

THE ALGERIAN EDUCATED ELITE'S NATIONALISM

(1925 – 1962)

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There is not a set definition about nationalism. It has been described by some historians as the desire of a group of people to subvert and to overcome the moral, political, and cultural predominance of the coloniser over the colonised. On the other hand, Historian Thomas Hopkins views nationalism as “any organisation that explicitly asserts rights, claims and aspirations of a given society to ... [an alien] authority whatever its institutional form or objectives”¹. According to another historian, J. S. Coleman, nationalism is extrinsically related to any organisation that is solely political with the aim of achieving self determination and ultimate liberation from an alien domination.

Nationalism in Algeria emerged as a reaction to the impact of colonialism. The French political dominion and their economic exploitation of the Algerian lands and people urged a group of intellectuals to emerge in Algeria to oppose the French rule and its theory of assimilation.

Historically, the intellectual nationalist sentiment in Algeria has been, to a great extent, accelerated with the bloodiest confrontations which took place in Setif on 08 may 1945. This incident could but add fuel to the growing fire of the Algerians’ nationalist feelings.

As a movement worthy of the name, nationalism in Algeria has evolved through different stages including the reformist stage which extended in a period from 1945 to 1955, and the radical phase from 1955 to independence in 1962. It was through these two phases that the Algerian intelligentsia sought to attain independence and ultimate liberation from the alien rule. It is worth noting that the intellectual movement has never been able to attract all the masses in its ranks, yet it has persisted throughout the years, and after a marked decline by the beginning of the 1950’s, the Algerian nationalist movement has experienced a revival by the mid 1950’s and was to lead to independence in 1962.

The reformist phase of the intellectual struggle was led by prominent leaders like Messali Hadj (1898-1974) and Ferhat Abbas (1899-1985). The former was the founder of The Star of North Africa (L'étoile Nord Africaine "E. N. A.") in Paris in 1925, a movement among Algerian intellectuals and workers. The official paper of the movement was entitled The Nation (La Nation). It called for three basic principles: the establishment of an Algerian nationhood, North African unity, and the realisation of a complete agrarian reform. As a result of these reforms, the French felt their authority over the Algerians threatened and therefore dissolved the E. N. A. in 1929 and Messali was expatriated from France in 1930.

Back to Algeria, Messali launched The Algerian's People's Party (Le Parti Populaire Algerien "P. P. A.") in 1937. The P. P. A. was banned in 1939. Nonetheless, it had been supported by a group of students and workers and could, therefore, operate illegally and militantly until the mid 1940's.

Ferhat Abbas was another prominent figure of the Algerian nationalist movement that marked the reformist phase for the struggle for self determination and liberation from the French rule. Supported by Messali Hadj, Ferhat Abbas founded on March 14 1944 a moderate reform group The Friends of the Manifesto and of Liberty (Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberté "A. M. L."). This latter group became later known as The Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto (Union Démocratique du Manifeste Algerien "U. D. M. A.").

By September 1944, the members of the U. D. M. A. circulated a paper entitled Equality (Egalité). This paper came to be known by the end of the 1940's as Equality – Algerian Republic (Egalité – République Algérienne), and then as Algerian Republic (République Algérienne) for short.

In 1946 some A. M. L. members together with a group of the P.P.A. formed a legal front organisation known in history as

The Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (Le Mouvement Pour le Triumphe des Libertés Democratique M. T. L. D.) with Messali as the leader of the movement. At the National Assembly elections of November 01, 1946, the M. T. L. D. was able to win five out of the fifteen elected seats. Nonetheless, the movement lost all its seats in 1948 and in 1950 it was suppressed by the police. Members of the M. T. L. D. launched a more radical paramilitary group known as The Special Organisation (L'organisation Spéciale "O. S."). However, this organisation did not prosper. It was dissolved and its members were jailed.

By the 1950's the Algerian nationalist movement became increasingly radical. Its leaders realised that their reformist grievances were utterly ignored by the French authorities and came to the conclusion that their ultimate goals of self determination and liberation could never be achieved through peaceful means and embarked on a radical change.

In 1951 the M. T. L. D. launched political and cultural organisations like: the Algerian Front, the Algerian Communist Party, and the Society of 'Ulema. In 1954, former members of the O. S. organisation left the M. T. L. D. to found the Revolutionary Committee of Unity and Action (Comité Révolutionnaire D'Unité et D'Action C. R. U. A.).

The C. R. U. A. was an organisation that called for armed rebellion. It urged all nationalist movements in Algeria to gather under one united force to combat the enemy. On 1st November 1954 the C. R. U. A. became known as the National Liberation Front (Le Front de Libération Nationale) or F. L. N. for short. The F. L. N. was in fact, a socialist party that grouped together members of different nationalist groups like: M. T. L. D., the U. D. M. A., members of the Society of 'Ulema, and former independents and young leaders. The F. L. N. members became more militant and were gradually joined by new organisations which did not, like the older ones, exclude the use of violence to obtain their ends.

The F. L. N. members were among the earliest prominent nationalist leaders who organised and led people to the first armed confrontations. The leading members of the F. L. N. were known in history as chefs historiques (historical leaders) of the Algerian war for independence. These eminent leaders were men like: Larbi Ben M'hidi, Mustapha Ben Boulaid, Mohamed Boudiaf, Mourad Didouche, Belkacem Krim, Rabah Bitat, Ben Bela ... and many others.

The F. L. N. members divided the Algerian soil into six military zones with a leader to command each zone, and declared war on France on November 01, 1954. The first open struggle took place in Toussaint Rouge (Les Aurès) one of the six military zones under the leadership of Messali Hadj, then it extended over the remaining military zones.

The French did not remain passive to the F. L. N. military confrontations. Under the governorship of Pierre Mendès France, the French adopted a restricted policy over the Algerian territories and reinforced their army throughout the Algerian soil to maintain order in the colony. Nonetheless, the French colonial policy could but further the F. L. N. militant actions. On August 20, 1955 the Algerian militants killed more than 123 French pièd noirs, including women and children in the second military zone of Constantine. The French replied by doing the same thing and murdering over 1200 civilians in the same area.

By the middle of the 1950's, the F.L. N. sought after an international assistance for its cause of independence and liberation. Its members participated in a number of Pan African Conferences in the aim of achieving aid on the part of the other Pan African organisations. Algeria was, for instance, represented in the Bandung Conference in 1955. The conference brought together for the first time in history the colonised people of Asia with the ones in Africa under one political force to combat western expansionism. The members of the Bandung conference resolved

to promote mutual interest and cooperation among the colonised people along both continents, respect for fundamental human rights according to the principles of the United Nations' charter, and respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations. Furthermore, the delegates of the Afro-Asian conference expressed their support to all nationalist movements who have resorted to the armed struggle as a means to achieve independence and self determination.

Algeria was further represented in other Pan African conclaves like the First Conference of Independent African States which took place in Accra in 1958. This conference played a pivotal role in the future independence of African states still under the chains of colonialism including Algeria. The conference was held from 15 to 22 April and was composed of different delegates from eight independent states. Ghana (former Gold Coast) and Liberia represented black Africa in a Pan African context, and Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Libya represented North Africa in a Muslim and Arab contexts. The conference was also attended by other members from Ethiopia.

During the 1958 Conference, the delegates raised the problems of racial discrimination with regard to the black race world wide. They also stressed on their African personality and proclaimed a political, economic, and cultural coordination among the different African independent states. The delegates finally resolved for a direct involvement in the future independence of the African states still under the chains of colonialism. The delegates recommended that:

... a definite date should be set for the attainment of independence by each of the Colonial Territories in accordance with the will of the people of the territories and the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, ... [and] that all Participating Governments should give all possible assistance to the dependent peoples in their struggle to achieve self-determination and independence ...²

For the achievement of their goals, the delegates insisted on the unity of all the independent states through the creation of a permanent body that would defend the common foreign interests of the independent states in world affairs. Furthermore, the delegates also sought support among the nationalist movements of the dependent African states as an important step for the future emancipation of their respective countries.

The All African Peoples Organisation (A. A. P. O) was first held at Accra, Ghana from 5 to 13 December 1958. It was a non governmental organisation that grouped together African political parties from different African geographical backgrounds. The A. A. P. O. was held to stimulate African independence movements to achieve a continental political union among the different political activists from all Africa

About 250 delegates from twenty eight African territories attended the conference. There were representatives from: Algeria, Tunisia, Mauritania, West Africa, Cameroon, Togo, Dahomey, Senegal, Guinea, Angola, and South Africa. Significant emphasis was placed on the issue of independence in Africa. The delegates claimed that the independence of some African states would be meaningless without the independence of all Africa.

The delegates also raised their Pan Africanist slogan "Africa for the Africans". The slogan did not exclude the participation of non black members, but it implied that Africa must be ruled by the Africans. In Nkrumah's words:

... We are not racialists or chauvinists. We welcome into our midst peoples of all other races, other nations, other communities, who desire to live among us in peace and equality. But they must respect us and our rights, our right as the majority to rule. That, as our Western friends have taught us to understand it, is the essence of democracy.³

He added:

When I speak of Africa for the Africans this should be interpreted in the light of my emphatic declaration that do not believe in racialism and colonialism. The concept- “Africa for the Africans” –does not mean that the other races are excluded from it. No. It only means that Africans, who naturally are in the majority in Africa, shall and must govern themselves in their own countries.⁴

The delegates finally resolved to establish a permanent conference secretariat located in Accra to pursue the promotion of the feeling of unity among all Africans, to struggle for the eradication of discriminatory practices, colonialism and imperialism in support of independence, and to work for the establishment of a United States of Africa.

At a national level, a secret meeting took place in la Soummam on 20 August 1956 to group together about 20 leaders of the F. L. N. The members resolved to re-organise their army through the creation of L’armée de la Libération Nationale (A. L. N.). The A. L. N. intensified its armed fight throughout the different military zones especially in Algiers where the militants put bombs in cafés and public places. In doing so the number of the French victims became increasingly great. On 19 September 1958, the F. L. N. created its own Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne “G. P. R. A.”) under the governorship of Ferhat Abbas.

In 1959, General De Gaule spoke about the Algerians’ right to independence. In 1960 negotiations with regard to the independence of Algeria were launched between De Gaule and the G. P. R. A. However, not all the French were in favour of the Algerian independence. Some French expatriates in Algeria violently opposed Algerian liberation through the foundation of a secret army organisation known in history as the O. A. S.

(Organisation Armée Secrete). The O. A. S. expected to do by extra- or legal means what had not been allowed by law: to exercise absolute control over the Algerians, drive them and their fellows from power, and maintain the French supremacy in Algeria through the preservation of the theory of assimilation. These reactions could but strengthen the Algerians' desire for independence. Between January 24th and February 2nd 1961, people protested in Algiers claiming for a complete emancipation of Algeria.

By the end of 1961, and as a result of pressure on the part of both the Algerians and the French, secret negotiations took place in Evian between De Gaulle and the G. P. R. A. The Evian Accords were then signed between both sides, the French and the Algerians, and the French government agreed to sign a cease fire agreement on 18 March 1962. The Evian Accords also recognised the Algerians' right to sovereignty and independence. In July of the same year the Algerians voted for a referendum that affirmed the cease fire with the French and Algeria became officially independent on 05 July 1962.

Foot Notes:

¹ Cited in B. Lahouel, *The Origins of Nationalism in Algeria, the Gold Coast, and South Africa, With Special Reference to the Period 1919-37*, (Aberdeen: The Aberdeen University), 1984, p.1.

² C. Legum, *Pan Africanism: A Short Political Guide*, (New York: F. A. Praeger), 1962, P. 141.

³ Ibid., PP. 43-44.

⁴ Ibid., P. 44.

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