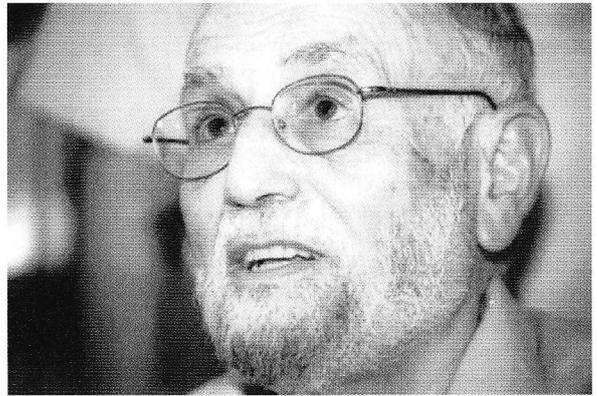


Benyoucef Benkhedda 1920-2003

Never compromised with tyranny



When the Algerian military regime banned parties based on ethnicity or religion in 1996 most of the political parties changed their constitution to conform to the new strictures. Not Benyoucef Benkhedda, the first head of Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic! He also refused to accept the diktat of an illegitimate regime that had been at war with its people since the *coup d'état* of January 1992, killing and terrorising them with impunity.

Instead, he dissolved the Oumma party in 1997, rather than 'sell his soul' as he himself put it.

He had set up the Oumma in 1989 after the introduction of multiparty democracy in Algeria; the party had its roots firmly in the Islamic values and the noble traditions of the Algerian people. Such was his integrity that his departure has left a gaping hole in the life of the Algerian nation; he was firm and uncompromising in his beliefs and convictions.

Benyoucef Benkhedda died on 4 February 2003. He was born on 23 February 1920 at Berroughia, a small town in the Wilaya of Medea, south of Algiers. As the son of a magistrate, he was one of the few lucky Arabs in Algeria to benefit from the French colonial system of education. He attended the colonial college of Blida (now Ibn Roshd). Muslim students at the school were a tiny minority, and the general climate was hostile to Algerians and Islam. At Blida Benkhedda met such friends as Lamine Debaghine (1917-2003) and Sa'd Dahleb (1917-2000) who would later become prominent figures of the national movement. From the University of Algiers Benkhedda graduated as a pharmacist.

At an early age, he joined the Algerian Muslim Scouts, an organisation that sought to protect the identity of Muslim youth, to support them morally and to guide them during their difficult formative years. At the age of 22, Benkhedda joined the Union of Algerian Muslim Students and the Algerian People's Party (PPA, *Parti du Peuple Algérien*), and rose through the ranks to become a member of its Central Committee.

Benkhedda was precociously aware of the harshness of life under colonial rule and the humiliations that characterised

the daily life of the Algerian masses. At the age of 23, he was arrested and imprisoned for eight months for opposing the conscription of Algerians into the French army during the Second World War. In his view, the war did not concern the Algerians at all since their own political and human rights were denied to them. He denounced the use of young Algerians as cannon fodder by the unscrupulous colonial rulers.

The national movement of Algeria was not a monolithic one but traversed by many currents of opinion. In 1953 it experienced a crisis that would radically transform the political landscape. The Central Committee of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Freedoms (MTLD, *Mouvement pour le Triomphe des Libertés Démocratiques*), a successor party to the PPA, broke with Messali Hadj (1898-1974), the charismatic leader of the national movement over his autocratic tendencies. Relations between them had been strained for sometime.

Other middle ranking activists who were neutral in this conflict favoured armed struggle against the French. Their disillusionment with political activity led to the founding of the National Liberation Front (FLN, *Front de Libération Nationale*) and the war of liberation in November 1954.

Two months after the start of the revolution Benkhedda who was then secretary general of the MTLD was arrested. When he was released in April 1955, he joined the FLN and became active in the liberation struggle. He worked closely with Abbane Ramdane (1920-57) and Ben M'hidi (1923-57), the architects of the battle of Algiers (1956-57).

He was actively engaged in preparing the Congress of the Soummam (August 1956), a declaration for the conduct of the liberation war. Aware of the power of the media, he was instrumental in setting up *El-Moudjahid*, the mouthpiece of the revolution. Whether in the national movement or in the FLN, Benkhedda encouraged the quest for knowledge and truth and intellectual excellence.

In 1958 he served as minister of social affairs in the Provisional Government of

the Algerian Republic (GPRA, *Gouvernement Provisoire de la République Algérienne*), replacing Ferhat Abbas (1899-85) in 1961 as the president. He oversaw the complex negotiations at Evian, France, between the FLN and the French government that paved the way for the independence of Algeria.

Benkhedda proclaimed the independence of Algeria on 3 July 1962 and thus became the first head of government of independent Algeria at a time when the revolution was caught up in a new crisis. The dark clouds of disunity were already looming over the National Council of the Algerian Revolution (CNRA, *Conseil National de la Révolution Algérienne*) which held a congress at Tripoli in June 1962 to chart the future of the emerging Algerian nation.

Irreconcilable divisions rent the congress. There was a faction of the provisional government with its supporters (*wilaya* 2 and 3 and the Federation of France, assimilated to a *wilaya*), on the one side. The military chief of staff was on the other, with the support of Ben Bella, Rabah Bitat (1925-2000) and Mohamed Khider (assassinated in 1967 by the regime of Boumediene) and the *wilaya* 1, 5 and 6 – Wilaya 4 remained neutral. In the terminology of the revolution, a *wilaya* was a military region.

These divisions in the leadership soon sealed the fate of the provisional government. As Algeria was celebrating its newly found independence danger loomed on the horizon. The army of the frontiers based in Morocco and Tunisia, led by Col Houari Boumediene (1932-78) and supported by Ben Bella stormed through Algiers and seized power. Through defections and lack of support the GPRA collapsed by August 1962.

Benkhedda preferred not to take a stand against his wellarmed brethren. He listened to the cries of the people who did not want further bloodshed after a savage war, which had lasted

seven and a half years and resulted in the death of hundreds of thousands of Algerians. He believed the use of force was counterproductive and destructive in the long run and in his wisdom he chose a course of action that was of deep significance.

Indeed, history validates his vision because the culture of violence introduced by the military as the only form of government had led Algeria, 30 years later, to a spiral of violence and destruction that surpasses the scale of the war of liberation.

The withdrawal of Benkhedda from politics despite the legitimacy of his position is an eminent act of selfless sacrifice and nobility of mind. The pharmacist was trained to dispense medicine and heal people, not to harm them. The collapse of the GPRA meant the end of his political activity.

Colonialism did not break him but his compatriots had prevented him from serving and guiding his people who were now at the mercy of the revolutionaries without constitutional checks and balances and a free judiciary to protect the rights of the people. Benkhedda had, however, warned against the consequences of such illegitimate and foolish actions:

'Some officers who have lived abroad have not experienced the revolutionary war like their guerrilla brothers. The war has relied essentially on the people. These officers who stayed, for the duration of the war, at the Tunisian and Moroccan frontiers have often the tendency to count only on the force of arms. This dangerous conception leads to the belittlement of the role of the people, indeed to their contempt, and risks engendering feudalism or a militarist caste as is the case in certain under-developed countries, notably

Latin America.¹

How prophetic are these words! Not only is feudalism back but also a militarist caste is firmly entrenched in power. Another irony, which coincides this time with the physical death of Benkhedda, is that a conspirator of the army of frontiers is presiding over the destiny of Algeria.

After his political death, Benkhedda went back to the practice of pharmacy and excelled in his profession. However, he never stopped giving his opinion whenever a major event occurred in Algeria. In 1976 he defied President Boumediene by issuing a declaration with a group of friends – including Ferhat Abbas, Cheikh Kheireddine and Hocine Lahouel – denouncing the rule of one-party system, lack of freedom, and corruption. All the signatories were put under house arrest.

Benkhedda left four valuable books *les accords d'Evian* (the agreement of Evian), *aux origines du 1er Novembre* (the origins of first of November), *Abane et Ben M'hidi, leur apport a la Revolution* (the contribution of Abane and Ben M'hid to the revolution and Algeria at independence), (*L'Algérie a l'indépendance la crise de 1962* (the crisis of 1962).

Benkhedda was buried on 5 February 2003 in the cemetery of Sidi Yahia of Hydra, on the outskirts of Algiers. A large crowd of mourners accompanied him to his last abode. Algeria today would have been totally different if Benkhedda, the wise pharmacist, had not been sidelined in August 1962. The fall of the GPRA and the subsequent military coup of Defence Minister Boumediene against President Ben Bella in June 1965 paved the way for the confiscation of the independence by

the power-hungry military at the expense of the long suffering Algerians.

Mohamed Harbi, an eminent Algerian historian and also a leader of the national movement, writes about Benkhedda in his memoirs²: 'A man of great devotion and dedication without equal. He is simple and calm. He has a strong internal force. He is slow to make decisions but once his mind is made up he would rarely go back on his decisions.' And to highlight his integrity, Harbi adds: 'Circumstances had propelled him into high responsibilities which a Machiavelli would have undoubtedly exploited.'

The legacy of Benkhedda can be summed up as no compromise with tyranny; devotion to the cause of the liberation of his people; witness to the truth; intellectual engagement; and humility and strong faith.

At his burial his old companion Bencheikh, from the days of their joint struggle in the PPA-MTLD, gave him a memorable tribute: 'Giants will remain giants and great will remain great... few of this generation know his historical path.' He recalled also that: 'Benyoucef Benkhedda had assumed heavy responsibilities in the most difficult moments. He had a strong personality and was firm in the decisions that he took. Being pious and modest, he was the man of reconciliation.' There can be no better epitaph than this. May the Almighty receive the deceased with His infinite mercy in His infinite Paradise. ■

Lamine Zakaria

1. Public declaration of President Benyoucef Benkhedda, August 1962 in *Etienne Mallarde. L'Algérie depuis*, Editions La Table Ronde, 1975.

2. Mohamed Harbi, *Une vie debout. Mémoires politiques. Tome 1 : 1945-1962. La Découverte*, 420 pages, 2001.

Shaikh 'Abd Allah bin Bassaam, 87, who died of heart attack on 30 January 2003 was a distinguished scholar who held many important positions such as official teacher at the Masjid al-Haram, Makkah al-Mukarramah; chief judge at the Supreme High Court in Makkah; head of the High Court in Ta'if; member of the Muslim World League; and member of the World Fiqh Council etc. His *Janazah* was held the following day in Masjid al-Haram after the *Jumu'ah* prayer.

He was born in Qaseem in the city of 'Unayza, where his early studies began mostly under the guidance of his father; his unswerving pursuit of blessed knowledge was thanks to his father's encouragement and inspiration.

'Abd Allah bin Bassaam then studied

under the Faqih, Shaikh 'Abd ur-Rahman Naasir as-Si'di (known as al-Sa'di), and other scholars from Najd. His dedication and devotion enabled him to acquire not only vast knowledge but also a deep insight into Fiqh, from which a huge number of people benefited.

Of the many books that he wrote, perhaps the most well known are his explanation of *Umdatul Ahkaam (Tayseer al-'Alaam Sharh Umdatul Ahkaam)*, *Tawdeeh al-Ahkaam Sharh Bulugh al-Maraam*, and *Haashiya alaa Umdatil Fiqh*.

Shaikh 'Abd Allah bin Bassaam

Faqih, judge and imam

Every day the Ummah is indeed getting poorer by the deaths of eminent Faqih such as Shaikh Abd Allah and colleagues of his generation. As another leader from Ahlus-Sunnah wal Jamaa'a, Shaikh 'Uthaymeen, his companion and friend, Shaikh 'Uthaymeen had remarked before his own death: 'The 'ulama are many, but where shall we find the fuqaha?' He was asked: 'Who are the scholars that we should turn to in future?' ■

Abû 'Eesa Niamatullah