

ALGERIA: A YEAR OF THE BEN BELLA GOVERNMENT

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A LITTLE more than a year ago Algeria lay prostrate, bleeding and exhausted. And when Ahmed Ben Bella was invested as the country's premier in September, 1962 the immediate task confronting him and his Ministers in restoring some semblance of order and normal life to a people that had suffered much, was immense.

After seven and a half years of the most brutal war ever fought on African soil, in the course of which the Algerian people sacrificed more than one million of their best sons, Algeria endured for three and a half more months between the signing of the Evian Agreement in March, 1962, and the declaration of independence in July the same year, the most murderous period of O.A.S. terrorist activity. For two of those months the F.L.N. (Front de libération nationale) which had won a great victory for the Algerians was in the throes of a serious political crisis and civil war threatened.

From the day of the declaration of independence a flood of refugees and displaced persons filled the country. The two million Algerians who had been forced out of their localities and 're-grouped' by the French army during the war of liberation left their new villages to return to their more familiar *douars*, while the several hundred thousands who had fled into Tunisia and Morocco recrossed the frontier into the country they could now call their own. The widows, orphans and war wounded bore yet more poignant testimony to the cruel suffering of the Algerian people.

Even before independence the Europeans had begun to leave the country and the closing factories filled the towns with unemployed. Of the one and a quarter million French Algerians more than half a million left the country immediately on the declaration of independence. Many were fearful of possible Moslem vengeance for the crimes of the O.A.S. during the last days of French rule. Many also left as a result of intimidation by the O.A.S. whose policy of sabotage included the driving away of as many Europeans as possible to cripple the Algerian economy. There has been a steady outflow since that time and it is estimated that by the end of 1963 there will be fewer than 70,000 Europeans left in Algeria.

From the ranks of the 'pieds noirs' (as the French Algerians are called) came the managerial class running farms and factories, tech-

nicians on the railways, leading personnel in the electricity, gas, postal service and other public utilities. They provided most of Algeria's doctors as well as the shop owning class and the artisans. Their departure from the country paralysed its economy to such an extent that industrial and commercial activity in the summer of this year was only thirty per cent of what it was two years previously when Algeria was still at war. Quite a considerable section of the 'pieds noirs' were ordinary workers and they were just as exploited by the rich colons as were the Moslem Algerians. Most of them and others like them scattered throughout the country did not feel themselves to be in any physical danger, but the O.A.S. insisted otherwise and ordered them to leave. Indeed, there have been remarkably few acts of Moslem reprisals for O.A.S. atrocities.

Not only was the economy in a state of collapse, there were even no funds with which to finance the administration when Ben Bella assumed power. There was a monthly deficit of something like £11 million; the state-owned railways, postal services and other public services were all running at a loss. And while gas and electricity were being maintained, meters had not been read for a year in some cases and no bills had been sent to customers. The salaries of civil servants were several months in arrears and though half of the fifty million dollar oil royalties was supposed to be for the army, they were no better off. The O.A.S. organised an effective non-payment of taxes campaign and systematically destroyed as much of the country's social security records as they could lay hands on. With so many war widows, orphans and unemployed to say nothing of the war incapacitated to be cared for, the Government faced what appeared to be an insuperable task. Questionnaires were compiled and sent out all over the country. Municipal authorities, the police and the press were appealed to for help. Slowly and laboriously the indexes were built up again. Staffs necessary for the social security pay offices had to come from the Algerians themselves, who had to do jobs previously done almost entirely by Europeans. A very large number of staffs thus recruited were young people many of whom were barely adult. The Government had little choice in the matter for of the Algerian population of nearly eleven million, no less than seventy per cent are under the age of twenty five years.

If in reorganising the social security service the Government had to bow to the pressure of circumstances and 'Algerianise' the service, it was under even greater pressure from the people to implement the Tripoli programme which had been adopted by the National Council

of the Algerian Revolution shortly before independence. This programme provided for agrarian reform, proposed industrialisation, control over foreign capital, state ownership of mines, quarries and cement works and envisaged nationalisation of insurance companies and banks. In his speech of investiture Ben Bella outlined a long term programme, the fundamental objective of which was 'a socialist economy which would lift the country out of its under-developed state'. He promised that in the coming year the first quota of available land would be redistributed in accordance with the Tripoli decision. He announced that the Government would shortly begin to run those farms 'declared vacant' as the owners had left for France. But before the Government could act, management committees were already being formed by the peasants. After independence the peasants occupied abandoned land in some cases burned the crops for fear the Moslem rentiers might inherit them and replace the colons as the new privileged class. The decrees adopted by the Ben Bella Government on March 18, 1963, legalised many of the take-over acts already undertaken by the management committees and at the same time gave a further impetus to agrarian reform. These decrees, which dealt with the 'Regulation of Unclaimed Property' and the 'Establishment of a National Office of Agrarian Reform', came as an appropriate and sharp retort to the French imperialists who chose March 18, the anniversary of the signing of the Evian Agreement, to carry out an atomic test in the Algerian Sahara, a crude reminder to the Algerians of the fetters which still bound them to France. Ben Bella was to say later that he would step up the pace of socialist construction every time the French exploded a nuclear device.

Ben Bella has always supported the peasantry in their actions in taking over vacant properties. The Tripoli programme recognised that 'the Algerian peasantry has been the active base of the war of liberation in which it carried the heaviest burden' and Ben Bella commented on his assumption of power that 'this peasantry intends that the revolution should bring to it, at the same time as independence, a perfectly legitimate well-being'. On the morrow of independence the property of 9,000 European farmers who had decided to carry on in Algeria still covered some two and a quarter million acres for 9,000 cultivations. Today there is no longer an acre of cultivable land in Algeria which is the property of a Frenchman. To his French critics—and some Algerian too—who complain that the pace of agrarian reform is too fast Ben Bella points out that the principle of agrarian reform in Algeria was accepted even by the

French imperialists at Evian. It was agreed that 2.7 million hectares (out of a total of seven million) of the best agricultural land which were in the hands of the colons were to be redistributed.

Nevertheless, President Ben Bella insists that the Evian Agreement is out of date and will have to be revised. Last month he said the French Government realised the accords were no longer valid because there were no longer 500,000 French in Algeria but only 100,000. For all Algerians, then, the call to revise the Evian Agreement means a demand to break the bonds which still prevent the realisation of full sovereignty.

'I am not saying that what we are doing pleases everybody, but the common people and the immense majority of Algerians are in agreement with what we are doing', says Ben Bella. Certainly, most of the measures he and his Government have carried out so far have their inspiration from another of his sayings—'We must let the masses choose for themselves'. Hence the immense popularity that he personally enjoys throughout Algeria. Even in the Kabylie Mountains region where the fewest voters were recorded in the presidential election, his erstwhile comrade and friend, Hocine Ait Ahmed, failed miserably in his efforts to raise the banner of revolt with his Front of Socialist Forces.

It is generally agreed that the nationalised farms are being well run by the peasants, but the Government has not met with the same degree of success in the industrial enterprises taken over, either, by the Government itself or by the workers. There have been a number of drawbacks and failures in this sector. There have been problems of honouring debts incurred in colonial times, of disorganisation of the internal market, so that some factories cannot easily dispose of their products. The Tripoli programme declared that, 'it will be necessary to allow a private sector to exist' for a time, and during this limited period the import of foreign private capital is desirable on certain conditions. It is intended that such capital should function only in mixed enterprises and that the transfer of profits must be strictly regulated. Moreover, a certain proportion of the profits must be re-invested in the enterprise. In carrying out faithfully the Tripoli programme the Government plans to develop light industry. A number of factories will soon be established in the Algiers area.

To President Ahmed Ben Bella and his colleagues such as Colonel Houari Boumedienne and M. Mohammedi Saïd belong the credit of having been sufficiently vigilant in the difficult days and weeks of the spring of 1962, when other F.L.N. leaders were preparing to halt

the revolution and to liquidate it. They recognised the fact that the tasks of the revolution were by no means completed, and that in consolidating and extending the independence won at such a great sacrifice, it was necessary to preserve not only the image of the F.L.N. but also to maintain its revolutionary momentum.

Ben Bella pointed out that if the F.L.N. had been allowed to dissolve itself when hostilities ceased, in the objective conditions of Algeria there would have emerged a plurality of bourgeois parties with rival policies, with each party liable to become a bridgehead for neo-colonialism.

In the circumstances the ban on the Algerian Communist Party in November, 1962, must be seen as a tactical political measure taken in the interests of the country as a whole and not simply as a blow against Communism. Indeed, when President Ben Bella received the editors-in-chief of *Pravda* and *Izvestia* in September, 1963, he stressed the role of the F.L.N. as the leader and organiser of the construction of socialism in Algeria and added:

The construction of socialism is incompatible with anti-communism. Anti-communism will find no place on Algerian soil.

Algeria's Communists, who in alliance with the F.L.N. inspired the courageous struggle of the Algerian people, are not hounded and persecuted, despite the ban on the separate existence of the Communist Party. Many leading Communists are in fact today active in the F.L.N., state organisations and at all levels of the committees of management, and are widely respected for their contribution towards the country's regeneration. Above all, Algeria's Communists are for the interests of the nation.

Under the leadership of the Ben Bella Government and the F.L.N., the Algerian people are tackling the problems of peace with the same dauntless courage and unity of purpose that characterised their heroic fight for national liberation. Algeria has taken a non-capitalist road to social and economic regeneration and in committees of management, workers and peasants gain experience of democratic procedures. In the past year the Algerians have not only achieved considerable successes in rehabilitating their war-ravaged country; they have richly fulfilled their role as 'Arabo-Islamic Maghrebian and African peoples'.