

10 years after  
the October  
1988 riots

Algeria  
TASSADIT YACINE

The legislative elections of June 1997 have enabled an apparently new political map to be drawn up. From these elections emerged a coalition government composed of ministers representing the RND, the FLN and the MSP (Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix [Movement of Society for Peace], formerly Hamas, the moderate Islamic political tendency described in more detail below). These three parties constitute the current majority in the Assembly – a majority which gives President Zeroual a degree of room to manoeuvre.

For its part, the parliamentary opposition is made up of parties occupying about a hundred seats. Some of these parties are very old; others have appeared more recently. The former are characterized by the charisma of their leaders, the leaders of the national movement. Essentially, they are the FFS (Hocine Aïr Ahmed's Front des Forces Socialistes), the PRS (Mohammed Boudiaf's Parti de la Révolution Socialiste; which dissolved itself in 1979), the PCA (Parti Communiste Algérien which was later to become the PAGS) and the MDA (Ahmed Ben Bella's Mouvement pour la Démocratie en Algérie). As their acronyms suggest, the PRS and the FFS, as well as the PAGS, remain attached to the principles of the revolution in its socialist sense. Ben Bella's MDA, which arrived late in the day, advocates democracy and does not abandon the idea of modern Islam. They recruit from the older generation (those who experienced the Algerian War) but also from younger people: those who are discontented with the system. As far as the FFS, the PRS and the PAGS are concerned, they are composed of intellectuals who are looking for an ideological and political doctrine (socialism and democracy in the case of the first two parties, socialism without democracy in the case of the PAGS and democracy without socialism in the case of the MDA). In addition to a radical reform of the system that it has always advocated, the FFS has succeeded in opening itself up to other demands: the Berber

# The HAMAS Movement A Moderate Face of Algerian Islamism

culture and gender equality. Generally speaking, almost all of these parties are open to progress and the separation of politics and religion.

## Recent Opposition or Radical Islamism

It is the Islamists who are mobilizing the most and who are mainly recruiting among the working class (the FIS) and the more favoured classes (Hamas, Nahda, etc.). Roughly speaking, one could say that two main currents run across the opposition parties as a whole: radical opposition to the government such as the old FIS (dissolved). This movement has given birth to at least two armed branches (MIA and AIS), as well as the GIA. With the 'truce' of 1997, the old FIS is attempting to return to the political stage. The guerrillas, led by the GIA, are, of course, opposed to negotiation. The Islamist area is troubled by bloody disputes according to the objectives of the various factions which appear to follow different strategies. The GIA, on one side infiltrated by the security services and by groups linked to the organized crime surrounding it are also in favour of the eradication of everything which does not conform to their vision of the world. The armed wing of the FIS (the AIS) seems more politicized than

the GIA and it is no coincidence if the government undertakes negotiations with representatives of the AIS, thus 'killing two birds with one stone': it is a way of excluding the GIA and the political leaders of the old FIS.

## 'Moderate' Opposition or Islam à la Carte

This is composed of Islamists who are militating in favour of the institution of an Islamic republic but within the context of 'republican' order. Through their participation in political life, these parties are trying to reconcile religion and modernity, opposition and government and not opposition to the government, as can be seen with Hamas which, led by Mahfoud Nahnah, has become the Movement of society for civil peace – one of the important parties on the political scene.

## HAMAS (MSP)

If ambiguities, contradictions and demagoguery are the characteristics of government, then the latter is not alone in making use of these because opposition parties have recourse to the same practices. With the RCD and Euahadi, we are dealing with the 'radical', anticlerical opposition to the government while Mahfoud Nahnah's Hamas constitutes a moderate 'religious' opposition to the government since it is the only one (with Djballah's Ennahdha) to officially embody Islam. But the Islam to which Hamas lays claim is very open and modernist in appearance compared with that advocated by the old FIS.

Since Algeria gained independence, Hamas, now the MSP, has been represented on the political scene by its charismatic leader Mahfoud Nahnah. Arabist in the eastern manner, linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Sheikh is nonetheless far removed from other Islamists both in terms of image and strategy. Physically, the Sheikh resembles any other modern-day Arab or Muslim leader. Dressed in an expensive Western suit and tie, his beard neatly trimmed, he gives the impression of membership of a modernist elite which is nevertheless linked to Islam. In fact, Hamas embraces a middle class from the business world (tradesmen) but also Arabist technocrats and a scientific elite. Hamas' social base distinguishes itself diametrically from that of the FIS sphere of influence. Contrary to the FIS, which extols social justice, Hamas bases its strategy on order and thus respect for the 'prince'.

It is doubtless for this reason that Sheikh Nahnah will very soon distance himself from the radical Islamists. Is this really based on principles of tolerance and open-mindedness or political calculation? We shall never know.

Since 1988, he violently opposed Ali Benhaj whom he calls a fanatic. He was, at first, equally opposed to the formation of Islamic political parties before creating one himself. According to Nahnah's project, it is the State as a whole which must be re-Islamized. Sheikh Nahnah's project is not far removed from that of the fundamentalists of the 1940s in that it is based on the moral and religious education of society, preaching and charitable action. He shows

himself favourable to the emancipation of women and their participation in modern society, thus granting them the opportunity to improve and raise themselves but while remaining within the context of Islamic law. According to the Sheikh, women are equal to men in the context of the family code (inspired directly by the Sharia) that is currently in force and which does not recognize this equality that Sheikh Nahnah nevertheless makes his hobby horse.

Contrary to that of his rivals, Mahfoud Nahnah's strategy thus consists of compromising with the system while making token concessions. As in the struggle which opposed the radical nationalists (Messali Hadj) and the others (the moderates, UDMA and Oulémas united), the struggle here consists of claiming the paternity of Islam, thus legitimacy. Hamas is showing itself open (is it?) by making concessions with the aim of gaining the sympathy of the population which was hostile to the old FIS, in the hope of winning over the 'middle-class' strata which had little sympathy for the 'secular' democratic parties. He is encouraging commerce, private enterprise, the participation of women in development, etc. With the FIS banned, the Sheikh has all the room he needs to channel an entire 'Islamist' population that is now in disarray. His situation as a representative of Islam in a position of strength (with Djballah's Ennahdha) – in other words, aligning itself with the government – does not entirely earn him credit. On the contrary, because, in the eyes of the radical Islamists, Hamas discredits itself by siding with the government. He allows the system to use religion in the same way as it uses secularity. None of these contradictions embarrass Hamas which exists legally not because it represents Islam but because basically it poses no danger to the existing system. The last elections are there to prove that Nahnah is the man of the moment. He has succeeded in granting himself real legitimacy by capturing part of the old FIS's power base. Nahnah knows how to bend his shoulders to achieve his final objective: to wait and compromise in order to share power legally.

Perhaps recent events (following the massacres of the summer of 1997) will lead to a re-composition of the political scene, particularly in view of the civil truce initiated by the FIS and its armed wing, the AIS (Armée Islamique du Salut, or Islamic Salvation Army). If the radical Islamists return to the political scene (even under a different banner), they will unquestionably contribute to a change in circumstances and, in a way, to an intrusion on their rivals' preserves. With the civil truce, the government will have succeeded in fragmenting the Islamist movements in the hope of isolating the GIA who are continuing to practise their own bloody form of guerrilla warfare. In that it is eminently political, the game played by moderate Islamists appears from this fact to be more profitable than that of the radicals. ♦

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## ADVERTISEMENT



### Islamic Urbanism in Human History *Political Power and Social Networks*

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