

Will Algeria take the Iranian road?

by Thierry Lalevée

The upset victory in Algeria's June 12 provincial and municipal elections of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which advocates turning Algeria into an Islamic republic, was not a total surprise to anyone who was paying attention; neither is it decisive of Algeria's future. The leadership of the National Liberation Front (FLN), which has ruled Algeria since the revolution in 1962, did not seem overly shocked, and very visibly do not want to give way to panic. The elections are but a phase in the struggle for power in the country—which, since October 1988, has been characterized by popular outbursts and a thoroughgoing shakeup in the state apparatus.

To avoid demoralization among its members—following the discovery that an Islamic fundamentalist official does not necessarily have any more economic or social power than a non-fundamentalist official—the FIS is mobilizing in the streets, to throw itself as rapidly as possible into another electoral campaign, this one for the legislature. The government will resist its demands, and the coming months will see a far more decisive test of power.

Will Algeria collapse into an Iranian-style crisis? One can only speculate. Very little is known of the leaders of the FIS. One of them, the populist Abbasi Madani, who proudly drives a Mercedes, recalls his past of struggle side by side with the FLN, and speaks of his studies in London; another, the younger and apparently more radical Belhadj, harangues the working-class districts and slums of Bab el Oued. Where do they really come from? How was the FIS created so rapidly? And what are their sources of financing? Until these questions are answered, no competent judgment can be made.

Turmoil across Africa

The Algerian developments come in the aftermath of recent weeks of turmoil in the African continent overall. Faced with their difficulties, the Algerians turned toward Islam; in Central Africa, people are turning toward new political parties—or, in some cases, toward Christian and even animist sects. Despite the militant rhetoric of its government on behalf of Arab causes, Algeria has more to do with the rest of the African continent, than it does with the Middle East. Algeria suffers from the same problems as the rest of Africa: For example, since 1988, the debt service on the foreign debt has amounted to more than 77% of the value of exports, so that revenues, as in Gabon, collapsed after the

fall in the price of oil. Even a miraculous economic recovery cannot save the present institutions of Algeria. From the moment that the communist dictatorships of Eastern Europe crumbled, it was inevitable that the 30-year military dictatorship of the FLN would be transformed, at the very least.

Whether Algeria does or does not fall into Islamic fundamentalism, will be an economic issue, and this has implications for France as well. Some French politicians have already begun screaming about the “boat people” which the Algerian fundamentalist victory creates. A radical brand of Islam in Algeria would allow these French politicians to affix the label of “fundamentalist—dangerous” to the entire Maghreb community in France, creating the basis for massive expulsions which would be favored by the stated desire of the FIS and the other mullahs to bring back home all Algerian emigrés. Racial politics—that too is an economic program.

It was symbolic, unfortunately, that, at the moment the elections were taking place in Algeria, there occurred in Marseilles an economic seminar of the European Community and the Maghreb Arab Union. To the appeals of the MAU that Europe create a European-Maghreb investment bank similar to the one created for Eastern Europe, the representatives of the EC, as well as of the French government, turned a deaf ear. That decision was as heavy with consequence for the Maghreb, as were the Algerian elections.

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