

disperse the demonstrators. The police opened fire on the fourth day and soon afterwards, the government resigned. A state of siege was declared, and the military authorities were given powers almost equivalent to martial law.

The ISF did not call off its strike until a deal was reached with the authorities through the newly appointed prime minister, to postpone general elections and to hold presidential elections by the end of the year. An informal agreement was also reached to change the new electoral laws opposed by the ISF and the other parties.

In a sermon at Friday prayers in mid-May, Ali Belhaj, deputy chairman of the ISF, said that if the ISF gained a majority in the general elections, it would immediately suspend the constitution and enact *sharia* (Islamic law), ban all socialist and secular parties, and impeach Benjedid (*Al Safir*, May 13th). This theme has been echoed on many occasions by fundamentalist leaders. It demonstrates clearly how the fundamentalists would achieve democracy.

Despite their crushing victory in the local council elections two years ago, the fundamentalists have failed to provide desperately needed solutions for the many problems from which the country is suffering. ISF leader Madani said, «We won the municipal elections. Now people say we did nothing. That's true» (*Time*, June 27th). Although he blamed the government for the ISF's failure to provide jobs and housing, it is clear that even if the government had provided the means, the ISF is incapable of solving the complex political and socioeconomic difficulties of the country.

It was, therefore, logical for the ISF to avoid the scheduled June elections, by escalating violence and anarchy. Neither was it a surprise that the NLF government resorted to violence to confront the fundamentalists, declared a state of emergency and suspended elections. The authorities also face the same complex realities. Moreover, the deplorable events in October 1988, and the continuously deteriorating living conditions have stripped the ruling party of the mass support on which it was relying for winning the general elections.

Democracy is long overdue in Algeria. Yet it is apparent that the fundamentalists are not capable of achieving or sustaining true democracy. However, it is also true that the government had carefully tailored the new electoral laws to keep itself in power. The means used by the ISF to express opposition and pressure the

government are extreme and condemnable. At the same time, the government's reaction was incorrect and unjustified. Repression and violence threaten the country's unity, cause material damage, generate more violence and plant the seeds of civil war.

The authorities, who are responsible for security and stability in the country, did not initially chart a course that took into account the fact that the ISF is the largest opposition party in the country. To avoid the disastrous confrontations, the NLF should have capitalized on its own access to the masses on the one hand, and on the major weakness of the ISF on the other: its two-year flop in the local councils. Sectors of the Algerian people are profoundly uneasy with the fundamentalists' attempts to impose a mini-Islamic state on the local level; and the broad masses have had none of their basic needs fulfilled. Embarking on a broader democratization, which involved the masses, might have given the NLF and the government much needed leverage in dealing with the fundamentalists' challenge. In this context, the ISF could have been allowed to present its programs in a public debate, to be judged by the people and the other opposition parties. If the ISF's intentions had been thus exposed, the government would have been in a strong position to call the fundamentalists to negotiations when the latter called their strike. This would have deflected the anger of the masses – the government and NLF's first line of defense – and further exposed the ISF's true aims.

An open dialogue on the political and socioeconomic problems of the country would have given the people at large the chance to evaluate the ISF's proposed solutions. But unfortunately, open dialogue has not been a tradition of the Algerian government. Thus, the ISF was not held publicly accountable for explaining its mistakes. With the ISF's challenge to the state reaching proportions tantamount to a coup, the authorities saw no alternative but to resort to outright repression.

## Future prospects

The other opposition parties in the country were clever enough to realize what the ISF's intentions were. Although they shared the ISF's view concerning the electoral laws, they refrained from participating in the provocation of the street confrontations. Though for different reasons, the other opposition parties are also in agreement

with the ISF's demand to hold presidential elections to coincide with the general elections, but they disagree that this should be achieved by force. The opposition has not given a convincing reason for the second demand, except to say that they want a comprehensive renovation of the whole system. If this is their aim, then holding the presidential election parallel to the general election is not enough, since real change does not come about only by replacing officials.

Political pluralism and obtaining power by means of elections are only the tip of the iceberg of democracy. The essence of democracy is social justice, i.e., equal distribution of the national wealth among the masses. The Islamic fundamentalists view democracy as a means of obtaining power. But once they achieve this, they would abort democracy, as one can deduce from the previously quoted Belhaj. The NLF and the authorities, on the other hand, supported democracy to the extent that it keeps them in power. The new election laws bear witness to this fact.

The fate of democracy in Algeria depends primarily on the role of the popular masses in the current struggle. It also depends on the ability of the democratic parties to close ranks with the masses, and step up efforts to safeguard national achievements and past progress, meanwhile developing solutions to Algeria's current problems. In this, the decisive question is how the NLF will push forward in the new situation. There are many indications that the NLF today is not a monolithic bloc, but encompasses a variety of forces and opinions concerning how to proceed.

Clearly, the role of the left, outside of the NLF, has been marginal in the past and present events in Algeria. The struggle in the country has polarized between two main blocs: the NLF and the ISF. So far, this form of confrontation appears to be leading the country to a real disaster. Two key questions remain: Will socialist forces, whether inside or apart from the NLF, be able to emerge as a bloc that can influence the course of current events? Will the NLF be able to rejuvenate its historically progressive role, orienting its internal policy towards the broad masses whom it originally led to independence? In both cases, the ability of these forces to contribute to a democratic resolution of Algeria's current crisis will depend on their being innovative in their thinking and remodeling their work in tune with new challenges on the local, regional and international levels.