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ALGERIA: THE REVOLUTION TURNS INWARD

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A high-ranking Algerian official was recently asked if he thought the ambitious goals of the new Four Year Plan could be realized. Without hesitating, he replied: "Of course, we will achieve the objectives of the Plan even if it takes us ten years to do so!" This mixture of confident optimism tempered by realism is a common trait these days among Algerian leaders. After years of relative stagnation, the economy is beginning to move. Social and political reforms are finally under way. Official pronouncements that used to be dismissed as rhetoric are beginning to be taken seriously as statements of purpose. The Algerian "revolution" is being revived, this time with its focus on internal development. But despite the determined efforts of the leaders of the country, progress will be gradual rather than sudden. Nonetheless, progress there will be, in the economy, in the society, and even within the political system. This, at least, is what many informed Algerians now expect. In view of Algeria's turbulent past, what accounts for this optimism regarding the future?

A major reason for the current mood in Algeria is that for over five years there has been a measure of political stability. To some foreign observers, the first few years of Algerian independence when Ahmed Ben Bella was President were exciting, experimental and full of revolutionary promise. But to many Algerians these were years of confusion, demagogy and bitter internal conflict. Since Ben Bella's ouster in June 1965, political life has been unexciting, but gradually and methodically the Boumedienne regime has been consolidating its

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power, and with the self-assurance that has come with experience and a sense of security, Algeria's leaders are now turning their energies toward the vast social, economic and political problems that still face Algeria.

During the nearly three years of Ben Bella's rule there was little continuity in top governmental positions of responsibility. Ben Bella seems to have consciously sought to enhance his own influence by playing off other members of the elite against one another. In little more than two years there were two major and several minor changes of the cabinet. Most of the prestigious nationalist and revolutionary leaders moved into opposition or dropped out of political life. Throughout this chaotic period Ben Bella was forced to rely upon the army to remain in power, and in doing so he became dependent upon his Minister of Defense, Houari Boumedienne. Ben Bella was quite aware that Boumedienne might turn against him, however, and he sought to develop new bases of support among the workers and students, as well as through the establishment of popular militias. Had he remained in power much longer, there is little doubt that Ben Bella would have tried to evict Boumedienne and his followers from office. Knowing this, Boumedienne moved first, and in the course of a few hours Ben Bella, from having been President of Algeria, leader of the "Third World," and Hero of the Soviet Union, became a "non-person." Today he is rarely mentioned, is never seen, and his whereabouts are unknown. He presumably is still alive, but is kept under close surveillance. Even if he were to be freed, however, the Ben Bella mystique is gone.

Boumedienne's political style has been nearly the opposite of Ben Bella's. He rarely appears in public and seems uninterested in personal popularity. He is serious, calculating, generally cautious, but capable of decisive action. He initially seemed to play the role of mediator among the various factions that came to power with him, but more recently he has begun to exert his own authority directly. The collegial style of decision-making, which frequently resulted in no decision for lack of agreement within the elite, has been altered

in recent years to allow for more firm actions under the direction of the President.

The ruling coalition that accompanied Boumedienne to power in 1965 consisted of professional military men, technically competent ministers, prestigious ex-guerrilla leaders, and a few of Ben Bella's supposed friends. This heterogeneous group of men who had agreed to depose Ben Bella soon found that they differed on many issues concerning Algeria's future development. The first to leave the coalition, in late 1966, were a few cabinet ministers who had once been close to Ben Bella. They were rapidly replaced with well-educated, competent men with good revolutionary credentials. The problems of authority and stability were, however, still not solved.

During the early part of 1967, it became increasingly apparent that the ex-guerrilla fighters and their supporters were coming into conflict with the more pragmatic and technically oriented ministers. The Minister of Work, Zerdani, and the Chief of Staff, Zbiri, were seen to represent a group opposed to the Minister of Industry, Abdesselam, and more generally to the so-called "Oujda group" of Boumedienne's colleagues from revolutionary days -- Ahmed Kaid, Cherif Belkacem, Ahmed Medeghri and Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Despite efforts by Boumedienne to reconcile these factions, a showdown by force became inevitable. In mid-December 1967, Zbiri and his supporters led a rather pitiful attempt to overthrow the government, but the professional army men rallied to Boumedienne and succeeded in putting down the rebellion in a matter of hours. The most immediate and far-reaching result of the coup attempt was the elimination of virtually all of the ex-guerrilla leaders from positions of responsibility. Those remaining in power were either professional military men, many of whom were French trained, or technically competent ministers, plus the "Oujda group."

Since December 1967 there have been a few minor changes of personnel within the ruling elite, but most of the members of the Council of Ministers and the Council of the Revolution have now been in their current posts for at least five years. Boumedienne himself

holds the record for longevity, having been Minister of Defense since September 1962 and President since July 1965. Nearly as long-lived are Foreign Minister Bouteflika and Interior Minister Medeghri, both of whom have headed their ministries for approximately seven years. The two other members of the "Oujda group" have experienced more ups and downs. Ahmed Kaid, now "Head of the Party Apparatus," has served in a variety of positions under both Ben Bella and Boumedienne. Cherif Belkacem, who likewise has been Party head and Minister of Finance in the past, resigned from his post in the Cabinet in early 1970 because of a serious health problem.

Apart from the "Oujda group," there are ten ministers in the cabinet who have been with Boumedienne since 1965. Two others joined the cabinet in late 1966, two in early 1968, and one in 1969. Overall, the degree of continuity in top cabinet positions has been impressive.

The Council of the Revolution, composed primarily of military officers, the "Oujda group" and, initially, the ex-guerrilla leaders, has always been a somewhat mysterious body. Some of its members are not well known and its functions are obscure. Presumably it exercises ultimate authority, and the Council of Ministers is responsible to it, but it has rarely been convened in recent years. Originally, it consisted of twenty-six members, but since December 1967 it has been reduced to sixteen, only thirteen of whom have any significant voice in the affairs of state. Among its most important members -- aside from the four cabinet ministers -- are the Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense, Chabou; the Director of National Security, Draia; the head of the Gendarmerie, Bencherif; and the heads of the three main military regions of Oran, Algiers and Constantine, Colonels Bendjedid, Belhouchet and Benahmed. These latter two in particular seem to have considerable autonomy and influence in the regions under their jurisdiction.

Boumedienne's political style is rather secretive, and it is difficult to know how he has managed to keep this coalition of military leaders and civilian ministers together for so long. Several

principles have been scrupulously observed, however. Boumedienne has shown virtually no interest in reconciling himself with leaders from the past. Once someone enters the opposition or is dropped from power, it is nearly certain that he will not be brought back into the government at a later date. (This practice, incidentally, is quite different from Tunisian President Bourguiba's style.) Related to this practice has been an unwillingness to break openly with members of the "Oujda group." At various times, Medeghri, Bouteflika, Kaid, Cherif, as well as Abdesselam, have all been on the verge of leaving the government, but in each case they were persuaded to stay on. In order to retain the coherence of the present ruling group, Boumedienne has sought whenever possible to increase the "homogeneity" of the elite. A common theme running through the critiques of the Ben Bella period was that the elite was too heterogeneous, from too many diverse backgrounds. Consequently, whenever there has been the opportunity to bring new people into the elite, they have been men whose background and experiences quite closely parallel those of the current rulers. Of the four cabinet ministers who have been named since 1966 -- Ben Yahia, Khene, Mazouzi and Yaker -- most, if not all, are relatively young university graduates, former activists in the nationalist student movement, the UGEMA, with some experience in the provisional government, the GPRA, during the war for independence.

During 1968 and 1969, the Algerian government began to focus on both internal developments and foreign relations with a new seriousness of purpose. Energies that had formerly been spent on internecine quarrels were directed into more constructive channels, and, as the regime began to feel increasingly secure, initiatives were taken in several fields. Two priorities seemed to stand out in the thinking of Algerian officials. First, there was widespread recognition of the need for economic development and social change. It was acknowledged, however, that there were dangers involved in moving too rapidly on either front. Fortunately, revenues from oil production made it possible to take the time needed to plan the

orderly industrialization of the country. Priority was given to the creation of heavy industries, in the hope that the overall benefits to the economy from industrialization would compensate for the fact that the serious problem of unemployment would only gradually be alleviated by concentration on heavy industry. Likewise, it was hoped that the agricultural sector could at least maintain itself during the initial period of industrialization. In pursuing this strategy, Algerian leaders were clearly hoping that potential pressures resulting from massive unemployment and a stagnant rural economy could be dealt with adequately until the time came when more resources might be devoted to these problems.

A second objective, related to the concern with potential mass dissatisfaction stemming from the regime's conscious decision to emphasize production rather than consumption, was that of increasing the legitimacy of the regime. Since modernization and industrialization were bound to create tensions and bring pressures to bear on the government, it would be easier to deal with such political problems if the ruling elite had acquired some degree of legitimacy among important sectors of society. Boumedienne had consistently argued that his government should be judged by its acts, not by its words. Programs that had been announced as early as 1965 were now approached with renewed determination to make them succeed.

An important precondition for economic and political development was the creation of a pattern of foreign relations that would permit both independence and economic benefits, while avoiding costly entanglements in issues marginal to Algeria's interests. The critical foreign ties were those linking Algeria with France, the Soviet Union, Morocco and Tunisia. Less urgent were problems involving the rest of the Arab world and relations with Western Europe and the United States.

Algeria moved rapidly to improve its rather poor standing with its immediate neighbors. Both Morocco, and to a lesser degree Tunisia, had long claimed that territory under Algerian control belonged to them. The first breakthrough came on the Moroccan front, where bitter past quarrels were apparently surpassed in a new spirit of amity and co-

operation. Just as Moroccan-Algerian relations were improved in early 1969, Tunisian-Algerian disputes were essentially settled later in the year. In addition, the Algerians played a role in patching up the long-standing Moroccan-Mauritanian conflict. With this new found unity, the Maghrebi states began to take common stands on some international issues. At the Rabat Summit Conference in December 1969, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia all strongly supported the Palestinians' right to direct their own affairs, and were joined on several issues by such unlikely allies as Saudi Arabia, thus placing Algeria in a camp generally thought to consist of the moderate Arab states.

Equally important as inter-Maghrebi cooperation was an improvement in French-Algerian ties. Algerians had long worried about the willingness of post-de Gaulle France to continue the special relationship that had existed since 1962, and in anticipation of declining French aid they had turned to the Soviet Union for support. The Soviets, despite some irritations with the Boumedienne regime in 1965, proved to be quite willing to help Algeria in both economic and military fields. By 1969, it seems, the French had become concerned by the scale of the Soviet presence in Algeria. Consequently, determined efforts were made to patch up relations between Paris and Algiers. The French went so far as to offer 28 Fouga-Magister jets to Algeria, which were gratefully accepted.

Other foreign policy decisions contributed to the objectives of obtaining both independence and economic benefits from Algeria's external relations. Despite their token military presence on the Egyptian-Israeli front, the Algerians seemed to be retreating from any major involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Algerians stressed the importance of letting the Palestinians determine their own future, but at the same time were critical of the divisions within the commando movement and the lack of a coherent political-military strategy for confronting Israel.

Relations with the United States and Europe were primarily designed to bring Algeria economic advantages. Most important was the agreement reached between Algeria and El Paso Natural Gas Company

for the annual delivery of ten billion cubic meters of liquefied natural gas to the United States for a 25-year period. Serious obstacles remained even after the initial understanding had been reached, primarily involving formal approval by the Federal Power Commission and the financing of the very substantial investments required of the Algerians. There is little doubt, however, that if legal and financial problems can be overcome, Algeria will have developed a valuable link to the American economy, and some political consequences can be anticipated.

Having achieved relative stability and having dealt with external problems, what have the Algerians achieved in terms of their goals of economic and political development? Economically, the country is beginning to move. Oil production is increasing at a steady pace, and a substantial proportion of oil revenues is being reinvested in an effort to discover new reserves. Work on the steel mill at Annaba is progressing, and production is soon to begin on a large scale. The Algerian balance of trade has been favorable in recent years, and sizable reserves of dollars and gold are available. Consequently, the Algerian dinar has become sufficiently strong so that it was unnecessary to follow the recent French lead in devaluation.

A major success has been registered in the regime's plan to reduce regional disparities in levels of development. One of the poorest parts of the country, and politically the most explosive, the Kabylia, has recently been experiencing something of an economic boom. Massive government investments have been poured into this region, and, when combined with local resources, this has succeeded in stimulating the regional economy. The political payoffs have been substantial. In the most recent elections, Kabylia was the only department in which support for government-selected candidates sharply increased in comparison to earlier elections.

As the example of Kabylia demonstrates, economic development may contribute to the acceptance of the regime. Other efforts are being made to "institutionalize" the revolution, as Boumediene is fond of saying. Institutions are being created first at the local, then regional level, and eventually new national institutions will also emerge. In February 1967, communal assembly elections were held, following the

principle of limited competition by allowing two Party-approved candidates to run for each seat. In May 1969, this same procedure was used in departmental assembly elections and it is anticipated that in 1971, elections will also be held for a national assembly.

Elections are also under way at the local level for party officials, but the importance of the F.L.N., Algeria's only legal party, has never been very great. It is still unclear whether the Party can develop an important role within the state, or whether it will primarily serve as a symbol of revolutionary continuity, while incidentally providing sinecures for the many claimants on governmental positions. A major dilemma for the Party is that if it does become strong, the state bureaucracy might lose some power, and to avoid this the bureaucrats try to ensure that the F.L.N. will remain weak.

Despite signs of progress, numerous problems remain that could darken the seemingly bright prospects for Algerian development. Unemployment is widespread, perhaps affecting as much as one-half of the male labor force. The birthrate is extremely high, which slows the pace of increase in per capita income. In addition, oil resources may be more limited than is generally believed. Likewise, present economic plans may be too ambitious for a country that lacks large numbers of trained specialists. And, finally, agriculture is in need of reform if productivity is to be increased. Each of these problems in isolation would be hard enough to solve, but Algeria does not have the luxury of facing them one at a time. They all exist now, and most demand urgent action. Clearly, the Algerians are playing for time, in the hope that expected economic growth will provide the necessary resources for coping with these difficulties later.

Lastly, a serious problem may be emerging in terms of a "generation gap." Politically conscious students and workers are now coming of age who did not directly experience the revolution. It is doubtful that they will passively accept good revolutionary credentials as sufficient reason that the men now in power should remain there for an indefinite period. This problem is accentuated by the fact that Algeria's leaders today are in their 30s and 40s,

and in normal circumstances they might expect to remain in power into their 50s and 60s. But the new generation is unlikely to be so patient, particularly since the examples of young men achieving great success in political and economic life are widespread. Consequently, the regime will soon face the problem of having to deal with demands for political participation on the part of the younger generation. If the political system is opened up, stability might be jeopardized. But if the system remains closed, stability could become synonymous with stagnation, and in such a situation all bets about Algeria's potential for rapid development would be off. Difficult political as well as economic choices will face Algerian leaders as they seek to achieve the ambitious goals they have set for themselves.