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Algeria:

# Is exercising citizenship a crime in Algeria?

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**In a regime of democratic freedoms, citizenship, i.e. the participation of citizens in the construction of the public space but also their determination to defend their rights, is the essential criterion for the functioning of the regime. In a regime of dictatorship and authoritarianism, citizenship embodies subversion, being a spoilsport for the rulers. Is this the case in Algeria in view of the harassment that is befalling Kamel Aïssat, whose trial is scheduled for 24 December 2023? He is being prosecuted on mind-boggling and senseless charges of “undermining the national interest” and “undermining national unity”. He is the patriot of all homelands and oppressed peoples.**

What did he do? No offense, no misdemeanour, no crime. Better still, he tried to do what his duty as a citizen dictates, as proclaimed by the country's constitution and the laws of the republic. Thanks to an order from the *wali* opening a public inquiry, he supported the citizens and associations of his region with the local institutions in learning about and expressing their opinions on the impact study concerning the Tala Hamza/Amizour lead and zinc mine project. Relying on the laws on the environment and mining law and the international Ramsar convention ratified by our country, and the decree of the *wali* of Bejaïa number 13/1066 of 06/05/2013 classifying the Soummam valley as a protected wetland of international importance, they expressed their rejection of the project, considering that since the study presented is not serious, and guarantees do not exist, the environmental risks and dangers to human health are immense.

But the authorities don't see it that way. In the name of reasons of state, they violate the sacrosanct principle of the will of the people in whose name they govern, they turn their backs on the laws of the republic, they decide to force their way through. This fait accompli was perceived by the villagers as violence by the state against them. Outraged, they began to write petitions, to raise awareness among their fellow citizens about the major risks of this project, but above all to call on the public authorities to reassure them and protect their integrity as stipulated in the constitution. Unfortunately, the response of the authorities has been and remains harassment and repression. This is what Kamel Aïssat is accused of and what is characterised as a crime against the national interest.

We only gag the mouth that tells the truth! Hundreds of citizens have expressed their rejection of this project and have petitioned against it, but only Kamel Aïssat is harassed, why? Kamel Aïssat is no ordinary citizen. He is a veteran political activist from the popular camp, a convinced activist for democracy and human rights, resolutely committed against injustice and oppression. A seasoned trade unionist, he has taken part in all workers' struggles. He is also an environmental activist who has regularly communicated about environmental pollution. As an academic teaching natural sciences, he regularly provides advice to farmers in the region. He has hosted several programs on the subject on Soummam radio. As an expert, he was commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture to provide training in agricultural subdivisions and forest conservation. Today, he is a professor of microbiology and as such he is designated as coordinator of North African countries within the International Organization for Biological Control. It is his scientific insight that he has put at the service of his fellow citizens, his ability to challenge the reliability of the impact study carried out by pseudo-experts in the pay of Terramin that have earned him harassment and targeting.

Why do the public authorities turn their backs on the laws of the republic? In 2012, the Minister of Energy and Mines, Youcef Yousfi, during a visit to Béjaïa, indicated that “the study that was presented by Terramin was not satisfactory”. Two months later, in an interview with the *Quotidien d'Oran*, he said of Terramin that “small companies have come to try to do good business and they do not have the technical means to develop these mines in a rational way and in a way that can ensure the safety of the population and protect the environment.” As a result, the contract was terminated. Two years later, a new mining law was promulgated “prohibiting, in its article 3, all mining activities on sites protected by international agreements and/or by legal texts”.

## Is exercising citizenship a crime in Algeria?

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But since 2020, the revival of mining has become one of the key axes of the Algerian government's economic policy to revive the crisis-ridden economy. Is it because the project is being revived at the initiative of the president that the intermediary authorities are allowed to discharge their responsibilities towards the law, trivialize a prominent environmental disaster, gag critics, repress dissent, ignore the laws of the land and put the lives of thousands of citizens at risk? Isn't it the first mission of the state to protect the integrity of its citizens? Doesn't the Constitution stipulate that the state shall protect agricultural land; ensure a healthy environment with a view to protecting people and developing their well-being; ensure continuous awareness of environmental risks; ensure the rational use of water, fossil fuels and other natural resources; and ensure protection of the environment in its land, sea and space dimensions by taking appropriate measures to punish polluters (Article 21).

Is it not the purpose of the environmental law to prevent any form of pollution or damage caused to the environment by ensuring the safeguarding of its components, to strengthen information, awareness and participation of the public and the various stakeholders in environmental protection measures?

The Minister of the Environment and Renewable Energies recently stated that "all measures have been taken to protect the environment from the possible impacts of the project". But why on earth do we hide everything from the people and refuse to respond to their requests? Doesn't the Environment Act stipulate that "everyone has the right to be informed about the state of the environment and to participate in procedures prior to taking decisions that may have adverse effects on the environment"?

Article 7 of the same law stipulates that: "Any natural or legal person who so requests shall receive from the institutions concerned information relating to the state of the environment. This information may relate to any data available in any form relating to the state of the environment and to regulations, measures and procedures designed to ensure and organize the protection of the environment." This is what Kamel Aïssat and the citizens of the region have been calling for in vain.

In the current context, taking into account the state of ecological consciousness of society, it is not obvious that Aïssat's struggle is getting the attention it deserves. It is in the years to come, when the damage has been done, that we will perhaps measure our collective responsibility for the irreparable degradation that we have inflicted on nature. In the meantime, only a few whistleblowers will be rowing against all odds. Good people are like candles, they burn themselves to give light to others. Solidarity with Kamel AÏSSAT!

24 December 2023

Translated by **International Viewpoint** from [l'Anticapitaliste](#).

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