

Algerian Nationalism and the Popular Front

Professor Margaret Majumdar, University of Portsmouth

Keywords

Algeria; AML; Blum–Viollette proposals; ENA; nationalism; *pieds noirs*; Popular Front; Sétif

Q. What were the main strands of Algerian nationalism in 1936?

A. Resistance to the colonizing power had been continuous since the French invasion and conquest, which had started with the taking of Algiers in 1830. It had taken a number of forms, from outright military struggle, which re-emerged after the defeat of the forces of Abdelkader in 1847 in a number of armed revolts, to various types of less overt political and cultural resistance. In the early part of the twentieth century, the resistance developed into several types of movement.

One strand evolved as a result of the frustration of elite groups, who found that access to a French education did not result in the equality promised by the idealistic discourse of French proponents of assimilation. Beginning with the group known as Jeunesse Algérienne at the end of the nineteenth century, this group pursued a reformist agenda, arguing for equal rights for the educated Algerian elite, but within the context of full integration with France. One of its early members was Abdelkader's grandson, known as the Emir Khalid, although he withdrew to Damascus in 1923. These were people who sought office within the French administrative and political system on more favourable terms. Some went on to form the Fédération des Elus Indigènes in 1926. In 1936, the leading figure of the reformist movement was Ferhat Abbas, who at that time was denying that Algeria had a future as a separate nation.

Another strand was grounded in the Islamic reformist movement, which favoured a more modern, purer version of Islam and opposed the superstitious traditional practices, associated with the *marabouts*, or local holy men, favoured by the French. This reformist movement was institutionalized by the establishment of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema, founded by Abdelhamid Ben Badis in 1931. It encouraged a return to the orthodox values of Islam, in terms of personal life-style, with alcohol, smoking and gambling all frowned upon. Its main influence was through its promotion of the Arabic language and Islamic culture, and the education it provided through its schools for both children and adults. As a powerful revivalist movement, it played an important role in channelling resistance to the French colonial power and fashioned an Algerian nationalism, founded on a strong cultural and religious identity. As Ben Badis said, 'Islam is our religion, Arabic our language and Algeria our country.'

A third important strand was developed initially by those Algerian workers, who were based in metropolitan France, some of whom had left their homeland to fight with the French Army in the First World War. The movement was initially close to the French Communist Party (PCF) and shared much of its socialist and Marxist ideology. Indeed, its founder, Abdelkader Hadj-Ali, who created the Etoile Nord Africaine (ENA) in 1924,

was a member of the Central Committee of the PCF. Under the leadership of his deputy, Messali Hadj, the ENA evolved into the first avowedly nationalist, Algerian political movement, with the demand for Algerian independence first raised in France in 1927. This led, ultimately, to the banning of the organization, as well as a rift with the PCF.

Q. What impact did the Popular Front have upon politics in Algeria?

A. With the establishment of the Popular Front Government in France in 1936, there was a sense of expectation on the part of those Algerians seeking political change. It was thought that the climate would now be more favourable towards reform and would act as a spur for several different political strands to come together in the first Algerian Muslim Congress. This included the Ulema, the Fédération des Elus Indigènes, as well as the Algerian Communist Party, which had initially been formed as an offshoot of the French Communist Party, but achieved independent status in 1936. The ENA, with its radical nationalist agenda, was not included in this Congress, which presented a list of demands to the French Government, amounting to equality of rights for Algerians, but not independence.

Q. What were the Popular Front reforms for Algeria? Why did they fail?

A. The Popular Front Government's response was summed up in what came to be known as the Blum–Viollette proposals, after the Prime Minister, Léon Blum, and the Minister of State for Algerian Affairs, Maurice Viollette. The main proposal was to extend French citizenship, with the political rights that this entailed, to about 25,000 Algerian Muslims (essentially graduates, certain categories of army personnel and civil servants) without loss of the personal status linked to their religious beliefs.

The proposals failed for a number of reasons. On the one hand, while some of the Algerian political elite welcomed them as a step forward, these proposals were too limited in scope to satisfy the growing demand for equality and did nothing to appease nationalist demands for independence. Indeed, it was the Popular Front Government, which banned the ENA in January 1937, then reborn as the Parti du Peuple Algérien (PPA). On the other hand, even the modest Blum–Viollette proposals were too much for the European colonists, or *pieds noirs*, and they demonstrated their opposition forcefully until the proposals were finally withdrawn in 1939.

Q. What was the state of Algerian nationalism at the time of the fall of France?

A. The failure of the Blum–Viollette reforms had brought disillusion in its train for those, like Ferhat Abbas, who had earlier favoured full assimilation with France as the way forward. Increasingly, the need to proclaim and reinforce a specifically Algerian identity was evident. However, most Algerian Muslims had rallied to the French cause in their fight against Nazi Germany. The fall of France was nonetheless seen as an ignominious defeat by many and revealed the limitations and weakness of what had hitherto been considered a mighty military and political power. This perception was exacerbated by the

subsequent divisions between French supporters of the Vichy regime and the Free French.

Q. What policy did Vichy adopt towards Algerian nationalism?

A. The Vichy Government, with the support of many European colonists, embarked upon a policy of ruthless repression, in which any real or potential opponents of its rule were persecuted. In addition, it stripped Algerian Jews of the French citizenship, which they had enjoyed since the Crémieux Decree of 1870.

Q. What impact did the arrival of the Americans have upon Algerian nationalism in November 1942?

A. The ousting of the Vichy administration and the establishment of the Free French forces in Algeria, as a result of the Allied landings, led to the repeal of some of the most repressive legislation. The Free French Commander, General Giraud, called on Algerians to join the fight, declaring that political reform would nonetheless have to wait until the end of the war. In response, Ferhat Abbas drew up a Manifesto of the Algerian People in February 1943, which was signed by a representative sample of Algerian leaders of all persuasions and presented to the Free French and the Allies. This document demanded an end to colonialism, the right to self-determination and full democracy for Algeria, along with the recognition of Algerian cultural specificity and the Arabic language. Although a Franco-Algerian commission agreed a set of reforms, known as the *Additif*, this was, in fact, never implemented and put into cold storage, pending the end of the war.

Q. How did de Gaulle respond to Algerian nationalism?

A. The reluctance to adopt reforms was influenced by the key stumbling-block of the European colonists and their opposition to any change in the status quo. Thus, even though De Gaulle and his advisers, notably Georges Catroux, his appointee as Governor-General, appeared to be convinced that some measure of reform was necessary, they considered the Manifesto proposals to be too far-reaching and unacceptable to the *pied noir* minority, which would rapidly become marginalized by the Algerian Muslim majority in a truly democratic system. The reforms that the provisional French Government introduced in 1944 were in fact largely based on the Blum–Viollette proposals and would have enabled approximately 60,000 Algerian Muslims to gain citizenship, those considered to have earned the right through their service to France or their educated status. This was in spite of the fact that the limited Algerian political support, which might have existed in 1936 for the original reform, had by now largely evaporated.

Q. What events led to Sétif in May 1945?

A. The dismay caused by the proposed reform and the opposition to it had led to a coming together, as the Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté (AML), of the major strands of the Algerian nationalist movement to campaign for the demands set out in the

Manifesto, including the supporters of Messali Hadj and the Ulema. It was against a background of gathering overt and clandestine nationalist organization and activity, along with the inevitable brutal reaction of the colonists, as well as an intensification of social unrest, as a result of food and other shortages and a poor economic climate, that the events of Sétif in May 1945 have to be viewed.

It had been agreed that the Algerian nationalists would mark 8 May, the day set aside for the celebration of VE Day and the liberation of France, with demonstrations of their own for the liberation of Algeria. Although these demonstrations were planned and took place in a number of Algerian towns, it was in Sétif that the collision between nationalist demonstrators, displaying the national flag in defiance, and the colonial power erupted into a bloodbath, in which both nationalist demonstrators and colonialists were killed, and violence was unleashed on both sides. The repression that followed was brutal and extreme, leading to many arrests and killings by the French security forces, variously estimated at 1,500 by the official French figures and 45,000 by the nationalists.

Q. What impact did Sétif have upon Algerian nationalism?

A. Whatever the actual impact of the events of Sétif and the subsequent repression at the time, it has become a key moment in the construction of independent Algeria's national memory and consciousness, as a turning-point, marking a dramatic new phase. For many who would come of age at the time of the national liberation struggle (1954–62), these were events that marked their view of French colonialism indelibly and instilled in them a determination to oust the colonial oppressor. There is no denying its power as one of the key mobilizing founding myths of Algerian nationalism. Yet, although it is generally accepted that Sétif marks a point of no return, after which it becomes impossible to contemplate any peaceful resolution of the issues at stake between the two polarized communities, this is not the same as suggesting that, without Sétif, events would have taken a different course, given that compromise was never part of the colonists' agenda.

Key publications by Margaret Majumdar

'Language and history in Franco-Algerian relations', in Kamal Salhi (ed.), *Francophone Studies: Discourse and Identity* (Exeter: Elm Bank Publications, 2000).

Francophone Studies: The Essential Glossary (London: Arnold, 2002).

'Exceptionalism and universalism: the uneasy alliance', in A. Chafer and E. Godin (eds), *La France exceptionnelle* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2004).

'Orientalism and the problematic of vision: a contemporary perspective', in Margaret Topping (ed.), *Eastern Voyages, Western Visions: French Writing and Painting of the Orient* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2004).

'The "New Man" at the dawn of the 21st century: challenges and shifts in Algerian identity', in M. Majumdar and M. Saad (eds), *Transition and Development. Patterns, Challenges and Implications of Change in Algeria* (Portland, OR: Intellect, 2005).

Further reading

C.-R. Ageron, *Histoire de l'Algérie contemporaine* (Paris: PUF, 1999).

- M. Harbi, *Aux Origines du Front de Libération nationale* (Paris: C. Bourgeois, 1975).
- J. Ruedy, *Modern Algeria: The Origins and Development of a Nation* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1992).
- B. Stora, *Les Sources du nationalisme algérien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989).
- B. Stora, *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale (1830–1954)* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).