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Arab Securitocracies and Security Sector Reform

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State, Security and Reform: the case of Algeria

Mustapha Mohamed *

In Algeria, the reform of the security sector requires a reform of the state. The system based on a total control of society and politics by the military intelligence must be challenged. But the society doesn't have the means to impose peaceful change. These can only come from within the regime.

Since their emergence in the context of the struggle for independence, Algerian intelligence services and the armed forces have continually asserted their intrinsic link with Algeria's national revolution. Given the failed transition to democracy, the country's historical struggle for liberation - the Algerian Independence war - still provides them with political legitimacy, justifying their claim for power. Popular support for the revolutionary forces, the National Liberation Front (*Front de Liberation Nationale*, FLN), played a decisive role in this asymmetric conflict, which was carried out on political as well as military grounds. Winning over the Algerian people became the key to the FLN's victory, despite the occupant's overwhelming military advantage. The revolution's executive branch therefore needed a strong, centrally based and hierarchical police apparatus in order to keep the population in check and retain control over the entire territory.

The ideological policing of the population was entrusted to the so-called *Liaisons g n rales*, which in 1958 became the Arms and General Liaisons Ministry (*Minist re de l'Armement et des Liaisons g n rales*, MALG¹), one of the most important departments in newly founded Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA). Apart from policing the population, this organ also ensured a secure link of command between the revolution's central base and its operational units inside the country. Later known as the *Malgaches*, the members of the Algerian republic's first secret services still surround themselves with an aura of mystery and hold their founding father, Abdelhafid Boussouf, in high esteem.

¹ See article by Baya Gacemi, now deceased, on "Algeria's networks" first published in *L'Express* and now available on Algeria-Watch: http://www.algeria-watch.org/fr/article/eco/reseaux_algerie.htm.

* An Algerian journalist and researcher.

Several accounts by war veterans tend to indicate that the MALG were a distinct, elite corps with direct links to revolutionary command. The liaisons officers in charge with transmitting orders depended directly of commanding officers, whom they served, and whose fate they were ultimately bound to. The Algerian Independence war provided the Malgaches with a strong *esprit de corps* and a culture of secrecy, which would outlive its original historical context. This morale was later strengthened by KGB training provided in Yugoslavia and the USSR, which produced the famous “red carpet” promotion of secret service officers.

Intelligence services thus developed an intimate relationship with leaders of the revolution from the very start of the struggle for liberation, before the state was even formed. These links with the centre of political power were based on both protection and surveillance of revolutionary activities, and would later have profound consequences. The issue at stake during the war was, as it is today, the “pre-eminence of political power” over the military - one of the principles adopted at the 1956 Summam Congress. One factor contributed to complicate discussions surrounding this issue at the time: the fact, claimed by many officers, of their non-military origins, as men who originally took up arms to defend the revolutionary cause. The assassination of Abane Ramdane, who convened the Summam Congress, on the orders of three army leaders, is seen by many Algerian intellectuals as emblematic of the use of force to assert military dominance over political institutions. These “politicians in uniforms” also had at their disposal, by the end of the war, a nationwide, fully-fledged army, consolidating their supremacy. This

military presence throughout the country turned out to be the decisive factor in the power struggle leading to the 1962 declaration of independence, the outcome of which determined the foundations of the new Algerian state.

The various debates and disputes which took place prior to 1962 and in the first months after independence were not only concerned with who was to govern the country; they ultimately touched upon the new Algerian state’s founding principles. While some, such as Ben Bella, inspired by Nasser, hoped to reproduce the Egyptian model, other revolutionary veterans were already ahead of their time in calling for a pluralistic, multiparty democracy. Though many now aspire to such ideals, these views had no chance of prevailing given the imbalance of power at the time. Several factors also contributed to weakening the democratic stance: on the one hand, the bitter rivalry between the National Liberation Army’s chief of staff and the leaders of the resistance fighters; on the other the border, conflict with Morocco, leading to the 1963 “Sand War”. Both gave currency to the populist, one-party argument, also favoured by an exhausted population after seven years of war.

The provisional government’s first president, Ferhat Abbas, stepped down from his appointment as president of the Constitutional Assembly in protest against the lack of regard afforded to national representatives. Another constitutional project was indeed being drafted outside the remit of the country’s legislative organ, one which would enshrine a closed political system, based on one-party rule. Other important figures, including Mohamed Boudiaf and Hocine Aït Ahmed, tried to counter this development, to no avail.

In a country battered by war, the most effective and organised forces were able to take over, despite opposition by ex-revolutionary commanders. What Algerians short-handedly call “the System”, was falling into place.

“The System”

The regime consecrated in the wake of independence, or “System”, is one that, by nature, does not favour politicians, most of whom would eventually quit politics, either willingly or by force. Despite various evolutions and adaptations, its nature has essentially remained the same, its defining characteristic being the formal exercise of power by the president and government, as set out in the constitution. Contrary to expectations however, these formal institutions exercise a certain amount of real authority when it comes to administrating the state and the economy. Staffed mainly by technocrats, they provide the regime with expertise and management skills - at times even with useful ideological discourse. They can thus be said to hold some degree of real power - though by delegation only. They hold up an appearance of power, emitting opinions and advice when consulted on the economy or the management of state affairs; when it comes to defining key policy choices however, their power is limited. Though the president is always to a certain extent involved in the decision-making process, the military and state intelligence services are a permanent force to be reckoned with. Their increasing autonomy within the regime ultimately gave them enough power to dominate it completely. In short, far from being a puppet institution, the presidency holds some measure of power; it does not, however, play a dominant role within the

regime, despite being granted quasi-monarchical powers by the Constitution. “We were the system’s Harkis” remarked Sid Ahmed Ghozali, Sonatrach’s first CEO, and later Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister from 1991 to 1993, one of the tensest periods in Algerian history. The “Harkis” were Algerian auxiliaries fighting for the French army during the war. Used in a struggle they could not fathom against the FLN, they performed a lot of the army’s “dirty work”, and were subsequently abandoned by the army or held in French camps as second-class citizens. Sid Ahmed Ghozali’s bitter remark, made 48 years after independence, is emblematic of generations’ feeling of having been “used”, and later “abandoned” by the System. A man with no apparent aversion to the army and intelligence services, he supported their controversial decision to abort the second round of elections in January 1991, in the hope that a new form of governance could come to terms with the regime’s essential duality - the dichotomy between actual, informal power and the formal appearances of power. Such hopes have since been dashed. The real issue at hand - that which this paper is concerned with - is whether a move away from this dichotomy is at all possible.

Boumediene’s undisputed rule

After independence was declared in July 1962, the popular Ahmed Ben Bella was swept to power as the first president of the Algerian republic, with the assistance of the armed forces and its chief of staff, Colonel Houari Boumediene. This alliance lasted a mere three years: on June 19th 1965, the army seized power and Boumediene was afforded full powers, ruling through the stand-in Revolutionary Council. The military had been

critical of Ahmed Ben Bella's erratic ruling style, which they saw as hindering Algeria's progress from revolution to political maturity. He also held a rather high opinion of himself and the "historical legitimacy" of his function as Algeria's first president, making him less inclined to cooperate with the army on a level basis. Boumediene's accession to power in 1965 is seen by many political analysts and historians as the second act in the original 1962 military coup against the GPRA.

There followed a politically exceptional period in which all powers were concentrated in the hands of Colonel Houari Boumediene, who ruled directly, with the help of a close circle of associates. It is the only time when the distinction between formal and informal powers can be said to have been abolished. The so-called Revolutionary Council only played a symbolic role, with ex-revolutionary leaders forced into exile or induced to go into business and stay away from politics. An ideological framework promoting the "specificity" of Algerian socialism served as a background for the establishment of an all-powerful and omnipresent Soviet-style secret police. State intelligence services and Military Security (MS), headed by colonel Kasdi Merbah, functioned as the regime's eyes and ears, acting out its orders and providing counsel, rather than acting autonomously. Power lay in the hands of a political leader, whose authority remained unchallenged.

Boumediene himself remarked that "the army forms the backbone of the regime, and the MS are its spinal chord", as noted by Baya Gacemi in a series of articles published in *L'Express*². Houari Boumediene's rule, which lasted until his death in 1978, can be

considered in retrospect as an exceptional period where there was essentially no distinction between formal and informal powers. He exercised power directly, easily contending with the various forces under his authority. A misleading climate of stability ensued, held up by various factors such as Boumediene's own personal charisma, the extended recourse to political surveillance of the population, the country's still vibrant nationalism and hopes for reconstruction amidst fresh memories of the Algerian war.

First attempts at reform

After Boumediene's death, a battle for his succession at the head of the regime ensued between two "civilian" contenders for the presidency - Foreign Affairs Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika and Mohamed-Salah Yahiaoui, head of the FLN. The armed forces ended up arbitrating and imposed their own "primus inter pares", Colonel Chadli Bendjedid. The new president, who arrived in office bearing promises of economic reforms, was critical of Military Security and attempted a reorganisation of the services with the aim of limiting their powers. Several entities were thus created. This constituted the first reform in Algerian politics ever made with the express will of limiting the security services' level of political involvement. Algerian society burst onto the political scene by way of its frustrated youths in the violent 1988 October riots. The political unrest that followed was felt at the heart of the regime: General Medjdoub Lakhehal-Ayat, head of intelligence services (*Direction générale de la protection et de la sécurité*, DGPS) was sacked by the president and replaced by General Betchine, who in turn, was also dismissed, leaving the position to be taken over by General Mohamed Mediene.

² Ibid

The services were once again united under a new name, the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS, *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité*). In the years that followed, from 1990 to 1991, the Prime minister Mouloud Hamrouche and his team of collaborators attempted to push through a thorough and daring programme of reforms, in a tough social climate characterised by rising Islamist militancy. The impetus for reform, which had the support of President Bendjedid, was felt everywhere; it even included the removal of the surveillance organ responsible for keeping an eye on state companies and the administration, the BSP (*Bureau de sécurité et de prévoyance*, Security and Readiness Bureau). Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche's drive for reform won him the enduring hostility of the armed forces and intelligence services.

The latter were able to regain a measure of power in the violent political unrest that followed the botched 1992 elections. The Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, FIS) had won the first round, held on December 26th 1991, and looked set to come out ahead in the second round. President Chadli Bendjedid resigned, he claims, in opposition to the army's plan to cancel the elections. In such event, the Constitution imposed that power be held for 45 days by the president of the National Assembly - but the clause was neutralised by means of a political-institutional arrangement. In the power vacancy that ensued, the High Security Council (HCS, *Haut Conseil de Sécurité*) was left in charge of ruling the country and ensuring the regime's continued existence. Whereas Boumediene exercised power directly, the armed forces were careful to give themselves the appearances of civilian rule.

Mohamed Boudiaf, a former revolutionary leader, was brought out of his Moroccan exile and appointed head of the High Council of State (*Haut Comité d'Etat*, HCE). He was murdered only a few months later, in a lone act by one of the men responsible for his security. This left the army somewhat in the limelight, despite the presence of Ali Kafi, an ex-colonel turned politician, at the head of the HCE. In 1994, the army appointed Liamine Zeroual to the presidency, and had him formally elected in 1995. Zeroual would later resign amidst political attacks on his security advisor General Mohamed Betchine. However, he did not step down immediately following the announcement of his resignation, providing the army and secret services with enough time before the elections to prepare their own candidate, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. What followed is history: the six other candidates stepped down in protest against mass electoral fraud, and Bouteflika remained the only one vying for the presidency. In 2004, a fresh round of elections were organised despite opposition by the army's Chief of Staff. State intelligence services ensured Bouteflika a triumphant re-election, while convincing part of civil society and the press that his opponent and ex-Prime Minister, Ali Benflis, would win, demonstrating their great persuasiveness.

From a political standpoint, the 2004 elections represent the culmination of the intelligence services' autonomy and institutional dominance over the armed forces. It was the very same services who spread the false theory according to which Bouteflika, who publicly proclaimed he did want to be "a three quarter president", had brought the army and generals to heel. The organisation's cult of secrecy means it prefers leading its activities

away from the limelight - with the exception of its counter terrorism and several anti-corruption campaigns. The DRS were ostensibly active in this area in 2010 (Sonatrach's public projects, including the east-west highway). These campaigns will result in a judicially orchestrated purge in Sonatrach's top management and the dismissal of Chakib Khelil, who has been Energy Minister since Bouteflika's election in 1999. The Algerian press has rightly commented these developments as signs of a weakening "presidential clan".

"Virtual" services and institutions

The political situation in 2010 was characterised by the secret services' hegemony over the regime, a weakened Islamist opposition, and a tightly controlled political system with submissive or overtly cautious media. In a curious and unexpected development in October 2010, three political figures emanating from or close to the regime came out publicly about the role of intelligence services, perhaps sensing a coming change at the top of the regime. Remarkably, the three men in question, Said Sadi, Redha Malek and Sid Ahmed Ghazali, had been in favour of the army's involvement in the 1992 electoral process which hindered the FIS's access to power, and thus cannot be said to be overtly hostile to intelligence services. These interventions opened up a debate on the services' pre-eminence and decisive role within the regime. Said Sadi, president of the Gathering for Culture and Democracy (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie*), a secular, mostly Kabyle party, thus pointed towards signs that Algeria

had entered a "post-Bouteflika" era³. Readers are reminded that President Bouteflika amended the constitutional provisions limiting the number of presidential mandates to two; he is now in his third term. Though his mandate could, in theory, be renewed, he is generally expected to step down for health reasons; his succession at the top of the regime is now open. According to Sadi, a "trench war" is underway in the Algerian state, and the army has now "regained control". State institutions are in the process of being "remilitarised". Ex-Prime Minister Reda Malek, on the other hand, whose age and health condition bar him from being suspected of any further political ambitions, but whose thinking, like Sadi's, is secular, emphasised Bouteflika's failure to operate a transition of power from military to civilian rule. In a collection of articles published in book form, Reda Malek remarks that "Bouteflika's election in 1999, the candidate having been given the army's unofficial blessing as "the lesser of two evils", has helped limit the armed forces' role in the management of government affairs. However, given the way power is currently exercised, the armed forces cannot be expected to give up those duties which lie outside the remit of security." The ex-Prime Minister implicitly blames Bouteflika's failure to carry out sufficient reform, rather than the army's willingness to hold on to power. Foreign media who spoke of the generals having been "brought to heel" have been too quick in their analysis of the situation, he explains. The time for that has yet to come. "The army's withdrawal from politics would create

³ http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/des-signes-confirmant-que-l-apres-bouteflika-a-commence-16-10-2010-94832_109.php

a power vacuum, which neither a fragile civil society nor its fundamentally divided political parties would be able to fill.”, he argues, noting the risk of an anarchical turn of events. “There follows an obvious dilemma. On the one hand, the army’s presence at the heart of power constitutes an obstacle to the shift towards democratic governance. On the other, its complete withdrawal from politics would automatically compromise the emergence of democracy.” Malek therefore suggests that there be a “transition”. “Both pro-democracy forces and the army need to act simultaneously: the former will have to get together in order to constitute a coherent, well-organised sociopolitical movement, while the latter follow a pre-established plan for gradual withdrawal.” The situation is clearly urgent, argues Malek. “In a couple of years, Algeria will have a population of about forty million. A country of forty million simply cannot be governed according to old-fashioned rules!”⁴. Such remarks perfectly illustrate the background for the issues that currently interest us. These issues should have required urgent attention since at least 1988, the moment at which the political system and the actual country were revealed as being fundamentally at odds with each other. The riots acutely demonstrated the urgent need for democratic reform, for Algerian society to obtain representation of and by itself through democratic means. True representation can only be achieved by challenging the current state of affairs, characterised by the security services’ total control over Algerian society. Ex-Prime Minister Sid Ahmed Ghazali

⁴ See Reda Malek’s analysis of the situation in Algeria (« Bouteflika, l’armée et la transition ») in *El Watan*, October 3rd, 2010. Available online at: http://elwatan.com/actualite/bouteflika-l-armee-et-la-transition-03-10-2010-92908_109.php.

refines the issue in a long interview published in *Le Quotidien d’Oran*: “They are ‘the Services’, clearly. More than just ‘the Services’, it’s their many ramifications. Listen: having ‘services’ that try to have more power and abuse it is not a uniquely Algerian phenomenon. Democratic countries have them too - look at the CIA, NSA and FBI in the United States for example. Every one of them tries to affect political decisions as much as possible. The difference is other countries have institutions with actual powers. We only have ‘the Services’ and virtual institutions to contend with. Do you believe the National Assembly has legislative powers? Do you actually believe it?”⁵

An impossible reform?

Bringing about a reform of the security services comes down to reforming the Algerian state. The real issue at hand in light of past failures in reforming the system, including the government’s efforts under Mouloud Hamrouche, is knowing whether organised, orderly reform is still possible from the inside. Practical and material issues ought to be left aside. The increase in oil prices has brightened the regime’s financial prospects, providing it with the opportunity to modernise and upgrade the military and police forces. The aftermath of September 11th has caused outside criticism of the regime to dry up, and the nineties embargo on arms sales to be lifted. The times when the regime faced harsh scrutiny and demands for “reform” from its American and European counterparts are over. The regime has acquired a new “inner and outer peace”,

⁵ <http://www.lequotidien-oran.com/?news=5144312>.

which it hadn't experienced in many years. With the possible exception of "residual" Islamist terrorism in the guise of the GSCP/AQMI, nothing seems to trouble an otherwise motionless regime. However, the fact that a number of politicians close to the regime show signs of nervousness speaks for the lack of organisation of civil society and its lack of political and institutional means of bringing about peaceful change. Such change can only come from the inside. The difficulty in bringing about this reform lies in the fact that the army and intelligence services, which effectively hold the reins of power, would have to set about undermining their own dominant role in the regime. Their acceptance of constitutional rule, that is, the recognition of political authority, would amount to a revolution. The services might have been tempted to undertake an orderly "evolution", trumping their instinct for "conservation", were it not for a deep-seated apprehension linked to their inability to anticipate the Islamic Salvation Front's landslide victory in the first round of the 1991 elections. They thus consider slightest move towards political change with the utmost suspicion. The military were also caught off-guard when part of the FIS took up arms and began resorting to terrorism, and have focused their efforts since then on trying to avoid repeating such mistakes. Their method for doing so has been to impose themselves on the political scene and empty public life of all substance.

The security services are objectively in the best position to appreciate the deep changes taking place in Algerian society, and to understand that such changes cannot, in the long term, be averted by security means only. In the end, the country will need to go down the road of reform, putting an end to the unacceptable distinction between formal and informal power and ensuring authentic political representation. However, the services have systematically clamped down on every tentative move towards liberalisation since October 1988. This conservative approach is the result of their negative assessment of democratic reform, in addition to their special distrust of the Algerian population and its tendency to vote unpredictably. The fate of Algeria hangs in the balance while the country's real decision-makers make up their mind, and the chances for social breakdown increase.