

The French political parties in the colonial Algeria, 1945–1954

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There are many facts, events and connections awaiting scholarly scrutiny in the history of the colonial Algeria. One of these problems is the European population's political attitude and the preference of the parties after the Second World War. This study surveys the divisions, aims and electoral acts of the French parties in Algeria and through these it has also surveyed the popularity of the parties among the population.

We have focused on the parties' activities, their inner conflicts and their relations to the Muslims in Algeria instead of the history of society and economy. The main stress has been put on the parties and party-politics. Therefore some fields, have been highlighted, e.g. introduction and analysis of campaigns before the parliamentary elections, and reports of the constitutional dispute.

The starting-point is the East-Algerian rebellion in May, 1945, because this event proved that the French governmental circles and parties stick to the previous settlement and they are not willing to tolerate the secession of

the most important colony, Algeria and they step up against nationalist movements with fire and sword.

The following period offers several possibilities to look into the Algerian-policy of the parties. Politics was marked by constitutional disputes in 1945–1946 including the role of the colonies, their status in the future and the disputes around the Algerian fundamental law in 1947. The Algerian institutional system was formed in April 1948 when the fundamental law came into existence: the Algerian assembly ("parliament") was elected and it put an end to the endless constitutional disputes and to the referendums.

The political scrambles were sleuthed in the next thematic unit between 1945 and 1951. This period is relatively untroubled compared with the previous period. The parties sought their place in the framework of the colonial legitimacy and contended with each other for the implementation of the fundamental law. The questions of the reforms were on the agenda but the main issue, which determined the conflicts among the parties, was the ap-

proach to the reforms. There was great tension between the parties, their French leaders and the Algerian sections in the parties, and in the European right wing there was a dispute about what to do and how they should approach the original inhabitants politically. The period was finished by the parliamentary elections in 1951. This time – as before – illegalities were carried out against the original inhabitants in the second elective body by the government in order to prevent the candidates of the nationalist parties from getting into the national assembly.

Finally those events have been studied that made the inner opposition faded away owing to the acceleration of the decolonisation process, and on account of the colonial crises (Indo-China, Tunisia, Morocco) in the European right wing and the parties concentrated on holding the achieved “results” and they were under the illusion that no reforms were actually needed in the calm Algeria. The 1954 revolt, which was inspired by the defeat of the French in Indo-China and the humming happenings in the North African protectorate, was an answer to this conservative policy of the parties and the settlers’ attitude.

After the Second World War, the union of the parties gathered in the Resistance broke up. The nature and the character of the new government was the most important question then. The colonies played an important role in these enormous and momentous disputes, so did Algeria. There was an election in Algeria in the autumn of 1945, in which the communist party achieved a remarkable result. This showed that the European population was not in favour of the right and if

there was a party on the left, which gave the settlers undoubted rights in Algeria (ACP did this), then they would vote that political power.

The left (communists, socialists) had great success in the homeland so they absolutely outnumbered their opponents. Thereby they were able to make the first draft of the constitution. Both parties wanted to introduce wide reforms (i.e. the socialists wanted to bring in the one turned electoral system) but the right wing and the radical powers condemned them especially in Algeria.

The French population declined the first draft of the constitution – just as it happened in France – which could be understood as the first sign of a slow right movement. This became unambiguous by the election of June. Both the communists and the socialists lost a number of votes, however the right became stronger.

The ACP made the idea of an independent Algeria its own, because it sensed the political progresses and guarded it steadily in the forthcoming time. The other initiation was the unity of the nationalist parties with which it would have taken up the struggle more effectively against the colonial power. There were also vital disputes inside the other parties (especially among the socialists) but in the whole those won who wanted to keep the colonies. The draft of the second constitution, which was prepared for autumn, did not contain the right of secession from the French Union while Algeria continued to be an integrant part of France. The new constitution allowed special status to some colonial territories – because the referendum in October had already accepted the draft.

All political parties advanced their conceptions about the future of Algeria during a half-year dispute about the Algerian fundamental law. The most intense dispute was about the Algerian electoral system and the representation of the population. The Muslim population had the preponderance over the European population and the electoral system would have favoured the original inhabitants. Because of this, the settlers pressured the government and the parties accepted a law that Algeria continued to be the integrant part of France creating a group of departments and the two turn electoral system remained. Every French law was valid in Algeria as well. An Algerian "Parliament" was created but this only dealt with the financial and economic matters as well as implementing new reforms by the new fundamental law. However, both communities condemned the status law. One of them expected more from it and the other thought that it could lose its privileges.

The frame of the following period was the spring of 1948's election. The French government attempted to prevent the nationalist politicians from getting mandates. In favour of this they committed many illegitimacies and with this only those French candidates won who uncritically accepted the presence of France. Therefore, just a few candidates of the nationalist parties got in the Algerian Assembly. Those powers won among the Europeans who turned away the fundamental law. Thus that kind of majority received place in the Algerian Assembly who would have impeded any serious reforms brought in the country.

The political struggle smoothed down between 1948 and 1951. However, the parties continued their fight for the realization of their programmes and expansion of their party members. Time after time there was a drastic communist demand for the establishment of an independent Algeria and the creation of a new social rank. Similarly, they did not give up their plan to bring the nationalists together and step up as a union. The nationalist parties declined this initiative repeatedly. Apart from this, some approach was noticeable between the parties while the European population were definitely drawing away from the party, because they did not want to share the party's idea about the Algerian independence.

The tragedy of the socialist party was that while the moderate circles wanted to cooperate with the Muslims, the high-ranking officers of the colonial administration used unlawful methods against the native population. They expedited some minor important reforms in the administration and the education system, but these reforms were not accomplished because of the tough opposition of the right wing. The party's popularity declined step by step owing to the complete successfulness not only in the second but also in the first elective body where the settlers could not identify with the policy of the reforms.

The right wing was not as unified as many historians thought before, although their inner problems were almost the same. There were minor inner crises inside at the Christian Democrat MRP and at the Gaullist RPF when the homeland leadership wanted to make approaches to the political representa-

tives of the Muslims. This could have happened in the most careful way; the Algerian sections immediately gave in their objections to their party's leadership and threatened to step out from the movement. Consequently, the North Africans and the people of the motherland did not see the Algerian problems in the same way. However, in the end always the colonials' policy proceeded through their influential Parisian supporters.

There was an unlikely but no less important dispute inside the radicals. The most resolute protector of the settlers' rights and the colonial legitimacy, proposed a new type of alliance with the moderate nationalists at the beginning of 1951. According to their motivation, this would have been necessary because through this the two communities could come close together and the long presence of the French could be ensured. It should be emphasized that this so called "liberal" wing did not want to give expanded rights to the natives. It just wanted to ensure with other methods the "eternity" of the French presence - just like those hardliners who were not willing to negotiate with the nationalists and who stigmatised the liberals as a "separatist" in reply. A sharp dispute emerged between the two groups and they entered the election in separate rolls in 1951. Public opinion was divided by the two conceptions and because both wings had influential leaders the election ended in a "draw". Taken, as a whole there was no doubt about the victory of the right wing.

The growing colonial crises generated defensive reactions from the Algerian settler community at the beginning of the 1950s and the former dis-

agreements almost disappeared completely. At the same time the extreme left wing continued its previous independent policy.

The initiative of the ACP succeeded with the nationalists and they established a united front after the 1951's election. The reason of this was that the electoral unlawfulness of the previous years had been repeated in the election, which impeded that the candidates of the nationalists could gain mandates in the French parliament. It became clear that they could not defend their interests with the former method; therefore these parties thought that they would try to enforce the reforms. The Communist party played the definite role in the creation of the front, however the co-operation did not become successful in the end. The front dissolved by the middle of 1952.

The colonial crises caused different reactions inside the right wing parties. The intellectuals inside the MRP more firmly attacked the power politics, which the government represented in Morocco, Tunisia and Indo-China, and pleading Christian principles demanded more liberal approach. Therefore, the Algerian settlers harshly attacked these intellectuals. At the same time the traditional moderate right wing became stronger and those extremities that almost extinguished after the Second World War strengthened as well. On account of the Cabinet crises in France and owing to a swing to the right, these powers also gained governmental roles. With them that movement gained ground which was uncompromising and wanted to defend colonial interests at any price.

This kind of policy failed after the defeat of the French army in Indo-

China in the spring of 1954. Mendès-France – presented the left wing of the radicals – could form the new government, who signed the armistice with the Vietnamese in Geneva then followed on the reforms and gave internal autonomy to Tunisia. The French population of Algeria took these steps with mingled feelings. They admitted that they had to find the way out of the war somehow, but they could not ac-

cept that the prime minister would bring in such a risky reforms in North Africa. They were afraid that this so called “gracious” reforms might provoke the nationalists and they would behave more forcefully. However, the government was decisive in the case of Algeria: the Home Secretary announced in October that the presence of France “will be kept”.