Secularization of the Islamic Movement in Algeria
Cezayir'deki İslami Hareketin Laikleştirilmesi

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Abstract:

When observing the Algerian Islamic movement during the last two decades, one is stunned by the transformations in the initial projects of this movement. At the beginning the main concern was the return to traditional forms in order to reorganize Algerian society, but the result was very different. This movement managed to assimilate the very modern system of organizing societies that is the democratic system. This movement is structured into legal parties and participates regularly in democratic elections, and forms coalitions with national parties

Those political parties, whose programs advocated Islam as a solution, are now the defenders of secular solutions to political and economical problems, far from the idealistic project they first held.

The international, geopolitical changes and the evolution that Algerian society has gone through, forced the Islamic movement to make concessions, according to the traditional political agenda announced by this movement and after multipartism was recognized by the Algerian constitution. The modern state was substituted for the Islamic state, and the call for an Islamic Caliphate was made less important than a nationalistic presidency.

In this essay, I will discuss the avatars of the Islamic movement in Algeria. By avatars I mean the contradictions between what was claimed in the first projects of this movement, and the reality of this movement today.

The first part of the article sheds light on the Islamic movement in order to prove its deep attachment to the traditional Islamic heritage. I will then focus on the political practices of this movement which is the new secularization of the Islamic movement in Algeria.

Keywords: *Secularization - Islamic movement – Algeria - political parties - politics.*

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Özet

Son yirmi yıl boyunca Cezayir İslami hareketleri gözlemlendiğinde, bu hareketin başlagıç projesinde büyük değişimlerin görüldüğü şaşırtıcıdır. Başlangıçta, Cezayir halkının geleneksel formuna geri dönmesi meselenin temelini oluşturuyordu fakat sonuçlar çok farklıydı. Bu hareket, sistemi uygulayan toplumların demokratik sistem olarak adlandırdığı modern bir sistemi assimile etmeyi başarmıştır. Bu hareket yasal partiler şeklinde yapılanır, demokratik seçimlere düzenli olarak katılr ve ulusal partilerle koalisyon yapar.

Programlarında bir çözüm olarak İslamı savunan bu politik partiler, başlangıçta savundukları idealist projelerin çok uzağında, politik ve ekonomik problemlerin laiklik ışığında çözüm önerileriyle modern seçim kampanyalarının en şiddetli savunucuları haline gelmiştirler. Cezayir toplumunun adım adım değişimi, uluslararsı ve jeopolitik değişimler, çok parlilikliğn Cezayir anayasası tarafından tanınmasından sonra ve bu hareket tqarafında duyurulan geleneksel politik gündeme göre Islami hareketi büyük bir konsesnsus içerisine çekmiştir. Modern devletin yerini islami devlet aldı ve ulusal başkanlık adaylığı için daha düşük bir politik destekle islami halife çağrılması fikri gözden geçirildi.

Bu bildiride Cezayirdeki islami hareketin avatarlarını ele alacağım. Avatarlarla kastım, bu hareketin başlangıcındaki projelerle günümüzdeki durumu arasındaki çelişkilerdir.

Bildirinin ilk kısmında, hareketin geleneksel islam mirasına olan bağlılığını kanıtlamak için İslami harekete ışık tutacağım. Sunucu daha sonra, bildirinin özünü oluşturan Cezayirdeki islami hareketin laikleştirilmesi meselesine vararak bu hareketin politik uygulamaları üzerinde odaklanacaktır.

Keywords: *Laiklik - İslami hareket- Cezayir - Siyasi partiler - politika*

Introduction:

When observing the Algerian Islamic movement during the last two decades, we are astonished by the big transformation of the initial projects of this movement. At the beginning, the main appeal of this movement was the return to traditional forms in order to reorganize Algerian society. However, the results were totally different. The Islamic movement has integrated itself with the very modern system of organized societies: the democratic system. This movement is structured into legal parties and participates regularly in democratic elections, and forms coalitions with national parties

In the political program of these parties, and after what they formerly called '*Islam is the solution*', Islamists are now the farouche defender of modernist electoral campaign, centered on secular solutions to political and economical problems, far from the idealistic project they first held.

The international geopolitical changes and the evolutions of Algerian society, forced the Islamic movement to make concessions, according to the traditional political agenda announced by this movement after multipartism was recognized by the Algerian constitution. The modern state was substituted for the Islamic state, and the call for an Islamic *Caliph* became less important than support for the nationalistic presidential candidate.

The beginning of the paper sheds light on the literature of the Islamic movement in order to prove its attachment to the traditional Islamic heritage. Then I focus on the political practices of the movement. Finally, the author will discuss the new secularization of the Islamic movement in Algeria.

Ideological paradox:

The constituting literature of the Islamist movement in Algeria establishes the 'transcendence' principle of both institutions and persons. Before they integrated into the political systems, the Islamist organizations appeared to activists and to the whole society as sacred institutions, and their leaders as sacred persons. Their job was to resolve the political and social problems of the society and to be the last protectors of Islam and the saviors of Muslims. When they first took part in the local political system, the Islamists expected to play the political game without accepting its rules. By doing so, the Algerian Islamist organizations were known as the unique choice leading to paradise: 'Your vote is a sacred duty', '*Saoutouqa amanah fi ounouqiqa*', and 'your vote is a testimony', '*Sawta-ka shahada*'. And of course every Muslim must be questioned, in the last day "*l'au-delà*", about his sacred duty and testimony. By these indoctrinations, the Islamic organizations and Islamists were identified as Islam-By-Analogy. Being out of these organizations and against these persons meant that you were against Islam, '*qafir*'.

In its history the Algerian Islamist movement has experienced two major steps. In the first, it was represented as the Islamic nation '*Umah*' project legitimate holder. It was seen as compensation for nationalist failure, in the reunification of Muslims under the control of a unique *Caliph*, and in the reestablishment of Muslims as the leaders of civilization. After the nationalists' success in decolonizing Algeria, their abandonment of Islamic ideals and their participation in national developmental westernized projects, they gave a golden opportunity for the Islamist to rise as a fierce defender of a unified Islamic state. Thus was born the tension between the nation-state and the *Islamic Umah*.

The Islamic movement tried at first to resist the secularizing process of the national project, by "re-islamizing" the Algerian society through NGOs (Non Governmental Organizations). However, in my point of view, this attempt led to a counter-effect because it reinforced the secularization of a Islamic society, by distinguishing between Islam and the state:

> As Islamists create civil institutions, whole new areas of private Muslim activity and Muslim areas of life become liberated from the control of the state. Islamists are in effect putting together a project based upon society and the public that is quite separate from the state and its instruments. They are creating a "Muslim space" within societies outside of and beyond government control that serves goals different from that of the state. Such space clearly represents a form of civil society that flourishes apart from state-controlled space. Here we have de facto separation of state and religion. (Graham E. Fuller. 2004: 33)

The nationalist regime responded to these attempts violently by persecuting Islamists and pushing them into clandestine activities and more radicalization.

In the second step, and in order to avoid nationalist pressure, the Islamists attempted conforming themselves to modernity and to nation-state values. In other words, they tried to integrate into the legal political system but this time by respecting the rules of the political game.

They first abandoned the principle transcendence, and instead of idealizing the Islamic *Umah* and *Caliph*, they were satisfied with an honorable place in the national political map, recognizing all other political movements, including communists and secularists.

This new status of the Algerian Islamic movement pushed it to a decisive concession, imposed by the 1996 constitution: the acceptance of the law, which forbade political parties to be religious. By this concession, the Islamists agreed to a central secular principle: the elimination of

religion from the political sphere. The Movement of the Islamic Renaissance '*Harakat al-Nahda al-Islamiya*' became the Renaissance Movement '*Harakat Anahda*', and the movement of the Islamic society '*Harakat Almoujtamaou AlIslami*' became the Society of Peace Movement '*Harakat Moujtamaou Alsilm'*.

If the Islamists accepted the first step, the distinction between religion and the state, in the second step they would apply it in their own organization to avoid ejection from the state, as was the case for radical Islamists. By this, the Islamists realized a difficult and a painful blending of what is modern and traditional.

This blending gave the Islamist Movement the opportunity to renew its political project, by restructuring it in a reformed version, which I consider to be secular version of the Islamist's project. Therefore, in their attempt to modernize Islam or Islamize Modernity, the Algerian Islamists found themselves cast right into the heart of modernity by choosing secularism.

,Political practices paradox:

Having become political participants, the Islamist parties based their political projects and strategy on criticizing nationalist development. They focused on nationalist regime failure in not rectifying the economic and social challenges inherited from the colonial era.

At first, the main Islamists bemoaned the secularization of society while corrupt nationalist leaders argued that the second was the result of the first. The absence of Islamic values and absence of God allowed for a fear of leaders free of any form of responsibility to society. The Islamists presented the nationalist leaders as the principle cause of underdevelopment. This corruption was due, according to the Islamists' point of view, to the "non-religiosity" of these leaders. So, it was thought, if there was a wish to resolve Algeria's political, social and economic problems, there was a need to re-Islamize Algerian society and its leaders. They then presented themselves as the sole alternative to this corrupted regime.

This discourse was welcomed by society, because the Islamist critics had touched a very sensitive part. The majority of people were suffering, and the Islamists were seen as divine saviors of a society hurrying toward an apocalypse.

The religious approach to the Algerian crisis was resisted during the first years of the multi-party system, but once elected in local and municipal elections, the Islamists were required to give material proof of their approach. Algerians hoped to see the validity of the Islamist formula of:

Good Muslim = right leader = real Islamic society = end of crisis.

In reality they saw neither good Muslims nor right leaders, and as a consequence, no end to the crisis. More than this, Algerians started suffering new and more negative dimensions of the crisis. At this level Algerians became convinced that leaders, even if they are Islamist, are always only political. Maybe these leaders can be good Islamic theologians, but this did not mean they would be good and efficient politicians. When religious and theological knowledge is removed from the Islamist politician, one has only socially poor and inexperienced men; with no conscious of real challenges that the Algerian society had to confront. To conclude, they were no better than those they always criticized. Surprisingly, the nationalist epoch, even with its dramatic faults, can be evaluated better than any Islamist dream with its potentiality to turn into a nightmare.

Thus, the Islamist tried to unify politics and religion and they succeeded very well theoretically, but when they were given the opportunity to prove it in practice, they faced the opposite of what they wanted. Instead of Islamicizing politics, they secularized Islam.

This secularization of Islam was increased by a very intelligent maneuver undertaken by nationalists through President Abdul-Aziz BOUTEFLIKA. As a nationalist who was untainted by corruption, the president recognized the nationalist regime's mistakes, and agreed with most Islamist critics and their approaches: corruption of administration, negative impact of economical and Mafia trade. He adopted the Islamist's proposed alternative to the crisis: rehabilitation of the Arabic language, reformation of the educational and judicial systems; and an alliance with apolitical Sufi Islam.

This new nationalist strategy pulled the rug from under the Islamists' feet, and they were transformed to secular and modern political parties.

Indicators of Islamist secularization:

Secularism and modernity in Islamist parties can be proved through the indicators below:

1- Internal conflicts:

Internal conflicts were for a long time a permanent characteristic of the Islamists, but they always succeeded in managing them so secretly that any external person would conceive the movement as solid, strong and homogenous. It was able to be seen by society as the ultimate solution for Algeria's problems. However, was a big surprise to the Algerians when they discovered that the activists and leaders of this movement were no different from the nationalist movement by using official institutions and political and professional organizations to promote their own and personal interests.

After 1999, the first Islamist conflict began within the Nahdha Movement (MN), when dissidents obliged historical leader and founder of the MN, Sheikh DJABALLAH Abdallah, to leave the party with some of his supporters. He created a new party and named it the "Movement for National Reform" (MRN). However, in 2004, a new conflict arose in this new party, and once again Abdallah was forced to leave the party after a juridical decision.

Targeting the leader of an Islamist party on two occasions is an important indicator of the secularization of these parties. In the collective imagination of Islamist activism, the leader is not only a political authority, but is also a religious and theological authority and is called *Sheikh*, so he is a sacred person. This status protects the Islamist leader, and no one dares contradicting him. When some of the activists of MN and MRN decided to eject their leader, they stopped seeing him as a sacred person, but rather regarded him as a political person and acted accordingly.

In the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), the conflict began after the death of Sheikh NAHNAH. The schism started before the MSP congress in 2008, and became concrete in 2009 when opponents of Sheikh SOLTANI, the new MSP leader, declared their retreat from MSP and created a new Islamist movement. What is important about this split is that after a long struggle between brothers, and in spite of virulent attacks against each other, the two fractions took the

same position towards the candidacy of President BOUTEFLIKA. This led, in my view, to a new level of the secularization of the Islamist movement, since the conflict was purely political.

No one during these episodes tried to put forward religious solutions to the conflicts, as was the case in Islamist tradition. All debates were political and so were the solutions. The idealic Islamist aim to rule a whole nation by rehabilitating the Muslim *Caliph*, was once again set aside. Thus their two decades in politics came to nothing more than supporting the national and secular leaders.

In the local and social imagination, internal conflicts detached the Islamist movement from the realm of the sacred, and attached it to the political one.

2- Coalition with secularists and nationalists:

Throughout their history, the Islamists divided on political participation with secularists and nationalists with three distinct positions. First, the radical position refuses any cohabitation with regimes in place. This position usually leads to terrorism. The second position accepts the democratic rules of the political game transitively. They declare that after gaining a political majority, they will change democratic rules to Islamic ones. This position also often leads to terrorism. The third position is the participatory. It adopts a strategy of living with other ideologies, even if they are non-Islamic. In the first two positions the religious conviction of the Islamists dictates the political position, but in the third position priority is given to politics rather than religion. Therefore, the acceptance of political cohabitation with secularists and nationalists also indicates of Islamist secularity.

The political participation of Islamists in the Algerian government began in 1992 when nationalist leaders decided to integrate some individual Islamists opponents in the political regime in order to isolate the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). In 1996, the MSP accepted participation into the government with two ministers, and since then they have always participated in the government, with seven ministers in 1997. In 1999, they started what was called the presidential coalition with the National Liberation Front (FLN), the National Democratic Assembling (RND), and the MN. In 2004, the coalition was renewed but without the MN, and this alliance continues as of this writing.

This political participation and coalition with nationalists and secularists reflects the modesty of Islamist aims. After having called for all Muslims to support the mythic return of the Islamic state, they are now satisfied with a symbolic presence in the Algerian political system without any Islamic state. So Islamists are satisfied with politics to the detriment of their mythical theocratic project.

3- No candidate to presidency:

In the collective imagination of Islamists, the return to an Islamic state must be done through Islamists' direction of the state. Logically, this control cannot be done without an Islamist president. However, the reality of Islamist political practices in Algeria indicates that they are no longer concerned with this aim. After their defeat in the presidential elections of 1995, they have been content to support the nationalist presidential candidate on three occasions.

With this strategy, they are not only accepting to be ruled by a nationalist leader, but they also accept giving Islamist legitimacy to a non-Islamist leader. This can be interpreted in Islamist concepts as divine testimony to the primacy of politics, or what I call Islamist secularization.

4- Denial of international Islamic brotherhood guidance:

In Algeria Sufism is the sole local version of Islam while all other versions are imported from the east, either from Saudi Arabia for Salafism, or from Egypt for the Muslim Brotherhood. This importation implies at least a symbolic dependency of Algerian Islamists on these origins and was seen as a religious obligation. For the Muslim Brotherhood, represented in Algeria by the MSP, they created the International Muslim Brotherhood. Their aim consisted of the fact that, if each local organization succeeds in changing its local society into Islamic society, the sum of the local changes would be the desired and expected Islamic state.

After the internal conflicts of the MSP highlighted above, and after the General Guide of the Muslim Brotherhood amicably attempted to resolve the problem, the MSP declared its independence from the international Muslim Brotherhood, and is now an Algerian political party. Once again, this independence is proof that Islamists are choosing to be secular.

Conclusion

There is a big difference between conviction and practice. The Islamists are convinced that Islam is a religion, a society and a state. More than the weakness of this slogan to resist before Islamic and non-Islamic critics, the Islamic experiences in the past and today give us powerful proof that Islam cannot build an Islamic state but only a state adapted to the *Nunc* and *Hunc* (here and now). Every time the Islamists get the opportunity to realize the project of the Islamic state, they realize a non-Islamic state. Islamist themselves thus shorten their Islamic convictions to a religion and a society, but never a state. Modern history proved several times that Islamist Movements are Islamists only when they are out of their local political systems. Once they assume the power democratically or through violence, they turn to banal political movements, which are not so different than secularists or nationalists. So either they dash to interminable bloody conflicts with other internal or external ideologies and powers, or they dash to internal schisms and conflicts. In both cases they are very far from the idealistic projects they always militate for, the Islamic state, and very close to the secular one.

Reference:

- Graham E. Fuller. (2004). *The future of political Islam*. New York: Palgrave, Macmilan.