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Insurrection in Algeria

Wolfi Landstreicher

2002

An uprising began in Algeria in April, 2001. Riots began after police murdered a high school boy on April 18 in Beni-Douala, an area of Tizi Ouzou in the region of Kabylia about 70 miles east of Algiers. Riots and demonstrations quickly spread to other villages in the region. Rioters attacked police stations and troop detachments with stones, molotov cocktails and burning tires, and set fire to police vehicles, government offices and courts. Government attempts to quell the uprising failed. From the beginning, the rebels showed an unwillingness to negotiate and refused all representation. By the end of April, targets of collective rage broadened to include tax offices, all sorts of government offices and the offices of political parties. Rebels blockaded the main roads and looted government buildings and other property of the rulers. The entire region of Kabylia was in open insurrection. The state sent in its guard dogs to repress the revolt, leading to open conflicts with deaths and injuries on both sides.

By the end of the first week of May, the insurgent movement began to organize itself in village and neighborhood assemblies (the aarch) that coordinated their activities through a system of delegates who would be bound to a very interesting “code of

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honor” a few months later. The only political movement that might have had a chance of recuperating the revolt, the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS) very quickly showed its true colors by offering to aid the president of Algeria, Bouteflika, in organizing a “democratic transition”.

The coordination of aarch has been organizing demonstrations, general strikes, actions against the police and the elections.

By mid-June, the rebellion had spread beyond the borders of Kabylia, and in Kabylia state control had been nearly completely routed. Offices of the national police were thoroughly devastated, and the police themselves were shunned. Because no one in the region would sell them food and other needs, the government was forced to ship in supplies to them by helicopter and heavily armed convoys.

At the end of June, the coordination of the aarch refused to meet with a government representative, clearly expressing the attitude of the insurgents. In mid-July the coordination of Tizi Ouzou adopted the “code of honor” which required delegates to pledge themselves “not to carry forward any activities or affairs that aim to create direct or indirect links to power and its collaborators”, “not to use the movement for partisan ends nor to drag it into electoral competitions or any other possibility for the conquest of power”, “not to accept any political appointments in the institutions of power” among other things. This pledge was put to the test almost immediately when unionists and partisans of the left tried to infiltrate the movement for their own ends. The failure of this opportunistic attempt to hijack the movement was made evident during a general strike on July 26, when demonstrators chanted: “Out with the traitors! Out with the unions!”

Huge demonstrations continued. In mid-August, the insurgents banned all officials from the Soummam valley. This was not just due to a government celebration that was to occur there, but also because government officials had begun to

contact certain unidentified delegates of the coordination who supported the idea of negotiation. Rather than weakening the struggle this government ploy led the insurgents to ban all government officials from Kabylia. The minister of the Mujaheedin had to cancel a trip to Tizi Ouzou, and the minister of the interior was greeted with a rain of stones when he came to install a new prefect.

At the beginning of October, the government banned a demonstration that was intended to present a list of demands called the Platform of El-Kseur to president Bouteflika. A massive array of counter-insurgency detachments was used to block the demonstrators. These demands mainly deal with relief of the immediate effects of government repression against the uprising (end of judicial action against insurgents, release of prisoners, etc.), but also include the demand for the immediate departure of all police brigades from the region. The ban of this demonstration provoked further conflicts between insurgents and the forces of order. On October 11, the inter-regional coordination (of the aarch and other self-organized assemblies and committees) decided that they would no longer submit the demands of their Platform to any state representative, that the demands were absolutely non-negotiable and that anyone who chose to accept dialogue with the government would be banished from the movement. Disobedience was total: taxes and utility bills are not paid, calls to military service are ignored, the upcoming elections are refused.

On December 6, some self-styled “delegates” claiming to represent the aarch planned to meet with the head of government. In protest a general strike was called in Kabylia. Sit-ins blockading police barracks turned into violent conflicts throughout the region, some of which lasted for three days. Offices of the gas company, of taxes and of the National Organization of the Mujaheedin were burned in Amizour. In El Kseur, there were looting raids On a court and a judge’s house.

The struggle continued throughout December and January with protests and road blockades. It intensified when a delegation from the aarch was arrested in front of the UN office in Algiers on February 7, 2002. On February 12, a general strike was called throughout Kabylia to protest the reappearance of police on the streets. The entire region was shut down. People assembled in front of the police barracks and there were conflicts.

At the end of February, president Bouteflika announced that there would be elections on May 30. The movement responded by confiscating and burning ballot boxes and administrative documents. At the beginning of March it called for a boycott of the elections throughout Algeria.

Bouteflika tried to appease the rebels by offering compromises which were refused and by moving police forces out of two major cities, But he followed this with mass arrests of delegates of the aarch. On March 25, security forces attacked a theater in Tizi Ouzou that was being used as the office of the citizen coordination and 21 delegates were arrested. After police searches many other delegates went into hiding. Soon conflicts broke out. The government issued 400 arrest warrants against delegates, leading to further demonstrations. Conflicts continued throughout April.

Despite government repression, the anti-electoral campaign of the aarch went forward in May with calls to action, marches and the destruction of ballot boxes. Students demanding the release of prisoners greeted president Bouteflika with a rain of stones when he went to the university of Algiers on May 20. The next day the students occupied the university demanding the release of their comrades.

On May 30, election day, the entire region of Kabylia had less than a 2% voter turn-out. People showed their preference for direct action by barricading the streets, occupying the offices of the prefectures and the municipalities, and strewing the public ways with the remains of burned ballot boxes. A general strike

can only unite all the leaders of Algerian society and their accomplices in other countries against you. A revolt without leaders and without parties won't even find favor among the professionals of international solidarity who are deprived, in this case, of charismatic figures or sub-commandantes to idealize. Up to now, you have only been able to count on yourselves. And the repression presses hard, with hundreds of deaths, thousands of injuries, people disabled for life, so many missing, the torture and arrest of many delegates of the aarch and many demonstrators. With prisoners on hunger strike and many insurgents forced to go underground.

Now the radicality of what you have already done finds other accomplices in the world, in order to break the information embargo and the murderous violence of the state. The bullets that strike are also given by the Italian government and Italian industries, Eni in the lead. The weapons that are used against your demonstrations are often of Italian manufacture.

COMRADES, YOU ARE NOT ALONE. MAY YOUR REVOLT EXPLODE EVERYWHERE.

Some friends of the Aarch

paralyzed the region. There were conflicts with the police and election offices were attacked and destroyed. In the whole of Algeria, voter turnout was less than 50%, showing that the refusal of elections had spread beyond the borders of Kabylia.

All through June, rebellion and social conflict continued through out Algeria. On June 19, the government again tried to derail the movement, authorizing movement prisoners to meet to discuss a proposal of a government emissary arranged through the mediation of two supposed delegates. The movement disowned these delegates, and the prisoners refused this government ruse to pressure the movement into negotiation over the Platform of El Kseur in exchange for the provisional release of those arrested. Instead the prisoners issued a communiqué conforming their confidence in the coordination and their unwillingness to negotiate the demands of their Platform or their release and that of all the other prisoners.

By August, violent conflicts and an ultimatum issued by the movement forced Bouteflika to pardon all the arrested delegates of the aarch. Upon release, the delegates declared that the struggle would continue.

In October another election was called. The movement met it with a general strike and demonstrations. There were conflicts with the police everywhere. Once again, about half of the eligible Algerians boycotted the elections. In Kabylia, in spite of the participation of the FFS in the elections, 90% of those eligible refused to participate in the elections, and in the rest of Algeria 50% of those eligible did not vote.

Toward the end of October, the authorities cracked down. Police raided various halls where assemblies and coordination groups met and hundreds of insurgents and delegates were arrested. Some of the imprisoned insurgents began a hunger strike in late November. This expanded in December so that insurgents in prisons in Bugia, Tizi Ouzou and Bouira were hunger-striking. Thirteen of the thirty-nine who started the hunger strike were still fasting after forty-two days. They were

placed in isolation to prevent them from “infecting” the other prisoners with their spirit of revolt. Throughout the hunger strike there were a number of demonstrations in support of the prisoners, but many were severely repressed. The prisoners ended their hunger strike on January 13 at the request of comrades and family. It is hard to know where this will go from here. Repression has been intense, and it seems the many people grow weary, but the problems that provoked the uprising remain.

This insurrection is of great interest to anarchists. There have been no leaders, no parties, no charismatic spokespeople and no hierarchical or representative organizations of any sort behind it. It has been self-organized by those in struggle in a horizontal way and with specific guidelines to prevent the possibility of recuperation by parties, unions, politicians or other unscrupulous individuals, and these guidelines have been actively reinforced by those in struggle. The movement has remained equally opposed to all of the contenders for power: the military, the government, Islamic fundamentalists, the left and the unions. It managed to keep police “quarantined” to their barracks for long periods of time. It carried out two election boycotts. Once it even forced the government to release arrested comrades. And it carried out the daily tasks of an ongoing insurrectionary struggle. All through autonomous direct action. Now it is undergoing intense repression, and solidarity is needed.

Here is a statement of solidarity issued by some Italian comrades at the end of November:

Insurgent Algerians,

The struggle that you have been carrying forward against all society’s rulers since April 2001 is an example for us and for all the exploited. Your uninterrupted rebellion has shown that the terrorism of the state and the integralist groups, allied for a

decade in the slaughter of the poor to the benefit of the rich, has not lessened your ferocity. You have understood that faced with the infectious disease of military dictatorship and the plague of Islamic fundamentalism, the only choice is open revolt. In the union of two capitalisms, the liberal one that privatizes and fires people in mass and the socialist-bureaucratic one that tortures and kills, you have responded with the unity of a generalized struggle.

We imagine what it means for a state and its police to find themselves facing a mass of rebels whose posters warn: ‘You cannot kill us, we are already dead’ as occurred in June 2001. But we can barely imagine what it means for a region with a few million inhabitants, like Kabylia, where the police are barricaded in their barracks, ‘quarantined’ by the insurgent population; in which elections are deserted in mass, the ballot boxes and the offices of political parties set on fire; in which the city halls are deserted and boarded up.

The politicians who sit in the parliament with zero votes obtained have revealed the lie of representative democracy and the arrogance of a power that is increasingly mafia-like to all. You have managed to shatter the plans of anyone who tried to give your struggle a regionalist or particularist image.

The universal content of your demands — such as that of the immediate and non-negotiable withdrawal of the police — can no longer be hidden.

The autonomy of your movement, organized horizontally in the aarch (village assemblies),