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1988-1992

Multipartism, Islamism and the descent into civil war.

Malika Rahal

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Following the youth riots of October 1988, Algeria experienced the first serious democratic opening in the region, 20 years before the revolutions of Egypt and Tunisia. Political parties, such as the communist Parti de l'avant-garde socialiste (PAGS), which had been clandestine, entered the public domain. And many new parties were created, including the Islamist party Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) which won the first round of the legislative elections that were then suspended by the military coup in January 1992 thus ending the new found experience of democracy.

This chapter tracks the multiple issues at stake in Algeria during this brief period (1988-1992): democratization, the collapse of communism, the emergence of Islamism, and the descent into a civil war in which the communists were amongst the first targets of assassinations. Examining the history of PAGS during this period allows us to understand the on-going divide in Algeria between Islamists and secularists on

the one hand and — amongst the non-Islamists — between those who, in the name of democracy, considered all Islamists to be the arch enemy to be eradicated at all costs, and those who, in the name of democracy, did not.

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Between October 1988 and September 1989, Algeria underwent dramatic political reform: it went from being a single party regime — led by the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) — to a multiparty system planning the first free elections since the country's independence from France in 1962. As such, twenty-three years before the “Arab Spring”, Algeria was in sync with the political evolution of the African continent: by 1994, more than 30 Sub-Saharan African countries had undergone some level of regime change, and none of them still overtly called themselves ‘single party regimes’ (Bratton and Walle, 1997: 8).

As in many Sub-Saharan African countries, such changes carried the risk of political violence. By the end of 1992 in Algeria, elections had been suspended, the main opposition party, the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) — legalized in 1989 — had been disbanded; president Mohammed Boudiaf had been assassinated, and the perspective of the war that would engulf the country for the decade to come was becoming a reality. Making sense of this period is difficult due to the rapid succession of the events in question and because our present-time knowledge of how this democratization process ended in the ‘black decade’ of the 1990s orients how we read the past and assess the hope and fears of men and women at the time.

In this chapter we unfold the chronology and describe the debates as they took place by following political activists of the underground party Parti de l'avant-garde

socialiste. PAGS was created as an heir to the Parti Communiste Algérien (PCA), after the repression that followed the military coup of 1965. The party had been organized with a small group of activists living entirely underground since 1965, and most of its membership leading legal lives — holding jobs, and even actively participating in mass FLN-led organizations such as the official trade union, the Union générale des travailleurs algériens (UGTA), or the youth organization Union Nationale de la Jeunesse Algérienne (UNJA) — while working underground for the PAGS. Under president Boumediene (1965-1978), despite being an underground organization and having some of its leaders in prison, the PAGS supported the more left-leaning measures taken by the president, such as the nationalization of oil and gas and the Agrarian Revolution of 1971. However, at the beginning of the 1980s, arrests of several activists indicated that more repression might be in store for the PAGS, bringing to a halt the plans fostered by some leaders to seek a degree of legal recognition of the party.

The PAGS's trajectory from 1988 to the elections of the early 1990s is revelatory of the way the country tackled two distinct world-wide phenomena: the collapse of the Eastern bloc on the one hand, and — though this was not yet perceived as a world-wide threat — the rise of Islamism and jihadism. The results presented in this chapter are based on research in Algeria, Canada and France, where I conducted interviews and consulted private archives as well as the party's publications, mainly the francophone *Saout ach-Chaab* and the arabophone *Sawt as-Sha'b* [both titles meaning in Arabic The Voice of the People].

PAGS remained clandestine until several political parties were legalized in September 1989, only weeks before the collapse of the Berlin wall. For PAGS activists

— many of whom still claimed to be communists —, the timing was dramatic. 1988-89 marked the beginning of a period of turmoil, a combination of political enthusiasm and existential as well as organizational questioning pertaining to the very nature of the party and the redefinition of a political line in the international context of the collapse of communism. This turmoil was also due to the national context of the (re)discovery of multipartism; should the party take part in free elections? And how to react to, and resist, the rise of Islamism? It quickly became obvious that the *pagsistes* were losing ground to the Islamist activists of the FIS and that political violence was increasing. The question of how to analyse Islamism became one of the fault lines within the party.

Thus, between 1988 and 1992, during what I contend to be a revolutionary period, the history of the party was at the crossroads of two stories. On the national level, it is a story that goes from pluralism to civil war; but it also sets the country's history in the broader transnational context of the collapse of communism and the rise of Islamism.

‘October’

During the night of 4-5 October 1988, tension rose in Algiers in the working class Bab el-Oued neighborhood. Groups of youths gathered and attacked public buildings, including the famous state owned *suq al-fallah* stores. On Wednesday 5 October, various neighborhoods of the city (Bab el-Oued, el-Biar, Kouba, Ben Aknoun, Chéraga, Belcourt) as well as cities throughout the country also experienced rioting. In the morning, in the centre of Algiers, a bus was attacked, as were private venues such as the Blue Note bar, the Lufthansa offices, and the Polisario information centre, in a

festive atmosphere reminiscent of carnival: popular Stan Smith shoes were stolen from the store of SONIPEC (the national company that manufactured them), on Didouche Mourad street; on Place Audin, fake Lufthansa tickets to faraway destinations were issued by an individual sitting on a looted office chair. Riots took on a theatrical dimension (a donkey named Chadli Bendjedid, jokes about FLN leaders, appeals for the return of the deceased president Boumediene) that conveyed political messages. Rioters made their way to the brand new commercial centre of Riadh al-Fath, where windows were smashed and shops were looted. They also attacked police stations in various neighbourhoods. The typical rioter was a male between 15 and 20, still in school or unemployed and unskilled, living in a working-class neighbourhood, in the overcrowded apartment of a large family, with no prospects for the future. He was not connected to any youth organization or underground party such as PAGS, nor was he a sympathizer of the Islamist movement (Charef, 1990: 95).

On 6 October, president Chadli declared a state of siege, allowing the army to intervene with tanks and guns. Rumors of the first victims spread. Up to that point, there had been no banner, no slogan, and no one to claim the riots as their own. Islamist slogans were first heard on Friday 7 October, during an after-mosque demonstration of six to eight thousand people. With General Khaled Nezzar in charge of military command, the violence escalated. On 10 October a demonstration of 20,000 people, organized by a section of the Islamist leadership, marched from Belcourt to Bab el-Oued where it was met by police gunfire in front of the DGSN (Direction générale de la sûreté nationale). The death toll of the entire sequence of events was heavy, with an official figure of 169 killed. The riots left many shocked by the destruction of the social pact and deeply disturbed that the Popular Army had shot

and killed the country's youth. On 10 October, the day of the shootout, president Chadli gave another speech announcing a new series of political reforms, including amending the constitution (Kapil, 1990).

The communist experience of October

The cause of the riots and their interpretation were debated in the immediate aftermath of the event. The meaning of October was constructed following two opposing approaches: Authorities denied any political meaning to the riots — accusing the youths of vandalism —, while foreign journalists, drawing on the stereotype of bread riots to which much political contestation in the Arab world was reduced in previous years, considered the rioters to be famished crowds. On the other hand, various groups mobilized in support of the rioters in order to 'grant them the dignity of politically challenging the FLN regime' (Aït-Aoudia, 2015: 31).

PAGS experience of October raises a number of questions that were also debated in the aftermath. Perhaps the most troubling detail is that dozens of PAGS activists were arrested *ahead of the riots*. Amongst those arrested, several were employees of the École polytechnique d'architecture et d'urbanisme (EPAU) in el-Harrach, including demographer Kamel Kateb. Many were tortured. Shortly after the October riots, a Comité National Contre la Torture was created by academics with writer Anouar Benmalek as secretary general. In 1989, the Comité published accounts of arrests and torture in a booklet entitled *Le Cahier noir d'Octobre*: for example, Hacène Benazzouz, age 35, director of a state company, claims he was arrested in the centre of Algiers at 5.30 pm on 4 October, repeatedly questioned about belonging to the PAGS and tortured. The party reacted in a statement circulated on 5 October,

detailing arrests and calling ‘workers, patriots, citizens’ to end repression and support the victims. Another statement (9 October) condemned ‘arbitrary arrests’ and addressed army officers and soldiers directly: ‘Ne tirez pas sur les fils du peuple, vos frères’ [do not fire on the sons of the people, your brothers] (Charef, 1990: 114-15).

In the light of these events, former PAGS members question the spontaneity of the riots, they develop theories concerning the role of the police and highlight the economic context and tensions that had developed since the summer of 1988. Upon succeeding Houari Boumediene as president of the republic in 1979, Chadli Bendjedid had launched a series of economic reforms, withdrawing from investing in heavy industry, while developing the private sector; the Socialist management of businesses was abandoned. Chadli’s slogan ‘pour une vie meilleure’ [for a better life], was transformed by popular humour into ‘pour une vie meilleure, ailleurs’ [for a better life, elsewhere]. The national economy suffered from the 1986 economic crisis as the drop in value of the US dollar worsened the effects of the decrease in oil prices. Chadli chose a new secretary of the presidency, Mouloud Hamrouche: Along with a group of young reformers, known as the ‘Hamrouche boys’, they implemented vast economic reforms. Under IMF pressure, the industrial public sector was to be divided up into smaller units. During the summer of 1988 the government itself recognized the housing crisis, while prices of food soared due the drought-caused agricultural crisis. Numerous strikes took place in public companies. Even Taïeb Belakhdar, secretary general of the FLN-connected Union générale des travailleurs algériens (UGTA), contested the reforms. By September, strikes were commonplace in industrial areas throughout the country.

In this context, it is tempting to analyse October as yet another reaction to the economic crisis and to the reforms, though historian Hugh Roberts has shown how tenuous this view is by pointing out that the president's 10 October speech brought the riots to a halt despite announcing that economic liberalization reforms would proceed (Roberts, 2003: 107). Many former *pagsistes* therefore propose their own theories. NA, a former member of the Party's Political bureau, explains:

En 1988, [le PAGS] représentait un très grand danger, parce qu'il allait y avoir le tournant vers la libéralisation. En 88, on n'avait pas bifurqué encore complètement [...]. Le PAGS était la seule force qui pouvait s'opposer et mettre en difficulté le processus d'ouverture. (Algiers, 9 March 2011)

[In 1988, the PAGS represented a real threat, because there was going to be economic liberalization. In 88, it has not yet been achieved [...]. The PAGS was the only force that could oppose it, and create difficulties for the process of economic liberalization.]

Other interviewees dismiss this idea as self-aggrandizing, given how poorly the party performed in the municipal elections of 1990.

While the arrests of PAGS members are significant, without reliable internal sources, theories and counter-theories are impossible to verify. While it remained underground, it was impossible to assess the actual strength of a party that assumed a clandestine but mythical dimension. And NA does not claim that the party *actually* was dangerous, only that it was considered dangerous by the regime itself. According to him, before they were freed, several arrested *pagsistes* met the new head of the Sécurité militaire, Mohammed Betchine: 'il leur a dit, nous savons que si vous prenez le pouvoir vous allez nous pendre' [he told them, we know that if you seize power, you will hang us]. And NA adds, laughing: 'Moi j'ai jamais eu l'impression qu'on était près du pouvoir.' [I never had the impression we were close to seizing power].

Did the authorities truly believe the PAGS to be a threat? And did the *pagsistes* truly not believe themselves to be close to power in 1988? It is difficult to say, but what

the narratives of the event reveal, for both the PAGS, and the Islamist movement, is that October is a watershed moment between secrecy and transparency: former PAGS members tell the story of the moment when the Islamists revealed themselves in the streets to have developed, unbeknown to their opponents. PAGS on the other hand, was still living in the misconstrued self-representation that it was a powerful force. Two years later, that representation would be proven false in the country's first competitive election. What I aim to show is that this transition from an implicit, clandestine, and invisible political situation to the explicit, legal and visible new conditions of 'doing politics', blurred the lines of the well-known and routine political practices, creating a sense of uncertainty and anguish, that for the *pagiste* is identified as a political crisis.

'La légalité' [going legal]

Following the riot in October, a new constitution was adopted on 23 February 1989, that opened the door to a multiparty system and instated democratic freedoms. The legislation on political parties was soon to follow, with a law on multipartism voted on 5 July 1989. According to article 3 of the new law, a 'legal political association' should contribute to protect the consolidation of national independence, of territorial integrity, and national unity, as well as work for cultural and social flourishing (*épanouissement*). However, it should not have a religious, linguistic, or regionalist basis, nor should it have objectives that go against Islamic morals. All political associations were to apply for authorization from the Ministry of Interior.

The first political party — the Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie (RCD) — was inaugurated on 9-10 February and was not met by political repression, thus confirming the states's good will. Within the Islamist movement, the decision to form a party was taken at the last minute, in response to the new possibilities opened up by the reforms. Competition amongst several figures of the political Islam movement (including Mahfoud Nahnah, leader of the Algerian branch of the Muslim brotherhood, and Ahmed Sahnoun, neither of whom joined the FIS) encouraged a group of younger leaders (including Ali Benhadj and the somewhat older Abassi Madani) to announce the formation of the FIS on 18 February at the As-Sunna mosque in Algiers (Aït-Aoudia, 2006).

For the PAGS, which had always viewed itself as a vanguard party, the sole question was whether or not to go legal. After over twenty years of underground activity, this was not a simple matter and not everyone agreed to it. In September, the Salle Ibn Khaldun hosted the party's first ever public gathering, known as 'le meeting de la sortie de la clandestinité' [the emergence from clandestinity meeting]. NA recalls the danger he perceived in such a radical move by connecting it, in his narrative, with the killings that would begin in 1992:

En septembre [1989], y'a eu la première sortie médiatique à la salle Ibn Khaldun avec Sadek qui présidait. J'ai pas assisté, j'étais dans un local pas loin en cas de pépin avec quelques camarades. On ne sait pas ce qui peut se passer. Mais les camarades ne prenaient pas en compte la vigilance. C'était l'euphorie, un peu. On n'avait pas protégé ne serait-ce que quelques éléments en cas d'un retour de manivelle. Y'a eu des gens qui ont poussé à ce qu'on abandonne une vigilance minimale. Et on a vu ensuite avec les tueries... (Interview, Algiers, 9 mars 2011)¹

¹ [In September [1989], there was the first media broadcasted event at the Ibn Khaldun venue, presided over by Sadek. I didn't attend; I was in a nearby place, with a few comrades, in case of a problem. You never know what can happen. But the comrades weren't taking vigilance into account. There was a feeling of euphoria. Nothing was in place in case of a backlash. Several people pushed for us to abandon even minimal vigilance. And then we witnessed the killings....]

In a clandestine organization where each person only had direct contact with two or three others, this meeting changed their experience of the party. For the first time, a physical group of people collected in one place was made visible, including to themselves, in a rediscovery, or (re)invention, of its collective self. The atmosphere was both enthusiastic and strained at this threshold moment between 'la clando' [clandestinity] and 'la légalité' [legality]. For the first time activists introduced the party to spouses and families. In real life, outside of the party, they hardly knew each other and some were surprised (and sometimes disappointed) to recognise that several of their neighbours or colleagues had also been *pagsistes*. NA is not the only one to question, with the benefit of hindsight, the risk of going entirely legal rather than maintaining part of the organization underground to protect the party structure in case the democratic process went sour. The colossal enthusiasm and the rapid succession of events after the October riots prevented, they claim today, the necessary debates and exploration of options, including partial or incremental legalisation. While no interviewee claims to have foreseen the risk of civil war in 1989, the worse consequence of going legal, they claim, was the total absence of any underground structure to protect activists from being killed after the assassinations began in 1992.

In September 1989, along with several other parties including FIS and RCD, PAGES was legalized for the first time in its history. Following the new law on political parties, the newspaper stated in Arabic: 'On August 13 1989, our party filed the demand for accreditation in order to transform its activities making them legal'² 'Communists and their party are ready for the struggle within the framework of legality'.

² *Sawt ash-Sha'b*, 21 August 1989.

The Local Elections of June 1990

For the new, and newly legalized, parties, as well as for the FLN — which had never before been challenged in any electoral competition — the reality of running in free elections came quickly. The first election was the local election of June 1990, in which the PAGS ran, and which the FIS won by a landslide, taking 853 municipal assemblies (APC, *Assemblée populaire communale*) against 487 to the FLN, and 48 departmental *assemblées* (APW, *Assemblée populaire de wilaya*) against 14 to the FLN.

From the outset, the conditions had been challenging with only a month for political parties to register to contest the elections. This involved finding candidates for over 13,000 seats in 1,541 APC, and 1,889 seats in 277 APW, as parties were to compose lists of as many candidates as there were seats. The electoral law also required every list of candidates to provide a political program in writing (Aït-Aoudia, 2013).³ Despite the short run-in, the party promoted local candidates and sought to demonstrate its vitality. In Jijel, on May 17, Hachemi Cherif addressed a crowd of 500, and was asked many questions (*Saout ach-Chaab*, 187, June 1990): How to solve the party crisis? What is the future of socialism? What is the position of PAGS vis-à-vis the FLN, ideological issues, and notably the position of PAGS on religion?

But lack of time created a sense of constant urgency that pushed the party to demand the postponing of the elections. More importantly, the PAGS appeared powerless to counter the campaign led by the FIS: ‘the FLN and the FIS have means that other parties do not’, the newspaper claims (*Saout ach-Chaab* 187, June 1990).

³ Art. 5 loi 90-06 du 27 mars 1990 modifiant la loi 89-13 du 7 août 1989 portant loi électorale, JORA, n°13, 1990.

One PAGS activist and candidate in the municipality of Gué de Constantine, a working class suburb of Algiers that became a FIS stronghold and during the civil war an area of intense violence, explained why he was a reluctant participant in the campaign:

Mais on s'est présentés, on a distribué, etc. Et pendant la campagne, ils nous ont bouffés, les gars du FIS. Ils avaient des moyens beaucoup plus importants, colossaux. D'abord ils étaient bien implantés : ils tiennent la mosquée donc ils tiennent tout. Et puis ils avaient fait des débats, avec des vidéos et tout. Ils sont passés dans le quartier et ont filmé tous les trucs à réparer. Au cours des élections, ils ont dominé d'une main de maître le déroulement [...] c'était une organisation de tonnerre.⁴ (Interview, Delly Brahim, 1 June 2012)

The effectiveness of the FIS campaign was based on the control of a network of mosques that provided the logistic backbone and foreign funds which, former activists claim, had been provided by Saudi Arabia.⁵

Beyond the spectacular rise of the Islamist movement, narratives of this period also reveal a second source of unease: during the campaign, while PAGS activists confronted FIS members, sometimes winning public arguments, and canvassed neighbourhoods, they were making themselves known by names, and photographs, thus exposing themselves publically to the rising political violence of which they were to be amongst the first victims.

⁴ [We ran, we handed out leaflets and newspapers etc. And during the campaign, guys from the FIS chewed us up. They had colossal means, much more important than our own. Firstly, they were deep rooted: they held the mosques, so they held everything. They had organized debates, with videos and everything. They came to the neighbourhood; they filmed everything there was to repair. During the election, they dominated the entire process masterfully [...] it was a fantastic organization.]

⁵ Sultan Ibn Abdelaziz, Saudi minister of defense, made a public statement admitting his country had financed the FIS in March 1991, after the FIS leadership supported Saddam Hussayn against Saudi Arabia. This foreign financial support was reported by the Algerian press, and denied by Abbassi Madani. (Al-Ahnaf, Botiveau, et Frégosi 1991, 35-36)

The electoral campaigns crystallized that had developed since the beginning of political reforms. TA, the executive manager of a state-run factory in the industrial zone of Berrouaghia, explains the increased tension of the confrontations with FIS activists. Berrouaghia is in the Medea *wilaya* that was part of the ‘triangle of death’ — due to intense terrorist activity — during the ‘black decade’ of the 1990s. Beginning in 1989, openly selling PAGES party newspapers resulted in hostile encounters and, at times, physical conflict. Islamists heckled PAGES rallies and were especially vocal against women activists, denouncing their T-shirts and low-cut cleavages, accusing them of being *mécréantes* [un-believers] (Interview, Algiers, 9 June 2011). Workplace confrontations became even more violent after the creation, in July 1990, of a Syndicat islamique du travail (SIT), an Islamist union under the aegis of the FIS, which assumed a paramilitary dimension (Zerrouky, 2002). TA emphasizes his female comrades’ courage and the protection they received from ordinary factory workers, thus dramatizing the struggle between PAGES and FIS for working-class support, a contest which the PAGES was rapidly losing. But many members now acknowledge how reckless they were, how unaware they were of the danger they were putting themselves in by campaigning within Islamists strongholds such as Berrouaghia, Gué de Constantine, Kouba and others.

Narratives of the ballot count at the end of election-day also tell of physical tension with FIS members, who were present in each polling station while PAGES and RCD combined were unable to place representatives everywhere, as well as a growing concern as the results came in — only 1% of the votes were cast in favour of PAGES. Interviewees sarcastically recall a comment — often attributed to party leadership member Hachemi Cherif — that the party had won very few votes, but that ‘chacune

de ces voix vaut de l'or' [each of those votes is worth its weight in gold] as a pathetic attempt at making the best of a shipwreck. They claim to have been thunderstruck by the results, unable to analyse the news in any meaningful way.

In the traditional way of the clandestine PAGS, debates took place in written form, and some contributions can be found in private archives: they reveal an increasingly tense atmosphere. One of the party leaders, Abderahmane Chergou, disagreed with the notion of a 'shock' that stunned both activists and leadership. If it took the party leadership 6 whole days to produce an official reaction to the results, it was not, claimed Chergou 'because we were "knocked out" by the results', but because there existed 'deep differences of opinion' as to the assessment of those results, and differences of opinion as to the legitimacy of integrating the Islamist movement within a democratic process. Several contributors criticised the party of its inability to assess political realities and devise efficient tactics, the party malfunction in this new context and was unable to reach the people.⁶ Such organizational flaws can be linked to the lack of experience in 'doing politics' legally, and to the difficulty in grasping the state of public opinion on the eve of the first free elections since independence.

For others, it wasn't just an issue of tactics and lack of efficiency: an entirely new party line was made necessary by the political circumstances in which, oblivious to these discussions, FIS leaders were attempting to create 'Islamic communes' in the municipalities they had won. They founded their governance on religious morality, imposing a new dress code on the beaches, closing music festivals and attempting to gain political influence in the city of Algiers in the months following the municipal

⁶ Anonymous memo, dated 18 June 1990, private archives.

elections. The territory was increasingly divided, though not yet by armed checkpoints as they would be during the war.

The party reaction in the aftermath of the June 12 elections was far from unanimous. In October 1990, the party newspaper also published a letter entitled 'Sortir le Parti de la crise' [Solving the crisis within the party], signed by Akila Ouami, Sadek Aïssat, A. Charef Eddine, Djamel Labidi, Abdelatif Rebbah and Mohamed Tin (*Saout ach-Chaab*, 190, 15-31 October 1990), denouncing the party's post-election Statement of 18 June and the analysis it offered of the local election. And while some within the party leadership wished for the party to demand the cancellation of the elections, or even the banning of FIS, in an internal report Sadek Hadjerès rejected these options that would reinforce popular support for the FIS, and might 'surchauffer l'atmosphère politique' [overheat the political atmosphere].⁷ While the recent FIS victory represented a 'grave danger' and democracy could be in 'mortal danger' if FIS were to win the upcoming legislative elections, he claims in his report, it was essential not to overdramatise the situation. Political analysis and tactics are key, he continued, to diffusing the situation, as are on the ground work to maintain the connexion with the popular masses attracted to FIS. His voice did not prevail, and activists were beginning to understand just how divided the party leadership was.

The December 1990 PAGS National Congress

In December 1990 the PAGS organized its first national congress as a legal party in the '5 juillet' sports arena designed by Oscar Niemeyer.

⁷ Sadek Hadjerès, report for the Conférence des cadres of August 1990, published on Hadjerès' website Socialgérie on 20 February 2016, accessed 21 February 2016.

The congress during which former secretary general Sadek Hadjerès, who did not wish to run again, was replaced by Hachemi Cherif, and a new central committee was elected. For many interviewees, the congress was a turning point in the crisis experienced by the party. The general atmosphere, as revealed by interviews as well as videos of the proceedings, was one of both excitement and tension. The venue had been decorated with slogans and artwork, as many famous artists, including M'hamed Issiakhem and Mohammed Khadda, were party members. In the opening session, homage was paid to old PCA activists, such as Larbi Bouhali, and to guests from other parties. Party branch delegates from across the country gave speeches, some read poetry or sang, or expressed frustration with the political situation and with the lack of transparency within the party. Nonetheless, the excitement of being together as a public, political party, of being able to address the party as a whole was still palpable even after a year of legal existence.

However, most of the members of the party leadership remain unmoved by the memories of these collective moments. Former secretary general Sadek Hadjerès even expresses some annoyance with the 'folklore' that surrounds it. They are more interested in what happened behind the scenes. In the weeks prior to the congress, a platform proposal entitled 'Avant projet de résolution politico-idéologique' (AP-RPI) had been circulated. It was a lengthy text drafted to redefine the party line, moving away from Marxism and class-struggle and explaining the world as an opposition between the archaic and the modern. Party members were expected to discuss the text within their political cells but many explain it was too complex to offer any space for discussion and caused much discontent.

Nevertheless, the AP-RPI was adopted during the congress as the party's new political platform (thus becoming the Résolution Politico-Idéologique or RPI), and a new leadership was elected: Hachemi Cherif became the new party figurehead. However, expressions of frustration and discontent increased and were directed against forms of partisan debate considered undemocratic and authoritarian, if not influenced by nebulous police influence on party leaders. While it has so far been impossible to confirm (or discredit) theories of a plot, or even police meddling, accounts of the congress (and more generally of this period of the party's history) are interesting as they are indicative of a time characterized by newly acquired transparency in political life, and the anguish that it created.

In any event, though it seldom mentioned Islamism or the FIS by name, the 30 page-long AP-RPI submitted to the Congress explained that the dynamic of history at this stage was not (or no longer) class-struggle, but the struggle to the death between the modern and the archaic. With Islamism clearly on the side of archaism, the aim was now 'la lutte pour l'édification quotidienne d'un large front en faveur d'une société moderne démocratique et de progrès social' [the struggle to construct on a daily basis a broad front that would favour a modern democratic society and social progress]. This dramatized opposition became the new party creed. But it failed to create a consensus.

'Peut-on démocratiser l'intégrisme ?' [Can Islamism be part of a democracy?]

In his contribution to the debate, Abderrahmane Chergou was very critical of former Secretary General Sadek Hadjerès, and others, for being too conciliatory with Islamists. He accused them of discriminating between FIS, with which no dialogue was possible, and Hamas, a party created in December 1990 by shaykh Mahfoud Nahnah. For

Chergou, Hadjerès and those who condemned the new party line of the RPI, believed that there were within Hamas ‘potentialités démocratiques’ [a democratic potential] thus refusing the prerequisite blanket condemnation of all Islamist groups. This position echoes the RPI excerpts repeatedly cited in the party press, after Nouredine Zenine was ousted from his position as news editor: ‘The Socialist vanguard party calls every democratic party to [...] refuse any dealings with authoritarian groups even though they may use a false modern discourse [...]. In any event, a revolutionary party must not be fooled by sweet talk about democratic freedoms without directly asking the question [...]: democracy, for what?’.⁸

Could any Islamic fundamentalists be integrated into a democratic regime, even though they claim to comply with democratic rules? Could it be transformed? Not everyone agreed on the answer to that question. But clearly, Chergou, Hachemi Cherif and others answered, they could not. Another contribution to the same effect was signed ‘El Hadj’ — in all likelihood el-Hadj Bakhtaoui — and posed the question directly and in capital letters: ‘PEUT-ON "DEMOCRATISER" L'INTEGRISME ?’ [Can fundamentalism be ‘democratized’?]. ‘Mais Camarades, comment transforme-t-on radicalement la nature d'un phénomène? À ce jour, on ne connaît pas d'autre moyen que de supprimer ce phénomène. Ce serait donc supprimer, interdire, l'existence politique des partis intégristes.’⁹ Believing, he continues, that fundamentalism could be transformed is to recognize it contained ‘the germs of democracy’. At stake was the very essence of each phenomenon — democracy and fundamentalism — and any mis-evaluation of their nature would be a historical mistake tantamount to treason.

⁸ *Sawt ash-Sha'b*, 179, May-June 1991 [translated from the Arabic].

⁹ [But Comrades, how do you radically transform a phenomenon? To this day, we don't know of any other way than to suppress this phenomenon. That would therefore mean to suppress, forbid the very existence of fundamentalist parties.]

According to several interviewees, El-Hadj Bakhtaoui was the main contributor to the AP-RPI. His style, characterized by communist jargon, is certainly recognizable.

Parlant du parti intégriste Hamas, Sadek estime quant à lui qu'il faut aller 'vers une négation de sa potentialité ultra-réactionnaire'. Ici l'idée est trop importante, [...] pour ne pas relever que la potentialité n'est pas la réalité. (Le fœtus n'est être que dans le domaine de la possibilité, de la potentialité. Ce n'est qu'à la naissance qu'il devient être dans le domaine de la réalité). Cela signifie donc que le caractère ultra-réactionnaire de Hamas ne soit pas la réalité d'aujourd'hui, sa nature profonde même ? Cela signifie-t-il donc que Hamas soit un parti démocratique mais avec tout au plus des tendances, des velléités, réactionnaires ?¹⁰

The repetition of the biological metaphor, in this text as well as others, was indicative of a society that feared for its survival, that pictured itself a body under attack, infected by a disease that posed an existential threat. In addition to the language of 'radical suppression', it manifests how the language of civil war, and of the construction of the enemy, was developing within society and not only on the Islamist side. We see here how such language had permeated into the internal discourse of the PAGS.

The foreshadowing of the catastrophe to come is omnipresent in these documents from 1991. In the hardliners' texts, it takes on a millenarian dimension that is difficult to think critically of now that the catastrophe *has indeed happened*. However, the constant reference to a threat to come, the apocalyptic anguish expressed and created by such discourse, emphasized by the frequent reference to the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the threat of the Islamic Republic that followed, acted as a means to construct the enemy and accelerate the descent into civil war.

¹⁰ [Speaking about the fundamentalist party "Hamas", as for Sadek, he reckons it is necessary to go 'towards a denial of its ultra-reactionary potential'. Here, the notion is too important, [...] not to underline that potential is not reality. (The foetus is only a being in the realm of possibility, of the potential. It's only upon birth that it becomes a being in the realm of reality). Does that therefore mean that the ultra-reactionary nature of Hamas is not a reality today, in its profound essence? Does this mean that Hamas is a democratic party, with at most, reactionary tendencies, or leanings?]

These sources are essential to understand that such language did not appear *ex post facto*, after the civil war, but was forged even before the outbreak of violence.

What is significant is that it not only targeted Islamism — in answer to an increasingly violent, if not yet murderous, FIS — but also those who were considered insufficiently aggressive or combative. In present time interviews, criticism against them now bears the added layer of what happened upon the collapse of the PAGS and during the civil war. One of the tropes emerging from these interviews is the assumption that those who resisted the language of civil war and the dramatization of violence (they are presented as not having been aggressive enough towards Islamists) ended up leaving the country during the civil war, fleeing in the face of danger. Sadek Hadjerès himself left the country in November 1991, seeking refuge first in Greece and then France, a fact that is often held against him.

But not all of those who refused the new party line of the RPI and the language of civil war, became exiles, though most of them did quit the PAGS during the crisis even before it was terminated and never became members of the new party, Ettahaddi, after its creation in 1993. One former Central Committee member, who remained in Algeria throughout the ‘black decade’, is clear in his view that the outright rejection of Islamism was not a responsible party attitude. After the 1990 local elections in which the majority of voters chose FIS, it was impossible to go to war “against the people”, he exclaimed during a 2013 interview. Perhaps because this group was not on the winning side of the internal party conflict, we find ourselves with fewer sources to document their views.

Nevertheless, an earlier letter, written in the July 1990 by Sadek Aïssat to the party leadership, is representative of this current within the party. In this letter, Aïssat,

who had been a member of the party for 17 years, and a leader of the party's Federation of Algiers, was very critical of the new party line that was emerging. He wrote to resign from his duties as party leader in the Algiers region:

Je considère, pour ma part, cette ligne comme défensive et poussant à la jonction, parce qu'elle en exprime bien le désarroi, avec la petite bourgeoisie occidentalisee. Elle nous coupe du peuple et de la réalité. Elle est porteuse, en germes, de positions non-nationales. [...] A mon sens le problème n'est pas d'apparaître à coups de communiqués dans la presse comme les ennemis les plus déterminés du FIS, mais d'être par notre orientation et par notre action les alliés les plus déterminés du peuple.¹¹

Aïssat's letter shows how the question of the crisis of communism was posed within the Algerian context: if the more popular classes — who were most influenced by the FIS — had turned to a fundamentalist party in the local elections of the 1990s, was it possible to anathematize Islamism altogether? Should the limit between what is acceptable in democracy and what is not be based on the essence of political movements — the nature of their ideas — or on the level of violence actually produced?

The attitude that emphasised the dangers of Islamism has recently been denounced again by Hadjerès as a useless dramatization of the national situation preventing any strategy other than one focusing solely on having FIS banned despite its massive success in the local elections of 1990 (Interviews, Paris, 2015 and Hadjerès. 2010). For Sadek Aïssat or Sadek Hadjerès, as communists, it was their role to remain with the people and the language of civil war could not provide an acceptable political line. In other words, they refused to see the workers, peasants, youth, or unemployed

¹¹ [I myself consider this line as defensive line pressing to the collaboration with the westernized petty bourgeoisie, whose disarray it expresses well. It cuts us from the people and from reality. It carries the germ of non-national positions [...] For me, the problem is not to appear communiqué after communiqué in the press as the most resolved enemies of the FIS, but, through our orientation and our action, to appear the most resolved allies of the people.]

as enemies – even when they had voted for the Islamists – and refused this new world divide between archaic and modern. The polarization of opinions within the party is revealed by the fact that Sadek Aïssat was shortly thereafter excluded from the party and, according to several accounts, physically ousted from his party-owned apartment. Shortly thereafter, he left the country in exile, even before the beginning of the civil war: in his case, the causal relation between leaving the party (or being excluded) and leaving the country is very clear.

General Election of December 1991

The run up to the general election that eventually took place in December 1991 was marked by confusion, the date of the ballot having been pushed back several times. It was preceded by a revision of the electoral law, according to which it was no longer legal to use places of worship for electoral purposes, aiming to weaken the FIS in its ‘war of the mosques’, as the press called it. The law was immediately denounced by FIS leaders who refused to recognise it, and another law redefining electoral boundaries was considered gerrymandering.

The PAGS Central Committee of April 1991 decided against running candidates and the May-June issue of *Sawt as-Sha‘b* published an article in Arabic entitled: ‘Why PAGS says ‘no’ to the June 27 legislative election And ‘no’ to the existence of non-constitutional obscurantist parties’. No detail was given and the entire page devoted to this issue was filled with excerpts of the RPI. The decision not to run was — once again — contested in form and content: According to Nouredine Zenine, ‘le CC a appris par

la presse la décision de boycotter des élections’ [It was through the press that the Central Committee learned the decision to boycott the election].¹²

In the meantime, the language and attitude of the FIS leadership became more strident, and its opposition to the regime clearer, with the general strike launched on 25 May 1991 which led to violent confrontations between FIS and traders refusing to close their shops, or students refusing to boycott classes and exams. FIS leaders organized marches and rallies. To avoid further violence, prime minister Mouloud Hamrouche allowed FIS to occupy several squares of the capital city, including Place des Martyrs, and Place du 1^{er} Mai, where they displayed symbols and put on performances that had a military and religious dimension, eventually leading to confrontations with the police. The international context of the Gulf War placed the Algerian crisis within a broader international context after Saddam Hussein declared the struggle against the US-led coalition as a jihad and revamped himself as a Muslim hero (Roberts, 2003: 63-79). FIS enthusiastically supported Saddam Hussein, organizing spectacular demonstrations and offering to open training camps for combatants willing to fight the jihad in Iraq.

After several days of strike, the situation became untenable: Mouloud Hamrouche resigned and was replaced by Sid Ahmed Ghozali, the ‘état de siège’ [state of siege] was declared, the army disperses demonstrators, and the FIS leadership, including Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj — who immediately threatened to declare a *jihad* if the state of emergency was not lifted — were arrested. Questions were raised as to whether it was possible to organize elections in such a context of political violence. After the crisis of the summer, the government attempted to de-escalate the situation,

¹² In Nouredine Zenine, ‘Contribution au débat’, Algiers, 24 Septembre 1991.

by reducing its anti-FIS discourse, opening up dialogue with all political parties, and revising the electoral laws. A new electoral date was set for 26 December 1991. On 22 December the Political Bureau of the PAGS circulated a communiqué entitled: ‘Vous n’irez pas à l’enterrement de l’Algérie’ [You will not attend Algeria’s funeral]:

Citoyennes, citoyens !

Ne jouez pas au "jeu démocratique" avec les pires ennemis de la démocratie, de notre guerre de libération et de notre longue histoire de combats pour la modernité et le progrès !

[Citizens !

Do not play the “democratic game” with the worst enemies of democracy, of our war for independence and of our long history of struggle for modernity and progress!]

The first round of the elections took place in December and FIS won over 3 million votes, almost a quarter of those cast, and three times more than the FLN (Aït-Aoudia, 2015). Only three parties were eligible to compete in the second round of the elections: the FIS, the FLN, and Aït Ahmed’s Front des Forces Socialiste (FFS). Surprisingly, the new electoral laws seemed to have disfavoured the FLN dramatically and despite winning three times more votes, it won ten times less seats than the FFS.

Reactions to the results were both spectacular and confusing. On 31 December, a Comité nationale pour la sauvegarde de l’Algérie (CNSA) was created: its appeal was published in the newspaper, *El Moudjahid*: ‘Il est impossible que la démocratie soit sauvée par ceux qui la dénoncent’ [it is impossible that democracy be saved by those who denounce it.] In this context, the CNSA claimed, a FIS electoral victory would be too serious a threat for the new democratic regime. Members of PAGS and RCD supported CNSA’s statement, though the meaning of this support is still disputed: was it a way to prevent the second round of the elections? Or simply a form of protest against FIS? On the other hand, the FLN and FFS clearly wished for the electoral process to continue. The confusion was such that all of whom were opposed to Islamist

fundamentalism — whether supporters of or opposed to the pursuit of the electoral process — demonstrated together on 2 January 1992, with the slogans ‘Sauver la Démocratie’ [Save democracy], ‘Adieu le FIS’, and ‘Ni intégrisme ni État policier’ [Neither fundamentalism nor a police state]. The media were awash with communiqués and opinions ranging from appeals for calm to expressions of panic in the face of the imminent victory of the fundamentalists.

Since June 1991, president Chadli Bendjedid had resisted all demands to ban the FIS based on its religious foundation. After the first round of the elections, the army intervened and forced him to announce his resignation on television on 11 January. The president also announced that he had dissolved the National Assembly a week earlier. A form of bloodless coup had taken place that would put an end to Algeria’s experience of democratization.

Conclusion

Revisiting the 1988-1992 period through the specific experience of former PAGS activists allows us to locate Algeria at the crossroads of several transnational dynamics and different chronologies. In effect, PAGS had to face up to the end of the Eastern bloc communism and the loss of purpose and sense of isolation was shared in the 1990s by so many communists world-wide. The political reforms of the end of the 1980s rendered visible a world that was suddenly unfamiliar and all the more distressful that Marxist theories of history failed to explain it. In Algeria however, this feeling of being lost was augmented by the immediate physical danger connected with the rise of Islamism which placed Algeria in the broader Muslim world, recently branded by the Iranian revolution of 1979. For those party members who agreed to the

replacement of Marxism and the theory of class struggle by the theory of a historic struggle between archaic fundamentalism and modernism, Algeria, at this historical juncture, was at the heart — if not at the origin — of a world-wide struggle of which 9/11, and the Jihadi Islamism in the aftermath of the ‘Arab Springs’ are but the most recent avatars. As early as 1990, they adopted the language of civil war, took over and mobilized what was left of the party to protect themselves from violence they thought would come (and that came indeed), thus participating in and intensifying the dynamics of internecine conflict. Opposed to them, were those who claimed that the Marxist vision of the world was not broken, that the old practises of “doing politics” still made sense and were made all the more urgent in order to resist the risk of civil war: working amongst the masses, and developing political and social activities. The fact that many of them disagreed with the new party leadership ended up leaving a party they no longer felt they belonged to only made them more isolated and vulnerable to the violence they were trying to prevent.

On a national level, the fracture that appeared within PAGS concerning the question of how to respond to the rise of Islamism and political violence is the main cause of the end of the party. But more importantly, this divide can also be found elsewhere on the political spectrum: later in the civil war it was dubbed as the opposition between ‘*éradicateur*’ [eradicators] and ‘*dialoguiste*’ [conciliators] (see Benkhaled and Vince, this volume). In the present, in the aftermath of the civil war, the reconciliation between these two lines is as important, and just as difficult, as the reconciliation between the two opposing sides of the civil war itself.

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