

State of Siege Replaces Algerian Elections

Allan Thompson writes from Algiers

Algeria's progress towards multi-party democracy has been halted in its stride, leading to an impending civil war. The opposition Islamic party has picked up significant support from among the poor and dispossessed, because it gives them hope. The ruling party has reacted by "Lebanonising" the discontent, and by gerrymandering. Many are now questioning if the government was ever serious about multi-partyism.

look to the streets of Algiers and several other major Algerian centres in early June after the government called off elections scheduled for June 27 and declared a state of siege — effectively martial law. The sporadic street fighting that has broken out since then is what prompts many to fear that the "Lebanonisation" of Algeria has begun. "You can call it Lebanonisation or any number of fancy names, but the plain fact is, it has all the makings of civil war," one high-ranking Western diplomat in Algiers said.

And as a senior member of the FLN establishment added, the danger is that elections may never come about. "Neither side will go into elections unless they are sure they are going to win, that is the conundrum," he said. The gunfire that cracked through the air each night in the capital city, accompanied by the clatter of pots and pans clanged to protest the government-imposed curfew, seemed enough to prove that Algerians have something to worry about.

fighting finally subsided in late June, Islamists warned that the silence may only be the calm before the storm. At any rate, normality in Algiers these days is a relative concept. The tanks and heavily armed soldiers, police and gendarmes still patrol the streets. After a series of restless nights, the tanks are out in force in the morning, deployed in key locations across this sprawling city of three million, their barrels pointing directly into densely-populated neighbourhoods.

Then, after a few days of relative calm most of the tanks simply disappear and suddenly the police are much more visible than the soldiers. But on the same day that newspapers say things have returned to normal, a bearded Islamic militant reportedly carrying a weapon is shot dead on, of all places, Rue de la Liberté. "This is normal," a civil servant said about the shooting incident. The elections were supposed to be the crowning glory of Algeria's transition to a fully democratic system with dozens of political parties competing for power — a novelty in a country ruled by the

around so there would be more representatives in areas where it had the most support. Heavily populated areas, where the Islamic party has millions of supporters, would have been under-represented. A bad situation worsened, demonstrations turned to violence, either because the government wanted to make a bogey-man out of the Islamic party, or because the Islamic party wanted to force the government to cancel the elections.

"Everything we did was perfectly legal," one FIS member said in defence of the strikes and civil unrest. "This is supposed to be a democracy after all. Even a dog will bite you if you kick it." But the decision to call out the army is by no means without support among many rank and file Algerians. "I prefer it this way, with police around I feel more secure," said one man. Added another: "We were on the road to democracy and FIS came along to ruin it."

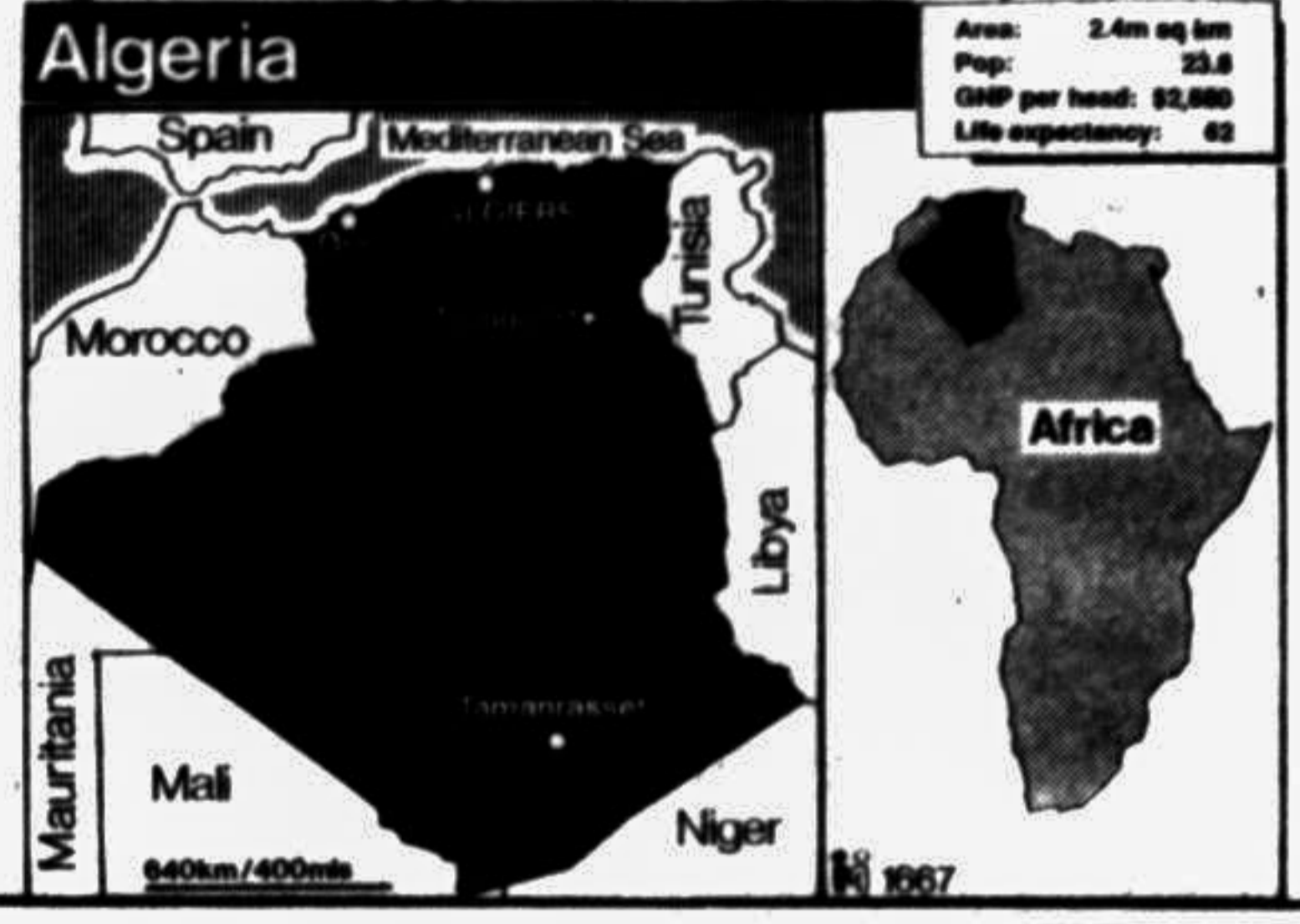
But some doubt the FLN's commitment to democracy and think it was simply paying lip service to the idea to keep a grip on power. "They deserve all the trouble they're getting now because they just had no concept of what democracy means," said a shopkeeper in the Saharan town of Benti Abbes. — GEMINI NEWS

ALLAN THOMPSON is a Canadian journalist currently working for Gemini. He is on assignment in North Africa.

ONE word strikes fear into the hearts of most Algerians these days — Lebanon, with its suggestion of civil war. Many are worried that Algeria, which was supposed to be on its way to becoming a multi-party democracy, could be slipping into civil war as a result of a power struggle between the ruling Front de Liberation National (FLN) and Islamic militants rallying around the Front Islamique de Salut (FIS).

Still others fear that President Chadli Benjedid has dangerously polarised Algerian politics in an attempt to manipulate the transition to democracy and cling to power. "The government is playing on the fear of FIS, lifting them up as a scarecrow and saying, this is the monster that could come and impose a way of life you don't want," one observer in Algiers noted. "The FLN could be saying you want democracy, have democracy, now choose between us and them."

But as a former top minister in the Algerian government noted, FIS has enormous support among the "excluded" in Algerian society — the poor, the unemployed, the homeless, the young. "People don't necessarily follow FIS because of ideology, but because it gives them hope." "It's just like Lebanon," is the refrain in the streets of the capital where government soldiers war green and red armbands that authorise them to shoot without provocation. The soldiers and the tanks



Moving Ahead, with Consensus

Within five months of elections, the fifth Jatiya Sangsad has achieved something which most people thought impossible even back in January. The fact that the Sangsad Select Committee, comprising government and opposition members of parliament, managed to come to a unanimous decision regarding a fundamental issue as the way the country would be governed from now on, is a measure of the maturity and sense of responsibility the political parties and leaders have gained during the intervening period.

There was some room for apprehension at the outset, as the Treasury Bench's 12th Amendment Bill contained provisions which were viewed as undemocratic by opposition parties. Given their past record of bickering, it was not at all unrealistic to fear that the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and the Awami League would fail to arrive at a compromise, and thus jeopardise the whole move to revert the country to its pre-1975 parliamentary form of government.

But the sceptics have been proven wrong. To their immense credit, government and opposition leaders were able to forget party politics and apply their considerable intellects to the crucial job at hand. The fact that the government side agreed to drop a number of its provisions shows a welcome attitude of accommodation and realism, while opposition success on this score points to the existence of great deal of bargaining skill and power of persuasion among their leaders. Both these factors will be crucial in the days ahead to give parliamentary democracy an effective institutional framework.

It is often said that the political system of a country is nothing but a sum total of its politicians. It is frequently pointed out that, despite not having all the requirements for the successful operation of democracy, India has managed to achieve a stable, liberal system of governance mainly because of the adherence of its politicians to democratic norms and values. The case will be no different in Bangladesh, where the process of democratisation will depend on how the political parties and leaders approach the job.

The unanimity achieved at the Select Committee deliberations is a major step in the right direction. Furthermore, the news that even those who opposed certain provisions in the 11th Amendment Bill of the government decided to aid the emergence of consensus by accepting majority opinion, is yet another healthy sign.

The question now is whether parliamentary leaders can extend this example of cooperation across the floor to other areas of national importance. With the issue of the system of government settled without much rancour, we must now move on to the pressing task of tackling major problems affecting the country, such as violence on the campus, deterioration of law and order in general, rising prices in the marketplace, crisis of confidence in the business sector, particularly among banks and industries with large debts etc. These problems are almost as crucial as the form of government. Can our honourable legislators continue the good work by cooperating on these issues as well?

Of Slumming and Squatting

As this capital city grows in area and population, so grow its slums. But not all of these growths are in step with one another. The growth of slums both in area and population occur at a far higher rate than the overall growth of the city. The city at present has a population of about 70 lakh of which some 17-lakh-plus or one-fourth is said to be slum-dwellers. The present tendencies persisting, before long more one-half of the city's population will be slum-dwellers. Dhaka's population is projected to surpass 10 million by the first decade of the new century. More than fifty lakh of them will be slum-dwellers — a gain of about 138 per cent while the population of the city as a whole will gain only by substantially less than 50 per cent.

With such a gloomy outlook for our dear capital city, time has come to apply our minds to the problem of slumming. Our best efforts have so far gone into creating ever new residential towns for the affluent — Dhanmondi, Gulshan, Banani, Baridhara, DOHS and Uttara are names of milestones in the business of raining the poor taxpayers' money on projects ensuring that the infinitesimal minority called rich live better. None of the newly-sprung baghs — Sabujbagh and Shantibagh and Chamelbagh etc have been able to attract government attention and care. Time has come to give our better thoughts to the housing and living of the majority of the city's residents.

A sample survey made of the more populous Agargaon slum in the city by the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies comes as a timely appreciation of the need to understand the phenomenon of slums. The main paper, done by Dr Pratima Pal Majumdar, throws interesting if not revealing light on the subject. Each slum complex evolves round a power structure with 'matbars' and 'mastans' at its centre. Their monthly earning reaches five-figure sums and the slum-dwellers stay there on these extortionists' mercy — mercy bought with free labour and a painful parting of hard-earned money.

But it is not all through a story of unmitigated vileness. The slum lords provide security, settle quarrels and even try to find job for the residents. About one-half of the male residents pulls — or drives — the rickshaw and as many women work as part-time domestic helps.

While we have unreserved praise for such exertions as this survey, we think something is fundamentally flawed in our discussion and understanding of housing and living below the bare-minimum line. Slums in advanced countries — and even most Third World cities epitomised by say, Bombay — do not mean thousands of clustered 'jhopries' into which you go on all fours and in which you may not even sit up. And all of them having no water and not even a pit for defecation. Slums are poor housing in poor environs — all too congested but the units have each a roof and at least four walls. The 'jhopri' has none. These do not exist elsewhere in the world. Calling these slums is confusing the whole issue at the very outset. And their residents squatters is even more unjust. They pay rent and with a kind of VAT which only a 'slum-lord' can levy. Dhaka's own sub-human 'jhopries' are wayside stations — the occupants will have either to move or perish. This unique phenomenon calls for new terms to comprehend it. Slumming and squatting are just not the right words.

Thailand

Coup Silences Rights, Green Groups

reference to the people's social and economic problems, but reflect mainly personal conflicts between military leaders and the ruling politicians," pointed out the newly formed Coordinating Committee for Democracy in Thailand.

The coup checked the growing dialogue and open public discussion among villagers, academics, government officials and the media about land rights, deforestation, and large-scale dam projects.

Public protests and gatherings on these issues had become a feature of Thai political life in the last three years. Thai green groups used to be one of the most vocal in South-east Asia. Progress had been made on

The military takeover in Thailand which ousted the democratically elected government of former Prime Minister Chaichai Choonhavan has virtually muzzled one of the most active environmental and human rights movements in South-east Asia, reports the Third World Network.

agreements to settle disputes between local people and the national government, which development workers regard as an essential part of a democratic political system. "No one in the military leadership or its appointed government has said they will take on the various agreements

worked out," said a development worker from north-east Thailand, one of the country's driest and poorest regions bordering Laos and Cambodia.

"Martial law has been an umbrella for the expansion of local powerful elites to do whatever they wanted," the aid worker added. There have been increased evictions, arrests and detentions of village and community leaders, said the worker, who like others in non-government organisations here did not want to be named.

Grassroots movements have grown in Thailand in the past decade out of the struggle for natural resources between villagers who depend on the land, forest and water for their livelihood, and business interests which want to exploit them in Thailand's rapidly industrialising economy. Despite Thailand's growing prosperity, some 60 to 70 per cent of the 55 million population still depend on agriculture for their livelihood, and will continue to do so for the next decade.

Villagers have been forced to protect their resources for themselves in the face of Thailand's disappearing land and forests. The land rights movement, inextricably linked with a community forestry movement demanding reforestation with native trees carried out by community residents, began in the mid-1980s in eight north-eastern provinces where controversies erupted. Villagers began holding rallies and seminars, petitioning officials and getting the attention of the mass media. After villagers from 25 communities were arrested, an agreement was reached with the former Prime Minister Chaichai Choonhavan and the local mili-

To the Editor...

Letters for publication in these columns should be addressed to the Editor and legibly written or typed with double space. For reasons of space, short letters are preferred, and all are subject to editing and cuts. Pseudonyms are accepted. However, all communications must bear the writer's real name, signature and address.

Affiliating University

Sir, This refers to the views expressed by Mr AKM Mokbul Islam on the above subject as published in your paper on July 19. My intention is not to comment on the issues raised by him but to bring to the notice of your readers certain facts possibly not known to many. Mr Islam commented that 'no feasibility study has yet been made for establishment of the proposed 'Affiliating Universities'. This is not fully correct. The University Grants Commission (UGC) formed a 10-member committee in November, 1985 to go into the details of desirability or otherwise of establishing Affiliating University for Universities in the country. The committee consisted of the undersigned (as chairman), Director (Planning) of the NCC (as member-secretary), Vice-Chancellors of Rajshahi and Chittagong Universities, a senior Professor of Dhaka University, noted educationist Dr. Fathuddin Mahtab, a Joint Secretary of the Ministry of Education (who, of course, did not participate in any meeting), two retired Principals of government colleges and the Director, Technical Education. The committee issued questionnaires to relevant institutions, invited opinion through advertisement in two dailies (one English and one Bengali) and submitted its findings to the chairman of the commission in December '87. The report was discussed in meeting of the full commission and accepted. It was then sent to the government (Ministry of Education) with views of the commission. A synopsis of the recommendations was published in the daily 'Sangbad' of 31 March, 1988.

However, what consideration for it (if at all) was given to the report by the government is a different question. Prof Kazi A. Latif former full-time Member, University Grants Commission

Torture on Rohingyas

Sir, It is heartening to learn that the President of the United States, George Bush, has decided to impose economic sanctions against the SLORC military regime in Burma affirming that the people of United States stand together with the Burmese people and against the brutal dictatorship that enslave them. In a related move, the government of Australia has condemned the Burmese military junta for continuously detaining opposition leader Ms Aung San Suu Kyi and called on Burma's military leaders to release her.

The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, Arakan (Burma) strongly supports and hails the decision and actions taken by the governments of United States and Australia and considers them as a step forward in fulfilling the democratic aspiration of the people of Burma.

In utter disregard and violation of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the SLORC regime has been committing most blatant and brazen suppression of democratic aspiration of the people of Arakan by letting loose a virtual reign of terror where thousands of Rohingyas have been evicted and subjected to arbitrary arrest, inhuman physical torture, killing and slave labour. On the night of 17th July alone 400 Rohingyas have been arrested from Maungdam township of Arakan state and all their valuable possessions including cash money, gold, silver and jewellery worth millions of kyats seized and confiscated.

The Rohingya Solidarity Organisation ardently appeal to the governments of the United States, Australia and other democracies upholding and peace-loving countries of the world and international organisations for their kind and immediate intervention to stop the infamous military junta

from committing further crimes against humanity in Burma.

Dr Mohammed Yunus President, Rohingya Solidarity Organisation, Arakan, Burma.

Change of telephone number

Sir, Our telephone No: 250823 has been giving us a lot of troubles. It remains dead very often. Even when there is a dial tone we cannot frequently establish contact with any other telephone. But our telephone is of much importance to us. We have to contact with different public and private offices, embassies, non-governmental organisations over the phone.

I made complaints several times but did not get any remedy. I would, therefore, request the office of the General Manager, Dhaka Telephone Region, to kindly arrange change of our telephone number from 25 group to 24 group at the earliest, so that we may get rid of the trouble now.

Mahbubuddin Chowdhury President, International Pen-Pals Club, 17, Hari Charan Roy Road, Faridabad, Dhaka.

Appeal to BTV

Sir, Elvis Presley fans all over the world look forward to the 16th August for the observance of the death anniversary of this greatest rock star of all times. In spite of many appeals in the past through the newspapers, Bangladesh Television never obliged the fans in Bangladesh. On the last 2nd of May, BTV had announced to telecast a film on Elvis Presley and we all had waited with lot of interest when without showing any reason, they cancelled it.

Through your column, I on behalf of the proposed Elvis Presley Fan Club of Bangladesh (EPPFCB) appeal to the BTV authority to telecast either a feature film starred by this great showman or any film based on his life on the occasion of his forth-coming death anniversary on 16th August, which also happens to be a Friday.

We thank BTV in advance. Adib Reza Faridbagh, Dhaka.

OPINION

BCCI — Options for Rescue

From international press reports just published it appears almost certain that Sheikh Zayed and family — majority shareholders of BCCI — are no longer interested in pulling it up from its present crisis by injecting money required for the purpose. What should, then, be the fate of BCCI in Bangladesh? Should we also do the same thing here as Bank of England has done to BCCI in UK? Liquidate BCCI Bangladesh operations? Certainly not.

Liquidation of a bank with 500 crore Taka deposits and about 100 crore foreign currency deposits can not be equated with a small domestic bank. The size of BCCI is, perhaps, bigger than any of the local private banks and certainly biggest among foreign banks operating in Bangladesh. Reportedly, BCCI used to handle about 33% of the country's foreign trade. Its financial health is widely said to be alright by Bangladeshi banking standard, its liquidity position quite comfortable and there is no cause for alarm for the depositors and the regulatory authority i.e. Bangladesh Bank.

Our country is now in the midst of an economic recession. New investments are shy; trade, commerce and industry are shrinking and unemployment is increasing. In this depressing backdrop, liquidation of BCCI in Bangladesh may turn out to be a last nail in the coffin. Liquidation of a bank of the size of BCCI will do more harm than good to our economy, business, industry and banking sector. Moreover, in a liquidation process, everybody is a loser, more or less, excepting the liquidator himself. Credit lies in revamping and reorganising a going concern such as BCC Bangladesh operation is and thereby making it stronger and not by destroying it in the name of liquidation. What op-

tions do we have to overcome the BCC dilemma?

Option 1: First option for Bangladesh Bank/Bangladesh Government should be, in my view, to try their best to get a foreign buyer — preferably a foreign institutional investor. Backed by BNP Govt's excellent relationship with the Islamic Ummah, it does not appear to be a difficult job to get a buyer, say, from Saudi Arabia (where King Fahd addressed our Prime Minister as sister during her recent visit there), Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait or Oman.

Option 2: The second option should be, in the event of the first option not being successful, to form a joint venture banking company between the Government of Bangladesh and a foreign government owned institutional investor, may be, a bank. This joint venture banking company will take over the assets and liabilities of BCCI Bangladesh.

Option 3: Third option is to create a new banking company which should be owned 50% by all the private sector banks and the other 50% shares should be under-written by the nationalised banks for the time being, to be offered for sale to the public at an opportune time later. This new banking company will take over the assets and liabilities of BCCI. Since all top bankers both from the private and the public sectors will sit on the new bank's board by virtue of their ownership of the same, I feel confident, this new bank (old BCCI) will be one of the best run banks of the country and it will set a good example of private and public sector cooperation.

Option 4: If neither of the Option 1, 2, and 3 materialises, the government will

then be left with virtually no choice than to acquire ownership of BCC operation (probably it will not cost the government any money) and merge it with a nationalised bank. This will ensure depositors' confidence and, hopefully, maintain somewhat continuity of foreign trade of affected BCC clients. In the present situation, buying off of BCC Bangladesh by local private parties, even a joint venture between Bangladeshi and foreign private parties, may not solve the crux of the matter — restoration of depositors' confidence. If a private party, Bangladeshi or foreign, or a joint venture of both, buys the bank and opens its doors, the chances of a run cannot be ruled out — forcing Bangladesh Bank to suspend its operation again, though this time it is not BCCI but a brand new name!

So, lending the name of the government is a must in solving the dilemma. The government in the process may have to provide support to the unprovided for loan losses of BCCI, which the government can do by issuing debenture bonds as it has done for nationalised banks' loan losses. This measure, in my opinion, the government will be well-advised to consider appropriate and necessary if it keeps in mind the backdrop mentioned above and the increasing uneasiness among the country's business community. Actualisation of any one of the options suggested above or any other positive decision will, no doubt, take some time. Depositors' patience may run out in between. It is, therefore, essential that they are paid out some part of their deposits to alleviate their sufferings to some extent.

M A Sattar Kakraal, Dhaka.