

Algeria, corruption and Islamic militancy

In the concluding post of our series examining the origins of Africa's War of Terror, Professor Martin Evans examines the role corruption has played in the rise of Islamic militancy in Algeria.

In Algeria the vast majority of citizens believe that the system is fundamentally corrupt. Algerians are intensely cynical about their rulers. Indeed cynicism as a source of humour is a national pastime.

Specifically Algerians are indignant about political and economic corruption. There is a widespread belief that the system is controlled by a shadowy political mafia – known by the French word *le pouvoir* (the power). These elite, made up of competing clans operating at the top of the system, the populace believes, pull all the strings and are involved in theft on a grand scale that focuses on the country's oil and gas resources. The elite know that the West needs these resources and uses his knowledge to construct an elaborate system of kickbacks that is siphoning off the country's wealth into foreign bank accounts.



Colonel Houari Boumedienne's period in power from 1965 to 1978 is regarded by many Algerians as the country's golden age

Importantly there is nothing specifically Algerian about this type of corruption. As a rule, oil is bad for democracy. Why? This is because elites in oil-producing countries do not have to rely upon taxation for revenue. As a result they do not have to be accountable. They do not have to engage with their populations.

This corruption explains why Algerians largely ignore the political process. In theory, the country is a multi-party system, but in reality most Algerians think that politics is about creating a pliable façade for economic corruption. Again, though, there is nothing uniquely Algerian about this. Across the globe there is a distrust of politicians. However, in Algeria this distrust is particularly strong. It explains why the turnout for national elections is consistently below forty per cent.

Yet it would be wrong to conclude that Algeria and Algerians are inherently corrupt. Rather this corruption is the product of specific historical circumstances. Corruption developed on a systematic scale during the Ottoman period from the early sixteenth century. It took the form of a

strata of local officials who extracted taxes for the Ottoman rulers and used this position to line their own pockets.

Not surprisingly these local officials (*qajids*) became popular hate figures and fuelled hatred of Ottoman rule in Algiers. Significantly, too, after the French invasion in 1830, this system was adopted by colonialism. So abuses were perpetuated and anger at this corruption, allied with anger at the fraudulent expropriation of Muslim land as well as anger at the political exclusion of the Muslim majority, was a root cause of the Algerian War 1954 to 1962.

With independence in 1962, the new regime claimed to be a new beginning. This would be a new system run, in the words of the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), 'by the people and for the people.' However as the country slid into chaos, in June 1965 the first president, Ahmed Ben Bella, was overthrown in a military coup by Colonel Houari Boumedienne. Boumedienne justified the coup partly as a return to Islamic values, but also on the grounds that the country needed military order.

Boumedienne remained in power until his death in 1978 and large numbers of Algerians now look back on this period as a golden age. As an historian, I am instinctively distrustful of golden ages. Yet, in talking to Algerians, it is striking how many, of whatever political hue, evoke the late 1960s and early 1970s as a period untainted by corruption. Boumedienne is remembered as a man with clean hands. Moreover, his political discourse underlined the importance of solidarity, togetherness and egalitarianism.

And in examining the myth there is much truth in it. Clearly, there was popular enthusiasm for the nationalisation of foreign petrol companies in 1971. Algerians cheered the way in which Boumedienne saw this as a continuation of the decolonisation process. They applauded his argument that now the petrol money would be used to benefit the whole population. However, the Boumedienne system, in common with so many Arab and African countries at the time, represented a militarisation of society and the spine of this system was the secret police. This secret police was the real power in Algerian society which would become the nerve centre of a system of patronage and corruption.

This corruption really took off in the 1980s with President Chadli Bendjedid. Under him elites were able to seize the opportunity offered by retreat from socialist planning. With economic liberalisation, encouraged by the International Monetary Fund, these elites were in a position to exploit their insider knowledge to hive off large parts of the economy, much like communist elites in post-1989 Eastern Europe. Crucially too, with the demographic explosion, this was the moment when the country was blighted by youth unemployment. With no realistic future, young people began to hate the system and corruption became a burning issue.

This anger exploded with the huge riots of October 1988 – the most significant event in post-independence history. In the wake of this violence Bendjedid pushed through a multi-party system. His hope was to preserve FLN rule, but the main beneficiary was a new political force: the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). This was an Islamist party whose rallying cry was anti-corruption. For the FIS, the system was rotten from the inside because it had departed from God's values. This message won widespread support and in January 1992 the FIS was poised to win power in national elections.

At this point the army stepped in to stop the elections. Mohammed Boudiaf, one of the historic FLN leaders, was brought back from exile in Morocco to become president. The coup plotters hoped that Boudiaf would give their actions a legitimacy, but he quickly made corruption his principal target. Therefore, when on 29 June 1992 he was assassinated, most Algerians did not believe the official line that he was assassinated by Islamist terrorists. Rather they see it as the work of a military clique who saw that Boudiaf was a threat to their corruption networks.

Thereafter Algeria descended into unspeakable violence between the army and Islamist guerrilla groups. By 2003 this cycle of violence and counter-violence had played itself out as most of the

guerrilla groups, realising that victory was impossible, were coaxed into a peace process. The architect of this process is another FLN veteran, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who won the presidency in dubious circumstances in April 1999. However, throughout this period the question of corruption has refused to go away. Indeed with receding violence it has returned to centre stage with many believing that it is worse than ever under Bouteflika. For most Algerians, that is for those outside the narrow elite, corruption is the system.

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