The development of Algerian nationalism
1936-1954

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The history of Algerian political struggle from the first world war until 1954 was dominated by three motifs, which were:

a) The general movement of politically conscious Algerians from assimilationist demands to militant nationalism;
b) The unceasing sabotage of the periodic metropolitan liberalising initiatives by the colons;
c) The tremendous difficulties in these circumstances of evolving an effective nationalist strategy.

These difficulties were apparent before the Second World War in the variety of Muslim political movements. Apart from those Muslims elected to the Conseil Superieur and the Delegations Financiers, whose criticism of French policies was very restrained, we can distinguish between the so-called French Algerians, led in the 1930s by Ben Djelloul and Ferhat Abbas, who demanded full assimilation; the reformed Oulema, led by Ben Badis, who were concerned to develop the Islamic and Arabic character of the Muslim population in opposition to French culture; the proletarian followers of Messali Hadj, initially in France, who demanded independence; and the trade unionists, especially the communists, who supported working-class solidarity with the working class in France.

The critical turning point in Algerian political life occurred with the disruption and revelations brought about by the Second World War. The reasons for this transformation were numerous: the submergence of assimilationist hopes with the failure of the Blum Violette project, the emergence of colonial fascism in Algeria under the Vichy government, the opening up of new possibilities of democratic nationalism with the Anglo-American landings and the early political weakness of De Gaulle’s liberation committee. The war situation produced a ferment of political activity and allowed the creation of the first real united front in Algerian nationalist politics. Even if only temporarily, Elus, Oulema and Messali’s Parti du Peuple Algerien (PPA) collaborated around the program of the 1943 Manifesto du peuple Algerien and its more radical supplement denouncing the assimilationist 1944 ordinance and demanding Algerian independence.

There was, therefore, a real transformation during the Second World War, which enables us to distinguish between interwar and postwar Algerian political life.

1. The shipwreck of the Blum Violette project

Undoubtedly, the most characteristic experience of the interwar period is to be found in the fate of the Blum Violette project and the defeat of the popular front in Algeria. In Algeria great hopes had been aroused by the results of the 1936 elections in France which brought the Popular Front to power, as Ach Chiheb.
The monthly review of the Oulema, put it: “les classes laborieuses et les indigenes des colonies...ont senti renaitre leurs esperances les plus vastes en voyant triompher le front populaire avec les principes de la revolution francaise sur les forces de la reaction.”(l)

On June 7, 1936 the first Algerian Muslim congress was opened in Algiers. Elus, Oulema and communists jointly participated in the drafting of a "charte revendicative". Messali, who was hostile to" assimilation and had not been invited to the proceedings, was not represented. The charter demanded integration, the suppression of all special institutions, separation of church and state, as well as the retention of the "statut personnel". A delegation went to Paris to impress these demands on Leon Blum. At the end of the year the government produced a project aiming to extend French citizenship to a qualified Algerian elite without modification of their "statut personnel". This project of law, considered revolutionary at the time, would have enfranchised about 21,000 Algerian Muslims.

The combined opposition of the colons and the Algerian administration, however, effectively prevented any parliamentary examination of the project throughout 1937. Algerian Muslims became increasingly apprehensive and a second congress held in July instructed all Elus to resign from the Delegations if the project was not promulgated by the end of year; incidents were frequent; 2 the colons called for repressive measures. Eventually, in September 1938 after Daladier replaced Blum, the project was dismissed by the senate.

Apart from Messali Hadj who was consistently opposed to the project, Algerian Muslims, whether Ferhat Abbas, whose elected followers were known as the Elus, or Sheikh Ben Badis, the leader of the Oulema - who before 1936 had invested real hopes in Leon Blum -now realised the weakness of the metropolitan government in the face of the colons and the administration of Algeria. It became clear that they had to turn to nationalism.

2. The "Manifeste du Peuple Algérien"

It was with the defeat of the Vichy government in Algeria that nationalist politics really began. The Decret Cremieux of 1870 giving French citizenship to Algerian Jews was repealed in October 1940 and a discriminatory numerus clausus of 2.7% was imposed on Jewish schoolchildren and students. (3) the enthusiasm among Muslims expected by Governor-General Peyrouton was not aroused. As Boumendjel put it:

...On a cru que les Musulmans se rejouissaient de l’abrogation du Decret Cremieux alors que ceux ci ont pu simplement se rendre compte qu’une citoyenneté qu’on retirait après 70 ans d’exercice était discutable par la faute de ceux la même qui l’avait octroyée.(4)

Having learned from the sabotage of the Blum-Violette project and the fascism of the colonate, encouraged by the democratic anti-fascist propaganda of the Allies, particularly the Atlantic charter, Muslim leaders and politicians began a phase of intense political activity, hoping to get some advantages in the absence of an effective constituted power in Algiers before De Gaulle and Catroux succeeded in consolidating the authority of the CFLN (Comité Français de Liberation Nationale).

In February 1943, Ferhat Abbas drafted the Manifeste du Peuple Algérien, in which the right of self-determination was posed, along with more specific demands: freedom of worship and separation of church and state; freedom of the press and association; universal civil and political liberties; agrarian reform;
recognition of Arabic as an official language. In consequence of the fruitlessness of the commission d’études économiques et sociales set up in April by the Governor-General, a more specific and radical supplement was added to the Manifeste on May 26, 1943. The Supplement openly requested ...

La reconnaissance de l’autonomie politique de l’Algérie en tant que nation souveraine, avec droit de regard de la France et assistance militaire des Allies en cas de conflit. (5)

A considerable change had certainly occurred. Ferhat Abbas, together with many Elus, now reached the idea of an Algerian nation, which he had dismissed as chimeric in 1936:

...J’ai interrogé l’histoire, j’ai interrogé les vivants et les morts; j’ai visité les cimetières; personne ne m’a parlé de la nation algérienne.(6)

With Messati’s PPA and the Oulema, Ferhat Abbas and his supporters were now insisting on the Manifeste as a minimum program. For the first time in Algeria assimilationism was unanimously rejected both as anti-nationalist and anti-democratic. For the first time political rivalries expressed themselves within a common organisation: the nationalist front of the AML (Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté), in agreement with the principles of the Manifest and its supplement.(7)

General Catroux, nominated by De Gaulle as Governor of Algeria, had reacted firmly to the publication of the supplement of the Manifest and to the growing radicalism of the Muslim Elus. On September 22, 1943, the Muslim section of the Delegations financières demanded equality of representation in the deliberative assemblies. Next day, the section was dissolved and its president, Sayah Abdelkader, and Ferhat Abbas put under house arrest till December of the same year. On November 9, General de Gaulle promised structural reforms in his Constantine speech. A mixed commission


Was set up to draft the new legislation which was promulgated in the ordinance of March 7, 1944. On the Muslim side of this mixed commission the Oulema and the progressive Elus were naturally missing. The ordinance defined principles of citizenship and political participation, whose application was to be determined by the future constituent assembly: about 60,000 selected Algerian Muslims were to receive French citizenship, while overall Muslim representation in local assemblies was increased to two fifths.

In effect, although De Gaulle succeeded in passing this measure of assimilation that had brought down Leon Blum, it had already lost the support of the most representative Muslim leaders. On March 14, 1944, a week after the promulgation of the ordinance, Ferhat Abbas created the Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté -AML- with the support of the Oulema, the clandestine PPA and later on the communists. The objective of the AML was to “rendre familière l’idée d’une nation algérienne et désirable la constitution en Algérie d’une république auto-nome fédérée a une république française rénovée anticoloniale et anti-impérialiste.”(8)

In September, Egalité, the weekly review of the AML, first appeared. Over 500,000 applications were received at the offices of the AML central committee.

Towards the end of 1944, there was a radical politicisation of a large part of Algerian society, especially among the youth, there was an apparent unification of disparate factions into a united force in the face of a French authority which was very fragile at that period. Two years later, this unity was definitely broken.

Let us examine how this unity of a nationalist common front was so quickly dissolved. First there were personal reasons. For the clandestine PPA, the AML provided a legal cloak under which to continue its activity and to increase its influence. The mass support of the PPA was shown at the
AML congress of March 1945. The congress was dominated by PPA supporters asking for an Algerian parliament, the release of Messali and rejecting Abbas’s federalist propositions. Communists did not conceal their opposition to national independence for Algeria and hoped to fight against outright nationalists inside the AML.

Secondly, although the AML achieved a great coherence, it still lacked any effective political discipline. More important, however, were the objective circumstances in which the leadership of the AML disintegrated, before the repression and reforms that followed in the next two years.

In early 1945, a revolutionary situation existed in Algeria: the political agitation created by the AML was escaping its control. Big demonstrations of unemployed and starving men took place in many parts of the country and an anti-French feeling was evident among the Muslim population. In May, a violent uprising took place in Algeria. On the occasion of the armistice celebrations, the real strength behind the nationalist impulse was revealed. In Sétif, Abbas’s town, a police officer snatched the national flag from a demonstrator; firing broke out from the police, the crowd dispersed wildly, attacking every European met on its way. By the end of the day 27 or 29 had been killed. This was the starting point for insurrection throughout the north of Constantine, especially in the mountainous regions between Sétif and the sea. The urban centres of Bone, Guelma Constantine, Batna, and Collo became dangerous for Europeans.

Repression was savage. Mechats were machine-gunned by low-flying aircraft; the coast was shelled by the cruiser Duguay-Trouin. While 100 Europeans were killed, estimates of Muslim deaths vary between the official under-estimate of 1,500 and the nationalist figure of 45,000. It is in fact quite impossible to establish the death roll, but C.A. Iulien’s figure of 6,000 to 8,000 seems acceptable. What is important to note about the uprising is that it permitted the moral and political reinstatement of the colons; it enabled them and the local administrators to substitute in the eyes of the metropolis the menacing nationalist present for their own fascist past. Moreover they used the uprising to reason their usual demands with renewed confidence. L’Echo d’Alger summarised colon opinion:

mais "Pour l’Afrique du Nord c’est l’heure du gendarme". (9)

French authority and the influence of the colons had been reimposed; and Algerian nationalism, constricted within a new constitutional framework, was to survive discredited and hollow until the war of liberation. This process of fragmentation once more illustrates the mechanisms of colonialism in Algeria, and the inadequacy of the Muslim political groupings in the face of them. It initiated the pre-revolutionary phase of Algerian political history.

1. The phase of the “statut”, 1947 to 1954

The AML was dissolved; Abbas was put in prison until 1946. Messali had already been sent to Equatorial Africa before the Sétif uprising took place. The institutional basis of the new postwar political arrangements was established by the ordinance of August 17, 1945, organising the population of Algeria into two electoral colleges, the upper college comprising French citizens and the Muslim beneficiaries of the 1944 ordinance and the lower comprising adult Muslim non-citizens. Each college was entitled to send the same number of deputies to the Constituent Assembly.

Since Abbas and Messali were both deprived of political rights, the PPA and the AML recommended abstention in the elections for the first Constituent Assembly. Nevertheless, 705,000 out of 1,350,000 lower college voters participated:
the assimilationist parties (Dr Bendjelloul’s group and the PCA) shared the lower college seats between them. However, this result was artificial and it was only with the amnesty and the return of Abbas (March 1946) and Messali (September 1946) that the political climate really changed. For the first time, avowed nationalist parties - UDMA, the Union Democratie du Manifeste Algérien, founded by Abbas in April 1946, and Messali’s MTLD, Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libértes Democratiques, founded in October of the same year to replace the PPA - could contest elections, openly organize and advertise on behalf of their programmes. The limitations of this formal right are clearly shown in Julien’s book l’Afrique du Nord en Marche. Under the heading "La fraude électorale institution d’Etat", he observes "En Algérie, la fraude électorale est une institution d’Etat considérée comme légitime pour défendre la souveraineté française". (10) The statute of September 1947 gave Algeria a constitutional formula distinguished by its incoherence and its permissiveness vis-a-vis French interests in Algeria. From 1948 to 1954, the political history of Algeria was that of application, or rather the violation, of the statute of 1947 by the colonial authorities. The inadequacy of legal politics became more and more evident to Algerian nationalists. As Boumendjel put it in 1951: "La république française a donc triché, elle nous a dupés. Et nous serions en droit de prendre acte, le cœur ulcéré de ce qu’Aimé Césaire a appelé l’impossible contact". (11)

The failure of Paris to act in face of the perversion of the statute of 1947 confronted the nationalist parties with basic problems of strategy and organisation.

The armed insurrection that began in 1954 was determined by the previous failure of both the UDMA and the MTLD to resolve these problems. The reformist UDMA was defeated because of the colons brutal refusal to join in the parliamentary dialogue on which its existence was based. Socially based on the small bourgeoisie and professional classes of the small towns, its programme and methods were badly adapted to the conditions which characterized Algeria under the statute. As Letoumeau noted: Il y a coupure sociale entre l’UDMA, parti de cadres et de modérés, et la masse de la population famélique et facile a enflammer. (12) Parliamentarianism was necessary for the existence of UDMA, which was a party neither Islamic nor Arab but rather lay and gallicised. Deprived of a parliamentary platform, and unable to fulfill the demands of its members, the party declined with each electoral defeat. The falling apart of the UDMA revealed the incapacity of the small bourgeoisie and the westernised intellectuals to bring a solution to the lengthy crisis of Algerian nationalism. It became clear that other forces had to assume the leadership of the national revolution. More dynamic and militantly nationalist than the UDMA, the MTLD could, it seemed, have become a mass party capable of overthrowing colonial domination. Based on the working class of the large urban centres, the party also had in its ranks students and revolutionary intellectuals. Rigid discipline and good organization were constantly emphasised. How was it then that the MTLD did not seize this historical opportunity and disintegrated by the end of 1953 into sterile controversy?

The answer must be sought in the party’s history and structure. MTLD was founded as a legal successor to the old PPA; it was never clear whether the party was intended to be a parliamentary cloak for the outright nationalist PPA or was a replacement of it. This incoherence led to a fundamental indecision about legal politics. The MTLD participated in the parliamentarianism which was denounced as sterile by the clandestine PPA. Considerable tension was thereby created
between the intransigents of the PPA and the politicians of the MTLD.
Until the MTLD congress of 1953 and the emergence of the centralists there was no serious ideological elaboration in the party. Its militants concentrated on simplified objectives such as independence, the Arab nation and the defence of Islam. Oscillating between legality and illegality, the party nevertheless possessed a rigid structure on the lines of a disciplined communist party. This was another contradiction of the MTLD: an Islamic, consciously anti-communist formation which was structured on CP lines and similarly deformed by the cult of personality consecrated to Messali. Discontent with the absence of internal democracy in the party was cyclic. In 1949, following protests against "the authoritarianism of the dictator who reigns over the party", the central committee dissolved the federal council of the party in France. Another explosion occurred with the schism of 1953. Messali in his turn accused the secretary-general and central committee of reformist deviation, and instituted administrative measures to eliminate the opposition. The MTLD, irrevocably split, and was no more able than the UDMA to fight the colonial system efficiently. Between 1947 and 1954 Algerian nationalism was marked by a triple failure. First, instead of uniting, the UDMA and the MTLD wasted their time competing at elections which both parties knew to be useless. They attacked each other when they could have created a common organisation and defined a strategy adapted to the prevailing situation. Secondly, both parties were based on relatively weak social classes, the small bourgeoisie and the metropolitan and urban proletariat respectively. Thirdly, both parties were unable to penetrate and mobilize the diffuse rural population which was a dominant social force. Incapable of making history and having chosen no basic strategy, these parties were Finally replaced by a completely new kind of organisation.

Notes
4. C. A. Julien, op. cit, p. 239.
6. As quoted in A. Nouschi, op. cit, p. 89.
7. For more details on that period see my article.