists, and around "Lambertist" Trotskyists (...). Manipulations by the authorities and divergences about the attitude to take towards the regime ended up dividing the human rights movement into three factions: those fighting for individual human rights in the sense of Amnesty International, those who, with Ali Yahia Abdennour, refused the established system, and those for whom human rights were only a tactic in a long-term revolutionary strategy. As the comedian Fellag put it, in Algeria instead of a League for Human Rights "there are three Leagues and no Rights."

The weakness in numbers and the factionalism that plague the human rights movement are dictated by the conditions in which it was born. As a whole, public opinion sees the movement as an elitist action of intellectuals seeking moral satisfaction. Their methods suggest that democratic pluralism, corollary of a secularized society, is at best a dream for the future.

4. Of all these politicized domains of the 1980s, **religion** is by far the most important. The lack of autonomy of the political arena with regard to the religious arena has contributed to the disintegration of the FLN-State. This process has been helped, not hindered, by the fact that the Islamic power structure has always been relatively amorphous in Algeria (as opposed to Tunisia or Morocco). Under the circumstances, religious authority has tended to fall into the hands of people who, on the basis of their claim to some level of erudition, took on the functions of imam, teacher, or religious functionary. The confusion between the temporal and the spiritual realms for a long time forced them to have a double discourse. The crisis of authority freed them from this obligation. In authoritarian situations, opponents of the State run the risk of facing repression. By choosing religious symbols to express its autonomy from the elites of the power structure, society delegitimizes the State without necessarily identifying itself with all of the values that religion represents. This explains the contradiction between a youth which attends mosques en masse, participates in all the demonstrations with passion, but

---

**Mohammed HARBI**

*Politics in Other Guises*

*Algeria 1980-1988*

translated from French by

Hannah DAVIS

has little respect for Islamic moral norms.

In contrast to the other sensibilities described above, Islamism has always benefitted from important support among certain of the strong men of the FLN (Boualem Benhamouda, Ahmed Taleb, Baki Boualem, Abderrahmane Chibane and Sheikh Hamani), who intended to re-Islamicize society from the top down, by means of the State. Their defense of the institution of the family as defined by Islam, their conception of the school and the educational system, their aim of preventing any separation between Arabic language, religion, and culture — all of these positions are similar to those of advocates of non-official Islam, including those who consider the new State as “ungodly.”

Among their disciples, there are many French-speakers. Islamicization of the school system has created a common base between Arabic-speakers and French-speakers. The criticism directed against the French language does not have the same function as it does for Arab nationalists. It is a way of expressing opposition to the reigning technocracy. At stake is the hierarchy of privilege.

Politically radical, the Islamists are conservative in social matters and carry their sexism to unheard-of extremes. Therefore, they cannot develop a coherent ideology. The followers of Islamicization “from below” are influenced by the doctrines of Ibn Abdelwahab (Saudi Arabia), Hassan el Banna and Sayyed Kotb (Muslim Brothers in Egypt), and Abu Al’Ala al-Mawdoudi (Pakistan). Those who are the most open to modernity look to the ideas of Malek Bennabi.

The Islam of this intelligentsia, strongly marked by totalitarian thought, has little to do with individual religious experience. The accent is on collective faith. Critical exegesis and the use of historical methods are rejected as forms of “cultural aggression.”

The activist, paramilitary movement for a long time was pushed into the background. It takes its inspiration from the nationalist tradition (Mustapha Bouyali, former FLN activist, killed in a battle in 1987, Meliani and Chebouti), and from the Afghan and Iranian experiences. It includes many heads of large

families, and this suggests a high level of commitment that is rare in paramilitary organizations. Among the 208 followers of Bouyali, there were 49 factory workers, 29 agricultural workers, 12 teachers, 22 merchants and tradesmen, 8 students, 9 employees, 3 entrepreneurs, as well as other professions that were not able to be categorized. All social groups were represented.

The confrontation of the Islamists with the power structure in the 1970s won them the support of the victims of agricultural reform on the one hand, and the nouveaux riches on the other hand. The latter, according to a time-honored tradition, were anxious to legitimate their wealth by building mosques to honor the community and also be honored by it. Only after 1980, with help from the social crisis and the shake-up of the power structure, did the Islamists find their way to the popular classes. Behind the religious posture, political ends are dissimulated. The Islamist movement is a millenarian one. Its power of attraction, its unbelievable success can be explained by this hypothesis. (...) The millenarian fervor expresses itself by the establishment of a deadline for the crumbling of the system and by the belief in the possibility of a brutal change following a few sudden jolts, independently of a patient strategy for taking power.

Other millenarian aspects characterize Islamism: the illusion that violence and injustice are always used by the other side, while one's own methods of physical and psychological pressure are forever justified and sanctified. (...)

The itinerary of Islamism is similar in many ways with that of populist nationalism. It is rooted in this tradition and is not as startlingly new as some claim. What is astonishing is the speed with which yesterday's downtrodden, now in power, turn on their Islamist adversaries with the same terms once used against them: "hoodlums, pimps, outlaws."

With the Islamists, the continued infantilization of society seems to be the precondition for new forms of subjugation. The Algerians are caught in a vice, trapped between the control of Islamism and the control of the instruments of coercion, the army, the police, the courts.