

Civil war looms in Algeria

by Christine Bierre

On Nov. 10, French Interior Minister Charles Pasqua ordered the arrests of more than 80 persons suspected of being members of Algeria's Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), and of using French territory to conduct FIS support operations. The trigger for Pasqua's actions was the worsening civil war in Algeria, in which French citizens have increasingly become the targets of violent attacks, presumably from Islamic radicals. Two weeks earlier, on Oct. 24, three French consular agents were kidnapped in Algiers by a group calling itself the Islamic Armed Group (GIA). Some French citizens have also been murdered.

Why would the Algerian civil war extend into France? This is the question that the kidnapping of the three consular agents, who were eventually released, has helped to clarify. Informed sources report that there are strong faction fights ongoing within the French administration to determine what France's attitude should be toward the FIS. Up to last March's election, which brought the right-wing opposition into power, President François Mitterrand, while not wholeheartedly favoring an "Islamic solution" for Algeria, had been favorable to opening up negotiations with the Muslims. An old political fox, Mitterrand knows that he cannot go on forever avoiding talks with an opponent which represents, like it or not, the majority of the Algerian electorate. The government of Prime Minister Edouard Balladur, however, has mixed feelings on this issue. Totally opposing any negotiations is Charles Pasqua, while Alain Juppé, the foreign minister, is leaning toward an opening to the FIS.

Tug-of-war in Algiers

Some sources suspect heavy-handed interventions from Paris to tilt the factional lineup in Algiers in favor of a hard-line anti-Islamic approach. Until this summer, the situation was evolving toward a dialogue between the main political parties and the FIS. A "national conference" which was to bring together the main political parties of Algeria would have been the best occasion for opening up the dialogue. The majority of the elites, including the National Liberation Front (FLN), were looking forward to the opening of negotiations as a last-ditch attempt to stop the country from descending into civil war.

These hopes were then shattered by a putsch against President Belaïd Abdessellem on Aug. 23, on the heels of the

Aug. 22 murder of Kasdi Merbah, a former head of the Algerian military and an extremely powerful behind-the-scenes operator. Redha Malek, the new President, represents the hard-line anti-FIS faction, centered around the chief of staff and the gendarmerie.

Informed sources report that under Belaïd Abdessellem's government, the defense minister had secretly appointed Kasdi Merbah to conduct negotiations with moderate FIS figures exiled in Europe. Merbah was murdered just one day after his return from Geneva, where he had been maintaining such back-channels.

Indeed, there is even much doubt as to whether the kidnapping of the French consular agents was carried out by Muslims at all. Commentators in the daily papers *Libération* and *Le Canard Enchaîné* have picked up on rumors that from the very start, the kidnapping had been a setup by Algerian hard-line anti-Islamic factions who are seeking to consolidate their power and to show the world—in particular, international banks—that they are indeed able to handle the situation. This ploy is said to have been designed to justify the adoption of a "Pinochet model" for Algeria: an austerity plan, dictated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), that has also been called the "Turkish model," and that has found some support among Charles Pasqua and his friends in Paris.

By December, the Algerian elites will have to take a decision on those issues, given that the body currently ruling Algeria, the High Security Council, was only named by the military to rule until the term of former President Chadli Benjedid ended on Dec. 31.

The FIS's electoral gains are in fact a protest vote against the economic crisis which is growing worse by the day, and against selling out Algerian sovereignty to the IMF and other foreign financiers. Meddling from Paris in the internal Algerian situation to support this or that faction will not change anything, and at worst will aggravate the crisis. If France is so worried about Islamic fundamentalism, the only sensible policy for weakening obscurantist factions among Muslims in Algeria, would be a major increase economic aid in the form of technology transfers.

The threats against French citizens living in Algeria has already forced two-thirds of the 8,000 living there to return to France. France, a melting pot society with long-standing ties to the North African Maghreb region, has been a traditional meeting point between those two cultures bridging the Mediterranean. Those conspiring internationally to divide the world into the rich North, and the poor South, are the only ones who will benefit from a total break between France and the Maghreb region. The hysteria unleashed against Muslims in Paris, however, even though there are violent factions which must be fought and brought under control, fits too well with the international attack on Islam being run out of England and the United States, in collaboration with extremist Israeli factions, not to examine the deployments of the French Interior Ministry in that light.