

# Algeria — a Painful Passage to Democracy

by Arshad-uz Zaman

**S**TABLE Algeria has been making news lately to which the world is not accustomed. Following bloody clashes in the streets of Algiers, which led to several deaths and a very large number of people injured, State of Siege was declared and the proposed elections, the first multi-party elections since her independence in 1962, due on 27 June postponed. The Government has been dismissed and a new Prime Minister Mr Ghazali has been named. President Chadli Ben Jeddid is obviously playing for time so that he may bring peace back in the country and reschedule elections.

The liberation war galvanised the Algerians in a highly egalitarian society. The ruler and the ruled addressed each other by the French 'tu'. The arrival of the Algerian delegation to the UN General Assembly session presided over by, then my chief, Sir Muhammad Zafrulla Khan, President of the UNGA of 1962, was a memorable event. The Government of Algeria led by President Ahmed Ben Bella got down to the serious business of rebuilding the war ravaged country. The country received a jolt in 1965 when Mr. Ben Bella was overthrown in a coup and the power was seized by Col Houari Boumediene. It is

the first areas they tackled was education. The result is remarkable. From a literacy rate of around 15% in 1962 it is almost 100% literacy today. They totally manage their vast complex oil and gas sector with their own men. They had a fine infrastructure of roads left by the French which they have greatly expanded. In 1962 the French had pulled out en masse from Algeria, so the State became owner and manager of all enterprises, big and small. It was a gigantic operation with practically no skilled manpower. Recall Bangladesh of 1971 when

the group with universal approval and this opened the door of our recognition by the whole of Africa and almost all the Arab States. The Non-Aligned Summit brought many new Embassies in Algiers and we were at one point 15 Embassies working and staying in Hotel St. George, the only decent hotel then in Algiers. The population of Algiers had swelled enormously with the independence but no new housing came up immediately, causing a cramped existence for the Algerians. Consumer goods were in short supply and import was highly selective in

the civilian. The death of Boumediene and the assumption of power by Col. Chadli Ben Jeddid did not alter this situation. Independence had brought a very young cadre of civil servants. Nearly thirty years of independence has thrown up a new and educated generation of young men and women. A world separates the French speaking old generation and the present bilingual Algerians. Politically Algeria has remained atrophied because of the eclipse of the FLN. There has been steady erosion of state power. Protests, big and small, have been sprouting all over Algeria. President Ben

model of economy has been discarded by herself. An air of freedom has been assuming gale force throughout the world and we too have bathed in that air of freedom at the end of last year. In Algeria the political vacuum has been filled by many elements and it has been spearheaded by religious elements. The Islamic Salvation Front, which won such a stunning victory last year, has under her umbrella practically all the elements, who have been clamouring for liberalisation within Algeria. Through the now postponed 27 June elections President Ben Jeddid intended to bring about an orderly sharing of power. The presidential polls were stalled for a later date. The recent bloody street clashes demonstrate that the chasm between the President and the opposition has widened and a big credibility gap has taken place. For, the opposition will not settle for anything less than simultaneous presidential and parliamentary elections.

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## A Think Tank for the Third World

President Mikhail Gorbachev has won another battle in his continuing efforts to gain the support of the industrialised world for his country's economic recovery programme. The Group of Seven industrial democracies, better known as the G-7, will have the Soviet leader at their economic summit meeting in London in July, not during the three-day deliberation, but at the end of it on July 17. In other words, Mr Gorbachev will receive a warm handshake, not an embrace. Since this will give the Soviet leader a chance to speak to heads of government of six most resourceful western nations and Japan and make his plea for economic assistance for his country, he may well be reasonably satisfied with what he has been offered, a polite invitation to come to London from the British Government, host of this year's summit.

For getting this invitation, Mr Gorbachev worked hard but got the G-7 divided. It is reported that the three European members — France, Germany and Italy — insisted that the Soviet leader should be invited during the conference, though not necessarily as a participant. The United States and Britain took a more cautious line, fearing that the invitation would raise expectations in Moscow of a massive aid that the G-7 would not be able to meet. Canada was also lukewarm. The real opposition to the whole idea of extending the invitation to Mr Gorbachev came from Tokyo which, having failed to persuade the Soviet leader to return the Japanese islands still held by the USSR, is least enthusiastic on the aid issue. So, the typical British compromise of bringing the Kremlin leader to London as a guest, rather than as a participant, of the summit suits all concerned.

In a month's time, we will have a number of high-sounding pronouncements on the state of the economy of the world, as seen from the perspective of the seven richest nations. We will know what they are doing about inflation rate, unemployment, aid programme for the developing world, about East European countries and the Soviet Union and, finally, about the schedule for European integration.

There is really nothing wrong with the G-7 summit. As far as the industrial nations are concerned, the exercise is useful, productive and, in terms of its deliberation, substantive.

However, one cannot help wondering if the developing world can ever set up a similar mechanism to provide for a regular, periodic exchange of ideas among countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. The Group-77 which speaks for the Third World does have a set-up in New York, where heads of mission of members of the block meet from time to time to coordinate their policies, not always with success, on UN matters. Many leaders of developing countries have made a case for the setting up of a secretariat — or even a Think Tank — that, like the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), another body serving the developed world, would be concerned with problems of the Third World, especially in the field of research and identification of solutions. Such a mechanism would certainly attempt some co-ordination of policies of developing countries, however limited may be the success of such efforts, and provide the governments concerned with detailed studies on relevant issues.

How such a set-up will organise continuous consultation among member countries of the grouping is another matter. Perhaps, it should be held at different levels, leading up to a summit of selected developing countries representing various regions and economic groupings. In our view, the first priority is to set up some kind of a planning mechanism and start the groundwork for what may well be an ambitious, but a most worthwhile, project.

## Stop This Madness

More bloodshed in Sri Lanka. So what's new, one may well ask. The Paradise Island of yesteryears has been bleeding for longer than most care to remember. But this time it is different. Nearly 200 poor, innocent Tamil villagers were massacred last Wednesday in an orgy of mindless, brutal, genocidal violence. The perpetrators of this heinous crime against humanity were not blood-thirsty terrorists, but trained, professional soldiers of the Sri Lankan army. We know of no language strong enough with which to condemn this criminal, cowardly action by Sri Lankan troops against their own countrymen, women and children.

What is it that makes supposedly well-disciplined soldiers behave in such a way which would put even vicious animals to shame? Is it their training, which imbues them with the idea that they have a right to take human lives, no matter what the circumstances are? Do their uniforms and weapons make them feel they have the power of life and death over mere mortals like ordinary villagers? Do they feel, being an army, that they are outside the jurisdiction of laws of the land as well as of natural justice?

These questions relate not only to the Sri Lankans, but to different armies at various times, because the massacre at Batticaloa is by no means a unique example of troops going berserk in an insurgency situation. Memories of My Lai and other atrocities by American troops against innocent Vietnamese villagers have still not faded; reports abounded during the nine-year long Soviet intervention in Afghanistan of reprisal attacks on Afghan villages; even fresher and more painful are memories of the bloody genocide committed by the Pakistan army against our people in 1971. But precedents do not justify or excuse mass murder.

Sri Lankan president Ranasinghe Premadasa's expression of regret over the incident is a welcome move, but it barely scratches the surface of the issue. What we would like to see is action — credible, meaningful, and going deep enough into the issue to be able to root out the cancer once and for all. The Sri Lankan government, if it wishes to seriously prove its innocence in the matter, should mete out the kind of punishment to the culprits that will stand as a warning not only to its own armed forces, but to soldiers all over the world, wherever they may entertain ideas of omnipotence. Military violence against innocent civilians is a madness that has to be stopped. If necessary, the United Nations should make provisions for international investigations into such incidences, but we must purge our civilisation of this plague.

The outbreak in the streets of Algiers has its roots in the past. It is a real trial of strength between the rulers and those who won the municipal elections last year in a convincing manner. It is evident that the victory in the elections last year brought about a sea of change in the political map of Algeria. The opposition under the banner Islamic Salvation Front is sufficiently emboldened to take on those who have ruled Algeria since her independence and will not settle for cosmetic changes.

After a bloody war of liberation lasting eight years, independent Algeria emerged on the map of the world on 5 July, 1962. That painful chapter was brought to an end by that great soldier-statesman of France, Charles de Gaulle. During those long negotiations De Gaulle escaped assassination several times, for there were nearly a million Frenchmen settled in Algeria and constitutionally Algeria was an integral part of France.

interesting to record here that the new rulers of Algeria had such aversion towards publicity that for a long time Mr. Boumediene's face did not appear on the national TV. This was in sharp contrast with Mr. Ben Bella's high profile.

Algeria is a very vast country with enormous natural resources like extensive deposits of oil and gas. She exports both and the income is more than adequate for the needs of her small population. One sector which faced difficulty from the start was agriculture. The independence of 1962 saw a massive departure of the French, most of whom were farmers. Thus food exporting Algeria became a large food importer following independence. Fired by revolutionary zeal Algeria set about the ambitious task of achieving economic independence. One of

Pakistani owners of mills and factories pulled out. To understand the dimension of the problem of Bangladesh would have to be multiplied by many times. In the absence of local capital and entrepreneur the State became the sole motor of all enterprises with all its distortions. Algeria was left with no option but to follow the Soviet economic model. In her ambition for achieving rapid industrialisation, she had to neglect certain sectors. Housing was such a sector. I opened our Embassy in a hurry in August 1973, for the non-aligned summit was due in Algiers in September and for our Foreign Policy objective it was important that we join it. Algeria was very keen and a delegation bringing the recognition of Algeria had come shortly before. We joined

fact the Algerian authorities made a fetish of austere living. An example of austerity was set by President Boumediene and he had a relatively smooth sailing. Algeria played a major role in the non-aligned group. Today with the end of the Cold War, the role of this group has enormously shrunk and Algeria like other members of this Group has not found a new platform.

The war of liberation of Algeria began on 1 November, 1954. Progressively the war drew virtually every Algerian and it became a truly National War. The political arm of this war was the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale). Following the seizure of power by Col. Boumediene, the FLN quickly was sidelined. Throughout the long rule of Col. Boumediene it was the ascendancy of the military over

Jeddid has been trying to ensure as peaceful and smooth transition as time would allow.

FLN performed its historical role of leading the war of liberation. In its ambition to build a self-reliant Algeria, with her considerable natural resources, the leadership has deliberately put politics in the cold storage. FLN has paid the price because it had practically no role to play, in the new independent Algeria. Algeria sits on the Mediterranean, very close to Europe and receives all the currents emanating from there. The advent of President Gorbachev has brought about far-reaching changes within the Soviet Union and the world. The dramatic dismantling of the Berlin Wall is but one manifestation of that change. The face of Eastern Europe has changed beyond recognition. The Soviet

The arrival of the tanks on the streets of Algiers, the clampdown of the State of Siege, are devices to cool the tempers. The absence of a political party to back the action of the authorities greatly complicates the political picture. Algeria cannot afford to remain out of the mainstream of democracy sweeping the whole world. We must hope that her transition to democracy will be achieved without further bloodshed and violence.

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**O**NE may argue that higher officials receive handsome perquisites which means that their real incomes are considerably higher than their money incomes. While it may be true for some officials, the benefits are often disproportionately distributed amongst the various classes and sections of people. In the case of university teachers, for example, even the seniormost professor is not entitled to a free telephone, let alone a chauffeur-driven car. These invisible payments and discriminations, instead of solving the problem, will only create social tensions.

Lesson number three for the government, therefore, is to try to ensure a decent living wage for all the employees. In addition, the total pay package should consist only of money wage, and other benefits should be kept at a minimum, so that the differentials amongst various classes are clear and determinate. Nobody will claim that such efforts will automatically ensure a corruption-free bureaucracy, but this is definitely a pre-condition. Estimates have shown that its budgetary implications will not be unbearable either.

### Price Policy

Except for some major agricultural products, notably foodgrains, the Bangladesh government does not virtually have any prices policy for the private sector products. In a market-oriented economy it is not desirable either to have extensive regulatory controls on prices. That will encourage blackmarketing, adulteration, counterfeiting and other concomitant vices. But when avarice replaces normal profit expectations and there is a clear tendency towards artificial manipulation with the market forces, the government has a definite right to intervene in order to protect consumer interests. For example, there is unusually high system loss in Bangladesh with regard

to electric power, and the loss particularly on non-technical counts can often be ascribed to outright thefts. Similarly, there are numerous illegal telephone lines being used primarily by unscrupulous indentors, transport owners, retailers, travel agencies, manpower exporters, import and export traders, contractors etc. which rob the country of a huge amount of revenue. This story is probably true of many publicly owned enterprises as well.

The fourth lesson for the government, therefore, will be to formulate and implement an overall and rational prices policy. Particular care should be taken with the public utilities. The consumers of such services should not be obliged to pay for an inefficient and corrupt administration to a point where they are left with no other option but withdraw to the black sector.

### Political System

Side by side with an under (ground) — developed economy, the political development in Bangladesh has also followed a distorted path. In the relatively short life of this nation there has occurred many attempts of coups and counter coups and the frequent military intervention and autocratic rules. As a consequence, the country's political system was deprived. Launching political parties from power has the potentiality of institutionalising corruption. The systematic destruction of various established norms and institutions created a condition of corruption. Fortunately, this tide has hopefully been stopped in the wake of a mass upsurge in 1990.

## Propositions in Favour of Corruption Hint Cures—II

by Prof. Sadrel Reza

However, already some question have been raised about the last election. For example, Tk. 3 lakh was set as the upper limit for election campaign per candidate. There are educated guesses that in many cases this figure exceeded by millions. Similarly there is a hush-hush policy with the way funds of major political parties have been raised. Judged by past experience, those who have spent millions and generously contributed to party exchequer will try, if opportunity permits, to recover the sum is not move. Politics is often considered a business proposition in this part of the world.

The lesson to learn is quite clear but very difficult to implement. All political parties should permit public scrutiny of their funds. The party in power, however, should be prepared to take the initiative and be quick and firm in meeting out exemplary punishment to those found to misuse public offices for personal gains.

### Law and Order

There is a consensus of opinion that the law and order situation is far from satisfactory in Bangladesh now. Armed hooliganism, arson, hijacking, theft, and cases of swindling all prominently feature on a regular basis in newspaper reports. A number of jail riots have also left many people dead in the recent past. There has, above all, developed a so-called 'masthan' culture involving usually young hoodlums under the protective umbrellas of influential persons and

political groups. These mastans or goons have become ubiquitous in virtually all fields of our social life including educational institutions, administrative offices, financial concerns and also in industrial establishments.

One study has just shown that 20 per cent of workers belonging to either different labour unions or collective bargaining agents do not simply work. The management usually follows a policy of appeasement vis-a-vis the labour leaders. Also, cases of unscrupulous members of both sides joining hands together are not uncommon, particularly in public sector enterprises.

The problem is further accentuated by legal provisions guiding industrial relations which are in many cases either too soft or equivocal. Even in situations where the law is quite clear and to the point, it may hardly be implemented for extra-legal considerations. The law-breakers naturally gather further strength in the process.

Lesson number six is therefore to restore the rule of law and ensure a disciplined working place.

### Social, Moral Values

There has been a considerable erosion in the established social values which earlier attached priority to ethical and moral considerations. The stigma previously associated with corruption which acted as a deterrent, appears to have simply vanished. Money, even

if it is unearned, it can buy power, respect and social standing. This is not really all evil, and indeed may have a positive side in that it encourages the drive towards attaining material well-being. But if one goes crazy in the process and adopts exploitative and other hideous means, it is not the productive capacity of the economy which will increase.

Rather, there will be an incentive for even innocent and honest officials to be afflicted with the vices of corruption.

The final lesson, therefore, will be to develop a happy balance between conflicting social values whereby the urge for

material gains can be restrained by ethical considerations. This will also help raise the productivity in the economy because people will depend more on hard work and diligence rather than other dubious means to improve their living standards. While educational curricula can be recast for the purpose by including religious and ethical teachings, it is the political and community leaderships who have to perform the principal duty of setting the first examples.

To be able to successfully contain corruption it is, therefore, necessary to undertake major changes in all the above spheres, which may also involve painful surgeries and amputations of some powerful administrative limbs. The situation is desperate and it surely calls for desperate remedies.

[Concluded]

## OPINION

### Plight of Lepers

While going through the "Daily Star", of 31st May, the news item based on 'Leprosy' in the northern districts drew my attention. Your correspondent deserves appreciation for featuring the frustrating situation confronting a significant section of our neglected population.

I had an opportunity to work in the northern part of the country for nearly a span of 15 years. In course of my participation in the development activities of the region, I came in contact with the people, mostly foreigners, involved in treatment and rehabilitation of the lepers. I visited a few clinics dealing with lepers mentioned: a) the Danish Leprosy Clinic where they have indoor/outdoor treatment facilities. Besides, they organise Mobile Treatment Clinic on Hat-days (weekly market) in the adjoining areas; b) Rangpur-Dinalpur Rural Service (LWF/RDRS). According to Annual Report-1990, RDRS dealt with 1550 leprosy patients in its six Upazilla Clinics of which 185 completed prescribed course of treatment and 1006 patients (65%) had switched over to multi-drug therapy. They hope to further their services to eight more upazilas in two eastern districts of Kurigram and Lalmonirhat in addition to the existing six; c) Dhanjuri Leprosy Centre (1927). At this clinic they extend both in-door and out-door privileges to the poor patients with a small rehabilitation programme close-by; d) Nilphamari Leprosy Hospital etc. These organisations deserve particular commendation for their wonderful job in this morbid field of human misery.

In this respect I choose to throw light on the following facts relating to leprosy:

1) Usually the social, cultural mores and taboos inhibit the patients to admit their misfortune and consult physicians for treatment. This, compounded with limitation of treatment and lack of required facilities, worsens the condition. The disease, often contagious and fatal, is spreading.

2) Local initiatives are insignificant whatsoever. We massively depend on foreign Non-Government Organisa-

tions. Necessary medicines are not in adequate supply and as such the treatment is hampered.

3) Media had never taken much interest in this subject. Thus the ignorance helped the problem burgeon unabated. Politicians, religious and social leaders, except only some social workers, did not take initiatives to address the problem and considered its solution.

In view of the above scenario, it may be emphatically said that it demands government's attention and more hospitals and clinics should be built in the affected areas. Efforts should be taken primarily to motivate the people, treat and rehabilitate them, and further, that the government extends effective support to the already existing working organisations.

Social changes such as attitudinal, behavioural changes are preconditions for a meaningful solution of the problem. Religious leaders affiliated with mosques, can play a very important role by particularly educating the general mass about the disease and supplying information about the available treatment. This will be effective because the people have a great trust on the religious leaders. Nevertheless the importance of government officials and political leaders cannot be undermined.

Main is helpless as limitations are always huge. In this world, therefore, we need one another's continuous support. While striving to build a just society, economically developed country and a respectable nation, we cannot plan things forgetting a section of our population writhing in anguish and pain. Development itself means a changed order of system ensuring betterment of all the individuals. A small neglected sick portion of the population can jeopardise the whole process of development.

I hope and pray that the people in authority will take necessary measures to address the problem, establishing more leprosy clinics and bringing the lepers into the fold of treatment and finally ensuring their rehabilitation.

Jerome Sarkar Singtoia, Dhaka.

## 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.

### Computer services

Sir, Dozens of advertisements in newspapers appear daily offering various courses on computer and similar ads are also there in TV in respect of computer marketing. One must assume the sale and use of computers are obviously increasing in the country. I applied for shares in a renowned computer company seven months back but till date no allotment has been made though they are selling IBM computers. I deposited money for a big venture paper mill shares and debenture was purchased five months back but till date no reply. Investment Corporation of Bangladesh declares dividend on ICB unit fund and mutual funds in July every year but the dividend is not ready before November. Thus I am tempted to point out what benefits are we deriving through computer services

I All the major banks have virtually stopped 'writing' debit-credit on savings account though it was mandatory in the past. The government has floated a computer council, but to what effect? Let us ponder whether computer services are really rendered or are we unfit to do so?

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### From skirts to saris

Sir, I read your feature column "Dhaka Day by Day" under the caption "From Mini-Skirts to Saris" published on June 3, with some feeling of amusement as it transported me back to the days when I too came here as a new bride now thirty-seven years back. In those days of yore the country was still rural and even the city of Dhaka had an air of rural

gentility. It was known then as the 'Garden city'. The streets were still lined with trees and only a few rickshaws plied the lanes. I should not call them roads. One could travel right across town and unaccompanied, in complete safety, for the price of only one rupee! The city boasted not too many cars and only a handful of buses which for the most part travelled empty! Can anyone imagine such a state of affairs now? Surprisingly, nobody objected if I chose to wear my own dress in those far off days but today I would be severely censured if I did so now despite my advancing years.

I sympathise with the young Japanese lady who finds the sweetsmeats not to her taste. My first experience with them was when my father-in-law introduced me to these delicacies but first he took the precaution of washing it in a glass of boiled water to protect me from the water-borne diseases which were prevalent then and for which there was virtually no cure! After that experience it took considerable time for me to acquire a taste for them!

Although I never really lived with my in-law's each year I spent several months in the

village home. I have had my skin rubbed, my hair fondled, and much more, by inquisitive villagers who crowded the courtyard and virtually set up camp there for the day. Each day would bring a fresh crowd continuing for days on end until it was discovered my young brother-in-law was at the gate selling two anna tickets to see the 'Memsahib'.

There are still one or two of us left over from the fifties who came as young brides and stayed on. Each one has a tale to tell if there is anyone who is interested to hear it. One among us served as president of the WVA and yet another is helping to establish a private medical college with her doctor husband. One more, after the retirement of her soldier husband has retired along with him to a village in Comilla. There are perhaps others still with whom I personally am not acquainted, who have made this country their home or perhaps, like me, although widowed, remain, perhaps forever! Maybe, too, we are a strange breed but then, it takes all kinds to make this world!

Sylvia Mortozza Dhaka.