

Algeria – Chance for Democracy?

In early June, President Shadli Benjedid, under pressure from the Islamic fundamentalist riots, accepted the resignation of the National Liberation Front (NLF) government. The new cabinet, appointed in its place, is the first non-NLF government since Algeria gained independence from French occupation in 1962. General elections scheduled for late June were postponed indefinitely, and a state of siege was declared.

by Lena Al Aswad

Two other factors were involved in

President Benjedid's decision to change the government: Firstly, the previous government had failed to alleviate

Algeria's economic crisis; secondly, Benjedid had prior plans to reduce the NLF's role in government. This was implicit in the new election laws, whereby all parties would compete on their own for parliamentary representation. It was further confirmed later in June, when Benjedid resigned from the NLF's chairmanship in order to serve as the president of all the people, rather than primarily the NLF's leader.

Increasing public discontent, due to the exacerbated economic crisis in the country, has caused broad popular protests in the past. Algeria has a foreign debt of \$29 billion. Out of a population of 25 million – 75% of whom are younger than 30 – 1.5 million are unemployed (*Time*, June 17th).

In October 1988, thousands of young Algerians, angered by the deteriorating living conditions, demonstrated in the streets of the capital city. The demonstration was brutally suppressed by the police, and untold damage occurred. To deflect public discontent, the government shortly afterwards began relaxing control and embarked on political reforms, calling for political pluralism and the creation of a multi-party system. Since then, some 40 odd parties have been established. Among the first to be formed was the Islamic Salvation Front (ISF), which quickly gained a large constituency of fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists. In municipal and provincial elections in June 1989, the ISF won the majority of seats (55%).

In April of this year, the ISF's anger was aroused by the introduction of the new electoral laws. The ISF said that the new laws would limit its chance of becoming a strong bloc within the government because the president retained the right to appoint the government, without considering the political composition of the parliament. The ISF gained maximum benefits by agitating the Algerian masses against the NLF party, and called upon the public to demand an Islamic state and the resignation of Benjedid.

Fomenting chaos

On the first day of June, the ISF called for a general strike and organized demonstrations in the streets, condemning the new electoral laws and complaining that they were biased. Local councils, which are controlled by the fundamentalists, went on strike. On the second day of the demonstrations, the police used tear gas to suppress them; on the third day, watercannons were used to

