

# THE FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY & WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN ALGERIA: A LONG LEGACY OF STRUGGLE

*The uprising that began in Algeria on 22 February 2019, was a watershed moment in the country's 57-year history since independence. It reflects, among other things, the culmination of decades of struggle by two secular movements that have pushed against both the extremist Islamist tendencies in the country, but also against a regime that tried to contain and use the Islamists to its own advantage. The absence of an Islamist presence in the protests and the secular nature of the demands is notable, suggesting that the country has now entered what some call a post-Islamist era. This article explores what gave rise to these new tendencies. It first documents the demise of Islamist influences and shows how the current protests have their roots in two secular movements: the women's movement and the Kabyle (Berber) movement, thus representing a fundamental shift in Algerian politics.*

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**T**he uprising that began in Algeria on 22 February 2019 is a watershed moment in the country's 57-year history since independence. It reflects the culmination of decades of struggle by two secular movements that have pushed against both the extremist Islamist tendencies in the country, but also against a regime that both tried to contain and use the Islamists to its own advantage. The absence of an Islamist presence in the protests and the secular nature of the demands is notable, suggesting that the country has now entered what some call a post-Islamist era.<sup>1</sup> Post-Islamist sentiments seek to combine religion with rights, liberty, and pragmatism. It recognizes pluralism of thought and a secular orientation.<sup>2</sup> In Algeria, this has particular significance given the recent history of the country and its experiences during the Black Decade (1991–2002), when large numbers of civilians died at the hands of Islamist militia and government soldiers. This happened when the country opened up to multipartyism, leading to the electoral successes of Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which the government could not accept, resulting in the shutting down of FIS and a second round of elections, thus leading to a civil war.

The 2019 demonstrations embody a moment of national unity, which is all the more remarkable given how divided the country was during the Black Decade. People have been protesting throughout the country from all walks of life, all political persuasions and ages, although the dominance of young people is evident. Islamists participate in the demonstrations, not for religious reasons, but as citizens. The presence of women was said to have helped ensure that the protests remained peaceful, as protestors chanted *silmiya* (peaceful). The protests are often compared with the October 1988 protests against high unemployment and government austerity measures in which women were absent. These protests, however, devolved into riots, in which over 500 were killed and about 1,000 were wounded. The appearance in the 2019 protests of women leaders like the iconic heroine of the Algerian Independence War, Djamila Bouhired, gave protesters added encouragement. The protests continued every Friday so that the term *vendredi* (to Friday) became a verb.

The protests began with demands against the president Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term in office. After he withdrew his candidacy, the protesters demanded that the oligarchy that had backed Bouteflika step down. One by one, various members of *le pouvoir* (the powers that be) stepped down or were arrested. Demonstrators also demanded democracy, dignity, an end to corruption, and transparency. The Grande Poste is a focal point of the Friday demonstrations and has been nicknamed *tahrir wa somoud* (liberation and determination).

<sup>1</sup> Abed Charef, "La Tunisie et le Maroc entrent dans l'ère post-islamiste," *Middle East Eye*, 18 June 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Meriem El Haitami, "Restructuring Female Religious Authority: State-Sponsored Women Religious Guides (Murshidat) and Scholars (Alimat) in Contemporary Morocco," *Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (2012), pp. 227-240.

Following International Women's Day on 8 March 2019, the demands for democracy were combined with demands for women's rights, as protesters marched with banners, stating, "No free and democratic Algeria without freedom of the women." One Algerian commentator, Hamid Zanaz explained that the slogan: "Democracy = women's rights" meant "No to a religious state. No to applying sharia. No to Islamists' rule and no to fundamentalist colonization."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the links between the women activist demands and the post-Islamist tendency could not be clearer. The rest of this article explores why this is the case. It first documents the demise of Islamist influence, which was at its height in 1991 when the Front for Islamic Salvation garnered millions of votes. Then it shows how the current movement has its roots in two secular movements: the women's movement and the Kabyle (Berber) movement, thus representing a fundamental shift in Algerian politics. However, despite initial inspiration neither movement gained strength due to the regime's efforts to subdue civil society.

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### ***The Demise of Political Islamists***

While Algerian society overall is very conservative, having been influenced by the Wahhabist tendencies after the 1980s, the political influence of the Islamists has diminished considerably. Already this was evident with the rise of Daesh. The number of ISIS fighters who went to fight in Syria and Iraq from Algeria to join the Daesh fighters was negligible compared to that of other countries in the region. Even the Salafists themselves have changed. No longer do they call for jihadism, violence, and accuse people of apostasy as they did in the 1990s. Those who are active are considered “quietists,” who focus on preaching and avoid politics.

These trends became evident with the demise of the Islamist parties and their political influence in elections starting in 2012, when the Islamist Green Algeria Alliance claimed only 47 seats or 6.2 percent of the seats in the legislative elections. They had a similarly poor showing in the 2017 elections, whether due to their own weakness, the rigging of the elections, or both. The Islamist Green Alliance collapsed and the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), which is close to the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood and is the largest of the three parties, formed an alliance with Front for Change. However,

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<sup>3</sup> Hamid Zanaz, “After Protests, Algerian Women Reconquer the Public Space,” *The Arab Weekly*, 28 April 2019.

they won only six percent of the seats. The MSP, which today is divided, had participated in the Bouteflika government along with ruling Front for National Liberation (FLN) and National Rally for Democracy (RND) between 2004 and 2012. The other Islamist parties, Islamist Renaissance Movement (Ennahda) and Justice and Development Party, formed their own alliance and won 3.7 percent of the seats. In contrast, the ruling secular Front for National Liberation (FLN) won 26 percent of the seats in parliament followed by the National Rally for Democracy (15 percent), whose president is the former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia. Today, the Islamist parties are regarded as irrelevant, divided, and lacking in consensus around clear objectives.<sup>4</sup>

Further indications of the decline were evident in April 2019, with the relatively small turnout for the funeral of Algerian Islamist leader Abbassi Madani, whose Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) dominated the country's first free elections in the 1990s. The attendance by Islamists was low compared to the numbers of people gathered for the farewell of pro-democracy leader Hocine Ait Ahmed in 2015 and popular artists of the popular Chaabi music such as Amar Ezzahi in 2016 and even Matoub Lounes in 1998.<sup>5</sup>

The presence of the Islamists in the 2019 demonstrations was minimal. Many of them demonstrated on the outskirts of Algiers, Kouba, El Harrach, and Bourouba, transforming the protestors' calls for a "free and democratic Algeria" to a "free and Islamic Algeria." Often they found themselves driven out of the larger protests. On International Women's Day, MSP president Abderrazak Makri was condemned by the protesters. Another Islamist leader Abdallah Djaballah, president of the Front of Justice and Development, and a party deputy wanted to participate in the 15 March demonstration but were met with cries of "Djaballah dégage!" ("Djaballah, get out!"). Protesters early on dismissed the regime's efforts to scare them by saying that their marches would ultimately lead to a takeover by Islamists.

Even the demonstrations themselves reveal several cultural dynamics of resistance which fly in the face of Islamist cultural norms. This was evident in the use of the Kabyle dialect in the banners, displaying of Amazigh flags, and Kabyle clothing, all evocative of the pre-Islamic culture of the region. This was especially the case in the Kabyle region. In other regions, women sometimes wore the traditional white *haik* garment in the demonstrations to evoke nationalist sentiments and opposition to the Gulf religious influences such as the full body covering, the *niqab*, which is

<sup>4</sup> Riccardo Fabiani, "Algerian Islamists, Fragmented and Irrelevant," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 14 April 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/sada/68679>; Dalia Ghanem-Yazbeck, "The Decline of Islamist Parties in Algeria," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 13 February 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/54510>

<sup>5</sup> Lamine Ghanmi, "Burial of Islamist leader in Algeria a bellwether of fading Islamism," *The Arab Weekly*, 5 May 2019.

not considered Algerian. The *haik* is rarely worn today except by a few older women. Recently, the Algerian government banned the wearing of the *niqab* by women in public sector jobs as a security precaution, but it is more likely to have been a measure to further marginalize the Salafists.

The prominent and ubiquitous display of the Algerian flag in all the demonstrations also emphasized the national and patriotic dimension of the protests. In a society that had been so deeply divided, Algerians cloaked themselves in the Algerian flag, partly as insurance and protection from the state, but most of all as an assertion of national unity.

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The use of humor on the placards was distinctly Algerian and secular, although many of the messages referenced global memes. These included, for example, the women who held up placards that read “No Country for Old Men”<sup>6</sup> or “March like a girl.” Another woman held up a sign with a tooth in the shape of Bouteflika, which read “*Ni couronne, ni bridge, l’Extraction*” (Neither crown, nor bridge, Extraction).<sup>7</sup> Yet another woman held up a conjugation chart: “*Je marche, tu marches, il marche, nous marchons, vous marchez, ils partent.*” (I walk, you walk, he walks, we walk, you walk, they leave).<sup>8</sup> Another woman held a plaque that read: “*shaeb yurid : ctrl alt suppr*” (“the people want: control alt remove,” referring to the names of the delete commands on a computer).<sup>9</sup>

One photo, which was widely circulated in social media in the early days of the protests as a symbol of female courage, was also suggestive of secularism: a young woman in jeans and pink pointe shoes calmly strikes a powerful classic ballet pose in the middle of the street as protestors stop in their tracks looking on in amazement. To the photographer, Melissa Ziad, who was interviewed by Salim Mesbah for *Huffington Post*, it “represents serenity and peace.”<sup>10</sup> Some social media

<sup>6</sup> Meriem Khelifi, “Pourquoi l’Algérie ne sera pas islamiste!,” *El Watan*, 28 March 2019, <https://www.elwatan.com/edition/contributions/pourquoi-lalgerie-ne-sera-pas-islamiste-28-03-2019>

<sup>7</sup> “L’humour, star des manifestations en Algérie,” *BBC*, 22 March 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-47673466>

<sup>8</sup> BBC (2019).

<sup>9</sup> Kamel Bouzeboudjen, “Chansons et humour au service de la contestation en Algérie,” *Radio Canada*, 8 March 2019, <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1157225/algerie-artistes-etudiants-humour-contestation-cinquieme-mandat>

<sup>10</sup> Salim Mesbah, “Trois questions à Melissa Ziad, danseuse classique et model: ‘cette photographie représente l’Algérie d’aujourd’hui,’” *Al Huffpost Maghreb*, 3 March 2019, [https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/trois-questions-a-melissa-ziad-danseuse-classique-et-model-cette-photographie-represente-l-algerie-d-aujourd-hui\\_mg\\_5c80f-8cbe4b0e62f69ea1abe?ncid=other\\_facebook\\_eucluwzme5k&fbclid=IwAR3DX10gKdGxEwRccFN4HiunNP-YmW-CYDzz0JBWnFhUmpkYur4NwjsRjnwk](https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/trois-questions-a-melissa-ziad-danseuse-classique-et-model-cette-photographie-represente-l-algerie-d-aujourd-hui_mg_5c80f-8cbe4b0e62f69ea1abe?ncid=other_facebook_eucluwzme5k&fbclid=IwAR3DX10gKdGxEwRccFN4HiunNP-YmW-CYDzz0JBWnFhUmpkYur4NwjsRjnwk)

commentators at first balked at the un-Algerian character of the photo, but soon the photo became a widespread meme perhaps because it challenged Algerians to think about who they were and how they were claiming individual freedom.

### *Kabyle Movement*

Historically, two secular movements have had a strong influence in shaping the post-Islamist era as evidenced in the 2019 uprising. One is the Kabyle movement, originating in the eastern part of the country, and the other is the women's movement. These two movements were the only ones that consistently challenged the single-party dominance of the FLN as well as the Islamists throughout Algeria's post-independence history. The Berber movement challenged the authorities, particularly after 1980 when the Kabyle region was shaken by the *Tafsut Imazighen* (Berber Spring), during which the Kabyle sought to claim their identity and language but found their protests violently repressed. Another Black Spring took place in 2001 when major demonstrations broke out in the eastern Kabyle region after a Berber high school student died in police detention. The crackdown on demonstrations across the region resulted in 126 civilian deaths and many more injured. These events were memorialized in April 2019 with large demonstrations in Bejaïa and Tizi Ouzou. The 2001 events led to the recognition of Tamazight (Berber) as a national language in the 2002 constitution. Islamists have adopted certain practices of Amazigh culture, including the celebration of the New Year (Yennayer around 12 January), the wearing of tattoos among older women, and many other such non-Islamic cultural practices. Accordingly, in 2017 the government recognized Yennayer as a non-working and paid day, along with the first day of the first month of the Muslim calendar and January 1st.

### *Women's Activism*

The other secular movement has involved women's activism. *Le Collectif de la société civile pour une transition démocratique* (The Civil Society Collective for a Democratic Transition) has emerged as the most powerful network within the 2019 protests since the start of the *hirak* or movement. It includes about 30 associations and citizens' organizations, and a large number of them are led by women like Mouwatana, Tharwa Fadhma n'Soumer, SOS Disparus, Djazairouna, Wassila Network.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Other organizations in the network include Rassemblement Actions Jeunesse (RAJ), Ligue algérienne pour la défense des droits de l'homme (LADDH), Comité Soutien Vigilance du Mouvement 22 Février (CSVN-22 FEV), SOS Culture Bab El Oued, Comité national pour la défense des droits des chômeurs (CNDDC), the Collectif des jeunes engagés pour l'Algérie, Agir pour le Changement et la Démocratie en Algérie (ACDA), Conseil National Economique et Social (CNES), and Syndicat National Autonome des Personnels de l'Administration Publique (SNAPAP).

The Algerian uprising of 2019 showed how women reclaimed public space as citizens. They overcame the enormous weight of fear and came out in the hundreds of thousands week after week throughout the country. Like men, women were undaunted by the riot police, their tear gas, and provocations. For many women, this was especially important because of what they experienced during the Black Decade (1991–2002), as they were among the first targeted by the Islamist fighters, especially those who worked as teachers, ran businesses, drove, did not veil, and engaged in the public sphere. During this period, Islamists and government forces clashed, leaving 200,000 dead and tens of thousands disappeared and injured. “Women mobilized, they protested. They were in the vanguard in confronting the Islamists. Indeed, they played a big role and gained the respect of everyone, including those in power,” explained one activist in an interview I conducted in Algiers in 2017. As another activist said to me, “We had nothing to lose, we had absolutely no other choice (other than to protest).”

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Women formed organizations like *Djazairouna* in Blida, which was established in 1996 by women whose families had been targets of Islamist terrorism. The overall objective was to provide moral, psychological, and legal assistance to victims of the Black Decade. The association, which included both men and women, attended the funerals of the victims of violent extremism. In the past, only men attended funerals, but women now started going as an act of protest to insist that the victims were not guilty and that the only culprits were the extremists. They also provided comfort to the families of the deceased. When *Djazairouna* was formed there were not many people attending funerals because if they attended a burial of someone who had been killed by the Islamists, they would then later find themselves on a list to be targeted. After the Black Decade, the organization continued to mobilize to bring attention to the justice deserved by the families who had lost loved ones and suffered at the hands of the Islamist militia.

In the wake of this decade, the government sought to neutralize the Islamists through repression, by monitoring the activities of religious leaders and curtailing their political engagement, and by signing a 2006 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation that granted amnesty to former Islamist fighters. In addition, the

government promised to forgive and forget all crimes committed during the Black Decade on all sides, including the government security forces. A quid pro quo was foisted on civil society actors, who were told that the government would provide stability in exchange for their silence. The country's leaders used the charter with the Islamists to suppress protest in the country, threatening at the outset of the 2019 protests that there would be a reemergence of jihadi Islamists and a breakdown of the country into a Syria-like civil war.

As a result of the charter, there never was a truth and reconciliation process. The crimes committed during the Black Decade were swept under the rug, and victims and their families suffered in silence without any right to speak out about the atrocities that were committed in this period of Algeria's history. No one was called to account and perpetrators live freely with impunity. Wounds inflicted by the government were similarly left to fester, including the atrocities of the Berber Spring of 1980, the suppression of the October 1988 protests, and the Black Spring of 2001. As Algerian scholar, Meryem Belkaïd, wrote of the current protests: "Transitional justice is one of the goals of our uprising. It does not necessarily appear explicitly in our slogans but that's basically what we all want. We have already begun our reconciliation by going out on the streets of the country every Friday, communicating, looking at each other again in the eye."<sup>12</sup>

Many women's organizations refused to be silenced after the Black Decade and continued to mobilize around calls for justice and an end to impunity for those who had killed, raped, and harmed people during this period. Women victims and the families of those who disappeared during the civil conflict continue to protest and demand answers. They were often beaten by the authorities. They were also arrested because they refuse to seek authorization for their protests on the principle that what they are doing is legitimate, and as such they should not require authorization. For example, activists from the *Tharwa Fadhma N'Soumer* and *Djazairouna* associations were arrested while protesting near the Grande Poste in Algiers on International Women's Day in 2017 to denounce inequality in Algerian society and honor the women who died during the Algeria's civil war in the 1990s.

Women activists not only demanded an end to the impunity of the Black Decade, but others also continued throughout the years to pressure the government to reform the Family Code and make other demands to improve the status of women. They were able to obtain some key constitutional reforms that gave them equality with men and greater political representation. After the 2012 elections, women held 31.6 percent

<sup>12</sup> Meryem Belkaïd, "Pour une véritable justice transitionnelle," *Al HuffPost Maghreb*, 15 April 2019, [https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/pour-une-veritable-justice-transitionnelle\\_mg\\_5ec18341e4b0764d31dd1c9a](https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/pour-une-veritable-justice-transitionnelle_mg_5ec18341e4b0764d31dd1c9a)



of the seats and 30 percent of the cabinet after 2014, the highest rate among Arab countries at the time. Today, four generals are women, also the highest proportion within Arab states. Women make up about one-half of the judges,<sup>13</sup> 44 percent of magistrates, and 66 percent of justice professionals<sup>14</sup> in lower courts. Algeria also made legislative gains in the areas of violence against women, electoral quotas, and nationality laws.

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*“The Algerian uprising of 2019 showed how women reclaimed public space as citizens.”*

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Although women make up almost 57 percent of university graduates, they constitute only 18 percent of the total workforce. One of the 8 March protesters declared: “The urgency now is to deal with equal rights, equal pay, parity.”<sup>15</sup> There is a strong sense that in spite of the gains that put Algeria ahead of many countries in the region, when it comes to gender equality, Algeria still has a long way to go, given women’s aspirations. As another protester stated: “I am here today, with my daughters, with all the children of the people, in order to recover this Algeria which is lost.”<sup>16</sup>

It is evident from the speeches and statements by women’s organizations and from their websites that there is a consensus that the Islamist ideologies are a thing of the past. There is a new resolve to fight for a democratic Algeria that guarantees gender equality, as well as individual and collective liberty. The 2019 protests in Algeria reflect a newfound unity and nationalism in the country and a rejection of a past of fear, impunity, and division based on religious identities.

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<sup>13</sup> Mary Kimani, “Women in North Africa secure more rights,” *Africa Renewal Online*, July 2008, <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2008/women-north-africa-secure-more-rights>

<sup>14</sup> “Tunisia Workshop Promotes Pathways For Women Justice Professionals,” *International Development Law Organization*, 18 December 2017, <https://www.idlo.int/news/highlights/tunisia-workshop-promotes-pathways-women-justice-professionals>

<sup>15</sup> “Au premier rang des mobilisations algériennes, les femmes revendiquent leurs droits,” *France Info*, 13 March 2019, [https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/algerie/election-presidentielle-en-algerie/video-au-premier-rang-des-mobilisations-algeriennes-les-femmes-revendiquent-leurs-droits\\_3231293.html](https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/algerie/election-presidentielle-en-algerie/video-au-premier-rang-des-mobilisations-algeriennes-les-femmes-revendiquent-leurs-droits_3231293.html)

<sup>16</sup> France Info (2019).