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Algeria

Being a mayor and a revolutionary in Algeria

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Our comrade Mohand Sadek Akrou, PST mayor of Barbacha, in Kabylia, answered our questions about his activity as mayor of a commune confronted with a particularly corrupt and blocked system, and about the struggles that the comrades lead in the city with the population.

How can you be a mayor and a revolutionary?

We can't say that we are revolutionaries, it's a big word, it doesn't fit the context. We are swimming in contradictions. We are not electoralists, but we participate in elections. At the local level, we build direct contact with the population, with the masses. We are at the service of the masses, with a function that tries to minimize the damage. We cannot do much more in a corrupt and backward capitalist system like Algeria.

We are there to accompany the people in their struggle. The only promise we make during election campaigns is that, if the masses want to fight, we will always be ahead of the battle, that they will be able to get behind us to fight. We also say that nothing is given in such a system, everything is taken away, that it is not a mayor who solves the problems, it is the balance of power. We've been sincere from the beginning.

We won this commune through our capital of experience, our militant capital. In 2007, there was a sanction vote against the RCD, the FFS, the Kabyle parties, but also the parties in power - FLN and others.

Our goal is that this should change the class consciousness of the population so that it accompanies us in our mission. It is not easy, in a commune of 18,000 inhabitants, which is totally dependent on public funds, which has few resources of its own and no means to develop them.

What is your room for manoeuvre?

The economic room for manoeuvre is limited because we are totally dependent on public funds. We can only act on the definition of priorities. For example, if we are given five billion centimes in the communal development plans (PCD), it is up to us to rank the priorities, with the participation of the population.

That allows us to show the true face of power. There is material to create local wealth.

We have an iron and limestone mine that was in operation from 1926 to 1957 because it was stopped during the war of liberation by the mujaheddin. The government in power does not want a commune to take charge of itself. Even now, with the oil crash of 2014-2015, there is talk of self-financing the communes but there is no support, no means given to the communes to create their own wealth.

We are a rural, mountainous commune, which can therefore be developed, create employment, in arboriculture, in animal husbandry. In arboriculture, we have engaged in a test of strength with the public authorities for the opening of agricultural possibilities. To do this, the forestry department and the agriculture department are intervening, but they are not doing enough. We are therefore asking for equipment for the commune to be able to develop possibilities to help the farmers invest in their fields.

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This is the issue that triggered the conflict with the *wali* (local state representative) for the period 2007-2012. We received him several times to explain the problems and expectations and, in the last two years of our mandate, we forbade him to set foot on our commune if he did not come with machinery, bulldozers, graders, backhoes.

We do not have any factories, there are only shopkeepers, small building material companies such as cinder blocks. The tax system allows us to receive a percentage for the municipality. It is this revenue on which we have freedom of choice for expenditure.

We are therefore immersed in everyday life and we do not really have time to play politics, to capitalise on what we do. There is a huge gap in the development of the municipality. There are 34 villages, there is still a form of tribalism and state subsidies are insufficient to meet the needs of the population.

We are still essentially at the stage of meeting primary needs - basement works for drinking water, sanitation, gas, electrification.

How can you involve the population?

When we call for the mobilization of the population, there is a party that joins in, but there is a habit, a reflex among people, due to a lack of commitment, which consists of saying: you are the mayor, we voted for you, it's up to you to go and bang your head in front of the prefect, the *wali*, the official authorities.

We may have done more than others in the development of a commune like Barbacha, not in the sense of installing production infrastructures, unfortunately, but we were able to develop many projects. Moreover, during the first mandate 2007-2012, we have enormously disturbed the regime, which tried to slow down our momentum. During the second mandate 2012-2017, we won and the regime was forced to invent a procedure that allows minorities to make alliances to block us, so we spent five years without a mayor in Barbacha! But there was enormous resistance against a mayor, chosen by the *wali*, from settling in and the commune was more or less self-managed for five years with an intermediary, the general secretary of the mayor's office, who was placed in charge of day-to-day affairs, the sub-prefect for the last two years.

We have been able to transform the relative majority into an asset in the sense that we explained in a meeting that popular sovereignty has been flouted.

The population has been mobilized for five years, notably in a large rally at the Bejaïa Prefecture, which we closed for one day. The police intervened in the evening and we had 24 detainees. The next day, the population again intervened *en masse*, with buses, all means of private and public transport, and 48 hours after the arrest, we were released.

It galvanized the population, it made them proud to have stood up to the regime. In difficult times, it is good to have an enemy identified so that we can unite and strike together.

During the third term, the current one, we also have a lot of enemies. The Kabyle right, the FFS, the RCD, the FLN, opportunists, those who have interests in the system, who take advantage of public funds, of land, these people create problems for us. But whatever their slanders, we are the winners because their lies quickly dissipate.

How is the town hall useful in the current mobilization?

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In the current context, we have been able to stand out from the rest of the mayors and the communal and *wilaya* people's assemblies. From the very beginning, we engaged our town hall in the movement, giving resources, buses, printing statements and the commune's workers participating in the marches. We were also the first to write official press statements announcing that the commune of Barbacha would not organise the elections.

This produces a double contradiction: the population is participating in the movement but, at the same time, they want all the problems to be solved within the system. The slogans are that the *wali*, the system must get out, but at the same time to get subsidies for projects, you have to go through the *wilaya*, through the public authorities.

We have also had the possibility of organising conferences and meetings to discuss the real problem, the capitalist system, the rentier system, corruption and the need for a balance of power to free the system.

In relation to our experience and the elections in France, without wanting to give lessons, I think that it is enough not to lie, to tell the truth to the people, the difficulties to be able to develop and the contradiction between the rejection of the system, of electoralism and the fact of being at the side of the population in the local and regional elections to accompany the struggles. In relation to the yellow jackets, to the law on pensions, to say that the communes that we could win will be in the vanguard of this type of struggle. And to snatch up projects for the communes or regions. Instead of making the capitalists rich, impose them, not the poor workers, peasants, etc., but the poor workers. It is also important to show that what we foresee, thanks to the elements of analysis that we have on capitalism, are actually happening. This is the case, for example, on the ecological issue, or on gender equality. This gives legitimacy to what we do, to our daily struggle.

Interview by Kamel AÃssat (PST) and Antoine Larrache for [l'Anticapitaliste](#) 17 January 2020.

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