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Algeria

"It seems surrealistic to talk about human rights"

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Interview with Houssin Zahouan, general secretary of the Algerian League for Defence of Human Rights (LADDH).

Can you describe your working conditions?

Houssin Zahouan: The situation of human rights in Algeria is grave, and it could not be otherwise. It seems surrealistic to talk about human rights today in a country where the number of dead can be counted in the tens of thousands, where a state of emergency has been in existence for years, where the violence is explosive and where everything is closed off.

Nevertheless, the League for the Defence of Human Rights has not given up. The situation we face is quite difficult for the sole reason that from the beginning the government has targeted our organisation as a primary enemy, and prevented us from opening an office. Our telephones are cut off and our post office box is monitored. Add to this a boycott by the media and the vilification of our league by portraying it as a pro-Islamic organisation.

Algerians continue to die in silence and with the almost total indifference of international public opinion. Why?

For almost a dozen years, Amnesty International (AI) has been the only organisation on an international scale which took a systematic interest in Algeria. That said, the group's latest report [\[1\]](#) severely underestimates reality. Other foreign NGOs and governments, are rather indifferent. In Europe the reaction is severe if injury is done to an animal or a dog. But human rights are covered by a different set of rules when it comes to developing countries, such as Algeria, where economic and strategic interests are at stake.

In June 1994 the president of the Algerian League for Human Rights (LADH) was assassinated. Why?

In 1984, Youcef Fathallah joined me in the defence of political prisoners before the State Security Court. We became estranged when the state, having decided to create a government group to oppose the LADDH in 1987, publicised his name as becoming part of the leadership of the new league. The goal was to lure him in, to integrate him into this league precisely because he was someone who defended political prisoners.

He began to change the nature of the "official" league. But, given his profound honesty he did not understand that this was beginning to derail it from the goals that his sponsors wanted it to pursue. Toward the end of his life he decided to simply close down this LADH through a unification of the two leagues. He did not appreciate the seriousness of this undertaking.

What are the repercussions of the recent referendum which approved greater powers for the president?

The referendum signified, for those who understand, the closing of the circle begun in 1988-89. After the coup against the elections Algeria entered into an emergency situation. Up until the time when Zeroual became president, people simply waited for an end to the emergency—that is the re-establishment of a secure situation and a normal life. Needless to say, their expectations have not been met.

The goal of Zeroual today is to secure his position by this referendum which shows that things are coming to a

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conclusion and we have entered into the final phase. This final phase represents the closing off of Algerian political and institutional life. Even the results of the referendum are indicative. One can estimate that there was a 15-20% participation rate while the government announced that it was 75%. This shows how far a closed system can go in its falsifications.

Was the university strike launched on October 15 the start of the rebirth of the social movements?

This is neither a beginning nor an awakening. There is today a considerable social unrest in Algeria, which is ignored because it takes place in the context of a media black-out on both sides of the Mediterranean. Nevertheless, things are stymied because the leadership of the central trade union (General Union of Algerian Workers, UGTA) is completely under the control of the government, a prisoner of the "Club des pins" (a residential neighbourhood where the notables of the regime live). It does not allow this social unrest to come to a head in a co-ordinated national movement.

The strike of teachers and of the universities is a creeping strike which has lasted for weeks despite the repression and pressures. But there are other strikes which are equally important, if not more important, in whole sectors (oil, etc.). These movements continue and will continue. The situation and the tension is such that we do not know what will make everything explode.

[1] Les Algériens souffrent et meurent en silence. Amnesty International 1996.