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Algeria

Kabylia's unarmed insurrection

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For two months now the Kabylia area has been in a state of insurrection and recently revolts have broken out in ten cities in the east of the country, in particular Annaba and Constantine.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/berber_1.jpg]

In an Algeria numbed by the dizzying cruelty experienced during the bloody years of a brutal war and battered by the program of economic dismantling demanded by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in the name of the imperialist creditors, despair was everywhere.

The Kabylia revolt started around two completely ordinary incidents under the state of emergency in a country where deaths are counted in the tens of thousands and the 'disappeared' in the thousands.

At the end of April, a young high-school student, Massinissa Guermouh, arrested at random, died in the police station at Beni Douala (near Tizi Ouzou), while at the same time, the police in Amizour (near Béjaia) removed three youngsters from their school and mistreated a teacher who opposed this violation. [1]

In a rebellious Kabylia, spared by the Islamist wave, and which on its Bédjaoui side practically experienced neither the war nor the despondency of the post-war period, the response from the youth was of an extraordinary radicalism.

Like a powder trail, the revolt spread to the entire Kabyle area, over seven wilayas (departments), expressing the hatred of hogra (an Algerian expression meaning to be excluded and held in contempt), the rejection of poverty and denouncing the murderous regime.

The demand for the recognition of the Tamazight (Berber) language is always present but social slogans are to the fore, contrary to the strongly identity-based explosion of June 1998, at the time of the death of (leading Berber singer) Lounes Matoub. The youth in revolt attacked all the public buildings, all the symbols of the central State and all the dignitaries suspected of corruption, but they also attacked the symbols of the parties - the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) as well as those of the establishment National Liberation Front (FLN) condemning their appalling municipal management, their membership of the liberal consensus and their bourgeois political practice.

Youth besieged police buildings, set fire to police residences and exhausted the reinforcements of riot police, in spite of their use of live ammunition. At the end of 40 days, there were 60 dead and hundreds wounded. The regime announced nearly 3,000 wounded, the majority among its own troops. Doctors testified that the majority of victims were shot in the back and that the snipers shot to kill.

[https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/berber_2.jpg]

Police officers acknowledged on television that the repressive forces were operational only during the first week, being satisfied thereafter with protecting their quarters, their residences and their families from the popular anger. A police spokesperson admitted to demoralisation and there are reports of desertion or self-mutilation in order to flee the confrontations.

Revolt against poverty

With 50% of the population below the poverty line, 30% unemployment, an economic structure in the course of collapse and the impending privatisation of the rare profitable sectors (oil, telephones), the neo-liberal policy imposed by Algeria's creditors has brought youth to despair while for the working class dismissals amount to hundreds of thousands and the retired are threatened with non-payment of their insufficient pensions.

To implement this unprecedented aggression against the Algerian people, to carry through this process, which will restore to imperialism, hydrocarbons, electricity, the mechanical engineering industry, the airport in Algiers and the management of the luxury hotels, a malleable regime was needed - rendered incapable of defending local interests against re-colonisation.

However, this regime should be able to come down with an iron hand on a population with a populist tradition in order to subject it to the new norms of capitalist exploitation.

Supported at the beginning of his reign by an immense popular hope around its promises of a return to "the golden age" of the 1970s and the populist dictatorship of Boumedienne, President Bouteflika had the political means to impose this wrenching turn on the people. This is why the Europeans and the US support him.

The Algerians had, as a whole, consented to his national concord and his amnesty for Islamic war criminals. Kabylia had not erupted in September 1999 when he had dared to say in Tizi Ouzou that the Tamazight language would never be official.

Bouteflika's aggressive authoritarianism sought to remove all those who dared to express their social distress. Acting like a megalomaniac, he had prohibited the political parties from access to television, which he reserved for his own expression. The managers and administrators of public companies were put on the defensive, demonstrations and strikes were threatened by police deployments and the military hierarchy was publicly accused of corruption. Dreaming of changing the Constitution to increase his power, without really knowing how, he tried to concentrate everything in his hands.

Indecisive, Bouteflika has for two years fed us with erudite and useless declamations, travelling the world to request improbable massive investments in a country where "everything is up for sale" in the words of the then economy minister Temmar.

While higher oil prices doubled public income, social conditions did not cease to worsen and society threatened to break down. While the discrediting of the representative parties weakened the institutions, restrictions on popular expression turned the page on the "democratic" opening conquered by the popular explosion of October 5, 1988. The regime was deprived of any security valve.

Riots to popular organisation

From the first days, in the Béjaia region, the education workers' union tried to organize the protest and called for a demonstration on April 28 in Amizour. Immediate repression led to violent confrontations.

The attempt by the FFS, the principal Kabyle party, to organise a meeting in Béjaia fell flat, because the youth

stoned the speakers, while the attempt at a march initiated by its members was dispersed by the immense procession of young rebels. Everywhere, throughout Kabylie, village committees were set up which multiplied initiatives, marches and delegations to the authorities.

In Béjaia, the economic metropolis, and in the valley of Soummam, more urbanized than upper Kabylia, in this area where the Socialist Workers Party (PST) has traditionally been strong in the social movements, the most interesting process unfolded. A co-ordination was built around the teachers trade-union, involving village and neighbourhood committees, trade-union structures and a university collective.

Within the grass roots structures, for the most part set up by left activists, there was insistence on the integration of young people who were more representative of the popular anger. This organisation, which progressively extended its representation to the immediately bordering wilayas, continues the tradition of the village committees of 1980, the gigantic mobilisations of the Berber Cultural Movement of 1989 to 1993, or the front against poverty in 1991.

In July 1998, the young rioters revolted by the assassination of Matoub Lounes set up the forums of rebels for freedom, directed by the current leaders of the popular committee of the wilaya of Béjaia. This committee tirelessly repeats its calls for demonstrations in spite of repression. Thus on May 3 it said: "Our march was repressed in blood and was stopped but our determination remains to impose the withdrawal of the police from all the areas and communes which demand it, to impose our right to march, to have work and housing and to pursue the Amazigh combat in all its dimensions. We call on all citizens to designate their representatives in all the neighbourhoods, villages, factories, universities, schools. We call for a general strike, except for transport, on Monday May 7 and for massive attendance at the popular meeting". [2]

On Monday May 7, after the meeting seen on the TVs of the whole world, an immense procession of tens of thousands of people passed through the streets of Béjaia, deserted by the police. The right to demonstrate was reconquered by Algerians. But as far as the media was concerned, the demonstration of April 3, called by trade unions and popular committees was described as "disorders in Béjaia", that of May 7 as "a small event". Occasionally it would be announced that the organisers were "former far left militants", without further precision. However certain Arabic-language newspapers mentioned the PST.

Co-ordination at Tizi Ouzou

In Tizi Ouzou, the symbolic capital of Kabyle resistance, the radical youth does not find in the preceding generation militant personnel full of left-wing traditions.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/gif/algeriamap.gif>]

The structuring has come later, the degree of representativeness is imperfect, the debates are less rich, but eyes of the press and the elites are on Tizi, the historical centre of the Berber movement. Contradictory calls for strikes and protest actions initially sowed confusion.

Then, an initial meeting took place in Beni Douala, to honour the memory of a murdered youth. The village committees which have been set up virtually everywhere decided to federate by tribe (Aarch, plural Aarouch), stressing ethnic identity rather than the social aspect and founding their co-ordination in Illoula around a platform which does not give much place to social concerns. [3]

The youth have succeeded with difficulty in being accepted and integrated into the neighbourhood committees. The

immense march on May 14 in Tizi Ouzou, established the representative nature and leading role of the coordination of the aarouchs, even if the youth maintained some distance from the organisers.

A march of 10,000 women in Tizi expressed eloquently a rejection of the patriarchal universe built on the right of seniority and the exclusion of the women. The women of Béjaia and Azazga also demonstrated in the thousands.

The demands of the demonstrators and the committees are, in Béjaia as in Tizi, the withdrawal of the police and anti-riot militias, a second sitting of the baccalaureate examination, the punishment of those responsible for repression, the satisfaction of social needs, and Tamazight as a national and official language.

Movement of self-organisation

This movement of popular self-organisation was supported by a student mobilization in Oran (a city in western Algeria) and Algiers, the capital, which is also the largest Kabyle city (just ahead of Paris).

Symbolic in Oran, although it constitutes the hard core of the democratic expression there, the student mobilisation, initiated by a coordination of autonomous student committees, was decisive in Algiers.

Competing, on May 3, with marches called in the capital by the apparatuses of the FFS and the RCD, the students held their own, courageously, in spite of a hundred casualties, with an impressive police presence.

The following day 10,000 of them, acclaimed by the population, went to the government palace where they read out their platform to the television cameras. It was small beer compared to the bloodthirsty drama in Kabylia, but it nevertheless had a considerable importance.

The spectre of the extension of the revolt to the inhabitants of Algiers paralysed the regime and to some extent reconciled the Kabyle youth with their country. Several neighbourhood committees were set up by the inhabitants of Algiers. The demonstration at Ain Benian ended in confrontations. A local coordination prepared the liberation of the 'Club des Pins' (a tourist zone reserved for the dignitaries of the régime and off-limits to ordinary citizens). A national inter-wilayas coordination was set upon June 7 and announced a march on Algiers for June 14.

The debates on platform confirm the lack of synch between the structures of Tizi with the concerns of the youth in revolt but unity was achieved on a common minimum by restricting the democratic and especially social concerns.

The aarouchs do not intend to replace the political parties. Thus, out went the demands for freedom of the press, women's rights, the maintenance of free medicine and public education, employment and housing and the lifting of the state of emergency. This retreat was necessary so as not to be cut off from the structures of the real movement but it offered us the chance for a splendid educational campaign around these slogans.

The gigantic demonstration of June 14 was the biggest in the history of the country although the mobilisation by the inhabitants of Algiers itself was disappointing. A further march is planned for July 5 [it was halted by the regime - ed].

The demand for the withdrawal of the police and riot squads has not weakened in spite of the renewal of forces and the restriction of the police to their barracks.

For several weeks, committees have negotiated temporary truces, obtaining the withdrawal of the police force to allow the population to sleep for a night or two. At the time of the baccalaureate examinations, the police were rejected by the wilaya committee of Béjaia and were replaced by tolerated local police officers.

Because their position is intolerable, the regime prefers to withdraw its police from confrontation. In Béjaia, deprived of telephone communication, there is a threat to cut off electricity.

Everywhere citizens deal with the committees rather than the police. But the popular committees are not organised as a counter-power.

Certainly, their authority is immense and binding even on the representatives of the state but if the question of the monopoly of weapons arises in general assemblies around the question of the police, the committee does not organise itself like a local authority either on the administrative or on the military level.

It is primarily conceived as a committee organising around the demands, even if the collapse of the official institutions, the sympathy of civil servants and the support of notable local FFS and RCD politicians opens up this possibility.

For sure, the committees decree boycotts, requisition vehicles and order all kinds of work done without payment. In spite of an undeniable popular legitimacy and the unexploited availability of the turbulent strike force of the radicalised youth, the committees, embryos of dual power, are still far from posing themselves as an alternative.

The extension of the revolt to other areas, which have neither the tradition nor the depth of the Kabyle revolt, also leads to caution from a leadership concerned that the area should not be isolated. However, in the Kabyle cities deserted by the police and abandoned to the anger of the youth, a qualitative step must be taken if the movement is not to collapse.

A regime at bay

The regime's initial response was with truncheons and live ammunition. They even dared to justify this on the grounds of the unavailability of rubber bullets. Bouteflika made an immense economic speech without the least word of compassion for the victims of the tragedy. He then flew to Nigeria to chair a meeting on AIDS in Africa.

But the determination of youth has not been blunted and this contempt consolidates it. The word was then given to the notables of the region to call for calm while the regime continued to attack the demonstrators.

Badredine Djahnine, the secretary-general of the teachers' union responded; "the regime is responsible, you want calm, stop repression, recognize Tamazight, give us work and housing".

After twelve days of violence, Bouteflika spoke finally, to say practically nothing. The regime tried to avoid the irreparable, to prevent a blood bath, which would generate a process of inescapable separation. But its police continue to fire with "normal" bullets, says an official anxious to deny the use of explosive bullets. The discontent continues to spread.

Breaking with the RCD, which has finally left the government, the regime tries to use the FFS as responsible

interlocutor. Unfortunately the FFS-organised march in Algiers, which gained strong media coverage, did not interest anybody in Kabylia and the postponement of the baccalaureate (bac) exams in the region at the request of Ait Ahmed's party led to new demonstrations: "No to the regional bac! For a second national sitting!"

With his fourth speech Bouteflika finally discovered the will of Kabyle youth to be identified with all the youth of the country and granted a second baccalaureate examination sitting to all Algerians.

Bouteflika announced that he would no longer seek intermediaries and would negotiate with the interested parties themselves and prepared to establish contact with the popular committees.

A new élan for the left

On March 28, the impressive general strike of the oil workers, supported by numerous sectors like the metalworkers, met with much popular sympathy. Bouteflika, discountenanced by the audacity of the workers, was forced to slow down the locomotive of neo-liberalism and to consider some measures of reflation of the economy.

One month later, the Kabyle insurrection began and upset all the political givens: it practically re-conquered the right for all to demonstrate, in spite of the state of emergency.

The television has been partially opened up whereas Bouteflika had closed it to the opposition, the police have got water hoses and their firearms have been removed, high-school pupils throughout the country obtained a second session of the bac, three ultra-neo-liberal ministers have been dismissed or marginalised to make way for house apparatchiks. And Bouteflika even has some reproaches for those who wanted to sell everything off.

Hope has returned to the popular masses. The regime's chauvinistic game of opposing Kabyles to other Algerians has no purchase now that all the cities of the East have seen demonstrations around the same social slogans and the same denunciation of hogra.

In the Arabic-speaking areas, the Islamists had expressed the revolt of the dispossessed. Their defeat is also the defeat of the people. The Islamic revolt's impotence and its barbaric practices discredited armed Islamists, Islamicism, the armed struggle and even the notion of revolt.

This demoralisation and distress do not affect the younger generation, who fulminate against an unjust social order and explode on the streets in Annaba, Constantine, Guelma, and so on.

If an organised framework is to be created, however, the absence of adult reference points similar to the Kabyle example will weigh heavily. However, the iron and steel industry in Annaba, the mechanical complexes in Constantine, the mining tradition in Tébessa, the ailing cycle factory in Guelma, have constituted the vanguard of the working class protest.

The challenge is to coordinate working class resistance, the growing revolt of the youth and the structured popular movement of Kabylia.

If the popular pressure does not succeed in imposing its own solutions, it will be used to implement one of the scenarios, which are now being discussed with the imperialist protectors.

Kabylia's unarmed insurrection

They involve the dismantling and plundering of the public sector, the loss of social rights embodied in a labour code now decreed to be too rigid and a huge worsening of poverty in the name of competitiveness.

We will not let them get away with it.

[1] Béjaïa, a city of 200,000 inhabitants, outlet of the valley of Soummam, is an oil port and tourist zone with various industrial establishments (oil, packing) and a thousand-year-old urban tradition. Tizi Ouzou, with 130,000 inhabitants, is a crossroads of communication in the centre of a very mountainous area with a big and active university.

[2] Appeal of the university community and the civil society, Bgayeth, May 3, 2001.

[3] A mountainous zone to the east of Algiers, the area of Kabylia was through the ages a place of refuge. Here the Berber language, Tamazight, has been preserved more than elsewhere. Despite massive emigration to the great urban areas of Algeria and to France, Kabylie remained for a long time outside the process of urban modernisation. Karl Marx, passing through Algiers, noted the survival of the pre-capitalist community organisation.

The Tajmaath, in Arabic the djemaa, literally the assembly, gathers together the representatives of village families, the wise old men, and manages the village, organising collective work and solidarity and resolving conflicts. Based on a reality of collective agricultural exploitation, this organisation has existed through the various phases of our history, the Arab occupation, the Turkish domination and French colonisation, before progressive urbanisation and the generalisation of wage labour sapped its bases and reduced its authority.

During the Berber spring of 1980, village committees set up by young radical militants, often students, supplanted them and the tajmaath which survive unequally through the region were reduced to the policing of morals and a formal existence. This strong community-based culture underlies the tradition of the village committees, which re-appear with each new radicalisation. It is often militants of the 1980 village committees who have come back into activity in the area of Tizi Ouzou. The reference to Aarchs, strongly marked by an identity-based assertion, does not correspond to sociological reality as urbanisation has substantially mixed up the populations.