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Algeria

The road from Sidi Bouzid to Algiers

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Straight from a visit to revolutionary Tunisia next door, I returned to Algiers a month after observing the first marches organized here by the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD) in mid-February. As the season turns meteorologically, I wanted to see if the North African spring is on its way here politically as well. The series of protests staged over the weekend suggested just such a possibility, but also that the road may be long and difficult.

On Saturday March 19, a group of about a hundred stalwart demonstrators stood on the Place de 1er Mai (First of May Square), at the now weekly gathering called by one section of the recently bifurcated CNCD. They included activists from opposition political parties, women's rights advocates, and people who were just plain fed up with their lot. This small but resolute troop was surrounded (and vastly outnumbered) by policemen in blue jumpsuits who pushed them around, and attempted to make them simply go away. At one point these cops encircled a small group of women, including a 62 year old wearing a long robe who says she recently lost her housing, and forced them out of the square altogether. Their grievances will be much less easy to dislodge.

I am sorry to see fewer people demonstrating now than in February, and ask an expert on the protests, the journalist Madjid Makedhi [\[1\]](#), who has covered many of them for the El Watan newspaper, why this is the case. He says the diminished numbers are entirely understandable in light of the massive security presence that has been mobilized to counter the marches. There is even a helicopter overhead. And, as if to underscore his explanation, as we talk he is forced to move from place to place by policemen, all the while explaining that he is a journalist. According to Makedhi,

'Algerians have been separated from politics by these security policies of the government. Today ordinary Algerians can only think about their daily lives, about taking care of their children, and trying to have enough money to satisfy the needs of their families.' But he is quick to point out that, "the fact that people are trying to live a normal life does not mean that they refuse change. It is not that they are against these efforts, it is that the government has installed fear in Algeria.'

Still, the activists refuse to give up.

Cherifa Kheddar, the prominent women's rights advocate I saw arrested on Feb. 12 [\[2\]](#), has been at every single Saturday protest since then. She was in the First of May Square again on March 19 with her sign calling for the abolition of the gender-discriminatory family code, and carrying a bag full of similar placards for others. However, the authorities ripped them all up. Finding herself empty-handed, she then raised her hand in the victory sign, and asked,

'Are you going to try to take my fingers away from me now?'

Why were they still here? Yacine Tegua, from the leftwing opposition party known as the Mouvement Démocratique et Social (MDS), explained to a group of journalists:

'We are sick of seeing young people having no prospect but to kill themselves. Today, we have workers who are threatening to commit collective suicide. We can either get together and express ourselves democratically and develop collective solutions, or we can leave people facing a wall, facing death.'

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His concern took me back 48 hours to my visit to Sidi Bouzid, the town about three hours south of Tunis that gave birth to the Tunisian revolution [3]. This remote city with its bustling main street and omnipresent trilingual revolutionary graffiti (“Stand up for your rights.” “Stay strong, Tunisia. The world is proud of you.”) was the setting for the desperate catalytic act of Mohamed Bouazizi [4].

Bouazizi was the – now-legendary – unemployed man who set himself on fire in front of the provincial headquarters when the produce he sold to support his family was confiscated and he was slapped by an official. He died on January 4, and thereby launched a now truly transnational revolutionary moment. A young man in Bouazizi’s neighborhood tells me he not only poured gasoline all over himself, but drank it before setting himself alight. Looking at the terrible pictures of the 26-year-old completely bandaged in hospital, you can only shudder to think how much he might have suffered. When I visit Sidi Bouzid, Mohamed Bouazizi’s picture adorns the public square downtown. And it is right here that I find (left) other young people on March 17 – three months to the day of the now world-famous self-immolation – with desperate eyes and urgent appeals, seemingly an entire generation of Bouazizis, possessing diplomas that have still not translated into jobs, on hunger strike since March 14 in a tent.

These same young people had started the Tunisian revolution when they took to the streets in December after the suicide, but are still waiting for that same revolution to concretely improve their own lives. They still call for “bread, freedom and dignity.” (“el khobz, el houria wa’l karama”) Importantly, the revolution does mean that they can now express their agony freely, and are allowed to remain here in the public square. Nevertheless, many of them told me:

‘I am ready to die.’

Will governments in North Africa – and beyond – save this generation of would-be Bouazizis?

Unfortunately, regional self-immolation did not begin in December 2010. In both Tunisia and Algeria, I am told that people have been setting themselves on fire in protest for the last two years [5]. Mohamed Bouazizi, however tragic, brave and fateful his action, was not the first and certainly not the last...

Just three days after my trip to Sidi Bouzid, on Sunday March 20, I spend the day in Algiers at a protest (right) of teachers and the new National Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed. About 600 protestors lined both sides of the street near the seat of the Presidency for hours, singing, chanting slogans (“hukuma degage” or “government out,” borrowed from Tunisia; al hukuma dar al ajaza, “the government is an old folks home”; “al shaab yourid iskat el chomage,” a bilingual rendering of “the people want to bring down unemployment”; and still other slogans calling on the national and international press to broadcast their demands). They sing “miyat wa khamsa wa khamseen milliards” (“155 billion”) [6], the song written by Amazigh Kateb about the foreign exchange reserves Algeria has from selling its natural gas. As the blogger Amine Menadi from Collectif Algerie Pacifique told me:

‘This country is rich but its people are poor.’

Everyone has demands today. The demonstrating teachers want better working conditions. The protesting jobless want decent jobs. On the other side of the street, waving their Algerian passports, stood a group of now unemployed workers who fled Libya during the current conflict and want to be assisted by the state. More than anything, they all want to be heard. The members of the National Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed were supposed to gather at the iconic Martyrs Square [7]. However, when I arrived there this morning I found it entirely shut down by policemen, and learned by phone that in the face of this blockade, they decided to join the teachers up the hill in the Golfe region of Algiers.

At the new location, there were as many policemen in riot gear as there were demonstrators. They lined the street in

front of the protestors. (bottom photo) I wonder what the young policemen must be thinking as they stand in the street all day with their youthful counterparts. Fadia Babou, a serious 24 year-old unemployed woman in a corduroy jacket who used to work for a radio station, tells me:

'Really, the young policemen are living in the same situation we are.'

In recent weeks, there have been multiplying manifestations of discord – communal guards marching, wounded veterans sitting in, doctors on strike, community meetings demanding change. Many more are planned. One of the young teachers tells me the problem is that each sector is demonstrating separately and there is currently no structure available to bring them all together. He is not hopeful about this as he says all the political parties are discredited and no single forum appeals to everyone. Notably, both the teachers and the unemployed have come from around the country to be here. Some have travelled over night by bus from Mostaganem, a seven-hour journey. I interview one of them, Dalila Touati (left), a young woman with long blond hair and a degree in physics, who was arrested this past Wednesday March 16 for distributing flyers calling on people to attend this very demonstration, an act which she says was considered tantamount to inciting revolt [8]. She spent 24 hours in custody, was repeatedly questioned by police, and is supposed to appear in court on March 26. Dalila is moved to tears as she tells me she is not political and simply wants decent work for everyone. Her words take me back to the tent of simmering youth in central Sidi Bouzid, when she pleads that young people not have to kill themselves but instead be given the possibility to build a future.

Standing next to her, a 28 year- old man also from Mostaganem says,

'We thank the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions for the fact that there is no police violence here today. The authorities know this situation could explode anytime, and might just do so if a cop touches a demonstrator.'

But he also notes that only one woman came with the group of ten present today from Mostaganem because they were frightened by Dalila Touati's arrest. He says that everyone will go to her court appearance. I hope he is right. Her unassuming bravery merits widespread solidarity. Later in the day, I am told that some of these protestors are planning to spend the night on the sidewalk, refusing to give up the fight. They have taken the lyrics of Bob Marley, via the message of the graffiti in Sidi Bouzid, to "stand up for your rights" seriously [9]. However, Algeria's road ahead may be quite different than that of Tunisia or Egypt. The lingering nightmares of the 1990s, when some 200,000 died in a terrible civil war with the fundamentalist armed groups, are partly responsible for this. According to this week's *Jeune Afrique*, the distinction is also partially due to the fact that much more freedom of expression is possible here than in Ben Ali's Tunisia and this provides something of a pressure valve [10]. The possible impact of the nearby conflict in Libya is a wild card. And Algeria possesses the resources to buy off sectors of the society, for a while at least.

However, one of the biggest obstacles may be a lack of popular belief in the possibility of change.

On March 19, I attended a discussion at the Chihab bookstore of a recent work about Ali Boumendjel, an important figure in Algeria's independence movement . Boumendjel, a lawyer, died in French custody in 1957 after 43 days of torture. Author Malika Rahal says that generation of activists was able to make the sacrifices they did because of their conviction that another future, beyond colonialism, was possible. Today, notwithstanding recent events in neighboring countries, the belief in the real possibility of an alternative future is shaky.

I interview Boumendjel's niece, the distinguished professor of medicine and women's rights activist Fadila Chitour [11]. At the Feb. 12 demonstration in Algiers, she was thrown to the ground and trampled during a police charge. Today she explains to me that many Algerians suffer from what she calls wounded memories, from the sense that so many

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deaths in the country since independence – in the protests of October 1988, in the Berber spring of 2001, in the terrible 1990s – have been in vain. Hence, there is a pervasive feeling that making sacrifices now will not change anything. This profound disillusionment with politics, which echoes Makedhi's assessment, makes rallying the population to protest much more difficult than elsewhere. Dr. Chitour is, however, persuaded that change will come to Algeria. She asserts:

'It is ineluctable.'

The optimism expressed by some at this last set of protests – by a brightly smiling young teacher in hijab, by those who traveled over night at a high cost relative to their means to attend – bears witness to this. However, the big question for Chitour is not whether change will come or when, but how:

'Will it be by peaceful means or not?'

She says that Algerians are terrorized by the idea that blood could flow in the streets again. And so, she and the other members of the CNCD will keep organizing their peaceful protests every Saturday trying to make sure that grievances are channeled non-violently. Meanwhile, the Committee of the Unemployed will meet soon to assess its next move as well. My fervent hope is that the leaders of Algeria will heed the calls of the peaceful protestors, while that is possible. This will require amongst other things responsiveness to the youth, unity in the opposition and a seizing by all of this "moment of grace" as the Tunisian human rights activist Alya Chamari described this spring across North Africa.

Is there a road that leads from Sidi Bouzid to Algiers?

That remains to be seen. Still, I cannot forget what Chamari says when I ask her if there is a message for Algerians, and others, from the Tunisian revolution:

'You must never lose hope. And you must count on your youth.'

From IntLawGrrls (a short version of this post appeared in *The Guardian*).

<http://intlawgrrls.blogspot.com/201...>

[1] <http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/le...>

[2] See on ESSF: Yesterday Egypt, today Algeria

[3] <http://english.aljazeera.net/indept...>

[4] <http://english.aljazeera.net/indept...>

[5] <http://www.courrierinternational.co...>

[6] <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vBF8...>

[7] <http://forumdesdemocrates.over-blog...>

[8] <http://www.tsa-algerie.com/divers/u...>

[9] <http://www.lyricsfreak.com/b/bob+ma...>

[10] <http://www.jeunefrique.com/Article...>

[11] <http://www.mondialisation.ca/index...>