

The Social Component of Algerian Nationalism

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Résumé

Le mouvement national algérien a un fort composant social depuis sa naissance dans les années 1920. Il se concrétise dans la question agraire. Au cours de la guerre de libération nationale, le composant social du programme du FLN s'approfondit insistant déjà non seulement sur l'anticolonialisme, mais l'anticapitalisme. (Exemples : Cuba, Yougoslavie.) Cette évolution aboutit à utiliser le terme « socialisme » pour la construction de la nouvelle société. Après l'explosion sociale en 1988, le FLN supprime le terme socialisme dans son programme, mais la structure sociétale reste sur place. L'islamisme populiste, force politique dominante entre 1988-1992, n'arrive pas à la détruire. Et le *hirak*, le libéralisme populiste actuel y arrivera ?

Keywords: Algérie, islamisme, option socialiste algérien, anticolonialisme

The 1960s was the period of decolonization, the collapse of classical empires, and the Third World's entry on stage. Colonies became independent and sovereign nation-states. They joined the international political scene as active participants significantly transforming the geopolitical map of the world, all within a single year. In 1960 sixteen countries in Africa gained independence. In one of them, in Belgian Congo, a severe crisis erupted, reflecting the contradictory ideological and political movements that permeated the continent. This crisis also demonstrated that the colonial powers did not refrain from violence, although they preferred peaceful ways in the resolution of conflicts. They attempted to form a new type of economic, financial, and cultural network of dependencies with their former colonies, transplanting them into treaties. This system of the so-called neo-colonialist methods was first brought to light by the President of Ghana in his book published in 1965.¹

In order to avert the dangers of neo-colonialism, and in defence of national sovereignty, radical socio-political programmes were launched in several African states: the hallmark names are those of Kwame Nkrumah in Ghana, Sékou Touré in Guinea, Modibo Keita in Mali, and Nasser in Egypt. Even the professedly liberal Burgiba spoke of Destourian socialism in Tunisia. In Algeria, the FLN (Front de libération nationale), which orchestrated the national war of independence (1954–1962), also heralded the advent of socialism in the country. From the very beginning, it was the pronounced element of social fairness and

¹ (Krumah, Kwame) 1967. The volume has been translated into several languages. Many of its observations remain relevant to the present. The term neo-colonialism, however, has recently been replaced by the phrase *soft power*.

justice of Algerian nationalism that came to distinguish it from the nationalistic movements of other Arab states.

The FLN passed a decision about the path of socialism at its Tripoli meeting in June 1962. "Armed fights must be followed by ideological ones, as national independence movements will be followed by a national democratic revolution. The national democratic revolution means the conscious building of the country on the grounds of socialist principles and the power is in possession of the people."²

There was an earlier existing option to the document later to be named the Tripoli programme: the Treaty of Evian of March 18, 1962, which marked the end of the war, and was signed by the French government and the representatives of the FLN. The Tripoli programme mentioned above remarked about the treaty that it was "a neo-colonialist platform that France attempts to use as a foundation and framework of the new form of her rule." The result would indeed have been that, had the points of the treaty been meticulously put into practice. This was also one of de Gaulle's aims, as he explained in his memoirs: "It contains everything we wanted it to contain. For the present, it means a ceasefire; for the future, a close-knit economic and financial partnership, and deeply embedded cultural and technological cooperation between France and Algeria."³

The socialist option, however, was not a mere child of the moment. Its proof may be found in the examination of the Algerian nationalist movement's programmes and the official news organ of the FLN: *El Moudjahid*. As Algeria was a primarily agrarian country, the social elements and content of the programmes were aimed at the betterment of the agricultural workers' conditions. During the colonization of the country, Algerians were deprived of the best lands (almost 3 million hectares) and the land was given to the settlers who immigrated from Europe. On the lands that were owned by Europeans the average wheat production was more than eight hundred kilograms per hectare, while on the property of the Algerians the crop average did not reach five hundred kilograms per hectare. In case of a poor harvest or a long, cold winter, starvation hit the Algerian countryside, which often led to famishment.⁴

The first agricultural reform plan was developed by the communist party as early as 1925. It was based on classical communist-socialist principles: "the land belongs to those who cultivate it no matter what race or what religion they belong to."⁵ The latifundia had to be nationalized and given over to the fellahs who were supposed to form cooperatives and to the peasants of European origin.

Two years later at the anti-imperialist congress in Brussels the nationalist Messali Hadj defined the confiscation of large feudal estates, and the lands of settlers as well as capitalist companies, and their passing to the fellahs, as the primary demand of the Algerian people. The most important demand, of course, was national independence. He rejected the often-heard accusations that the Algerian people did not have the talent to govern the independent Algeria themselves. Messali Hadj was the leader of the organization called the North-

² Cf.: the programme in: *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord 1962*. Paris: CNRS, 1963, pp. 638–704.

³ (de Gaulle, Charles) 1972. p. 159.

⁴ Barbé, René: La question de la terre en Algérie. *Économie et Politique*, 1955. 11. pp. 19–25. The population of Algeria was ten million in the middle of the 1950s, out of which one million was of European origin.

⁵ *Lutte sociale*, March 22, 1925

African Star, which was founded with the support of French communists. Its membership was made up by North-Africans, mostly Algerians who worked in France. Messali Hadj later turned against the communists but kept his original social program.⁶

The Great Depression of 1929–1933 affected the Algerians the most as they were the ones who lost their jobs first, their solvent demand diminished, and the land owners did not find markets for their products. The growing social tensions radicalized even the moderate nationalists, their program went through a considerable change.

In 1943 “a great land reform that would erase the large feudal estates, which would ensure the right to welfare even for the enormous layer of the agrarian proletariat” was one of the central demands of the widely popular document entitled the *Manifesto of the Algerian People*, edited by the moderate nationalist Ferhat Abbas.⁷ The Francophile Ferhat Abbas had an especially strong opinion about the great landowner settlers (but not about the French in general!), which the representatives of the colonial authority were shocked to hear. “We are not Francophobe, we need them, we need their experts, but the great landowner settlers – the parasites – have to be annihilated. If we transform their property modelled on the Russian cooperative villages, they will serve the interests of the community. We respect the French, but sooner or later we will have to get rid of the tyranny of the great landowner settlers.”⁸

The social tensions that accumulated during World War II burst out. The celebration of the end of the war in May, 1945 led to a spontaneous, unorganized peasant uprising in the eastern part of the country. Brutal retribution followed, and the number of victims is estimated to be 10-20 thousand.⁹ The most complex report listed the following causes for the social and political tensions: “it has to be noted that a lot of Muslims were in France as guest workers or soldiers, and they directed their attention to such social factors that their parents had not noticed. They were more sensitive to the propaganda of the press, the pamphlets, and the radio. They compare their situation to that of the Europeans, whom they considered privileged. They are envious of the great landowner settlers when they compare their own misery with the richness of the landowners. They demand the redistribution of land, they unveil the abuses of the landowners, which enable the privileged ones to be the overlords of thousands of hectares.”¹⁰

The uprising clearly showed that the most important social problem of colonial Algeria was the agrarian question, which at the same time was also a *national* issue, because it was only possible to improve the situation of the peasants if Algeria achieved *national independence* and eliminated the colonial system. After the repression of the uprising the parties that supported national independence did not simply want to establish a *republic* that would

⁶ See: (Stora, Benjamin) 2010.

⁷ (Collot, Claude – Henry, Jean-Robert). 1978. p. 164.

⁸ Renseignements et études du Centre d'Information et d'Études, janvier 1943. Archives nationales d'outre-mer (Aix en Provence) 11H50.

⁹ (Ainad Tabet, Redouane) 1987.

¹⁰ Rapport à M. le Ministre plénipotentiaire gouverneur général de l'Algérie de la commission chargée de procéder à une enquête administrative sur les événements qui se sont déroulés dans le département de Constantine, le 8 mai et jours suivants. In *Revue algérienne des sciences juridiques, économiques et politiques*, 1974. n°4. p. 310.

guarantee political rights, but wanted to establish a *social republic* that would guarantee material and cultural welfare for the individuals.

In the November 1, 1954 manifesto of the FLN, the organisation that started the national liberation war, the principal demand was designated as “the creation of an independent, democratic and socially-minded state that rests on the principles of Islam.”¹¹

Concentrating on the land issue, the resolution of the FLN’s first congress (Soummam, August, 1956) was also phrased in this spirit: “The peasantry is convinced that their land hunger will only be satisfied with the achievement of national independence. A genuine land reform means terminating the poverty of the countryside: it is an act of patriotism and is inseparable from the total demolition of the colonial system.”¹²

Numerous factors contributed to the foregrounding and strengthening of the social content within the FLN’s programme during the national liberation war.

Slimane Chikh stresses in his excellent volume¹³ that from 1959, the FLN started to add depth to the social aspects of an independent Algeria’s society with the Constantine Plan.¹⁴ The plan failed to reach its aim: it did not gather sufficient support among the Algerian populace. The FLN thus came to the conclusion that “an independent Algeria must not choose the capitalist model.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, it was the negotiations that had the most important effects on the deepening and refinement of the FLN’s social programme. During their course (1960-1962) the FLN was undoubtedly forced to make compromises, but it was always careful not to let Paris gain a strong nationalist stance and also prevented any single social group from gaining advantage from the scheme: instead, the positive effects were to be spread out over the widest possible groups of the nation. The “soldiers” would also put “the civilians”, the FLN’s delegation under considerable pressure to reach these results throughout negotiations.

The National Council of the Algerian Revolution, the FLN’s supreme body corroborated the social and democratic content of the independent Algeria’s society at its August 1961 session; democracy had to become real, a system under which people take control in their own hands. A land reform had to be carried out and social justice had to be given to the people who suffered most during colonial times. “The independent Algeria will not let neocolonialist structures form in the country as these invariably carry in themselves the infringement of sovereignty and thwart the free economic development of the nation,” reads the *El Moudjahid*’s article on the event.¹⁶

The other important contributing factor to strengthening the line of social progress was “the practice of nations fighting for their independence,” stresses the above mentioned editorial. On studying the issues of *El Moudjahid*, it is clear that three countries were referred to: the People’s Republic of China, Yugoslavia, and Cuba.

Beijing backed the FLN’s freedom fights from the very beginning. The Algerian delegation visiting China in autumn 1960 gave high esteem to the results reached there in the struggle against backwardness. Ferhat Abbas, the leader of the delegation presumed that

¹¹ The Manifesto in: (Alleg, Henri) 1981. p. 510.

¹² *El Moudjahid*, 1956, No. 4 (numéro spécial)

¹³ (Chikh, Slimane) 2006.

¹⁴ De Gaulle’s programme for the betterment of the Algerian people, launched in the autumn of 1958.

¹⁵ Le fiasco du libéralisme en Algérie. *El Moudjahid*, 1960. No. 72.

¹⁶ Préparer l’avenir. *El Moudjahid*, 1961, No. 89.

certain measures could also be implemented in Algeria: "Quite naturally, China's problems are specifically Chinese problems. Yet, in order for a nation to catch up with the developed West, with Europe, I do not see any other option but borrowing certain methods from China and the Soviet Union."¹⁷

The Yugoslavs were highly revered for the resistance they showed against the German occupiers during World War II, which the Algerians carefully studied before starting the uprising. It was only the Yugoslavs that knew about the preparations for the November 1, 1954 uprising. The Yugoslav ambassador to Cairo was "the only European who was initiated into the secrets of the November 1954 events."¹⁸ Tito's Yugoslavia, moreover, was respected for not belonging to any military-political blocs; it retained its independence. At the same time, they were respected both in the East and the West, and they could count on economic and military support from both blocs. "It is an example worth studying at length."¹⁹ During the war, *El Moudjahid* published the highest number of articles on Yugoslavia from among the socialist countries: nine in all, not counting the news reports, short or long.

Cuba earned the admiration of the fighting Algeria because a small country as it was, it dared to stand up against the United States in defence of its sovereignty. "Fidel Castro is the man who could crush the economic prowess of the Yankees in the eyes of whole Latin America. He gave economic and political freedom to the island. Why then would it be impossible elsewhere?"²⁰ In defence of freedom, Fidel Castro and the Cuban leaders ushered in a string of increasingly radical reforms that deeply transformed the structure of society. In the course of this, a land reform was introduced: "The land reform had to be carried out in Cuba because it was only in this way that the Cuban people could hope to gain real independence. This meant serious fights with the retrograde forces without and within. But those are not invincible. They can be defeated. Cuba's significance for Latin America and the whole Third World is the very fact that it proved that all countries, the small, the poor and the isolated, are capable of victory."²¹

In the Cuban example the FLN saw the organic links between the national and social factors that keep strengthening each other in the course of the national sovereignty fight. This is why it paid such close attention to the events in Cuba. Between July 1960 and March 1962 *El Moudjahid* published seven long analytical articles on Cuba. The titles themselves are quite telling: "Cuba, more than a revolutionary example (1960, No. 68); Cuba, a trade union solidarity front for Algeria (1960, No. 72); Let's get to know the Cuban revolution (1961, No. 77); Cuba – a long fight against imperialism (1961, No. 80); Cuba: Year III of the revolution (1961, No. 83); Cuba – Year IV of the agrarian reform (1962, No. 90).

The FLN saw the realisation of its own aims in the Cuban revolution. "This is no simple political change: it is a genuine national revolution, exclusively Cuban, or more like Latin American. Fidel and his movement may be called revolutionary nationalist" – thus *El Moudjahid* quoted Che Guevara.²²

¹⁷ *El Moudjahid*, 1960, No. 72.

¹⁸ (Abbas, Ferhat) 1980, p. 263.

¹⁹ La politique internationale des blocs et la guerre d'Algérie. *El Moudjahid*, 1958, No. 20.

²⁰ Cuba plus qu'une révolution, un exemple. *El Moudjahid*, 1960, No. 68.

²¹ Cuba, An IV. La réforme agraire. *El Moudjahid*, 1962, No. 90.

²² *El Moudjahid*, 1961, No. 77.

Guevara's definition of the third world revolutions in the 1960s was excellent. In essence they were nationalist revolutions, with the aim to create *a sovereign nation state*, which had been prevented by colonial imperialism. These revolutions had a very strong social component: they did not wish to give privileges to any layer of the society.

These kinds of "nationalist socialisms" had numerous risks. Their bases were not solid, because they were born under the pressure of certain events (in Algeria's case the liberation movement), which were not accompanied by intellectual reflections. They were characterized by spontaneity and intuition, and had a strong emotional content. They either got stuck at this level, and relying on certain elements of their culture and civilization they considered the theoretical problems of their socialism solved. The socialisms of the Arab countries belonged to this group. They have very often been denoted as Arab or Islamic socialism. However, it could also happen that they took the international experiences and examples into consideration, set aside intuition, and tried to formulate a socialist alternative based on a deeper analysis of the given society. Independent Algeria is a good example for both options.

The period between 1962 and 1965, which has often been called the Ben Bella era after the president of the republic, was characterized by intuition and some kind of emotional verbalism. Every official document declared socialism and its Algerian speciality, the Arab-Islamic characteristics. Ben Bella always emphasized that Islam was the religion of social equality. Even the local communists thought that it was possible to establish a socialist society with the Koran in one hand and The Capital in the other. Many people had similar views in the international communist movement. They thought that Algeria could become the Cuba of the African continent, the patriotic leadership of the country will more and more shift to the left and will get to the point when they will found a unified communist party that merged all the revolutionists. This, however, did not happen. In Algeria the nationalist FLN created the unified organization in an authoritarian way without any preliminary debates. Because of this, the new organization's cohesiveness could only be superficial. The Algerian communists dissolved their party, and its members "voluntarily", but in fact on the "advice" of Moscow and without any grounded belief, entered the FLN, where they were stigmatized as atheists and were completely marginalized. This kind of authoritarian and bureaucratic method characterized the organization of the "socialist sector" in the economy as well. It, in fact, meant complete nationalization. (Even the ice-cream parlours were organized into the "socialist sector".) Its natural consequence was, also due to the lack of professionals and experts, economic failure and bankruptcy.²³

Ben Bella's emotional socialism attempt was ended by the Revolutionary Council on June 19, 1965, which was led by Bumedien.²⁴ The new leadership declared the socialist option irreversible. It was not less authoritarian than the previous regime, but it eliminated intuition, expedience, and emotional exaltation. It did not outline its socialist framework instantly, only years later in the document entitled National Charter, which it opened to public debate that lasted for months. Then they took the critical remarks and recommendations into consideration, made the necessary corrections, and then called for a referendum

²³ On the Ben Bella era, see: Algérie, pays révolutionnaire du tiers-monde. *Démocratie nouvelle*, juin 1965, numéro spécial.

²⁴ On this day a military coup was carried out against which there was no opposition, except for a few hundred demonstrators. Ben Bela was imprisoned, or rather kept in house arrest far from Algiers until 1980.

to confirm it. Algeria was the only Arab country where the program of the socialist option was worked out on such a wide-ranging social consultation. The Algerian new concept had three sources.²⁵ Islam remained its first and foremost source. During the campaign for a referendum, the Islamists were especially active. They considered socialism equal to atheism and argued that for that reason it could not be applied in Algeria. And if it could, then it could only be with a reference to its origins: “Arab” or “Islamic”. So, as a compromise, they accepted the denomination “specific socialism”. Its gist, however, was an Islam that “condemned racism, chauvinism, and the exploitation of people by other people”. The second source was the war of liberation, whose program, as I quoted it before, was not only national, but also social. The third source, which was very rarely formulated in the states that just started their process of nation building, was the experience of the universal development of humanity and the “practice of world socialism”.

After Bumediën’s death (1978), however, the socialist option started to fade, and it was the traditional concept of the Islamic component that gained ground. After the social explosion of 1988 the extremist Islamists gained power, and in the irreversibility of the socialist way was omitted from the 1989 constitution. The complete “privatization” of the society has not taken place (yet). The political practice is still characterized by social sensitivity, and the idea of social equality has not disappeared yet. The question is to what extent will Algeria transformed by the economic liberalism that is sweeping across the world and whether it will tear the national roots of social justice.

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²⁵ Algérie, naissance d’une société nouvelle. Le texte intégral de la Charte nationale adoptée par le peuple algérien. Éditions sociales, Paris 1976.