

A NATION REBUILDS

Winds of change sweep through a war-torn Algeria as the country's political and intellectual elites try to shake off the stigma of violence, intolerance and introversion hovering over them throughout the 1980s and 1990s. Fundamentalists and democratic leaders now coexist under Buteflika's policy of 'civil concord.' By Javier Valenzuela

Healing the wounds of civil war

After a decade-long exile in Paris, Cheb Mami has returned to his native country and has started refurbishing an old Moorish villa in Algiers. As we sit in his garden sipping coffee under a palm tree, hundreds of swallows flutter about in the dusk of fall. "Swallows in your house bring good luck," says the rai music star. "The worst is over," he concludes.

Yes. The worst is over. Unlike a few years ago, beards and veils are no longer an ever-present reality in the streets of Algerian cities. The lay and the fundamentalist communities have started to tolerate one another. Oran and Algiers are safer for strollers than Caracas or Johannesburg, and the young and the old have returned to the dance floors. The media, moreover, operates freely. After the terrifying whirlwind of political and socio-economic crises of the 1980s, which gave way to the messiest and fiercest of civil wars in the 1990s, Algeria is recovering its breath, its hope.

Islamic guerrillas still kill in the country's mountainous regions, and the army cannot seem to erase the remnants of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) nor of the Salafist Group (GSPC.) A secret services officer explains the army's failures in terms of the scarcity of high-tech resources, those promised to Algeria by Americans and Europeans. Also the reforms pushed for by president Abdelaziz Buteflika stall before the enormous amount of problems his government faces: Growing unrest among Kabilia's Berbers; endemic unemployment; people barely making ends meet; and the persistence of the mafia, gathering army officers and top officials of the old ruling party, the National Liberation Front (NFL). Some among this group of men, enriched during their years heading public companies and state-run businesses, raise their voices calling for a military coup. And yet, anyone who lived through the 1980s and 1990s in Algeria would define today's situation as a miracle.

A meeting in the open-air terrace of the Al Yazair hotel, filled with the scent of jasmines, is the first hint of a miracle. A dozen or so women sit around the same table wearing veils, western clothes, flowing hair and traditional Muslim tunics. Environmental problems absorb their attention.

Perhaps the terrace of the Al Yazair is just an oasis, but it is worth stopping by. Inevitably we wonder why only women — engineers, doctors, economists, public employees and intellectuals — participate in this debate on the environment. "Because women were the most courageous during our war and at the time of confronting this postwar period they are also the most courageous," replies Fatiha Benanoum, a slim redhead dressed in western garb.



Muslims pray at the El Sunna mosque, in Bab el Ued, an Algiers neighborhood. / BERNARDO PÉREZ

"Women have always shown more interest in a culture of peace," adds Fatiha Larinouna, covering her hair with a yellow scarf and her body with a long tunic.

Women have been the greatest victims of a civil war that has killed more than 100,000 people and is now in its last gasps. The fundamentalists targeted any woman who refused to comply with the submissive and silent role awarded to them by their misreading of the Koran. Maissa Bey, who has never worn a *hijab* or a veil, who smokes in public and wears make-up and who has

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never stopped doing so, is one of them.

Middle-aged, with cropped hair and a soft, Mediterranean face, Bey is part of this environmental round table. With two novels published in France the Oran-based writer has received numerous death threats. "When it all started we were paralyzed. The scream came later, our calls for help, but nobody listened. And then came this injection of vitality, the period we are going through now. Many people said: 'We can't keep on living this way, it is self-destructive.' So people started walking out on the streets, going to restaurants and dance clubs and beaches. Boys

and girls went out together and held hands again," says Bey. "In Algeria we haven't had a civil war, but a war against civilians."

The beginning of the end of the war coincided with Buteflika's accession to power in April, 1999. Buteflika pushed for a "civil concord" sketching the basic traces for a peaceful transition to democracy and often looking to the Spanish model for inspiration.

Gradually liberalizing the NFL's Soviet-style economy, which had choked the country's productive structure for 25 years, Buteflika started opening the country to foreign products and investments. Later, September 11 won Algeria some much needed foreign support. Treated as an outcast during the 1990s, Algeria took new steps into the international scene holding onto Washington's guiding hand. Finally, last spring's legislative elections, won by NFL reformist Ali Benflis, were, according to international observers, fair and transparent. In those elections moderate Islamic parties absorbed 20 percent of the popular vote.

The situation, however, is far from ideal. A 50 percent voter turnout in the last elections illustrates people's lack of enthusiasm with politics and newspaper headlines scream out a new killing everyday in areas such as Tenés. There have been at least 1,300 casualties in the first ten months of the year alone.

A large demonstration of women dressed in hijabs gathers down the steep Roosevelt Road, holding up photographs of bearded men. They are a few of the

7,000 people that went missing during the years of fierce military repression. A repression that responded to the no less fierce Islamist upheaval. Aside from this peaceful protest with its inevitable police surveillance, the atmosphere in the city center is calm and normal.

Redhead Jalima Toumi is the voice and the face of the new Algeria. Culture and Communications Minister and government spokesperson, Toumi believes the war is over and the transition to democracy underway: "Algerians are too Mediterranean to accept a Taliban lifestyle." Eating a fried

"Algerians are far too Mediterranean to accept a Taliban kind of lifestyle"

fish lunch at Le Bardo, Toumi quotes French poet René Char to explain her vision of her country's future: "No testament anticipated our inheritance," said the poet. "In Char's France," explains Toumi "nobody foresaw Vichy or the Resistance, in the same way as nobody in Algeria had never foreseen the Islamist upheaval and the spontaneous civil resistance that challenged it. There are no scripts for us, everything remains to be done and everything is possible."

With various death threats against her by outlawed Islamist groups, Toumi is harshly criticized by moderate Islamist papers such as Chouruk and El

Biled. Her former colleagues in the democratic opposition, meanwhile, decry her adherence to Buteflika's project, which entails integrating those fundamentalists that have no blood on their hands. "Other than oil this country also overflows with freedom of speech," says the Minister. "No newspaper has been shut-down nor have any journalists been arrested since Buteflika became president. We even tolerate the sector of the press that calls for a military coup with headlines such as: 'Time for action, my general.'"

For now the Islamists have lost the second battle of Algiers. You can see it in restaurants such as the Sultan Ibrahim, where men and women of all ages spend Thursday night washing down seafood and fish with Tango beer, and white wine or whisky. There is live music and people fill the dance floor, shaking their hips and wriggling their arms in the air. Similar scenes take place in clubs such as Zoom, Les Milles et Une Nuits or Le Pacha, where the so-called *tchi-tchi* youth, young businessmen or the children of members of the mafia wear their baseball caps or show their bellies in their tight, western style clothes.

Bentalha, a dusty, tattered settlement in the outskirts of Algiers shows the other side of the coin. Four hundred of the town's 8,000 people were murdered there on the night of September 27, 1997, and people still argue over who was behind it all. Was it the GIA, as the government says or was it the work of army "death squads"

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as many others suspect? It is the eternal "who killed who" question that typified Algeria's civil war and that still tortures the country's conscience.

Through NGO Forem, Mostefa Jiali looks after the survivors of the Bentalha massacre. Receiving funds from the European Union, Kuwait and the Arab Emirates, the organization has set up camp in the outskirts of town with its solid team of doctors and psychologists. Dozens of children and teenagers are treated there for problems such as autism, aggressiveness, drug addictions, crime and prostitution. "Children are never to blame for their parents' actions," says Jiali as he refuses to make distinctions between the children of Islamists murdered by the army and vice versa.

"The most crucial thing is to put an end to our pessimistic and self-destructive spirit"

Official statistics set the number of war orphans at 200,000 and of traumatized children at one million. "We are just a drop of water in a desert of pain," says Jiali. But now children run and play where the defense line once stood. There is speech therapy for those who stopped speaking after the massacre, a small clinic, an Internet café and a small dromedary that has become the children's mascot. Some women dressed in traditional garb, with head scarf and long tunics, recall the night of September 27. "We don't know who did it or why; but they weren't good Muslims; Muslims don't do that," says Mrs Tual, whose son was killed that night.

Following the country's independence from France, the NFL imposed its single party rule guided by forced industrialization and a Soviet-style economic model. Uprooting the country's agricultural base and its tolerant version of Islam the model was shattered in 1988, when youngsters frustrated by unemployment and the government's inefficiency and corruption took over the streets. Only tanks managed to quash them. Then president Chadli Benydid responded with a fresh policy of political and economic openness, but Islamists of the FIS kept gaining ground in villages and neighborhoods throughout the country. So much so that the FIS won the 1991 general elections. In response the army overthrew Benydid, annulling the electoral results and plunging the country into a bitter civil war.

It is hard to know where the three million FIS voters of 1991 went, but what is certain is that Islamist movements are still an important element in the country. Caftans, Afghan style beards and the typical white or gray Kamis abound in Algiers' popular neighborhood of Bab el Ued. But on Fridays, the sacred day for Muslims, these Islamists and their veiled wives share the city streets with kids wearing Real Madrid or Barcelona soccer club shirts and girls wearing tight shirts and jeans. Like any other popular quarter, Bab el Ued is full of shops that remain open even on holidays. Some sell loose cigarettes, others sexy lingerie.



Singer Cheb Mami (left) and Brahim and Kahina Hadjas, (right) a banker and industrialist. / BERNARDO PÉREZ



Left: Maissa Bey, writer. Right: Farid Tualbi and the radio team El Badja. / B. P.

Cafes serving delicious cups of coffee and sweet tea brim with people and old men sit on the sidewalks playing domino. But by noon the area's vital energy starts moving towards the El Sunna mosque.

This is the birthplace of the FIS, brought to life in the 1980s by a young charismatic preacher called Ali Benyach. Benyach has been in prison for years, but his spirit is still alive — under discreet police surveillance — in El Sunna. The mosque is as crowded as in the best of Benyach's days. The difference is today's Imam does not ever mention politics.

Algeria has suffered a lot during the civil war. Exhausted, most of the country's factions have agreed to coexist, if only temporarily, alongside each other. The economy is the downside. Unemployment affects 32 percent of the population according to official statistics, but everyone knows real unemployment is higher. Only five million of Algeria's 30 million inhabitants have a long term job and most of them work for the oversized public sector. Algeria imports almost all it consumes and its economy grows at a rate of three percent, when it would need seven percent growth

rates to absorb all its unemployed. The country seems to depend on its oil and gas wealth, the two sectors that represent 97 percent of its exports.

Brahim Hayas, 57, started off selling peanuts in the streets of his native Constantina to later make a fortune in the textile industry in Mauritania. Sharing his time between Palma de Mallorca and Algiers he is now the president of Algeria's first business private

"We can breathe now, we are turning over a new leaf since the fundamentalists lost"

bank, "a company incubator," as he calls it. An Algerian TV crew interviews him in his offices in Algiers. Hayas has just obtained a credit line from a Washington institution and the country looks on expectantly at the possibility of fresh US investment. "The most crucial thing is to put an end to our pessimistic and self-destructive spirit; foreigners are starting to have more confidence in our country than we do," he says.

The narrow streets of Oran's

old Jewish quarter overflow with the vitality so characteristic of the Maghreb. Street sellers hawk dates, eggs, nuts, bananas, lemons, potatoes, and olives as people walk past them eating carantica, Oran's version of pizza. Standing under graffiti reading "NFL oui," a group of men read verses of the Koran in remembrance of a friend who has just passed away. With the Spanish castle of Santa Cruz watching over it, Oran is the most liberal of Algerian cities and the one that best weathered the stormy 1990s. Islamists call the city Sodom and term its lively rai music as "the choir of the devil."

Not surprisingly, Oran is also the home town of the country's most balanced newspaper, which also has the highest circulation. Founded in 1994 and owned by a varied group of industrialists, academics and professionals, *Le quotidien d'Oran* bases its editorial content on the principle of defending Algeria's democracy. Its editor in chief, 42-year-old Azzedine Seyal has been threatened with death by Muslims in the city where journalists Jamal Zaiter and Bajti Benaouda were murdered. Seyal never tells people he doesn't know about his job. The offices of the paper stand across

from the cream-colored fortress of Oran's police force.

"We can breathe now, we are turning a new leaf, the fundamentalists have lost," says Farid Tualbi, director of progressive radio station El Bahya. His station plays lively Algerian music: Chaabi, rai and rap. "Thank God we are alive," says Tualbi pointing upwards. "We went through very rough times in this station. During the 1990s I would sleep in the radio's offices, I had no fixed schedule and I would walk on the streets looking everywhere. I would always inspect the car before turning the engine on and I constantly had to change phone numbers...The fundamentalists hated our station. They were telling Algerians: 'Stay at home, don't listen to music.' And we would tell them: 'Listen to music, go out, have fun, try to be happy.'"

"In Buteflika, Algeria has found the right doctor. He has given an accurate diagnosis"

We won. Algerians can't live in a closed society, without being able to talk and have fun. They are too Mediterranean, too warm for that."

Born 35 years ago in Saida, nearby Oran, Algeria's rai star Cheb Mami agrees. For Mami rai is a "blend of Arab, African and Spanish music that talks of love and alcohol in an open manner in Arab dialect." The NFL's regime denigrated this type of music during the 1980s, considering it a vehicle for the young to express their discontent against the government. "I started off clandestinely, there was no space for me in public radio or TV and I had to spread my music through more or less pirate recordings." Mami, like other rai stars, soon captured the spirit of the young people in his country and in France, where he has lived for years, but as the FIS walked onto the scene rai musicians started being violently persecuted. "Fundamentalists knew the best way to break a country was to break its culture, so they tried to steal from us the oxygen of music, theater, cinema and literature."

Mami is optimistic now and that is why he has returned to Algeria. "With Buteflika, Algeria has found the right doctor. The doctor has given an accurate diagnosis and treatment. Now we just need a few years for it to have effect." Thirty-five-year-old Dilem, the mastermind of the country's most famous comic strip, disagrees with Mami, attacking president Buteflika almost daily from his page in *Liberté*. Dilem is adamant, Algeria "is a dictatorship." Why? "Because the Algerian people haven't had the chance to choose their representatives freely since 1962." And yet, he can freely publish his presidential satires.

This is Algeria at the dawn of 2003. A plural, passionate and problematic country. A country that must overcome a civil war, conduct a peaceful democratic transition and transform its Soviet style economy into a market economy. And also an enthusiastic country, moved by the willingness to leave its somber past behind. A country that knows what a war against fundamentalism is. And one that has, perhaps, won that war.