

Abstract

This paper, from an Algerian political activist, discusses the place of secularism in Algeria's unstable post-independence political history. It argues that secularism is not alien to Algerian society and is indeed a precondition for democracy.

Secularism as a precondition for democracy is an ambitious theme, and a challenge at a time when the resurgence of politics in religion is becoming a reality throughout the world. In the southern Mediterranean the issue presents a difficult but exhilarating challenge. Algeria has narrowly escaped a theocratic state, but without managing to settle the question of democracy. The patching up of the regime, which has led to its continuation, may be ascribed to several causes. It is interesting, however, to see the instrumentalization and complicity that link the government and Muslim fundamentalism in their efforts to reject democracy and ward off secularism. How did it come to this? The causes, which are both old and recent, are linked to colonialism, to the construction of the national State and to the kind of State this is.

Secularism and the national movement

The Great Revolution undoubtedly had a significant influence on all Algeria's politicians, including Messali Hadj (a radical leader) and Ferhat Abbas (moderate leader). These two figures, who dominated Algerian nationalism for a quarter of a century, were fascinated by the ideals of 1789. Both say so in their memoirs.¹ They fought in the name of these values to achieve collective emancipation on behalf of the colonized. Yet neither the founding of the Republic, with its legal and political discrimination, nor the importance of religion in indigenous society - where it acted as a marker of identity - prompted these two leaders to support secularism. To sum up, we might say that the Republic is the vehicle for the struggle while Islam remains the 'spiritual homeland'.

This position dominated the national movement from its inception until a daring

attempt was made at the Soummam Congress in August 1956 (FLN's first charter), to define what the future national state would be like. It was stated explicitly that, "it is not a question of restoring a monarchy or theocracy, which now belong in the past. It will be a democratic, social state." This openly secular position - put forward by Abane Ramdane, a leading figure socialized under the Third Republic, and the brains behind the Congress - was gradually weakened after independence.

The first period - great potential wasted

The era of national construction, which began in 1962, was inaugurated by a coup d'état by the frontier army to seize power from the legal authority, the GPRA (Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic). Until the advent of multi-partyism in February 1989, power was legitimized by the granting of charters and the holding of plebiscites on the basis of a negation of public freedoms accompanied by open repression. At the ideological level, although secularized options (Arabism and socialism) were introduced, all the constitutions of that period (three in total) proclaim, in Article 2: "Islam is the State religion."

So blurred was the distinction between the Arabo-socialist option and Islam that the term 'specific socialism' was used, to stress firmly that there was no place for secularism. During the reign of Ben Bella (1962-65), the only authorized association - apart from the mass organizations attached to the single party - was an Islamist one, el-Qiyam (Values). After the first president had been ousted by a putsch, the distinction was not clear. Houari Boumedienne (1965-78) dissolved el-Qiyam but arranged for a rapprochement with the Ulema (religious scholars), whom he included in his various governments, and from 1968 he speeded up the process of Arabization.

Whole areas in ideological sectors (education and justice) were handed over to Arabists close to Muslim fundamentalism. Although the rhetoric was progressive, nervousness about secularism showed through in the inability of the leaders of the time to endow the country with a family code. The reform of personal status laws introduced by Bourguiba in Tunisia was not something that was going to happen in Algeria. The issue was settled in a reactionary manner in 1984, when the single party's National Assembly (APN) voted for the most retrogressive family code in the Arab/Islamic world after that of Saudi Arabia. For ten years, until the upsurge of pluralism, the reign of Chadli Bendjedid (1979) was marked by both a slight political thaw and a shift towards conservatism at the societal level.

The Arabization generation began to appear on the political and economic scenes. It demanded a shift away from 'Islamic secularism' (*la laïcité islamique*), to quote the title of a work by Henri Sanson, who has made a useful analysis of this aspect of the period. The machinations of the Islamists began to become visible in public. Their influence could be seen symbolically when Algerian women began to wear the veil again, in the 1980s. During this period, the convergence between the state authorities and 'non-institutional' Muslim fundamentalism was established concretely for the first time since independence. At the political level, the Islamists were not satisfied with this marked change of course. They were aiming for power. They wanted power in its entirety.

What can be said about this first period of post-independence history? It is tempting to state curtly that the conclusion is inescapable: a lack of secularism goes hand in hand with authoritarianism and dictatorship. Is there a

relationship of cause and effect? The reality, as it is experienced in real life, and even as it is understood, is far more complex. One thing is certain: large numbers of Algeria's political personnel have been trained in, and for, the kind of modernity that is synonymous with individual autonomy. With determination, they could have gone down the road of downright secularization. We must not forget, moreover, that the concept of secularism is virtually peculiar to France, or that, taking the historical circumstances into account, opponents of this option award themselves patriotic credentials very cheaply. The defeat of the Tizi-Ouzou Group - a grouping of some of the *maquis* from within the FLN's Federation of France, aligned behind the GPRA - seriously undermined what chances this philosophy had. Without straying into the realm of fiction, all the elements for a potential Algerian-style Kemalism were there on independence, more than they had been for its historical promoter in his own time and in his own country, Turkey. Ultimately (and looking at the question posed here from exactly the opposite angle), I would hazard as an initial conclusion that the potential for secularism contained in the national liberation plan was suppressed by the lack of democracy at that time.

The second period - open calls for secularism

The second historical period began in February 1989 with a multi-party system. Democracy got in by the back door. True, from 1980 onwards the hegemony of the single party had been openly contested by Berberists invoking democracy and secularism, and Islamists demanding a theocratic state. In the end, the drastic collapse of oil prices in 1986 put paid to the FLN's political monopoly in October 1988.

Of these two groups which were the most active when it came to challenge, it was the democrats who suffered most from the lack of public freedoms. Unlike the Islamists, who had mosques as sanctuaries from which to launch propaganda, the democrats were pursued every where. The lack of ideological and constitutional clarity had given rise to a series of political fictions that were to end up strengthening democracy's worst enemies: the Islamists. In the first elections (local elections in June 1990, parliamentary ones in December 1991), the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) emerged with a majority throughout the country, Kabylia being the notable exception. There then began an extremely dangerous period, whose price in human lives was high: almost 100,000 deaths in ten years. The army burst brutally onto the scene, halting the electoral process between the two rounds of parliamentary elections, but it did not end the debate about the good and ill effects produced by this interruption. In its immediate aftermath, the army's action accentuated the differences between the two main democratic political formations, the FFS (Front des forces socialistes - the Socialist Front) and the RCD (Parti du rassemblement pour la culture et la démocratie - Alliance for Culture and Democracy). Referring back to the original message of November 1954, these two parties appealed for secularism: the FFS tried to forge a new concept by talking about the 'civil state' and the separation of the political and religious spheres, while the RCD openly called for secularism with the separation of state and religion.

For this latter formation, secularism was not foreign to Algeria when our traditional reference-points were examined. And in fact, in the village assemblies that dominated rural life, especially in Kabylia, there was indeed a clear separation between the spiritual and

political authorities. This is the experience we need to bring back into fashion and modernize. And if it does tally with the French concept, it is access to universality that needs to be not just accepted, but encouraged. For the first time in Algeria there are explicit calls for secularism as such.

A compromise between conservatism and fundamentalism

The way in which events have flared up since the electoral process was stopped have made it impossible to address such an emotionally and symbolically charged issue calmly. In all the havoc, which nearly brought down the foundations of the national state, secular intellectuals were targeted by terrorists. Kidnapped women were booty for emirs. Among those in power, the same cycle of mistakes started again. The new legitimization process, begun in 1995 with the first pluralist presidential election, was marred by electoral fraud even though, despite threats from Islamists, there was significant public participation. An identical fate awaited the whole process that was to come.

The legacy of what had gone before, combined with the preservation of power at any cost, was to give rise to a huge paradox: although Muslim fundamentalism had been defeated militarily thanks to the mobilization of society, politically it had not yet had its last word, thanks to the attitudes of the authorities. The recent referendum on "the charter for peace and national reconciliation", which guarantees impunity for terrorists and, in a subtle simulation, an amnesty for soldiers, is an additional indicator of this compromise between conservatism and fundamentalism which, in the end, advances the cause of social Islam. Unfortunately, this vast multiple hoax - as seen from the ethical, political,

ideological and even electoral points of view - has been hailed by the French foreign ministry as a "democratic consultation."

In conclusion I would say that, despite appearances, there is within Algerian society an immense democratic and secular potential which asks nothing more than to be allowed to emerge further. The idea of secularism is still new. It is not exhausted. While the idea is being manipulated here and there to set up authoritarian regimes, it nonetheless remains the guarantee of a flourishing democracy. The road ahead is a long and difficult one. It begins with school, which nurtures citizens. That is why we have chosen the symbolic acronym RCD, with 'culture' in the middle. We are convinced that Enlightenment is achieved through education and training, but also through a renewal of Islam involving society as a whole and theologians in particular. We in the South do not lack courage: what is lacking for us is interest from the North. Do not be timid when faced with fundamentalism - with fundamentalisms - wherever they may be. Ultimately, it is the idea of secularism that guarantees a balance between public and private life, a separation that is healthy for social and political harmony. And Algeria badly needs it in order to take a decisive, definitive step into modernity.

Endnotes

¹ Mohamed Boudiaf also identified with the ideas of the French Revolution of 1789 (memo by Simon Blumental).