

# FIGHTING GOD, MAGHREB'S POLITICAL TURMOIL

*The successes achieved by Islamic fundamentalists in Algeria's first democratic elections are a serious threat to peace and stability throughout the region.*

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**T**HE SPECTACULAR SUCCESS OF THE Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in Algeria's first democratic elections\* last December has profound implications for the varied populations and governments of the North Africa Maghreb region, other Arab countries, and the rest of the free world. The precedent of Iran is disquieting – an unease only increased by the fact that FIS's victories were won at the ballot box, whereas in Iran, Islamists seized power by force.

Reactions to the win were immediate and intense: "Algeria's future was ruined," "freedom and human rights buried." An immense demonstration on 2 January drew more than 300,000 people into the streets "to save democracy." FIS and its sympathizers were conciliatory; "Algeria is not Iran," they said. But what is going on? Is there reason to fear these new Islamists? Are they a threat to the region and to the stability of international relations in general?

WHILE ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM HAS RECENTLY become a political and social force that cannot be ignored, the origins of the movement go back to the beginning of this century, and to Egypt. Here, theologians advocated fundamentalism as a weapon against colonial masters and as a safeguard for Arab-Muslim culture against the dangers of assimilation. Islamic political movements gradually took shape supporting embryonic Arab nationalism where it was strong, and at the same time trying to fill the political vacuum whenever nationalism failed. Even former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, who for a while was the standard-bearer of Arab unity and nationalism, had serious problems with his "muslim brothers." Nasser violently suppressed the fundamentalists and they remained a minority grouping confined to Egypt and Sudan, only heard from via occasional acts of violence.

\*The first round of voting in the legislative elections was held 26 December 1991. The fundamentalists of FIS emerged victorious, with 24.9% of the 13.3 million registered voters and 47.5% of the votes cast: very close to an absolute majority (188 seats out of 430). The second round, planned for 16 January 1992, was postponed following the resignation on 11 January of the President of the Republic, Chadli Benjedid.

Towards the middle of the 1970s, Islamism appeared in the countries of the Maghreb. First in the mosques, where the speeches of the new *imams* had become political, virulently denouncing the governments of the region and the West; then in the street, where the first of the beards and veils, or *hidjab*, began to appear. The wearing of beard and veil sprang from the desire of fundamentalists to be separate from what they judged to be an "impure" environment.

IT IS NOW CLEAR THAT IT WAS THE EXISTING regimes themselves that fostered fundamentalist movements. The moment they achieved independence, the countries of the Maghreb launched into vast development efforts centred on secularism and modernity. But at the same time, they sought to serve their own ends and advance reforms more effectively by embracing religion on behalf of the state. Furthermore, beginning in the 1960s, they played religion off against the political left in order to counteract the Marxists, by introducing religious instruction into the schools, multiplying the number of places of worship, encouraging theological teaching and promoting, to the point of excess, programmes for Arabization and Islamization.

Before long, however, the Maghreb countries were in crisis. To failed economic policies, the absence of democracy, and the monolithic nature of single party governments, were added the leaderships' corruption and poor management. The omnipresence of the state fostered a privileged class and created a welfare mentality among the population. Existing inequalities were exacerbated, unemployment rose and out-migration from rural areas led to overcrowding in urban regions – a whole population felt itself abandoned and destitute. The young felt utterly disoriented by the arrival of consumer culture and found themselves excluded from the system. With the resulting profound identity crisis, and in the absence of another motivating ideology, the return to ancestral values and to religion became for many the only recourse.

It was in this climate of widespread disaffection that fundamentalism flourished. First, in Tunisia, it profited from the secularism of the regime that had promulgated the *Code du statut personnel*, a law that abolished polygamy

and gave women equal rights with men. Enshrining as it did the emancipation of women, the law was never completely accepted either within the country, or in the wider Arab world. In fact, Tunisian authorities had to retreat before Algerian and Saudi pressure, among others, and abandon plans for more reform to the laws of succession, inheritance and adoption.

Finding their recruits from among unemployed and disenchanting youth, the fundamentalists did well for themselves denouncing Tunisia's impious, atheistic regime for being incapable of resolving society's problems, enslaved to the West, and at one with the devil. In vain, the regime tried to outdo the Islamists at their own game by broadcasting prayers on radio and television, closing bars, and instituting programmes of Islamic instruction and the like. But nothing helped; the agitation continued and the fundamentalism of the "barbus" – the beards – permeated all layers of society.

The Islamic Tendency Movement (MTI) which in 1989 took on the name *Ennahdha*, the "rebirth," in order to get around Tunisia's new election laws prohibiting open political party affiliation with religious groups, arranged a series of violent incidents at universities and in tourist centres. The response of the government oscillated between repression and rapprochement.

A SIMILAR SCENARIO UNFOLDED IN ALGERIA, where the situation was exacerbated by the socialist economic experiment, even though care had been taken to eliminate expressions such as "the class struggle" or "the abolition of private property" from public discourse. The current of fundamentalism spread to the mosques, the university, the coffee houses, and the street. While many factions sprang up, it was the Islamic Salvation Front, created in February 1989, that proved to be the most steadfast. The first to profit from the new winds of democracy that followed the 1988 riots in the capital Algiers, FIS quickly obtained legal recognition, and in 1990 carried off municipal elections brilliantly, winning mayoralty races in the large cities, including Algiers.

In Morocco the story is different. As early as 1961 the then King Mohammed V (father of