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## Book Review: The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History by Michael Willis

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*The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: A Political History.* Michael Willis. (New York: New York University Press, 1997. Pp. vii-419. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95 Cloth)

The literature on African colonial history is enormous, and so are the prodigious writings explaining the intricate processes applied by colonial peoples to extricate themselves from the "yoke" of colonialism.<sup>1</sup> Algeria represents a peculiar case in Africa given the very character of the French colonial policy of *assimilation*. In this policy, Paris considered the colonial territories as part of France and conferred on the indigenous peoples the "honor" of being French citizens within the context of her perceived notion and obligation of *mission civilisatrice*.<sup>2</sup> The nationalists in Algeria (like those in Guinea and elsewhere) preferred their Algerian (Arab or African) identity to being French citizens.

The author of this important book provides a chronicle of the political saga of modern Algeria from as early as AD 710 when Islam became the dominant religion in the area to the present. It is divided into eight chapters. Each describes the chronological events at different epochs. For example, chapter one discusses briefly the role of the Ottoman empire that dominated the area until 1830 when French troops stormed the shores of Algeria and conquered it. The period from 1830 to 1962 witnessed attempts by the French to consolidate their grips on the colony, and the fierce but often futile

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<sup>1</sup>See J. Gus Liebenow, *African Politics: Crisis and Challenges* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 13-44; William Tordoff, *Government and Politics in Africa* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 29-49; Helen C. Metz (ed), *Algeria: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1994), pp. 22-25.

<sup>2</sup>E. Ike Udogu, "The Human Factor in Developing Africa" (Book Review) *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. XIII, No. 2 (Fall 1996), p. 248.

resistance by local Islamic groups. Foremost among these groups was the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama (AUMA). In spite of difficulties, however, the determination for freedom was not lost by the Islamic movement and nationalists. The nationalists coalesced under the political organization known as National Liberation Front (FLN). On November 1, 1954, the initial salvos that launched the independence drive were fired by the FLN and the AUMA was by the side of this liberation effort that culminated in Algerian independence from France in 1962 (22-24).

Chapters two through eight provide the politico-historical metamorphoses within Algeria and the Islamic movement itself. They chronicle the challenges which "Islamism" posed for the political system.

Having won independence in 1962, the emergence of competing interests as to what the true character and nature of the state should be came to the fore. Whereas the AUMA argued for a fundamental role for Islam in the new state (p. 36), the new president, Ahmed Ben Bella, espoused a socialist state for Algeria. Arguably, to the Islamic movement, socialism was seen as the "deification" of the state. Indeed, such a political theology, which seems to advocate one's allegiance to the state (and not to Islam), was unacceptable (p. 38). In a way, the debate and clash of ideas over the role of the state and religion in Algerian politics is somewhat analogous to that between the naturalist and positivist in jurisprudence—i.e., should laws be derived from God or should they entail only what the subjects agree to be bound by?<sup>3</sup> Between 1962 and 1965, this antinomy destabilized the regime of Ahmed Ben Bella, as Al-Qiyam, an anti-modern Islamic group, joined forces with AUMA. This resulted in a military coup led by Houari Boumedienne (pp. 44-47). But this change of government,

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<sup>3</sup>Theodore A. Coulombis and James H. Wolfe, *Introduction to International Relations: Power and Justice* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), pp. 248-249.

in the view of the Islamic movement, was only cosmetic. The political corruption and immorality of the state, contended the movement, had led to the decadence of the state. And this was in contravention to the assumptions and belief that "Islamism represents an oasis of moralism that is conducive to the adequate administration of the polity." Socialism, to begin with, is an anathema given the "Quranic endorsement of the concept and legitimacy of private ownership" (p. 50).

Basic to chapters three and four were political reforms that opened the political space to other political groups. It meant the formation of political parties with their conflicting interest in a system that was relatively unfamiliar with this genre of politics (p. 112). It was in light of this development that the powerful Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) under the leadership of Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, as his deputy, was founded (p. 117). In the first multiparty duel on June 12, 1990, the FIS out-performed the institutional party, the FLN, in the local elections (pp. 129, 135). The success of the FIS flowed from a number of factors—corruption in the ruling party, unemployment, social uneasiness, and the lack of a viable third option (152).

In chapter five and six, the author alludes to the national anxiety, especially among the military, created by the FIS's electoral success in the local elections. Indeed, the legislative elections of 1991-1992 in which the Islamic Salvation Front garnered 47% and FLN 23% (230) was the *coup de grâce* in the military's patience regarding the FIS's political and ideological putsch in the politics of Algeria.

Chapter seven analyzes the conflictual relationship between the FIS and the regime following the augmentation of terrorist activities launched by the FIS. The inability of president Boudiaf to mediate and normalize the crisis in part led to his demise. The FIS was accused of his assassination (pp. 265-266). Boudiaf's death was followed by the dissolution of the FIS as a political party and the prolongation of the crisis as various Islamic factions intensified their armed and terrorist struggles against the regime.

In chapter eight, the author addresses, *inter alia*, the search for a solution through a presidential election scheduled on November 16, 1995. The military regime encouraged Defense Minister, General Liamine Zeroual, to run for the presidency. Having banned the FIS from politics, the contenders were Zeroual ("no party"), Mahfoud Nahnah (HAMAS), Saidi Saadi (Rally for Culture and Democracy or RCD) and Norredine Boukrouh (Party of Algerian Renewal or PRA). In the election, Zeroual picked up 61% of the vote, Nahnah 25%, Saadi 10% and Boukroh 4% (pp. 362, 395). The outcome of this election, contends the author, led to a relative calm; but terrorist activities have increased since 1997.

In sum, this book provides the reader with a blow by blow account of the Islamic challenge in Algerian politics. In attempts to achieve this objective, the author placed emphasis on the causes of the political commotion in the country. These were poverty, unemployment and social and economic malaise for a majority of the population. This voluminous work could be compressed into a 250-300 page book while maintaining the very thrust of the argument and debate. But, as a political historian, the numerous repetitions in the work were necessary to keep the reader in focus. This is an excellent and timely book which not only shed light on the political system of Algeria but also on that of other regimes in the continent and elsewhere. Indeed, it adds significantly to the literature on African and Middle Eastern politics.

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