

# The Algerian Constitution and the Restructuring of State-capitalism

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## Introduction

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The purpose of this article is to describe the evolution of the Algerian state and form of government since the late 1970s, as internal social conflicts and external economic circumstances (and their domestic economic repercussions) have been mediated by the Algerian political system.

As may be inferred from this, the Algerian political system has an existence which is prior to and substantially independent of the particular structure of the state and the form of government. It has no formal existence, however: its existence is entirely informal, which is why it has never been described by academic observers. Yet if it did not exist, it would not be possible to speak of the evolution of the Algerian state. In its absence, the history of the Algerian state would have been an affair of fits and starts, as has been the case of so many states in sub-Saharan Africa. But the Algerian state has certainly evolved.

This evolution has been from one possible variant, within the parameters laid down by the constitutive principles of the Algerian state, to another possible variant. This evolution is in no way preordained. Neither teleological nor essentialist modes of thinking can seize it. The Algerian state is making itself as it goes along.

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## The Transition that Never Was

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It was not unreasonable to adopt a teleological approach to the analysis of Algerian politics a decade or so ago. By 1973-74 it was clear that a major radicalisation of the regime was taking place, and the new policies being adopted in the spheres of agrarian reform, the marketing of agricultural produce, the management of public enterprises, the provision of medical care by the state and the restructuring of regional and local government combined to give a great deal of substance to President Boumediène's increasingly frequent and insistent invocations of '*la Révolution socialiste*'. It was clear that a major turn to the Left was occurring and that the state had entered a new phase in its development, one in which it was actively seeking to promote particular changes in the society in accordance with a definite (if only vaguely articulated) vision of '*une Algérie socialiste et*

*fraternelle*' animated and sustained by '*un socialisme algérien pur et dur*' [Roberts 1984].

A state which possesses not only a definite social vision and project but also the means and the will to translate this vision into reality is in virtue of this unquestionably the principal determinant of political development. It is, accordingly, entirely appropriate to adopt a teleological approach to the analysis of political change, to explain political development, that is, by reference to this will and purpose, in terms, in this case, of the transition to socialism. The teleology of the observer's understanding corresponds to the voluntarism of the conduct of the government.

There were substantial reasons to believe that Algeria was embarked upon the transition to socialism in the mid-1970s. The fact that this excited little interest among left-wing intellectuals in the English-speaking world is neither here nor there. As Ernest Gellner remarked in 1974, 'somehow or other, Algeria isn't quite it' [Gellner 1974]. The determinants of intellectual and political fashions in Western Europe and North America are not the subject of this article. Let there be no doubt, however, that the socialist credentials of Algeria in the 1965-78 period were at least as strong as, if not a good deal stronger than, those of any other non-communist post-colonial state.

The transition was not completed, and the teleological approach to the analysis of Algerian political development predicated upon the fact of the transition has been rendered obsolete. A different approach is required.

The transition to socialism in Algeria was halted on the death of President Boumediène in 1978, and it has been put into reverse since 1980. If Boumediène's attempted transition to socialism had been consistent with the fundamental character of the Algerian state and its constitutive principles, it would have continued after his death, with only secondary modifications in style or form or tempo. The fact that it has not continued since his death suggests either that it was a comparatively superficial affair, or that it was inconsistent and even in conflict with the constitutive principles of the Algerian state and has succumbed to them.

It is therefore necessary to adopt a different approach to the analysis of the Algerian state, one which addresses its constitutive principles and their

implications directly, instead of indirectly through the teleological preoccupation with the transition to socialism. It will then be possible to understand Boumediène's attempted '*Révolution socialiste*' in its true perspective, as a complex moment in the open-ended evolution of the Algerian state and of the state-society relationship in post-colonial Algeria, rather than as the unfolding of this state's immanent destiny.

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### The 'Infitah'<sup>1</sup> that Dares not Speak its Name

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Not long before he died, the late Egyptian President Anwar Es-Sadat published a volume of autobiography mixed with reflections entitled '*In Search of Identity*'. The problem confronting President Chadli Bendjedid, who succeeded Boumediène in early 1979, may be defined as being how to *avoid* a very particular identity, that of 'Algeria's Sadat', while promoting substantially identical changes in economic and social policy to those of his Egyptian counterpart.

The 'new course' was not defined straight away. Between the end of the Second Four Year Plan (1974-77) and the beginning of the First Five Year Plan (1980-84), there was a two-year interlude of uncertainty and drift as the planners waited for the power-struggle to be resolved. Boumediène had undoubtedly sought to resolve it in an unequivocally socialist direction, and had devoted the year 1978 to a long process of political mobilisation designed to culminate in the holding of the first Party Congress of the FLN since 1964, at which a substantial number of familiar figures were almost certainly destined to be replaced. His death on the eve of this congress ensured that the power struggle was resolved in a different direction altogether. But it was not until mid-1980 that his successor had secured the departure of enough of the Boumedienist 'old guard' to permit him to embark upon the new policies.

The new course comprised a number of major elements. First, it involved a retreat from the ambitious industrialisation objectives of the Boumediène era, a retreat motivated in large part by the entirely realistic concern to reduce the high level of indebtedness which had been incurred by the pursuit of these objectives. Second, it involved a greater emphasis on light industry producing consumption goods and, more generally, a greater concern to meet the pent-up consumption needs of the population after years of austerity, needs which were particularly acute in the matter of housing. The slogan of the Party Congress in January 1979, at which Chadli's candidature for the presidency was approved, was 'For a Better Life' and there can be no doubt that a major concern of the new leadership was to ensure its

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<sup>1</sup> 'infitah' — (Arabic) — literally 'opening up', here of an economy to foreign capital, and more generally 'economic liberalisation'. Sadat employed this term to refer to his economic policy.

own popularity by delivering the goods. The third major feature, which emerged in 1983 and was enshrined in the Second Five Year Plan, was a new emphasis on agriculture and water supply, motivated by the concern to reduce Algeria's enormous food deficit in an era of steadily rising domestic demand for foodstuffs combined with declining hydrocarbons revenues.

While these three elements have been central to Chadli's new course, there is no reason to assume that they would not also have figured in a revised economic strategy had Boumediène survived. Since his death, it has become commonplace to describe Boumediène's policies as doctrinaire and dogmatic, if not idealistic in the extreme. It is widely forgotten that in his lifetime Boumediène was invariably described as a hard-headed pragmatist. It is entirely probable that essentially the same adjustments to take account of economic realities would have been made had he lived.

The same cannot be said of the other principal features of the new course, however, namely the entirely new attitude of the government towards the private sector, the limited but nonetheless substantial retreat from socialised agriculture, and the restructuring of the public sector. In the limited space at my disposal I shall not elaborate upon the first two of these features, but shall instead concentrate upon the third, which has been by far the most interesting and significant. The restructuring of the public sector represents the Chadli regime's answer to the problem of the Algerian bureaucracy, and it is a radically different answer from that proposed by its predecessor. It has therefore been of critical importance for the evolution of the Algerian state.

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### The Problem of Bureaucracy

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I have already discussed in some detail the character of the Algerian bureaucracy in an earlier article [Roberts 1983]. Like many bureaucracies elsewhere, it is riddled with patron-client networks which, by obliging individual functionaries to take account of occult solidarities and the traditional codes of honour, obligation and 'service' (*ma'ouna*) associated with them, systematically interfere with the efficient functioning of the administrative apparatus in accordance with a notionally rational and impersonal code. This phenomenon of 'clientelism' is not the main problem, however, since it is pervasive and, in a left-handed sense, regular, such that it can to a degree be allowed for by the planners and policy-makers at the apex of the state policy-making pyramid. Far more awkward to deal with is the distinct but related phenomenon of 'clannishness', the tendency for the larger networks to cohere into fairly stable factions which intervene not only in the implementation of policy but also in its formulation, at all levels and in

ways which are inherently unpredictable but frequently decisive.

There was little the Boumediène regime could do about this state of affairs in the 1960s. The development of a vast state sector of the economy inevitably entailed the massive expansion of the administrative apparatus and thus of the sphere of operation of this particular kind of bureaucratic irrationality. The popular dissatisfaction, and waste of state resources, to which it gave rise simply had to be lived with for as long as the government lacked the political means to subject the bureaucratic apparatus to effective control. And for as long as the ruling party, the FLN, was a ruling party in name alone, these means were most certainly lacking.

Boumediène's strategy for dealing with this problem became clear in the early 1970s. It was to rebuild and revitalise the FLN in order to equip it to carry out its notional functions in reality. This revitalisation required the transfusion of new, young and explicitly socialist blood into the ranks of the party, a transfusion which Boumediène clearly hoped would become possible as the radical policies of his '*Révolution socialiste*' began to mobilise genuine popular support for his regime and, in particular, to secure the active participation and mobilisation of the younger generation of Algerians. This process was interrupted and, as subsequent developments have made clear, decisively halted on the eve of its climax by Boumediène's death.

Boumediène's strategy amounted to building a new political coalition of the young, the poor and the Left against the entrenched power and vested interests of the older generation of the political élite, the bureaucracy and the middle classes in general, and the considerable forces of ideological conservatism in Algerian society. It may seem in retrospect that it was a foolhardy enterprise, destined to fail. Outside of the comparatively limited audiences of the national trade union (UGTA) and youth movement (UNJA) it cannot be said to have succeeded in mobilising significant popular support. It is therefore remarkable that Boumediène should have embarked upon this strategy in the first place and that he should have been able to sustain it for no less than six years (1972-78) in conditions of extreme complexity and unremitting political tension. What made this possible was undoubtedly his own unique position as the principal architect of the Algerian armed forces, and the extent to which he was able to maintain his own personal control over the defence establishment throughout his period in power. For it is likely that, while his vision of establishing effective Party rule was most unwelcome to the personnel of the administrative apparatus in general, it encountered the most serious opposition within the armed forces. The privileges and influence enjoyed by the officer corps in Algeria are unequalled,

and would clearly be jeopardised by the rise of the Party to a position of real, as distinct from merely notional, primacy within the structure of the state.

The reservations of sections of the officer corps were clearly represented by Colonel Chadli Bendjedid, who had commanded the Oran Military Region since 1964 and was thus the senior ranking officer in the Algerian army, and who had been a conspicuous absentee from meetings of the Council of the Revolution since the mid-1970s. Although the front-runners in the struggle to succeed Boumediène were his Party chief, Mohamed Salah Yahiaoui, and his foreign minister, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, it was Chadli who secured the backing of the armed forces and emerged as the one candidate capable of mustering a sufficiently broad coalition of interests and tendencies to allow a peaceful transition to a new regime.

There was therefore no question of Chadli pursuing Boumediène's strategy of dealing with bureaucratic inefficiency by means of enhanced Party control, the perspective of which Yahiaoui made himself the standard bearer up until his own dismissal in 1980. Nor was there any question of adopting, in the short run, the straightforward liberalisation perspective discreetly canvassed by Bouteflika, whose own support lay mainly in the middle classes and their ramifications within the bureaucracy. Instead, Chadli chose a third course, that of restructuring the public sector so as to render it more susceptible to capitalist criteria of efficiency and profitability. The 50 or so large and complex state corporations of the Boumediène era have been broken up into some 350 smaller and more specialised enterprises, many of which have been obliged to have their head offices outside Algiers. In this way, it is hoped, the government's control over the public sector will be increased. Each enterprise comes under the supervisory responsibility of one or another ministry. In theory, the restructuring will simultaneously simplify the task of the enterprise's management *and* enable the ministry to monitor its performance accurately and thereby ensure that efficiency and profitability are maximised.

In place, therefore, of enhanced party control, Chadli's new course has both strengthened the prerogatives and responsibilities of the managers of the public companies and reinforced the supervisory capacities of the respective government ministries. It is, in theory, an entirely coherent strategy, notwithstanding the considerable confusion to which it has apparently, and probably inevitably, given rise in the short term. It also has the great advantage of not antagonising the armed forces.

Thus the regime has, in a sense, struck a new bargain with the economic bureaucracy. Managers have been given greater independence of their superiors and greater authority over their workforce, but by the

same token they are more accountable than before, and the state Audit Court has already been functioning with frequency and despatch in respect of cases of corruption. A significant number of managers have also been subject to summary dismissal, notably in the sector of light industry.

The new policy is clearly premised, however, upon the applicability of capitalist criteria of economic efficiency. The perspective of a transition from state capitalism to socialist principles of economic organisation of the public sector has unquestionably been abandoned. One of the many implications of this is the change in the relationship between the regime and the working class. The national trade union (UGTA) was, as I have mentioned, one of the principal sources of support for Boumediène's socialist programme. By the late 1970s its leadership included a significant number of communists ('*pagsistes*' — i.e. members of the *Parti de l'Avant-Garde Socialiste*, the clandestine Algerian Communist Party) and its General Secretary was widely regarded as a fellow-traveller. Boumediène's perspective for the working class, to which the PAGES enthusiastically adhered, was the classic Leninist perspective in which the working class under socialism is closely associated with and involved in the process of economic management at the level of the plant and enterprise, but in virtue of this is not considered to be in conflict with management and is correspondingly denied the right to strike, etc. The retreat, under Chadli, from a socialist perspective on the management of the public sector and the reinforcement of managerial prerogatives was resisted by the UGTA leadership, which has accordingly been purged. A general campaign against '*les pagsistes*' (who were also notably strong in the UNJA) was launched in late 1980. In this context, the rise of a radical Islamic movement in Algeria, inspired by the precepts of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Iranian Revolution, although superficially presenting a challenge to the Chadli regime, was in actual fact very much grist to its mill, and was exploited very adroitly by the government in its campaign against the Left.

Thus the central feature of Chadli's 'new course' is a response to the problem of bureaucracy which is consistent with capitalist principles of economic management and inconsistent with socialist principles. It represents an authoritarian solution instead of Boumediène's attempted populist solution. And it implies a very different role for the Party from that which Boumediène envisaged. Instead of serving to mobilise popular participation in the state as a prerequisite of establishing and maintaining political control over a recalcitrant bureaucracy, it has since late 1980 been used to maintain popular subordination to the state as a prerequisite for the efficient functioning of the bureaucracy.

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## The Constitutive Principles of the Algerian State

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Chadliism can thus be seen to be a conservative and right-wing variant of the form of government of the Algerian state, as Boumediénism was a left-wing and populist variant. The degree of variation possible is defined by the constitutive principles of the state, which need now to be identified.

The first constitutive principle is, without doubt, the political primacy of the armed forces. The Algerian state is not merely the heir to the wartime FLN, it *is* the FLN, in power. The FLN was never a political party, it was a liberation front, and within this front the military wing (the *armée de libération nationale*, ALN) was paramount [Harbi 1980]. The specifically political — or, to be more precise, civilian, non-military — wing of the FLN was ancillary and subordinate to the army, much as in Northern Ireland today Provisional Sinn Féin is ancillary and subordinate to the Provisional IRA. It was the guerrilla leaders who set up the FLN in 1954, it was the military commanders who set up the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) in 1958, it was the army General Staff which rebelled against the GPRA in 1962 and resolved the power struggle in favour of Ahmed Ben Bella, it was the army under Houari Boumediène which overthrew Ben Bella in 1965 and it was the army which put Chadli Bendjedid in power in 1979. There have been only two instances since 1954 where this primacy has been infringed. The first occurred in 1956, when the unification of the scattered guerrilla commands was achieved under the dynamic leadership of a civilian figure, Abane Ramdane, the *de facto* head of the FLN organisation in Algiers. The catastrophe of the Battle of Algiers destroyed Abane's independent power base, however, and his ensuing marginalisation within the FLN leadership and subsequent assassination expressed the pent-up resentments of the military commanders and the resumption of their unchallenged ascendancy. The second instance occurred, paradoxically as this may seem, between 1967 and 1978, that is, during the presidency of Boumediène, a point to which I shall return.

The second constitutive principle is what may be called the imperative of unity. In establishing itself as the political representative of Muslim Algeria, the FLN was not only confronting the French state, it was also confronting rival political tendencies and formations within the Muslim population. It decided early on not to tolerate this rivalry and made it its business to incorporate all those tendencies and organisations which were susceptible to incorporation, and to eliminate physically those which were not. And having thus achieved an effective political and military monopoly (by *circa* 1958), the FLN was thereafter

permanently menaced by threats to its unity from within its own ranks. Not the least of its achievements was the preservation of its unity in the face of these threats to it. The state in independent Algeria is as much the heir to this aspect of the wartime FLN's complex legacy as it is to other aspects. To all threats to its unity, wherever they may come from but especially to those which come from within itself, it is allergic in the extreme.

The third constitutive principle is what may be called the premise of élitism. The Algerian national revolution was, rhetoric aside, not at all a revolution 'by the people'. It was a revolution conducted by the FLN on behalf of the people. It was not a popular insurrection, but a protracted war waged by rival armies in which the political allegiance of the population was the stake. It is entirely erroneous to conceive of the FLN as a relatively straightforward emanation of the Algerian rural population. It was formed by a handful of politicised (and *ipso facto* unrepresentative) individuals existing on the margin of rural society at its point of contact with the crucible of national consciousness in the towns. The founders of the FLN were familiar with Algerian rural society and knew very well how to mobilise and manipulate it, but they were in certain critical ways autonomous of it. The relationship of the FLN to the Algerian people resembled nothing so much as that of the Bolsheviks to the Russian working class, and its ideology was accordingly, *inter alia*, a radical nationalist variant of Leninist substitutionism. The degree of coercion to which it resorted in the course of the revolutionary war would not have been possible otherwise, and this coercion was made necessary precisely by the fact that the Algerian rural population was not as spontaneously and enthusiastically receptive to the message of revolutionary anti-colonialism as the mythological elements in nationalist historiography would have us believe. In effect, the function of the people was to adhere to and, where necessary, actively support a nationalist project conceived and executed by a force external to it, and this relationship has endured in most essential respects in the period since independence.

These are the three main constitutive principles of the Algerian state. They are not its only constitutive principles. At least two others may be cited, namely the principle of non-alignment, which defines the position of this state in the international political arena, and the principle of Arabo-Islamic nationality, by which the cultural identity of the Algerian nation is defined.

It is important to note that none of these principles — with the possible exception of the principle of non-alignment — is entirely uncontroversial. On the contrary, each of them has been contested at some time or another by one or another tendency within the

Algerian nationalist movement before or since independence. And some of these principles are clearly less legitimate than others. While I have argued that what I call 'the premise of élitism' is indeed a constitutive principle of the state, it is not a principle which lends itself to being openly and unashamedly avowed as such. It is merely expressed indirectly, although in a myriad of different ways. Equally, the principle of the political primacy of the armed forces is not openly proclaimed as such; it is merely implicit in much of what is openly proclaimed.

We are now in a position to see how and why Boumediène's attempted transition to socialism succumbed to the constitutive principles of the Algerian state, and in what way Chadlism represents a reassertion of these principles.

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### Boumediénism and the Algerian State

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At first glance, the form of government of the Algerian state during the presidency of Houari Boumediène would appear to be perfectly consistent with the constitutive principles outlined above. And in fact it was consistent with them during the first six years of Boumediène's presidency, from 1965 to 1971. Indeed, Boumediène himself appeared to incarnate all five principles in his very person. As Chief of the General Staff of the ALN from 1960 to 1962 and Minister of Defence thereafter, and as such author of the coup d'état of 1965, he clearly represented the political primacy of the military. But he also represented the imperative of unity, for the regime he had established in 1965 had been extremely broadly based, a coalition of almost all the various factions which had emerged from the wartime FLN, and a constant theme in much of his rhetoric was the willingness of his government to accommodate and preserve the legitimate interests of all sections of the Algerian nation. At the same time, the style and form of government but also much of the content of policy was clearly élitist, indeed technocratic. Finally, Boumediène was, unlike many Algerian political and military figures of his generation, a highly educated and cultivated *arabisant* as well as a conspicuously devout Muslim who personified the collective self-image of the austere and dignified Arab and Muslim Algerian while also expressing in his intransigent nationalism the principle of Algerian non-alignment in the wider international context.

Yet from 1971-72 onwards, Boumediène began to infringe all of these principles. The promulgation of the agrarian reform in late 1971 marked the first expansion of public property at the expense of domestic private property and inaugurated a series of measures which could be and were perceived as divisive. Increasingly Boumediène's rhetoric and policy appeared to pit one section of the nation against

another. In addition, the increasing political mobilisation which occurred from 1972 onwards began to infringe the premise of élitism in various ways, in particular through the development of parallel administrative apparatuses designed to outflank the inertia, conservatism and vested interests of the established institutions, and parallel mass organisations (notably the Student Voluntariat's *de facto* substitution for the entirely immobilised party apparatus in 1972-74 [Roberts 1984]. He even began to become vulnerable on what we may call his 'Arabo-Islamic' flank, given his staunch resistance of the more conservative proposals for social legislation emanating from the Islamic lobby (including his successful resistance of a highly conservative 'Family Code' proposal, ultimately accepted by Chadli in 1984), and given also his opposition to schemes for rapid Arabisation of education and administration at the expense of educational standards, administrative efficiency and the legitimate interests of the country's Berberophone minority. As for the non-alignment principle, Boumediène inflected it as far as it could conceivably be inflected in the direction of pro-Sovietism via a strategic anti-imperialist world-view which explicitly refused to place the two superpowers on the same footing or to maintain an equal distance from them.

Finally, as we have seen, his attempts to rebuild the Party and to launch it on a new role at the centre of political life could be, and undoubtedly was, seen by much of the officer corps as a major infringement of the principle upon which Boumediène had up until then built his own power, that of the political primacy of the military.

Boumediène came extremely close to transgressing the constitutive principles of the Algerian state with impunity. There can be no doubt that he did transgress them, and it is difficult to believe that he did not do so intentionally. In fact, what is remarkable is how far he was able to go in this direction. He very nearly managed to break out of the cul-de-sac constituted by the combination of these principles. His endeavour to do so involved the attempted establishment of a new constitutive principle, that of socialism as the social content of the Algerian state. This was enshrined in the National Charter of 1976.

But the National Charter of 1976 is to the Algerian state what Stalin's 1936 Constitution is to the Soviet state. Chadli represents the reassertion of the five original constitutive principles of the Algerian state at the expense of Boumediène's proposed socialist principle.

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