Islam and Democracy: The Failure of Dialogue in Algeria

Frederic Volpi
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In all of the Middle East and North Africa, Algeria was the first country to be infected by the wind of democratization that swept the developing world in the 1980s and 1990s. The country became a political laboratory for the rest of the Arab world, as liberalization opened spaces for moderate and radical Islamic groups to contest elections. Unfortunately, these elections quickly descended into a long drawn-out and brutal war with the

secularist rulers. This bitter battle, fought most fiercely between 1992-99, turned Algeria into a hot spot, thereby raising the question of whether democracy is feasible in the Muslim world. Frederic Volpi's new book seeks to answer this question by analyzing the process of political liberalization and the severe problems it generated in Algeria.

Volpi presents early and mid-twentieth-century North African scholars' reinterpretations of the Islamic creed that activated the emergence of anti-secularist movements in the Maghreb as a point of departure for his historical narrative of the Algerian conflict. Although Algeria's militant movement was coopted by the state party (the National Liberation Front [FLN]) and lost its dynamism during the post-independence years, it still sought to change the political system by operating from the community level, where it had built a network of associations. The author shows how this network's provision of services designed to meet the people's welfare needs helped thrust Islamic leaders into the political limelight as they utilized their organizational capacities and authority to transform the 1988 October food riots into a political protest.

The riots forced the Chadli Benjedid government to embark upon major reforms, which entailed designing a new constitution and institutionalizing the political pluralism that opened the door for official recognition of such Islamic associations as political parties, including the influential Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Here, Volpi does a good job of reporting the daily events that occurred during the October riots and the subsequent liberalization, but fails to provide basic information about Algeria's political history. Readers with little knowledge of this unstable North African country are left confused about such basic facts as how and when independence was attained, the types of regimes (civilian or military) from independence to 1988, and the relationship between the FLN and the military. These ought to have been presented prior to the narratives contained in chapter 3.

Volpi's accurate description of the transition process indicate that the FIS won the nationwide local government elections (June 1990) and also obtained nearly half of the votes during the first round of parliamentary elections (December 1991), thereby trouncing the ruling FLN, which won only 15 seats. He shows that anxieties over a FIS victory triggered a chain of events that included President Benjedid's resignation after his covert dissolution of Parliament, and the suspension of the second round of parliamentary elections. Then there was the transfer of power to a provisional government, the State High Committee (HCE), the deployment of

soldiers on the streets to quell riots by Islamist youths, the arrest and imprisonment of the FIS leadership, and the imposition of a state emergency. All of these culminated in the banning of the FIS (February 1992) and the assassination of Mohamed Boudiaf, head of the HCE, by one of his bodyguards (June 1992).

The question that arises here is why did the government intervene to halt the election? Was it because the government in office was not prepared to relinquish power, or because it feared that the FIS would turn Algeria into a theocracy if it formed the government? Volpi does not sort out these issues with his heavily narrative style of writing. His argument that a behind-the-scenes "coalition of military officers" was the *de facto* ruler of Algeria does not help the reader to know if the intervention was driven by the need to prioritize secularism over the Islamist party's electoral victory.

One of the book's high points is Volpi's discussion of the military's internal power struggle and of the FIS' internal dynamics (chapters 4 and 5, respectively). He shows that the internal rivalries between some of the principal military officers spilled over into the political arena, a development that made for periodic leadership changes and determined the fate of Algeria's troubled transition.

He shows that the FIS split over internal differences on how best to respond to the electoral suspension and to the ensuing military crackdown. The most notable splinter groups were such guerrilla organizations as the Armed Islamic Movement, the Armed Islamic Group, and the Islamic Salvation Army (FIS' official armed fighting wing). These guerrilla groups waged a very violent and deadly "holy war" that forced the government to hold elections in which the pro-government and moderate religious parties were allowed to participate. The guerrilla groups were disbanded following the 1999 general amnesty (the law of civil concord), which sought to promote national reconciliation, and Algeria remains a secular state. However, the question of whether the 1992 intervention was justified remains unanswered.

On balance, the book is very informative and is written in a beautiful prose style. However, the focus on processes and events could have been tempered with a brief discussion of the merits and demerits of the 1992 halted transition.

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