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Chaïma: Algeria women protest over teen's rape and murder

Protests have been held in several cities in Algeria to demand action to stop violence against women following the rape and murder of a teenager.

BBC News (09.10.2020) – https://bbc.in/3745Vyk - The charred body of Chaïma, 19, was found in a deserted petrol station in Thenia, 80 km (50 miles) east of the capital Algiers, this month.

Her killer confessed to the crime and is under arrest, local media say.

There are also reports that the charred body of another woman was found in a forest overnight.

Women held sit-in protests in Algiers and Oran, chanting Chaïma's first name and calling for an end to gender-based violence. Activists also took to social media with the hashtag #JeSuisChaima (I am Chaïma).

Activists say there was a heavy police presence despite the small protests.

"This government offers no shelters or mechanisms to protect the victims from their torturers, this government says it has laws, but in reality women are asked to forgive their aggressor, be it their brother or their father or whatever," one woman at the rally in Algiers said.

"Women file a complaint and wait three or four years for it to be resolved and for a judgement to be rendered. These are unacceptable conditions. Algeria is for Algerian men and women."

Chaïma's mother said the suspect had attempted to rape her daughter in 2016, when she was 15, but the case was dropped.

Femicides Algeria group, which tracks such killings, says 38 women have been killed on account of their gender in the country since the start of the year. They recorded 60 in 2019, but believe the actual number is far higher as many such killings go unreported.

Feminists on the front lines of the Algerian uprising

Since the start of the uprising, women have taken up an increasingly prominent role, demanding gender equality and the abolition of the patriarchal Family Code.

By Leïla Ouitis

ROAR (06.09.2019) - https://bit.ly/2m8CuFH - When in early February Algeria's ailing octogenarian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his intention to run for the presidency for a fifth term, millions of Algerians took to the streets in response. After weeks of rallies, Bouteflika was forced to resign on April 2, only to be replaced by a triad of government cronies: Abdelkader Bensalah as interim-president, Noureddine Bedoui as prime minister and Major General Ahmed Gaid Salah, who has emerged as the key power broker in the country.

Despite the arrests of two of the country's former prime ministers and several business leaders on corruption charges, the protests have been continuing for over seven months now, with protesters demanding a radical overhaul of the military-backed regime. Fresh elections that were originally planned for July 4, were postponed by the constitutional council in early June, allegedly due to a lack of candidates.

The postponement of the elections was seen as a victory by the protesters, who feared that hastily organized elections in the short term would benefit the old powers and leave little opportunity for civic parties to prepare. Proposals for a national dialogue led by former speaker of the lower house Karim Younes to pave the way for presidential elections have been met with little enthusiasm by the opposition. Gaid Salah has demanded that the date for the elections should be announced by mid-September.

Leïla Ouitis, a feminist, tenant organizer and a French-Algerian teacher working in Seine-Saint-Denis, close to Paris, regularly travels to Algeria to visit her family. She has witnessed the protests first-hand, and in this three-part series she offers her reflections on the socio-economic roots of the popular uprising, the background of the different groups and individuals involved with the movement, and the role played by feminists and women's rights activists in the protests.

In this second part of the series, Ouitis looks at the popular movement that has filled the streets since February 22. How are people organized? Who is protesting? Can we even talk about a "popular movement" in which people are following a common program beyond the demand for an end to the regime of Bouteflika and his cronies?

No specific group is directing these demonstrations. On the contrary, as was the case in other countries in the region in 2011, this moment is one of sudden upheaval (even though some analysts tried to sound the alarm mere weeks earlier). Some have attempted to attribute the beginnings of the contestation to the stadiums and homes of football supporters, given the sport's long political and decolonial history in Algeria.

The first calls in December 2018 to demonstrate in the working-class neighborhood of Bab El Oued in Algiers went unheeded. Mid-February, larger marches took place in Kherrata (near Béjaïa), in Khenchela, then in Annaba, where the portrait of the president was torn down and trampled.

The extent of the February 22 demonstrations was really surprising: the protests emerged simultaneously across the country in most of the major cities and several mid-sized cities. The movement even reached scarcely populated oases and wilayas (provinces) like Djelfa, Adrar and Tamanrasset.

Unlike the recent uprising in Sudan, which is more politically homogenous, in Algeria no organization or leadership has taken shape. This facilitates a mass movement: at their peak, according to police figures, the weekly protests brought together nearly 10 million people, or nearly a quarter of the population. Their democratic and peaceful nature is notable given the more riotous forms of past decades (see the first part of this interview).

One of the slogans is "silmiya, silmiya" or "peaceful, peaceful." Another is "handeriyya" or "civilized." These are protests where volunteers maintain order and clean the streets after the demo, where families protest together with children and babies in strollers — which reassures the older adults among them — where bottles of water and candy are handed out, and until recently, where freedom of speech had been reclaimed by protesters and relatively respected by authorities.

But since the government's failed attempt in June to divide the movement by banning the Amazigh (Berber) flag, repression has been intensifying at an alarming rate [this will be elaborated upon in the upcoming third part of this interview].

Nevertheless, in the streets, people are talking: small public forums take place each Friday before the demos in some of the major cities. For example, Oran's main square, Place du 1er Novembre, is still the site of frequent public debates. During Ramadan, the wilaya decided to judiciously set up a craft fair there but the next day, protesters came in mass and took down the fair tents.

"All of them must go!"

Responses to the political class's participation in the protests are proportional to the politicians' proximity to power. We have seen figureheads close to the regime, like Saïd Sadi, founder and former leader of the Rally for Culture and Democracy party, or Louisa Hanoune, founder and current leader of the Workers' Party, get expelled from demonstrations.

It is remarkable how hostile the movement has proved to any type of ideological or political slogans. It has found icons in figures like Djamila Bouhired, a celebrated national liberation militant, or Ramzi Yettou, a 23-year-old protester who died Friday, April 19 after being beaten by police. In early June, Kamal Eddine Fekhar, a Mozabite minority activist who had protested segregation in the south of the country, died from his two-month hunger strike, drawing wider attention to lesser-known "prisoners of conscience" beyond the activist circles of Algiers.

Embryonic organizing efforts are no doubt afoot with labor and interest groups, but people march individually or as a family, side by side with feminists, victims of the civil war, recognized veterans or forgotten members of "Patriot" militias from the décennie noire (Black Decade). Generally, constituents from across Algerian society come together to protest every Friday, united by one slogan: Yatnahaw ga' ("All of them must go, every last one").

Indeed, over several decades now, Algerian society has become polarized between a social minority dependent on the rentier state who continue to get richer thanks to their deep ties to the global valuation of capital and a large majority who continue to be pauperized in different ways. The rent-seeking nature of the economy lends a political tenor to all the social demands. In this context, the "everyone must go" slogans, both radical and vague, allow for a unification of all the social segments into a vast interclass movement.

From the young women and men of the informal proletariat to the middle classes and even the bourgeoisie [see the upcoming third part of this interview], each class has for the moment used this movement as a way to denounce the pressure it has suffered under an incredibly corrupt system.

Shoulder to shoulder, veil or no veil

Although there were few at the very beginning, women have been massively present since February 22, and even more so since International Women's Day on March 8. Women of all ages and classes have been extremely visible, but the majority are young, urban and highly educated. And despite their degrees, they find themselves unemployed, like many men, but in even greater numbers. So every Friday, they have been protesting shoulder to shoulder, veil or no veil, in the dense demonstrations.

Their very presence in public spaces has changed the movement. Now, when some women launch general slogans, men are following their lead and chanting alongside them. These women are unafraid of being arrested by the police.

From the first weeks of the movement, feminist collectives have been organizing meetings in major cities across the country. Tactics are discussed in French, Arabic or in Darja, the local Arabic dialect. Some women wear the veil, others reinterpret the religious norms in their quest for more equality. To grasp what is at stake in Algerian Islamic feminism, see Feriel Bouatta's recent work.

Most women are asking for the abolition of the Algerian Family Code, but they do not have a single strategy as to how best achieve this goal; feminist collectives are well aware of the greater risk they face of being accused of dividing the movement.

On March 16, the Algerian Women for Change Toward Equality collective decided to organize a feminist square in front of the Central Faculty in Algiers. Journalist Daïkha Dridi later reflected, "No one asked me for my opinion on the feminist square, and it isn't an idea that I would have defended if I had participated in the organization, but now that this square exists, I support it totally in solidarity."

Two weeks later, on March 29, the square was overtaken by several men who tore up signs and verbally attacked some women. The feminists held their ground. On April 3, an Algerian man living in England posted a video on Facebook threatening women who demand equal rights with acid attacks. His identity was quickly verified, activists lodged complaints, and he immediately apologized.

Toward a repeal of the family code?

Despite the fact that demands for gender equality do not please everyone, feminist groups large and small continue to march and coordinate; new groups pop up each month. Most of them demand the abolition of the Family Code.

The duality of secular and religious sources has prevailed in Algerian law ever since the colonial period. Juridically, Algerian women are torn between two worlds: a constitutionally defined status as equals to men and an inferior status under the domination of the father and the husband, as defined by the 1984 Family Code, which forces them to seek approval from a walī, or guardian, in order to be married.

Divorced women lose custody of their children if they remarry, a marriage is nullified if the husband is a confirmed apostate and certain forms of polygamy are still recognized, as are repudiations. The law of succession remains subject to normative religious law, creating inequality between inheritors on the basis of their gender.

Pressure from women and feminists has led to some improvement of the law over the last 10 years, like the 2015 law that allows women to press charges in cases of domestic violence. Still, that law contains an unacceptable clause in which the charges against the aggressor are dropped if the victim "pardons" him. This law opens a back door to all sorts of pressure.

In a context where the West — that is, the centers of accumulation threatened by the crisis — uses feminism to strengthen its grip at home and abroad, several antagonisms become clear when Algerian women mobilize as feminists. Algeria is a rentier country, dominated by the rent seeking that allows it to participate in global capitalism. Entire sectors of its economy have yet to be privatized and thus entice the appetites of international powers.

Given the West's obsession with culturalist and racist lies about Islam (see our text on this topic and especially Issue 26 of Théorie Communiste), we need to consider critically how the Family Code was part of the perestroika in the 1980s.

During the so-called "socialist" period, Algerian women benefited from the campaign for public education. Widely unemployed, they do not benefit from a more proactive national employment policy for women. As the feminist economist Fatiha Talahite has shown, "without abandoning the ideal of emancipation through work, generations of women were sacrificed in exchange for the promise that future generations of women would be able to work."

And yet, contrary to some Latin American countries where industrialization has led to jobs for women, the Algerian economy remains a prisoner of rent. In the early 1980s, faced with an immense reserve of educated yet unemployed women's labor power, government leaders would use the pretext of tradition to put the Family Code into place: the powerful status it accords men over women functions to mask the trouble with unemployment and housing in a context of accelerated liberalization.

The rigid structuring of the family as site of reproduction is a trend that accompanies general pauperization. In this way, leaders at the time deliberately chose to juridically accentuate the submission of women to men in order to ease the shock of the transition to a market economy. When rent revenues collapsed in 1986, women had no other choice but to go look for work in a market in crisis, in a situation of deindustrialization where only precarious, low-paying, mostly informal jobs were still available. This was the terrible Black Decade.

After the civil war, the increase in oil profits allowed for a reduction in poverty, and with that, a soaring birthrate. Since 2001, female employment has considerably declined. More and more women have been limited to informal labor. According to the National Office of Statistics, of Algeria's 11 million workers, only 1.9 million are women.

Women make up 60 percent of Algerians with college degrees, yet over half of them are unemployed and identify as such. Indeed, despite the re-Islamization of the country, gender relations have enormously evolved over the last 20 years, especially in the major cities where women manage to establish themselves through work. As Fatma Oussedik has observed, "With or without a hijab, the women are out."

Despite laws that are still unfair for women, and to the great chagrin of the most conservative Algerians, divorce has skyrocketed in recent years, notably in urban areas.

The fight is far from won

After a marked absence during Ramadan, women have returned for Friday marches. But in a context of generalized unemployment and diminished oil profits as the rent economy teeters, in a context where publicly advocating for abortion rights remains a punishable offense, the debate with some self-proclaimed representatives of "civil society" over equality before the law and at work continues to be tense.

For example, the Wasilla network, which brings together women's rights organizations, had to announce its withdrawal from June 15's national conference that took place and brought together several groups, organizations and unions — often autonomous — to propose "a way out of the crisis and a democratic transition."

The fact remains that, as the sociologist Nacer Djabi points out, "Unions are conservative. They reflect Algerian society. They are middle class and coming from across the country, not only from major cities." So the political tendencies covered everything from the secular extreme left to Islamism. The Wasilla network pulled out of the conference, rightly in our opinion, because it "does not clearly and without ambiguity state the fundamental and non-negotiable political principle of equality between men and women."

However, June 20–22 in Tigrhemt (near Béjaïa) representatives from around 20 women's organizations and collectives, as well as independent participants, met. As W. Zizi put it, such a variety of ideological tendencies, with leftist feminists, right-wing feminists, underground LGBTQI activists and women who do not separate religion from the state, can create debate that sometimes resembles "a huge mess."

In addition, new collectives from the South (Ouargla, Ghardaïa and Tamanrasset) could not come for logistic reasons but managed all the same to issue a common declaration against precarious work and for the repeal of the Family Code. Some collectives have even managed to organize in the villages with working-class women around issues of domestic work or the lack of childcare services for employees in the public sector, for example.

The fight is far from won, though. Despite efforts during the socialist period, and due to its specific colonial history of "Dutch disease," Algeria did not have the economic development in the 1970s and 1980s that had emerged in Southeast Asia and Latin America. Hence mass unemployment and a severely heteronormative society in which reproduction is still often guaranteed under pressures of an extended family or even clan.

The sociologist Rose Schembri, who recently described the "difficult homosexual affirmation in Algeria," uses as a counterpoint the work of the historian John D'Emilio, who correlates the emergence of a gay identity in the United States with the long history of the industrial revolution. D'Emilio shows how the arrival of a labor market and mass employment partially permitted a break from the family structure in capitalist centers of accumulation (which are still today structurally racist and patriarchal): exactly what was not able to take place in Algeria.

A better fight ahead

In a situation of declining rent and general unemployment, one can imagine the extent of the task of Algerian feminists. Though few in number, these women are very visible and must struggle in an international context where Western capitalists instrumentalize feminism to racist and Islamophobic ends, while at the same time pressing for an economic "opening" and an acceleration of privatization on the backs of poor Algerian women.