

# Why the FIS won in Algeria's elections

by Jacques Cheminade

Algeria's ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) and the secularist Front for Socialist Forces (FFS) are moving to negate the results of the first round of national elections that took place on Dec. 26, on the basis of alleged widespread voting irregularities. With more than 3 million votes, the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won 188 out of the 430 seats in parliament, as against only 15 seats for the FLN, despite their 1.5 million votes. The FIS could win enough additional seats in the Jan. 16 second round voting to secure a two-thirds majority, allowing them to rewrite the Constitution. Reuters quoted newly elected FIS member of parliament Abdelkader Moghni, "On Dec. 26 the Algerian people said its last word. It was the victory of Islam and the defeat of democracy, which is pure atheism."

The government declared that the first-round FIS victories were partly a result of ballot tampering, and announced that they had received about 300 election complaints. The London *Financial Times* reported that vote fraud complaints received by the constitutional court affected 100 out of the 430 constituencies. The *New York Times* reports fears among the French establishment of violence from the fundamentalists if the elections are annulled, and fears by the Algerian government of violence from the anti-fundamentalist democrats if the FIS takes power.

However, it was not so much the attraction of Islamic fundamentalism as the popular hope for a radical rupture with corruption and economic decline, that led to the FIS victory.

## FLN defeated itself

The first cause for the success of the FIS has been the economic situation: There was a profound crisis in which unemployment, overcrowding, inflation, and lack of transportation, housing, and even drinking water have drawn the wrath of the people, with the youth in the front ranks. Poverty, excessive prices for food staples (a kilogram of meat costs 15% of the Algerian minimum wage), inadequate supplies of semolina, the hundreds of thousands of unemployed youths without hope, have sapped the regime. The 22% devaluation of the dinar on Sept. 30, added on to the constant price hikes, made things even worse. Corruption and the black market are rampant, and their beneficiaries are visibly among the powers that be.

Second has been the generalized mood of being fed up

with the regime, first seen during the municipal elections of 1990, where there was a heavy protest vote against the FLN. After having sought the support of the International Monetary Fund and complacently implementing its disastrous "structural adjustments," Prime Minister Sid Ahmed Ghazali and his predecessor Mouloud Hamrouche were hardly in a position to then blame the IMF for the country's ills. Rather, they themselves suffered the full force of the shock in return for their cooperation.

Third, in spite of mistakes by FIS municipal governments, the party as a whole has profited from having a martyr image. With the imprisonment last June of the two principal leaders of the FIS, Abbassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, "the head of the movement has been decapitated," some high FLN dignitaries congratulated themselves. But again, they missed the point: With youths wandering the streets of every town because they cannot find work, whole families crowded into tiny quarters, and the stores displaying only their bare shelves, the FIS knew how to become the refuge for discontent.

The "democratic" parties, FFS, RCD, and others, were themselves unable to mobilize this discontent, because they simply acted like dissidents, and the people wanted a break. Their long and fastidious speechifying on the television or radio, measured up against the true problems of the citizen, hurt them more than it helped at the polls.

## Islamic fundamentalists, free-marketeers

The FIS has not the slightest program and is at least as divided as the Iranian integrists. It supports absolute economic liberalism, at which some American leaders and other "strategists" from the CIA have not looked askance. To have in Algiers a power whose economic convictions are not opposed to shock therapy and the free market, and which comprises a permanent blackmail instrument against France and Europe, adds up to an interesting prospect for the Project Democracy types.

How else to explain the subsidies that the FIS has been receiving from Saudi Arabia, but the benevolence of Washington's allies in Riyadh? But the FFS or the RCD could not for a moment figure out how to attack this aspect of the FIS, which sports "nationalist" and "Islamicist" appearances, but willingly receives a handout from the "Great Satan."

Algeria sits on the razor's edge, with a nearly bankrupt economy, between twin threats: that the FIS would install an Islamic state "for real" and would write laws assailing republican principles; and that the Army will intervene to sweep out all the politicians, Islamicist or not, but without itself having any program or perspective. The future of Algeria, rather, depends upon a program that would seriously build the infrastructure, industry, and agriculture the country needs, as the basis to unite political life with an Islam rediscovering the ways of the modern world, and an Army truly defending the cause of the national interest and democracy.