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Beyond Islamist Extremism: Women and the Algerian Uprisings of 2019

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February 22, 2019, marked a watershed moment in Algeria's history, and a key moment in the struggle for women's rights. For the first time since its independence 57 years ago, massive protests swept the country and were still in full force seven months later. Women's involvement in these protests holds particular significance. This brief explores how women's participation has contributed to the decline in influence of the Islamist extremists in Algeria. It first documents the demise of Islamist influence from its height in the 1990s, then it shows how the current uprising in Algeria has its roots in various secular movements, including the women's movement, representing a fundamental shift in Algerian politics.

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Calling for democracy

February 22 was, in part, the culmination of decades of protest by various secular movements, which protested Islamist encroachments as well as a regime that has sought to both contain and use Islamists to its own advantage. At a time when much of the world is experiencing threats to democracy and a pullback in women's rights, Algeria appears to be pushing for change in the opposite direction. Algeria's uprising started as a protest against the candidacy of President Bouteflika, who had announced his intention to run for a fifth term in upcoming elections, and evolved into demands for the entire oligarchy governing Algeria to step down, calling for democracy, an end to corruption and the restoration of dignity. Women's participation in these protests has contributed to the decline in influence of the Islamist extremists in Algeria.

Since independence, the movement has tried to curtail the influence of Islamist extremists, particularly during the years of civil strife (1991-2002). Women activists have also sought to pass legislation advancing gender equality, and to transform a restrictive political culture. All three elements of women's activism — resistance to Islamist attacks on women, legal reform and cultural tactics — are evident in the protests. The protests are notable for the lack of a strong Islamist presence, which defined the country for so long. Since independence, the movement has tried to curtail the influence of Islamist extremists, particularly during the years of civil strife (1991-2002). Women activists have also sought to pass legislation advancing gender equality, and to transform a restrictive political culture. All three elements of women's activism — resistance to Islamist attacks on women, legal reform and cultural tactics — are evident in the protests. The protests are notable for the lack of a strong Islamist presence, which defined the country for so long.

The Demise of Political Islam

Since the 1980s, Algeria had been influenced by conservative Salafism. This is now waning. Even as Daesh's influence was on the rise, the number of fighters that joined their ranks from Algeria was minimal. Salafists themselves no longer call for

jihadism nor do they accuse others of apostasy, as was common in the 1990s. Most tend to eschew politics and are considered "quietists." It is notable, for example, that there was a relatively small turnout for the funeral of Abbassi Madani in April 2019. His Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) had dominated the country's first free elections in 1991, garnering millions of votes.

Islamist parties have been on the decline, particularly with the poor showing of the Islamist alliances in the 2012 and 2017 elections amidst charges of election tampering on the part of the ruling Front for National Liberation (FLN). The Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), whose ideology resembles that of the Muslim Brotherhood, is the largest Islamist party, but it is deeply divided as are the other Islamist parties, which are considered by many to be irrelevant and lacking in clear objectives.

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The fading influence of the Islamists was evident in the 2019 protests. Many of the Islamist demonstrations were relegated to the outskirts of Algiers, Kouba, El Harrach and Bourouba, calling for a "free and Islamic Algeria." They frequently were driven out of the larger protests. On International Women's Day, MSP president, Abderrazak Makri, was condemned by the protesters. Another Islamist leader Abdallah Djaballah, president of the Front of Justice and Development, and a party deputy wanted to participate in the 15 March demonstration, but were met with cries of "Djaballah dégage!" ("Djaballah get out!"). Moreover, protesters rejected the regime's efforts to frighten them by saying that their marches would ultimately lead to a takeover by Islamists.

The prominent and ubiquitous display of the Algerian flag in all the "Revolution of Smiles" emphasized the national dimension of the protests. In a society that had been so deeply divided, Algerians

cloaked themselves in the Algerian flag, partly as insurance and protection from the state, but most of all as an assertion of national unity. Unprecedented numbers of people from all walks of life, all ages, and all political persuasions participated in the protests. Most Islamists participated in the protests as nationals, not as Islamists.

No Democracy without Gender Equality

“No Democracy Without Gender Equality” read the placards of women demonstrators in the May 8 International Women’s Day protests and thereafter. As women’s rights activist, Wassyla Tamzali, said of the March 8 demonstrations: “This is an absolutely magnificent gift to women and feminists. One sees a synergy between the important struggles for liberation of women and for democracy. From my point of views these struggles are the same.” March 8, 2019, saw the largest outpouring of women. Women reclaimed the public space and, in effect, their citizenship, by joining the protests in a society where certain places and activities were historically the exclusive reserve of men. After years of government suppression, women (and men) lost their fear, undaunted by the riot police, their teargas, arrests, and provocations. One photo (taken by Melissa Ziad), which was widely circulated in social media in the early days of the protests, captures this moment of courage: a young woman in jeans and pink pointed shoes calmly strikes a powerful classic ballet pose in the middle of the street as protestors stop in their tracks looking on in amazement.

Since independence, the ruling party in Algeria, the National Liberation Front, has systematically eliminated all democratic opposition as it solidified its position as a one-party state. Under Bouteflika’s rule, “*le pouvoir*” (the powers that be) had consolidated their shadowy power drawing from the military, intelligence services, business interests and some Front for National Liberation (FLN) party functionaries, including Bouteflika’s brother, Saïd Bouteflika. The ruling party suffocated civil society, in spite of moments of slight opening in the late 1990s and after 2011. The Black Decade, which was a conflict primary between the Islamists extremists and the government, further crushed civil society. Apart from the Kabyle (Berber) cultural movement, women activists were among the only groups that questioned the power of the ruling party.

Culmination of Decades of Struggle

The involvement of women in the 2019 uprising is the culmination of decades of struggle on the part of women, which have taken at least three different forms: civil society mobilization for reform, direct challenges to Islamist extremist provocations, and cultural wars against personal liberty.

Civil society organizations led by women have been central in the current protests and represent a second form of secular mobilization. *Le Collectif de la société civile pour une transition démocratique* (The Civil Society Collective for a Democratic Transition) emerged as the largest network within the 2019 *hirak* or movement. It includes about thirty associations and citizens’ organizations, and a large number of them are led by women like *Mouwatana*, Tharwa Fadhma n’Soumer, SOS Disparus, Djazairouna, Wassila Network. For example, Zoubida Assoul, leader of the party Union for Change and Progress and president of the Network of Arab Women Lawyers, is the spokesperson of the non-partisan *Mouwatana* (Citizen) movement, which was formed in 2018 to oppose the fifth term of Bouteflika, call for the rule of law, democracy, and a radical break with the current regime.

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These and other such organizations were active in efforts to pressure the government around the Family Code. They were able to obtain some key constitutional reforms that gave them equality with men and greater political representation. After the 2012 elections, women held 31.6 percent of the seats and 30 percent of the cabinet after 2014, the highest rate among Arab countries. Today, four generals are women, also the highest proportion within Arab states. Women make up about one half of the judges, 44% of magistrates and 66% of justice professionals in lower courts. Algeria also made legislative gains in the areas of violence against women, electoral quotas, and nationality laws.

Although women make up almost 57% of university graduates, they constitute only 18% of total workforce. One of the March 8 protesters declared: “The urgency now is to deal with equal rights, equal pay, parity.” There is a strong sense that in spite of the gains that put Algeria ahead of many countries in the region when it comes to gender equality, Algeria still has a long way to go, given women’s aspirations.

A second form of women’s mobilization has been directly against the Islamist influence. One Algerian commentator, Hamid Zanaz explained that the slogan: “Democracy = women’s rights” meant “No to a religious state. No to applying sharia. No to Islamists’ rule and no to fundamentalist colonization.”

Many women stood up to violent extremists



Photo: OMAR-MALO on Flickr (CC BY 2.0)

during the Black Decade, (1992-2002) as they were among the first targeted by the Islamist fighters for working as teachers, running businesses, driving, not veiling, and engaging in the public sphere. During this period, Islamists and government forces clashed, leaving 200,000 dead and tens of thousands disappeared and injured. “Women mobilized, they protested. They were in the vanguard in confronting the Islamists. Indeed, they played a big role and gained the respect of everyone, including those in power,” explained one activist in an interview I conducted in Algiers. As another activist said, “We had nothing to lose, we had absolutely no other choice [other than to protest].” Women formed organizations like *Djazairouna* in Blida, which was established in 1996 by women whose families had been targets of the Islamist terrorism. The overall objective was to provide moral, psychological and legal assistance to victims of the Black Decade.

After the Black Decade, the government sought to neutralize the Islamists through repression, by monitoring the activities of religious leaders and curtailing their political engagement, and by signing a 2006 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation that granted amnesty to former fighters and promised to forgive and forget all crimes committed during the Black Decade on all sides, including the government security forces. A quid pro quo was foisted on civil society, who were told that the government would provide stability in exchange for their silence.

Many women’s organizations refused to be silenced and continued to mobilize around calls for justice and an end to impunity for those who had killed, raped and harmed people during the Black Decade.

“ Women in Algeria have a long history of protest. ”

Women victims and the families of those who disappeared during the civil conflict continue to protest and demand answers. They were often beaten by the authorities. They were also arrested because they refuse to seek authorization for their protests on the principle that what they are doing is legitimate, and as such they should not require authorization. For example, activists from the *Tharwa Fadhma N’Soumer* and *Djazairouna* associations were arrested while protesting near the Grande Poste in Algiers on March 8, International Women’s Day, in 2017 to denounce inequality in Algerian society and honor the women who died during the Black Decade of Algeria’s 1990’s civil war.

Years of conservative Islamist threats left an indelible imprint on Algerian culture. A third form of mobilization has involved quotidian cultural wars against Islamist extremist influences. The use of humor on the protest placards was distinctly Algerian and secular, although many of the messages

referenced global memes. These included, for example, the women who held up placards that read “No Country for Old Men” or “March like a girl.” Another woman held up a sign with a tooth in the shape of Bouteflika, which read “*Ni couronne, ni bridge, l’Extraction*”(Neither crown, nor bridge, Extraction). Yet another woman held up a conjugation chart: “*Je marche, tu marches, il marche, nous marchons, vous marchez, ils partent.*” (I walk, you walk, he walks, we walk, you walk, they leave). Another woman held a plaque that read: “*shaeb yurid: ctrl alt suppr*” (“the people want: control alt remove,” referring to the names of the delete commands on a computer).

In recent years, some women’s struggles have included micro-protests against veiling and against Islamist efforts to monitor the length of women’s skirts. One woman in Algiers was verbally assaulted and beaten by a man for jogging along the beach in 2018. When she went to the police to complain, they asked why she was jogging and did nothing. She then took to social media to complain. The next day hundreds of women and men came to out to run with her in protest.

Implications of Women’s Involvement in Algeria’s Uprising

Women in Algeria have a long history of protest, and with each critical juncture in Algeria’s history they have pressed to defend their rights. The 2019 protests against an oppressive, undemocratic and corrupt government was no exception as women have been equally engaged as men. Their history of fighting Islamic extremism has helped bring the country to this post-Islamist moment, which is a remarkably nationalistic and unifying moment for the nation in stark contrast to the country’s divided past. Algeria’s neighbor, Tunisia, has democratized since its Arab Spring in 2011 and Sudan shows promises of moving beyond an impasse with its military controlled government, holding out hope for Algeria.

Algerians have been especially sensitive to international commentary on the current revolution, which they see as an internal matter. However, in the long run, civil society, including women’s organizations, will need to get back on their feet again. They are going to play a critical role in any transition, in holding a new government accountable, and in ensuring that democratic measures are adopted. Women’s rights activists have been at the forefront of fighting Islamic extremism and they have a vested interest in continuing this struggle. The struggle for women’s rights is key to keeping these forces in check. If a truth and reconciliation commission is launched, they are going to be central participants in such an initiative. And finally, the

struggle for women’s rights is important in ensuring that half the population regains its rightful place as full citizens.

Endnotes

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- 6 BBC (2019)
- 7 Kamel Bouzeboudjen, “Chansons et humour au service de la contestation en Algérie,” *Radio Canada*, 8 March 2019, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1157225/algerie-artistes-etudiants-humour-contestation-cinquieme-mandat>



The **'Women and Peacebuilding in Africa'** project looks at the cost of women's exclusion and the possibilities for their inclusion in peace talks, peacebuilding, and politics in Somalia, Algeria, northern Nigeria, South Sudan, and Sudan. The project also examines the struggle for women's rights legal reform and political representation as one important arena for stemming the tide of extremism related to violence in Africa.

The three themes that make up the project are:

- 1) Inclusion and exclusion in postconflict governance
- 2) Women activists' informal peacebuilding strategies
- 3) Women's legal rights as a site of contestation.

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