

The Rocket That Never Took Off

Yaquh Mounir on the late Ferhat Abbas, the intellectual giant of Algeria.

FERHAT ABBAS, one of the outstanding figures of Algerian nationalism, passed away in his home in Algiers on 25 December 1985, at the age of 86. Fate decreed that he would give up the ghost on the day the ruling FLN party's extraordinary congress was convened to adopt the revised version of the 1976 Marxist charter which he had criticized. He was put under house arrest for his derring-do by the late President Boumedienne.

Born in 1899 in the eastern Algerian area of Jijell in a well-off family of the Algerian middle-class, Ferhat studied at Algiers University and graduated in pharmaceutical studies. His political leaning and Islamic feelings in the face of dishonest anti-Islamic colonialist propaganda led him to become the chairman of the *Muslim Students' Society*, and he started writing in defence of the Arab-Islamic heritage under the pen-name of Kamal Abencerages. His writings were published in the form of a book, *The Young Algerian*, in 1931.

Meanwhile French culture started affecting his views and stand, and while not renouncing his Muslim identity, he believed that the Algerians should become French nationals as the only way of emancipating themselves culturally and economically. At the age of 37 he founded a journal which he significantly called *L'Entente* (the understanding) in which he took a clean pro-French stand which shocked Algerian Muslims.

"I shall not die for the Algerian homeland because this homeland does not exist... I sought an answer from history, I sought an answer from the living and the dead, I visited the cemeteries, none mentioned it to me. One does not build on nothing. We have swept aside once and for all the impossible and fanciful imaginations to forever link our future to that of France's work in this country..."

Abbas had before this even tried to



Martyr's Square in Algiers (above) is a constant reminder of the struggle of the ordinary people (opposite)

convince the *Ulama Association* of Sheikh Abdelhamid Ben Badis (1925–1945) to support his "assimilation" theory (cultural integration within French society) as the only means of salvation for the Muslims. Sheikh Ben Badis' strongly worded reply was: *"Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language, Algeria is my homeland"*. In response to Abbas's assimilationist view, Ben Badis composed a poem which became an Algerian Muslim slogan. The poem begins with: *"The Algerian people is Muslim, And to the Arab fold it belongs. Whosoever says it has moved away from its origin, or has 'died', is certainly a liar."*

Abbas's pro-French views at that time certainly affected his later political positions and he attained high positions. He was successively elected as a municipal councillor, general councillor, then financial delegate and later, in June 1946 he was elected deputy to the French parliament. Yet, in spite of his stand, the French authorities never listened to him in time. Even when one of his major demands, granting French citizenship to the Algerians, was eventually submitted to the vote in the form of the

Blum-Violette project, the French colonists in Algeria opposed it unanimously and the project failed.

The *Ulama Association* and the other nationalist parties were proved right not to give credit to Abbas's 'constructive' dialogue with the French. He himself was very disappointed by the rejection of the *Blum-Violette* bill. His bewilderment appears in his *Lettres d'un Algerien* (an Algerian's Letters) published in 1937. In that situation the party which he founded, *l'Union Populaire Algerienne* did not survive long as grassroots support was not forthcoming.

But the pharmacist of Setif (his town), as he was known, did not despair, believing that what some named "his protesting moderation" would eventually overcome. When the allied forces disembarked in Algiers on 8 November 1942, Ferhat Abbas contacted the Americans, hoping that they would bring pressure to bear on the French to secure a beginning of emancipation for the Algerians. After a series of talks with President Roosevelt's representative Robert Murphy, he published, on 10 February 1943, *Amis du Manifeste et de la Liberte* (AML), (Friends of the Man-

ifesto and Freedom). The manifesto demanded a Constitution which would put all the inhabitants of Algeria on an equal footing and ensure "the effective and immediate participation of Algerian Muslims in the running of their country".

These claims show a certain radicalization, for Abbas had hitherto demanded citizenship only. An addendum to the manifesto published later, specified the pharmacist's intention to demand autonomy for the Algerians which aggravated the French authorities. A strike by "the elected" Algerians was found daring and Abbas was under house arrest in the Sahara for a while.

However, the reformist's radicalization appeared to have reached a point of no return. When in the Summer of 1943 General de Gaulle announced that thousands of Algerians were granted French citizenship, Abbas felt that was no longer enough. In fact Abbas would have been discredited if he had accepted de Gaulle's gesture at a time when the other nationalists and the Ulama had been demanding nothing less than total independence. The situation of Algerian nationalism led him to increased toughness, and in 1944 he set up a party carrying the name of his 1943 manifesto, the AML, in response to France's offer of electoral rights to the Muslims. The AML brought together those who intended to act for the creation of an Algerian state.

However, *Monsieur Abbas's* radicalization was still not radical enough, and this was a great setback for him. On armistice day, 8 May 1945, a group of Algerians in the pharmacist's town of Setif requested the local authorities to honour their pledge to grant the Muslims independence in return for their fighting alongside the French against the Germans. The killing of some of the claimants sparked off riots which eventually led to the massacre of 45,000 Muslims in a few days. On that day Abbas was some 300 miles away in the capital where he reportedly went to congratulate the Governor-General of Algeria on the Allies' victory – and obviously to press ahead with his demands for reforms. Thought to be behind the popular revolt, he was arrested the same day, but later released.

Later the same year Abbas founded a new party, the *Union Democratique du Manifeste Algerien* (UDMA) which was to serve the Algerian bourgeoisie's emancipation purposes. The issue of this emancipation was raised in 1946 by Deputy Abbas in the



French parliament, but Algeria's colonists still refused to listen. In fact they were busy trying to impede the action of the other radical nationalist parties such as Messali Hadj's *Parti dy Peuple Algerien*. It is probable that Abbas – who actually could have been used by the French to divide the Algerians – was by then dismissed as just another nationalist.

In the meantime the radicals were heading towards armed struggle which broke out on 1 November 1954, under the newly formed Front of National Liberation. When this happened Abbas was taken unawares. It was not until April 1956 that he joined the FLN in Cairo, after the killing of his nephew by Ben Bella's group had given him a warning regarding the safety of his own life. Yet once again he adapted to a revolutionary situation which he had never advocated, and became the President of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) in September 1958. In 1962 he became the Chairman of the first National Assembly (parliament) of independent Algeria.

His political career ended in the Summer of 1963 when he fell out with the FLN revolutionaries who showed clear Marxist tendencies. His resignation letter, (12 August 1963) read in the Assembly, is extremely interesting. It tells a lot about the man's personality and his far-sightedness. The letter admonished President Ben Bella's group for drafting a self-styled Constitution outside the Assembly, and warned against the imposition "on our people (of) an ideology (marxism) which is not theirs...", saying: "We are not yet at the stage of a police regime. But if we do not take care we shall get there soon".

All that Abbas warned against in his

letter occurred soon after he had resigned. A Constitution was imposed as well as the one party (FLN) system, and socialism became the government ideology later to be turned into hard-line marxism under Boumedienne's rule (1965–1978).

It is not surprising, therefore, that *'Independence Confiscated'*, a book Abbas published in 1984, is essentially an emotionally strong indictment of Ben Bella and Boumedienne who imposed "Stalinian regimes" "in contradiction with Islam". But behind the criticism of the two former presidents lies a fierce attack on socialism and an equally powerful defence of Islam. "I am too much attached to Islam, he says, to exchange it against a social order which everywhere else has given such disappointing results" (page 19).

Yet under the two former presidents marxism reigned as a master, but was clad in Islamic garb to hide its action: "...the Algerian Republic behaved like an adulteress. Publicly married to Islam, it discreetly slept in Stalin's bed".

Ferhat Abbas (with other famous leaders of the FLN during the Algerian war of liberation) broke his silence again in March 1976 to denounce Boumedienne's personalized dictatorial rule, Algeria's responsibility in the Western Sahara conflict as well as the subservience to which the Algerian people had been reduced. In the letter, (included in the book), which was first sent to the government before being secretly distributed in the country, Abbas again spoke out in defence of Islam. He remarked that "Personal power... imposes on our children an educational system of its (own) choice. It submits us to an ideology hostile to the spiritual and moral values of Islam. This Islam for which one and half million Algerians died". In the same letter Abbas opposed President Boumedienne's proposed national charter (totally marxist in its outlook) because it was "to institutionalize his power".

The then 77 year old man was unashamedly put under house arrest for his stand. But strangely enough, the exercise of "improving" that charter recently (its revised version was adopted on 16 January) was essentially to stress the place of Islam in Algerian society, as had been advocated by Abbas in the book. In fact when he came to power in 1979, President Chadli released Abbas who was decorated as a national hero in November 1984 at the time of the publication of his book.

The tragedy of Algeria, as Ferhat

Abbas points out, has been indeed ideological repression, reflected in an attempt to undermine Islam "in its own land" through marxism — an alien and hostile ideology. Was the Algerian people destined to undergo such a fate? The author answers by referring to the nationalist period of the thirties and the forties when Messali Haj — considered to be the father of Algerian nationalism — ruled his members with a "Stalinian discipline". Messali was a communist for a while when he stayed in France and his leadership is understood to have been heavy-handed. Moreover, in recent years, Ben Bella, although not a communist has not hidden his admiration for the leader of the 1937 *Parti du Peuple Algerien* (PPA) who gave his party "the same structures as the (French) Communist Party and practised, like the latter, 'democratic centralism'." Hence for Abbas the connection is clear: Messalism gave rise to Ben Bellism which led to Boumediennism.

Yet socialism was "a fact added to the 1 November (1954) proclamation", the author says, specifying "During the war, nobody said a word about it". Ben Bella officialized his "Castro-Style socialism" soon after Parliament (the Assembly) was installed in 1962. Abbas goes on: "Whereas God tells us: 'Man is free to believe, he is free not to believe', Ben Bella forced us to believe in his system, failing which we would have been excluded from the national as horrible 'reactionaries'."

Meanwhile Colonel Boumedienne topped Ben Bella on 19 June 1965 allegedly to put an end to his "personal power", said the author. But Abbas devotes several pages to how Boumedienne developed his predecessor's dictatorial tendencies and even refined them. That was apparently a surprise as, "Nobody had thought that Boumedienne, a former student at al-Az'har, in Cairo, could give up the way of Islam and freedom for that of Stalinian totalitarianism".

Two notorious insults to Islam, reported by the author, took place, with all impunity, under Ben Bella and his successor's marxist rules. The first was the statement in 1964 in the leftist *Revolution Africaine* that the "Quran has become outdated". The second appeared in 1967 in *Algérie Actualité*, and was a cartoon by a certain talented marxist writer, Kateb Yacine, which represented two rockets: one American and the other Russian. Next to them was a minaret under which was the caption: "The rocket which does not blast off". "I felt

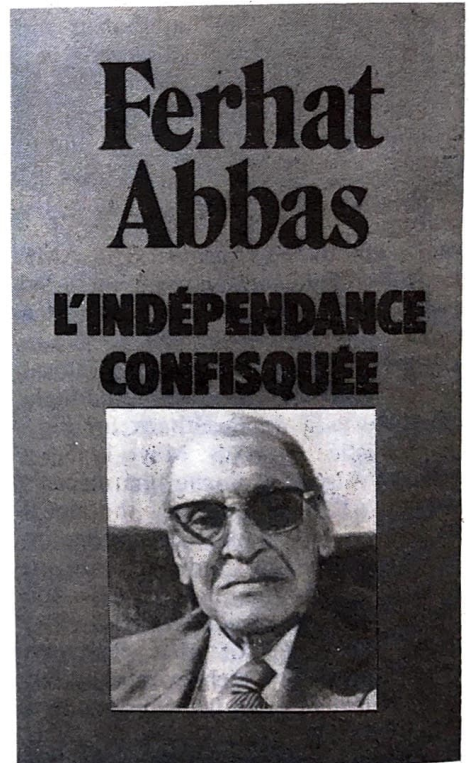


that caption as a slap and an insult". says Abbas, commenting that "It was also an injustice, for there was a time when the science which presided over the appearance of rockets, was taught to barbarian Europe by the Muslims".

'Independence Confiscated' is not a book on Islam, but as the period of independence was marked by a fierce ideological struggle in which Islam has been the target, and because Islam is normally "also a terrestrial city", it pervades the book.

The book is also autobiographical, therefore, one finds here and there some self-praise just as the author chooses to omit some other facts. For example he does not deal with his 'assimilation' stand and his subsequent polemic with Sheikh Ben Badis, the Leader of the *Ulama Assoxirion* (1925–1945). There are also other gaps. Abbas mentions that Algerian people resisted marxism and dictatorship by building "mosques everywhere with their own money and multiplying pilgrimages to the holy shrines of Islam", but he does not mention at all the existence of an Islamic movement in Algeria. Nor does he refer to the muzzling of Malek Bennabi and the Ulama.

One can only reproach him with having broken his silence in such a cogent way a little late, when marxism had already done great harm. But Abbas has the merit to have all the same, left a vivid testimony of the catastrophe which has struck Algeria for a quarter of a century of independence. This tragedy can be summed up



with two sentences from the book: "French Algeria' has been destroyed. Muslim Algeria has not been revived, and 'socialist Algeria' is not born". (p.60). The book (1), published in France, is still banned in Algeria. So have been his other works (in French) *The Colonial Night* (1962) and *Autopay of a War* (1980). ■

(1): Ferhat Abbas *Independence Confiscated*, Flammarion — Paris 1984, 227 pages, Fr.75