

Resignation of Algeria's prime minister reveals growing rift in ruling circles

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Prime Minister Ahmed Benbitour tendered his resignation to Algerian President Bouteflika on August 26. Bouteflika immediately accepted the resignation and appointed his own cabinet director, Ali Benflis, to form a new government. The fall of the Benbitour government testifies to the growing rifts in Algerian ruling circles confronted with rising social tensions at home and continuing debt repayment pressure from the Paris Club consortium of international banks, the IMF and the World Bank.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika was elected President in April 1999. He was promoted by the ruling clique of generals in the Algerian army as the candidate of the ruling coalition led by the National Democratic Rally (RND) and the FLN (National Liberation Front). The elections were so clearly rigged that six of the main opposition parties made a joint declaration on election day denouncing electoral fraud and withdrawing their candidates. They did not, however, withdraw their names from the ballot sheets and thus allowed Bouteflika to claim that he had been democratically elected.

As soon as he was elected, Bouteflika attempted to distance himself from the policy of all-out war with Islamic guerrillas that has been promoted by the army since its coup d'état in 1992. He launched a campaign for "National Reconciliation" and proposed an amnesty to the main guerrilla groups. Through negotiations with Abassi Madani, head of the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front), and Madani Mezrag, leader of FIS's military wing, the AIS (Islamic Salvation Army), he was able to obtain the disbanding of the AIS in exchange for an amnesty for all its members. Around 1,500 fighters turned themselves in before the January deadline. It is believed that many of these were Algerian secret service agents who had infiltrated the AIS and other armed groups.

The disbanding of the AIS did little to stop the on-going war between the army and the different terrorist groups,

for which the rural population has been paying a terrible price. FIS leader Mandani had already declared a truce two years before the amnesty ended in January. But the AIS, despite its status as the FIS's military wing, was far from being the largest of the Islamic guerrilla groups. The main groups, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and its many splinter groups such as the Safalist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), refused the amnesty.

Even though terrorist attacks in Algeria's big cities have lessened in number, the French daily *Libération* reports that between 60 and 100 people have been killed each week since the beginning of July. Most of the killings are perpetrated by guerrilla groups attacking villages or setting-up road blocks in the countryside. The numbers of dead have been growing since the failure of the army offensive launched after the amnesty deadline aimed at eliminating the GIA and the other guerrilla groups. At the end of July France put Algeria back on the list of countries not to be visited by French citizens except for "imperative professional reasons". Washington has also told US citizens to avoid making trips to Algeria.

Bouteflika's election and reconciliation policy was a response to pressure on the military regime from the US and the European Union to make Algeria more stable and open to international investment. But Bouteflika has had little room to manoeuvre. It took eight months for the first cabinet to be chosen, in which he bowed to pressure and gave two thirds of ministerial positions to powerful cliques within the ruling military coalition.

Since the amnesty Bouteflika has attempted to raise his own and Algeria's profile by concentrating on international diplomacy. He was recently given the red-carpet treatment on a visit to Paris, the first Algerian leader since the 1980s to do so. The US and other western powers sought his support in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and his aides were involved in brokering the recent truce between Ethiopia and Eritrea.

However the failure of the army to deal with the GIA and other guerrilla groups has resulted in increasing western dissatisfaction with the military regime, which the formation of a new stooge cabinet will do little to alleviate. The *Economist* magazine comments that, "potential investors will continue to regard Algeria as a dodgy place if power continues to be held by unaccountable military men and their hangers-on."

As the immediate threat of terror has receded from Algeria's cities, this has revived long-standing social tensions. In the last ten years the regime has driven down average income in Algeria to 50 percent of its 1990 level. An enormous polarisation of wealth has taken place, as the regime has implemented IMF Structural Adjustment measures.

Since its near financial bankruptcy in 1994, the Algerian regime and the small layer of businessmen around it have enriched themselves on the growing income due to higher petrol prices and gas exports. Meanwhile the vast majority of the population have been driven into dire poverty. Each Algerian that works has to support at least six people; nearly 70 percent of youth are unemployed (75 percent of Algerians are less than 30 years old) and, even according to official statistics, each housing unit is occupied by at least seven people.

Widespread social discontent first emerged in the riots of 1985 and 1988, against the flagging and corrupt FLN regime. Since France gave independence to Algeria in the Evian agreement of 1962, the FLN regime used its leadership of the national liberation struggle to justify its claims that it was "anti-imperialist" and was "building socialism" in Algeria.

The fraudulent claims of the FLN were exposed when petrol prices collapsed in the mid-eighties. For all its anti-imperialist bluster, the FLN regime had shown itself incapable of developing a viable national economy. The Algerian economy was entirely dependent on petrol and gas as its only exports—making up 50 percent of the state's budget and 25 percent of the country's GDP. To satisfy the demands of the IMF and the World Bank for debt repayment, the FLN resorted to growing attacks on wages and living conditions and factory closures.

The FIS used the attacks on living conditions, the Army's repression and the corruption of the FLN regime to encourage the spread of Islamic fundamentalism. Then President Chadli Benjedid first reacted by passing reforms which ended the single rule of the FLN and opened up free elections. In the first municipal elections held in 1990 the FIS were victorious, ousting the FLN from the

majority of town halls. In April 1991 90 percent of Algerian workers came out onto the streets against the FLN regime in a general strike, despite a boycott call by the FIS trade unions. The old FLN regime started to buckle and in-fighting developed in the party. In May 1991 the FIS tried to organise a general strike but got no support. They then resorted to anti-government riots in June and July. This gave the military the opportunity they had been waiting for. Troops and tanks were sent on to the streets and President Chadli was forced to declare a state of emergency. But Chadli eventually gave in to FIS demands and called a general election for December. The FLN regime was by this time completely discredited. Although votes for the FIS were on the wane (10 percent less than the municipal elections), the FLN vote collapsed and the absence of any political alternative for the working class enabled the FIS to gain a victory in the first round of voting.

At this point the army forced Chadli to suspend the elections before a disastrous second round. Soon after, in January 1992, they forced Chadli to resign, took power into their own hands in a coup d'état and declared the FIS illegal. The civil war has continued ever since. An estimated 100,000 people have died in the hostilities, and many others have fled the country. Bouteflika's regime is becoming increasingly unpopular, following initial hopes that social conditions might improve and the civil war come to an end. Regular protests take place in Algiers by groups of veiled women, the "mothers of the disappeared", over the thousands of people who have never been seen again after being arrested by the security forces.

The disbanding of the AIS and reduction in the level in violence has only put Algeria under more pressure from the IMF and western governments to carry out further cuts in welfare spending and to privatise state industries. Bouteflika's government can resolve none of the problems of the dependence of Algeria's economy on western imperialism that were exposed in the 1980s, or any of the acute social contradictions which led to the civil war and which have deepened over the last decade.



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