

Alternative Lessons from the ‘Algerian Scenario’

By Francesco Cavatorta

While it might be too strong to suggest that the ‘Algerian scenario’ dominates the politics of the Middle East and North Africa, its importance over the last two decades in structuring the political confrontation between regimes, Islamists, secular opposition, and the international community should not be underestimated.

Under severe popular pressure from an unprecedented economic crisis, the Algerian regime opened up the political system in 1989 with the hope of regaining legitimacy. Contrary to the expectation of the ruling elites, the process of democratization fuelled the ascendancy of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which challenged the very nature of the Algerian state.

During a tumultuous three years of political liberalization, free elections, and personal freedoms, the FIS emerged as the principal political movement in the country and was poised to take power after a landslide victory in the first round of the 1991 legislative elections. However, the second round never took place because the Army intervened in the political process. Following the military coup, authoritarian rule was re-instated, while the FIS was banned and its members imprisoned. Rather than simply fading away, a significant number of Islamist militants took up arms against the regime and a civil conflict ensued.

The Algerian war, largely fought away from the cameras and international public opinion, caused more than 150,000 casualties and was characterized by unspeakable brutality. The military junta accused the insurgents of “terrorism”, while the Islamist groups accused the security forces and their political supporters of “state terrorism” against the free will of the Algerian people who had expressed their preference for Islamism at the polls. The Algerian failure at democratization and its descent into civil war provided a number of lessons for political actors outside the country and later came to be known as the “Algerian scenario” – a scenario which was to be avoided at all costs.

Ruling regimes across the Middle East and North Africa came to recognize that they enjoyed very little internal legitimacy and that quickly opening up the political system – such as in the case of Algeria - would backfire. Thus, they opted instead for eliminating the Islamists (i.e., Tunisia), for co-optation (i.e., Morocco) or for a mix of the two strategies. No regime risked a full liberalization that would have included an Islamist party running in competitive elections. The Islamists themselves largely opted for political participation under authoritarian constraints in order to satisfy the “security” guarantees regimes needed (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan and Egypt).

While Islamists wanted to avoid being accused of instigating large scale political violence because this would taint the legitimacy and appeal of their cause, the secular opposition realized how little appeal it exercised on average voters. Fearing the Islamists more than the established regimes, vast sectors of secular civil society rallied around the authoritarian elites to ensure the exclusion of Islamists from power.

The international community, relieved that the Army intervened in Algeria, increased its support for authoritarian regimes because it was afraid of the radical ideas of Islamist movements on matters of international politics. The “Algerian scenario” encouraged political actors to try to avoid at all costs the choice between an elected Islamist government and civil war. This balancing act has worked so far, as no other country in the region has gone through what Algeria experienced over the last two decades. However, this does not mean that the continuous exclusion of Islamists from power can work in the future. The current tensions within the international system combined with the renewed legitimacy of jihadist ideology and activism threaten the moderation mainstream Islamists have displayed over recent years and endanger the regimes' balancing acts. Displays of political violence within the Arab world have been increasing, and understanding the origins is of the utmost importance.

This article attempts to provide a brief explanation for the choice of political violence that key Algerian actors made at the time, analyze its impact on policy-makers outside the country, and determine whether there are other useful lessons that can be drawn from the Algerian scenario in order to better understand current events.

Islamist Violence in Algeria

The civil violence affecting Algeria was largely interpreted as the inevitable outcome of the confrontation between the secular and liberal values of many within Algerian society and the inherent anti-democratic and violent nature of political Islam. Thus, General Khaled Nezzar - one of the 1992 military coup masterminds - points to the anti-democratic ethos of the FIS, which would have used the democratic openings to install an *obscurantiste* theocratic state when he claimed that “violence is inherent within Islamism”. [1] Former Minister of Interior El Hadi Khediri agreed with General Nezzar and implied that the initial choice of the FIS to play by the democratic rules was a sham because the “Islamists wanted to take by power by any means”. [2] A number of scholars agree with this view. Ben Mansour claims that “no political party founded on the basis of religion and its instrumental use can be integrated in a republic or in a democracy. And, if it takes power, it is in order to enslave the people and dominate neighbouring states. These parties only feed on violence and war”. [3] Thus, the mainstream explanation for the civil conflict became the “clash of values and methods” that existed between increasingly assertive *facho-Islamistes* and the defenders of secular republicanism. [4]

The popularity of this interpretation has been seldom questioned because of political opportunism. In fact, it relieved the Algerian Army, the sponsors of the coup within civil society and the international community of their responsibilities towards the democratic procedural game. If the FIS was inherently violent and anti-democratic, then there was nothing wrong in stopping it from coming to power even if this meant cancelling the results of free and fair elections. Thus, a coup by the Army was inevitable because it needed to defend secular values and prepare the country for a “genuine” democratic transformation, which could only take place once the Islamist threat was eliminated. Since it was assumed that Islamists simply wanted power with the objective of building a fundamentalist and authoritarian Islamic republic, responding with violence to their scheming would be justified. The military coup was presented as pre-emptive in so far as it responded with violence to the inevitable violence that the FIS would have unleashed on ordinary Algerians not conforming to the dictates of the new Islamic regime. The brutality of the war during the 1990s and in particular the Islamist massacres of 1995 and 1996 seemed to confirm the validity of the above explanation.

This simplistic and self-absolving interpretation should be and has been successfully challenged. On the one hand, many experts on the FIS doubt that the party would have had the internal coherence and the ideological drive to set up a fundamentalist state. Within the FIS there existed a number of different political currents with significant divisions regarding the 'content' of the Islamic state to be built and the policies to be undertaken. On the other hand, Mohamed Hafez convincingly argues that Islamists would not have chosen violence if the democratic processes had not been interrupted and highlights how extremists bent on violence “only gained prominence after the coup put an end to the FIS’s electoral option.” [5]

Islamists who never believed in the electoral process had been marginalised within the FIS and often belonged to groups that had nothing to do with the party. However, following the cancellation of the elections and the arrests of many FIS militants, the ranks of extremist groups swelled. It therefore emerged that the choice of political violence was the result of a changed opportunity structure where Islamists could no longer engage the regime through the political process. This contradicts the mainstream interpretation of the conflict and equally attributes responsibility for the violent turn of Algerian politics.

From the very beginning of the conflict, “the Algerian government invoke[d] the legitimacy of the struggle against terrorism to erase all the political aspects on the crisis in Algeria” [6] and fought the insurgents in the name of defending the values of democracy, secularism, and enlightenment. [7] However, upon closer inspection, it became clear that the generals charged with derailing the democratic process and fighting the insurgents mostly acted to achieve personal political survival and material privileges. [8] This does not mean that genuine concerns about the FIS were not widespread, particularly among the secular and liberal sectors of civil society. In fact, many of its most prominent representatives supported the Army's crackdown. This should not however obscure the fact that halting the process of democratisation served also the material benefits of many within the ruling elites.

It is interesting to note that the claim of fighting terrorism in the name of democratic and secular values handsomely paid off for those promoting such a policy. The international community not only turned a blind eye on the abuses of the security forces, but actively supported the regime and its efforts to stamp out the insurgency and fully eliminate Islamism from Algeria. [9]

From this brief analysis of the reasons behind the explosion of violence in Algeria, it emerges that it would be mistaken to see it simply as the product of an inevitable clash of values between liberal democracy and religious fundamentalism. This was however precisely the interpretation which was privileged outside Algeria. This framework of interpretation of Islamist violence found renewed validity after September 11th when the Algerian government claimed that the United States was now facing the same enemy that Algeria had been fighting with since 1992.

The External Effects of the Algerian War

As mentioned above, the Algerian civil war had a profound impact on the international community. The neighbouring Arab states immediately took steps to ensure that such a scenario would not occur in their countries. Some rulers such as Bin Ali in Tunisia decided that the process of democratic transformation that he had initiated should be immediately reversed as it might benefit the Islamists. He jailed or exiled the cadres of the Islamist party while smashing its social and political networks. In Morocco, the King introduced some democratic reforms, ensuring the co-optation of sections of political Islam while outlawing its more radical elements. In Jordan, the monarch marginalised the Islamic Action Front politically, but did not threaten its existence. Other Arab countries dealt with their own Islamists adopting one or all of the above methods according to local circumstances.

Western countries, grateful for the Algerian Army's intervention, decided that political Islam did indeed represent a significant threat to their interests in the region and supported whatever measures the local ruling elites adopted to deal with Islamist parties. Accordingly, very few concluded that the democratic process in Algeria should in fact have been allowed to take its course. While it is impossible to say that civil war would have been avoided if the FIS had been permitted to win the second round of elections, form a government, and run the country; there were strong indications that ordinary FIS members and voters would have not joined armed groups if their party of choice had been in power.

What emerges from the analysis of political violence in Algeria is that this was the outcome of a rational decision-making process on the part of many disillusioned citizens. The jihadist ideology was not particularly popular in Algeria at the time. Indeed, the main ideological current within the FIS was "Algerianist", which proposed a specific Algerian Islamism imbued with democratic notions as the solution to the country's problems. It was the denial of political opportunity that led to the choice of violence among Islamists. While this does not in any way excuse the ensuing brutality of the insurgency, it should be recognised that the decision to claim political rights through violence was both logical and rational.

This interpretative framework is analytically beneficial because it allows one to examine Islamist parties and Islamist voters as all other political parties are within the comparative politics literature. Thus, it should be assumed that Islamists make rational choices about their behaviour in light of the structure of incentives they are presented with. When this opportunity structure changes, they shift and adapt to it. Faced with an uncompromising regime that had just "robbed" it of a legitimate electoral victory, and suffering from the heavy handed repression of the security forces, it is of no surprise that the armed struggle became the only viable option for the FIS and its militants.

The Algerian Experience: Lessons for Today

There a number of points emerging from an alternative reading of the "Algerian scenario." First of all, it should be noted that Islamist political violence certainly feeds off a violent and uncompromising jihadist ideology, but the Algerian case demonstrates quite clearly that political circumstances matter a great deal in leading ordinary citizens to choose and support violence. The international community, intent on promoting democracy in the region, has focused on a number of different aspects ranging from constitutional reforms to changes in the human rights legislation to strengthening civil society activism. [10] Although all these are positive objectives, allowing citizens to choose their rulers should be the priority for all those who are genuinely interested in promoting democracy. While democratic governance does not eliminate in itself acts of terrorism or ensure against more widespread political violence, it is the first necessary step to legitimise the political system. [11] Those who would then oppose it through violence could be truly termed "terrorists". Islamist parties should be allowed to compete in free and fair elections and allowed to govern if citizens decide so.

A second point related once again to the importance of the political system in place is that when examining

how violence breaks out, it is crucial to look at the institutional setting in place and how it affects and constrains the Islamist movements. With the exception of a few committed jihadists, violence and terrorism are not the default options of Islamists. While all Islamists can be considered “radical” because their political programme entails the complete transformation of the social, economic, and political relationships in the societies they operate in, very few would pursue their political objectives through violence. Political radicalism does not necessarily have to take violent forms and the vast majority of Islamist movements thrive because of their charitable activism and political participation.

Finally, it is important to understand the reasons for the surge of Islamism and how it can shift from peaceful to violent. In Algeria, poverty, lack of employment prospects, and a feeling of humiliation *vis à vis* the powers that be all contributed to the growth and appeal of the FIS, which promised to rid the country of corruption, reinstate economic benefits for the masses, and provide an alternative to the current social relationships based on patronage. In addition, the FIS promised a more radical and confrontational foreign policy that would upset the major powers on the international scene. When the opportunity to see these electoral promises implemented was taken away, the internal dynamics of Algerian Islamism changed, moving away from political participation and towards armed struggle.

The ‘Swamp’ of Islamism

In the end the Algerian regime was able to deal with the challenge of the insurgency and effectively put an end to the threat to its stability by 1997. However, it has failed to deal with the very causes of the rise of Islamism such as poverty, corruption and authoritarianism. This does not bode well for the future of Algeria and for the other Arab countries.

Algeria, at least superficially, is today a very different country from the one that the October 1988 riots shook so strongly. The Algerian economy has changed considerably and the country has fully embraced the neo-liberal economic agenda jettisoning its socialist past. At the political level, the one-party rule does not exist any longer and it has been replaced with formal political pluralism and regular multi-party and multi-candidate elections. At international level, Algeria is now a privileged partner of both the United States and the European Union whereas twenty years ago it was a close ally of the Soviet Union and a leading member of the non-aligned movement, promoting anti-imperialism and “third-worldism”.

Although the change is evident, it is not as profound as may seem. While the economy has formally embraced free-market capitalism, this is built on the distribution of oil and gas rents through networks of patronage. The wealth generated from high rents has largely failed to trickle down and has fallen instead into the hands of an entrepreneurial class intimately linked to the regime. Thus, despite generational changes, the mechanisms for the accumulation of wealth still are still linked to networks of clientelism. [12] In addition, the indicators for inflation and unemployment are still high and opportunities limited even for university graduates. The political system, despite the formal trappings of democracy, is authoritarian and dominated by generals who act behind the scenes to shape the political system to suite their needs. [13] The prominent political role of the intelligence and security services empties of any significance the role of elected officials. While the Algerian regime might have renounced anti-imperialism, siding with the United States and the European Union on a number of important international issues contrasts sharply with the rising anti-American sentiment in the country.

All this points to the lack of legitimacy that the current ruling elites enjoy and indicates that there is a vast gulf between the appearance of Algeria as a stable semi-democracy with a functioning market economy and the reality. It is because of this gulf that Islamism still exercises considerable appeal for ordinary citizens. While it has been driven largely underground, it still represents a significant challenge and once the legacy of the 1990s civil war will have faded, [14] it is likely to come back with a vengeance. The creation of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb might just be the first sign.

Conclusion

Democracy is not the panacea to political violence that many argue it is. Democracy does not ensure against terrorism and does not protect the country from domestic violent challenges. Thus, it would be mistaken to argue that the arrival of democracy in Algeria and elsewhere in the Arab world would lead to the immediate dismantling of terrorist networks. Moreover, the case is strengthened if we take into account that much of the recent political violence seems to be linked to international factors rather than to domestic ones.

All this however should not stop one from arguing that the instauration of democracy is the necessary first step to building a legitimate domestic political order that in the long run will ensure the marginalisation of violent groups. Twenty years ago, Algeria attempted to democratise and it failed to consolidate its progress because an Islamist party was going to be the main beneficiary of regime change. Secular sectors of the domestic polity and the international community sanctioned a “democracy-saving” military coup. The outcome of the Army's intervention has been a brutal civil war and a legacy of authoritarian rule where the socio-economic and cultural situation that gave rise to the FIS is still very much alive.

Algeria, despite its high oil rents and its international role, is not a stable country and domestic discontent can be easily exploited by violent groups. As Roberts [15] argues, a “demilitarisation of the regime” is necessary and while a new process of genuine democratisation might indeed once again reward a radical Islamist party, living with it this time would be the best option. The alternative is that the memory of the 1990s civil war will fade and that a new generation will decide again that violence against the regime and society is more rational than living life as a marginal member of the polity with no political voice and no socio-economic benefits.

Francesco Cavatorta is a lecturer in International Relations and Middle East politics at the School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Dublin, Ireland.

NOTES:

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- [5] M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel; repression and resistance in the Islamic world*, Boulder, Lynn Rienner, 2003
- [6] M. Benchikh, *Algérie: Un pouvoir politique militarisé*, Paris, Ed. L'Harmattan, 2003.
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