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ALGERIA 1962-2012: More Questions than Answers

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“**L**’Algérie, c’est la France sans lois et sans hypocrisie”. Thus Alexis de Tocqueville summed up a report he had just written for parliament in Paris in 1847. “Tout ceci se terminera dans un bain de sang”. Just over a century after he penned those words, a war of liberation, as the Algerians call the fight to throw off French yoke, “*les opérations de maintien de l’ordre*” as they were described, in somewhat Orwellian language in France, began, which deeply scarred the psyche of France and Algeria. Fifty years on, the wounds left by eight years of increasingly bitter guerrilla warfare are beginning to heal.

The 132 years of French rule and the war of independence have entered the pantheon of modern political mythology: the Algerian Front de Liberation National (FLN) may have lost the war militarily but it defeated the –at the time– fourth most powerful nation on earth politically; the Battle of Algiers in 1956 pitted the paratroopers of Colonel Massu against the FLN militants of the capital, a story which Gilles Pontecorvo turned into a thrilling film twenty years later – it remains the test tube baby so to speak of modern urban guerrilla warfare. The war saw bitter feuding among Algerian nationalists but equally among the French. It destroyed the honour of the French army, already reeling from its bloody defeat at the hands of the Vietminh in Indochina, because officers resorted to the widespread use of torture. It brought down the French Fourth Republic and General de Gaulle back to power in 1958. Last but not least, it lasted two years more than it might have done had new reserves of crude oil and gas not been discovered in the early 1950s, which the French tried hard to keep control of.

After independence, Algeria, maybe inevitably, became the Mecca of revolutionaries from the Black Panthers to the African National Congress and a beacon of Third Worldism. The ideas which formed the basis of a New World Order were hatched here, alongside Tito’s Yugoslavia, Nehru’s New Delhi and Nasser’s Cairo. Had it not been for strong Algerian backing, the Palestine Liberation Organisation as we know it would never have emerged as a serious actor in Middle East politics. But revolutions, like Kronos, have a nasty habit of devouring their children. As Pontecorvo’s film was being shot in Algiers in July 1965, the tanks which were being used in the film were put to more practical use by the Minister of Defence,

Colonel Houari Boumediene as he staged a successful coup against Algeria's first president, Ahmed Ben Bella. Radical experiments in socialising agriculture and industrialising what had been a poor country were made. A dour form of Arab nationalism, of *baathism*, became the credo of a ruling elite in which the army, and, increasingly, the much feared *Sécurité Militaire* played a central role.

Education was for all and free, as was health but the other side of the bargain for the country's fast growing population was the absence of any political freedom. The hike in the price of crude oil after 1973 gave Boumediene the wherewithal for his ambitions. The *triomphe du tout état* as one commentator called it was short lived however and as the price of crude plummeted from the mid 1980s, the social bargain between rulers and ruled unravelled. The riots of October 1988 shook the regime to its foundations and led to a badly managed attempt to democratise the system. As elections which the newly minted *Front Islamic du Salut* was expected to win were cancelled in early January 1992, the country faced a fully fledged Islamic led insurrection. Putting it down carried a very heavy price indeed: an estimated 150,000 dead, thousands of disappeared, the widespread use of torture and the flight of over 500,000 Algerians abroad, many of whom were women and highly qualified professionals. Those years taught Algerian leaders and its people a lesson in caution and could explain why, despite high levels of unemployment and corruption, no copy cat events of those which have taken place in Cairo and Tunis have taken place in Algeria, at least to date.

This is a complex and complexed nation. Immensely proud, often brittle, usually dour, Algeria looks back on 50 years of independence with mixed feelings. Might it have done things differently? Might its leaders have been less harsh with their people? Should its foreign policy have been less ambitious? Should it have imposed Arabic in its education system quite so brutally? Why has it taken so long to accept that Berber language and culture are part of the bedrock of the country's identity? Could relations with France not be more normal, less brittle?

When it was a very independent part of the Ottoman empire, for three centuries up to 1830, Algerian fleets raided the south west coasts of England and Ireland regularly, the ships of the *raïis* (sea captains) went as far as Iceland in 1632. But Algeria today confronts the same problems as its peers along the southern shores of the Mediterranean do: how to build a more plural political system? How to create a process of due law, how to foster greater employment, especially in the private sector, how to offer its people greater confidence in their future which might stem the flow of native capital, how to adapt to the modern world without losing its cultural bearings?

Algeria is geographically the largest country in Africa; it boasts hard currency reserves estimated a \$230bn; its population is young and very restless. Much will depend on how President Abdelaziz Bouteflika chooses to leave the scene in 2014. Will he usher in men who are minded to reform Algeria, notably its economy in depth or just let the current system and its often mediocre and corrupt politicians simply reproduce itself *a minima*? Too many entrepreneurs and businessmen enjoy power and success not because of resources and activities they help create but from resources and activities they use their power to control. The conduct of the government has in recent years all too often discouraged productive enterprise and diverted talent to activities that stifle rather than promote economic growth. If the president wishes to exit through the grand door of history and be remembered as the man who, *in fine*, opened the door to a brighter future for his countrymen, he will promote those politicians and financial experts whose track record suggest they will promote more modern methods of governance.

How will the officer corps, which is today well educated, play the influential cards it holds? Even though it does not wish to be involved in politics directly, the army can certainly make its views heard – many younger officers appreciate the challenge their country faces and are well acquainted with the fact that it was a politician much of whose career had been in the army, Mouloud Hamrouche who led the most boldly reformist government in the country's history in 1989-91.

Outsiders will have little direct influence of the way in which events unfold in the months and years ahead but one country, France could mark the 50th anniversary of Algeria's independence by expressing regret for its harsh policies of yesteryear and extending a hand of reconciliation. Too many senior French officials continue to discuss North Africa as if its former colony was, if not the *only* at least the *main* trouble maker in North West Africa. If France wants to play a role in the Arab world, its more enlightened politicians such as Dominique de Villepin, know full well that reconciliation with Algeria is an essential prerequisite. A more outward looking and confident Algeria would have a very positive impact on the future of the North West African and broader West Mediterranean region. A key piece on the region's chessboard, at the age of 50, Algeria can master its future. Yet, the question remains open: would Algeria dare?