

The New Algeria, Albert Camus

The New Algeria

As things now stand, it has long seemed to me that the only regime likely to do justice to all segments of the population would be one similar to the Swiss confederation, which embraces several different nationalities. I think, however, that an even more novel system is needed. The Swiss population consists of different groups occupying different regions. Its institutions are designed solely to coordinate political life in the various cantons. By contrast, Algeria is one of the few examples of a country with different populations living together in the same territory.

A federation is first of all a union of differences, and what Algeria needs is an association not of different territories but of communities with different identities. Marc Lauriol, a professor of law in Algiers, has proposed a solution to this problem. Even if one does not approve of every last detail of his proposal, it seems to me particularly well adapted to Algerian realities and likely to satisfy the need for both justice and liberty that all the communities of Algeria share.

In essence, Prof. Lauriol's proposal combines the advantages of integration and federalism. While respecting particular differences, it associates both Arab and French populations in the administration of their common interest. To that end, it recommends as a first step a parliamentary reform that would divide the French National Assembly into two sections: a metropolitan section and a Muslim section. The first would include elected officials from metropolitan France and the overseas territories, and the second Muslims living under Islamic law. The rule of proportionality would be strictly respected. One can therefore envisage a parliament of 600 metropolitan deputies, 15 representatives of the French in Algeria, and 100 Muslim deputies.

The Muslim section would deliberate separately on all matters pertaining to Muslims alone. The plenary session, combining both French and Muslims, would have jurisdiction over matters of concern to both communities (such as taxes and budget) or to both communities and the metropole (such as national defense). Other questions of interest solely to the metropole (particularly in regard to civil law) would remain exclusively within the competence of the metropolitan section.

So laws pertaining only to Muslims would be dealt with solely by Muslim deputies. Laws applicable to all would be decided by all. Laws applicable only to the French would be decided solely by French representatives. In this first phase of the plan, the government would be responsible to each section separately or to both combined, depending on the nature of the question to be decided.

In phase two, after a preliminary period leading to a general reconciliation, the consequences of this innovation would be evaluated. Contrary to all French custom and to firm biases inherited from the French Revolution, the proposal would create two categories of equal but distinct citizens. In this respect, it would constitute a sort of revolution against the regime of centralization and abstract individualism created in 1789, which for many reasons should now be seen as the Old Regime. Prof. Lauriol is nevertheless right to say that his proposal would give rise to nothing less than a federal state in France, an authentic French Commonwealth.¹

Similar institutions could naturally find a place in a system that might eventually be joined by other countries of the Maghreb and black Africa. An Algerian regional assembly would then represent the distinctive views of Algeria, while a federal senate, in which Algeria would be represented, would wield legislative power in regard to matters of interest to the entire federation (such as defense and foreign affairs). It would also elect a federal government responsible to it. It is also important to note that this system is not incompatible with possible new institutions that may emerge in Europe.

That, in any case, should be the French proposal, which would then be maintained until a cease-fire was achieved. At the moment, the intransigence of the FLN has complicated that task. This intransigence is in part spontaneous and unrealistic and in part inspired and cynical. To the extent that it is spontaneous, one can understand it and try to neutralize it with a truly constructive proposal.

To the extent that it is inspired, it is unacceptable. Independence is conditioned on a refusal of all negotiation and provocation of the worst excesses. France has no option but to stick to the proposal I described, seek its approval by international opinion and broader and broader segments of the Arab population, and work toward its gradual acceptance.

This is as much as one can imagine for the immediate future. Such a solution is not utopian in light of Algerian realities. It is uncertain only because of the state of French political society. Its success depends on:

1. A collective will in metropolitan France, and in particular a decision to accept an austerity policy, the brunt of which would have to be borne by the wealthier classes (the working class already bears the weight of a scandalously unjust tax system).

2. A government prepared to reform the Constitution (which in any case was approved only by a minority of the population) and ready and willing to initiate a steadfast, ambitious, long-range policy to establish a French federation.

Objective observers may well feel skeptical that these two conditions can be met. The advent of considerable new human and economic resources in both France and Algeria justifies hopes for renewal, however. If so, then a solution like the one described above has a chance. Otherwise, Algeria will be lost, with terrible consequences for both the Arabs and the French. This is the last warning that can be given by a writer who for the past 20 years has been dedicated to the Algerian cause, before he lapses once again into silence.

1. "Le Fédéralisme et l'Algérie," La Fédération, 9, rue Auber, Paris.

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