

Ahmed Ben Bella and His Role in Building and Consolidating the Algerian State after Independence

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Received: 23/11/2025 ; Accepted : 09/05/2026 ; Published : 01/08/2026

Abstract:

After Algeria achieved independence and recovered its national sovereignty, the question of who would govern the country became urgent. Algeria had just passed through a crisis that nearly undermined the foundations of the new state. Several leaders acted with restraint, remained committed to revolutionary principles, and had made major sacrifices for national liberation. Grassroots militants and the wider public also adopted a responsible position. The crisis could have pushed the country toward civil war. The public response reflected the political awareness and maturity of the Algerian people. It also confirmed that national unity was essential to heal divisions and confront those who opposed or conspired against national independence.

This public awareness helped produce the compromises that brought Ahmed Ben Bella to the highest political office as the first president of independent Algeria. This study therefore examines an important period in Algeria's contemporary history. It considers the outcomes of Ben Bella's leadership while the country was emerging from French colonial rule and confronting its political, economic, and social legacies. It also analyzes his role in shaping the Algerian political system during a brief and sensitive period of rule. Finally, it traces the developments that culminated in the first military coup, through which the army, led by Houari Boumediene, assumed power in Algeria.

Key words : Ahmed Ben Bella; Independent Algeria; Algerian Political System; National Unity; Military Coup (1965); Houari Boumediene.

Introduction:

State-building in Algeria after independence is a major theme in contemporary historical studies. The period involved a difficult transition from the war of liberation to the establishment of state institutions. Independent Algeria had to reorganize its political and administrative structures and address the effects of colonialism. It also had to adopt policies suited to the construction of a modern state. Ahmed Ben Bella played a prominent role as the country's first president and as a central actor in the founding period. His political project centered on a centralized state based on revolutionary legitimacy and a socialist orientation. It also sought to consolidate national sovereignty and strengthen Algeria's position at home and abroad. These objectives were pursued through policies and reforms designed to establish the foundations of the national state.

The importance of studying Ben Bella's experience lies in its connection to a decisive period in contemporary Algerian history. It helps explain the political and institutional changes that

accompanied the formation of the independent state. It also clarifies the difficulties involved in moving from a revolutionary order to a state order. Researchers remain divided over this experience. Some regard it as a foundational stage that established the first building blocks of the Algerian state. Others argue that political and institutional challenges limited its results. The central question of this study is therefore as follows: To what extent did Ahmed Ben Bella contribute to building and consolidating the Algerian state after independence?

The study is based on the assumption that Ben Bella helped lay the first foundations of the independent Algerian state. He did so through institution-building and broad public reforms. His experience, however, faced obstacles related to the transitional context, internal political conflicts, and limited resources. The study uses a historical and analytical method to address this question. It draws on primary sources and relevant academic scholarship. Its aim is to provide a scholarly assessment of Ben Bella's role in state-building during the first years of independence.

1- Ahmed Ben Bella: Background and Early Life

Historians disagree about Ben Bella's exact date of birth. Some state that he was born on 25 December 1918¹, while others give 25 December 1916². Ben Bella himself said that he did not know the exact date because of the poor social conditions that prevailed under colonial rule. He nevertheless considered 25 December 1916 the most likely date. He adopted it after making inquiries among people who had known him during his childhood³.

Ben Bella was born in Maghnia, west of Oran⁴, into a rural family whose parents came from Marrakesh, Morocco. They belonged to the Amazigh tribe of Ouled Sidi Rahal in Marrakesh⁵. His father came to Algeria at the request of his elder brother, El-Miloud Ben Mahjoub. The latter had settled in Maghnia and had succeeded in business⁶. Ben Bella first attended both a Quranic school and a French school. After several years, he continued only at the French school. He later entered secondary school but did not complete his studies. In 1937, he was called up for service in the French army and trained in Marseille⁷. He joined an Alpine infantry battalion in the 141st Infantry Regiment. The unit was stationed at Saint-Charles Barracks and included both French and Algerian soldiers. Ben Bella ranked first in the non-commissioned officer examination and was promoted to sergeant⁸. Ben Bella began his political activity during the stay of Sheikh Bachir al-Ibrahimi in Tlemcen. He joined the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama and carried out the tasks assigned to him. This affiliation did not prevent him from contacting other nationalist parties, particularly the Algerian People's Party. His first contact with that party was through Abdelkader Barka⁹. The party leadership

¹ Bachir Bellah, *History of Contemporary Algeria, 1830–1919* (Algiers: Dar al-Ma'rifa for Printing and Publishing, 2006), vol. 2, p. 423.

² Ibrahim Lounissi, *Political Conflict in Algeria during the Presidency of Ahmed Ben Bella* (Algiers: Dar Houma for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, 2007), p. 10.

³ Ahmed Mansour, *President Ahmed Ben Bella Reveals the Secrets of the Algerian Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Mohammadia: Dar al-Asala for Publishing and Distribution), p. 11.

⁴ Alistair Horne, *Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie* (Algiers: Dahleb, 2007), p. 76.

⁵ Rabah Lounici, *Algeria's Presidents in the Balance of History: An Academic Assessment of Half a Century of Independent Algeria* (Algiers: Dar al-Ma'rifa, 2011), p. 55.

⁶ Shahid 'ala al-'Asr [Witness to the Age], interview with Ahmed Ben Bella, *Al Jazeera*, 2003.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ahmed Mansour, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 37, 48.

later entrusted him with organizational responsibilities. He established party cells in Maghnia and then organized the party in Tlemcen between 1946 and 1948. After his discharge from the French army, he immediately joined the Friends of the Manifesto and Liberty¹⁰. He did not hold a major position in that movement. He later formally joined the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties. In 1946, he stood in the local elections on an independent list. He won decisively and became a representative of the people of Maghnia¹¹.

2- His Activities during the War of National Liberation

Together with Mostefa Ben Boulaid and Bachir Kadi, Ben Bella helped establish the first arms-supply networks in Libya. They also created the conditions needed to receive weapons from Egypt in coordination with Colonel Abdelhamid Derna¹². Ben Bella was a member of the external delegation when he learned of the resolutions adopted at the Soummam Congress. He opposed those resolutions and asked Abane Ramdane to delay their announcement until all qualified leaders had discussed them. Ben Bella argued that the congress organizer, Krim Belkacem, sought to give priority to the internal leadership. In his view, this would limit his own influence and that of the historical leaders. It would also create greater space for moderate nationalists who had only recently joined the revolution¹³. He rejected the idea that Abane Ramdane and his associates alone were entitled to direct the revolution. This position intensified the conflict between them. Ben Bella then sought supporters for a corrective congress that would restore the influence of the external leadership¹⁴. His position was shared by Mohamed Khider, Hocine Ait Ahmed, and Mohamed Boudiaf. Their marginalization may have been linked to Larbi Ben M'hidi's visit to Egypt in late 1955. During that visit, he questioned the militants about their failure to perform their essential task of supplying the revolution with arms¹⁵. Some participants described the meeting between Ben M'hidi and Ben Bella as tense. Ben M'hidi reportedly returned from Cairo with an unfavorable impression of Ben Bella. The internal leadership probably saw little value in the external delegation attending the congress¹⁶.

¹⁰ Ferhat Abbas, *The Algerian War and Revolution: The Night of Colonialism*, trans. Abu Bakr Rahal (Algiers: Dar al-Jaza'ir lil-Kutub, 2011), p. 121.

¹¹ Benyoucef Ben Khedda, *The Roots of 1 November 1954*, trans. Massoud Hadj Massoud, 2nd ed. (Algiers: Al-Shatibi Publishing, 2012), p. 501.

¹² Aboubakr Hafizallah, *Supply and Armament during the Algerian War of Liberation, 1954–1962* (Algiers: Dar al-Ilm wa al-Ma'rifa, 2013), p. 214.

¹³ Abdallah Maqlati, *A Reference Guide to the History of the Algerian Revolution and Its Basic Texts, 1954–1962* (Algiers: Office of University Publications, 2013), pp. 70–71.

¹⁴ Mohamed Abbas, *Victory without a Price: The Algerian Revolution, 1954–1962* (Algiers: Casbah Publishing House, 2007), p. 232.

¹⁵ In a letter sent by Abbas in September 1956, this issue was presented as a cause of tension between the two sides: 'Since you are unable to serve the cause abroad, come inside and at least die with us.' See Mohamed Abbas, *Paths to Independence*, op. cit., p. 119. The external delegation considered the arms problem to have been exaggerated. It argued that Abane had little knowledge of the issue when he joined the FLN in 1955, especially of the weapons entering the Aurès from late 1954. It also maintained that he did not fully understand the complexity and seriousness of arms supply and underestimated the efforts of those responsible for it. See Mohamed Abbas, *Paths to Independence: Chapters from the Epic of Liberation* (Algiers: Dar Houma, 2012), pp. 120–121.

¹⁶ Zouhir Ihaddaden, *Historical Figures and Positions* (Algiers: ANEP Publications, National Communication Corporation, n.d.), pp. 152–153.

3- Establishment of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria and Ben Bella's Appointment as Head of State:

The victory of the Political Bureau after the Oujda Group prevailed marked the beginning of that group's consolidation of power. It brought Ahmed Ben Bella to the presidency as Algeria's first head of state. Ben Bella then formed the country's first government. That government had to define the orientation of the new Algerian state amid the Cold War rivalry between the Eastern and Western blocs. The central issue was therefore the ideology or political approach that independent Algeria would adopt while forming its political system.

On 20 September 1962, the newly elected National Constituent Assembly proclaimed the birth of the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria. It granted the government a majority vote of confidence and appointed Ahmed Ben Bella President of the Council of Ministers. The government included no member of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic¹⁷. Ben Bella was not selected because he was the only leader qualified for the presidency. Nor was he necessarily more deserving than Mohamed Boudiaf, Houari Boumediene, or Krim Belkacem. Rather, military calculations and the assessments of the General Staff favored a leader whom they regarded as the weakest link in an emerging postwar political order¹⁸. Ben Bella also took part in screening the candidate lists for the Constituent Assembly elections held on 20 September¹⁹. As head of government, he presented the government program to the Assembly on 28 September 1962. The government was installed the next day by 128 votes in favor, one vote against, and 19 abstentions²⁰.

Although the government included figures with different ideological backgrounds, its composition gave the impression that the Tlemcen Group monopolized power while including selected supporters and close associates. Ben Bella became President of the Council of Ministers, head of the first Algerian government after independence, and a member of the Political Bureau. Mohamed Khider served as Secretary-General of the Political Bureau. Ferhat Abbas secured the presidency of the National Assembly. His current was also represented in the government by Ahmed Francis at the Ministry of Finance and by Ahmed Boumendjel in another ministerial post. The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama was represented by Tawfiq al-Madani as Minister of Religious Endowments. The General Staff secured the Ministry of Defense for Boumediene, the Ministry of the Interior for Ahmed Medeghri, and the Ministry of Youth, Sports, and Tourism for Abdelaziz Bouteflika²¹. This composition clearly reflected the dominance of the group associated with the unelected Political Bureau.

On 17 May 1963, Colonel Houari Boumediene was appointed First Deputy Prime Minister. The army thus established itself as a principal arbiter in the struggle for power²². Boumediene retained the defense portfolio. Mohamed Said, Minister of Veterans and War Victims, was appointed Second

¹⁷ Benjamin Stora, *History of the World after Independence, 1962–1988*, trans. Sabah Kanaan (Damascus: Syrian General Book Organization, 2013), p. 23.

¹⁸ Aboudjerra Soltani, *The Roots of Conflict in Algeria*, 2nd ed. (Algiers: Dar al-Umma, 1999), p. 21.

¹⁹ Khalfa Mameri, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

²⁰ Abdelkader Boulssane, *The Algerian Government, 1962–2006* (Algiers: Dar Houma, 2006), p. 26.

²¹ Marnia Lazreg, *The Emergence of Classes in Algeria: A Study of Colonialism and Social and Political Change*, trans. Samir Karam (Arab Research Foundation, 1980), p. 10.

²² Benjamin Stora, *Algeria after Independence, 1962–1988*, trans. Sabah Mamdouh Kaadan (Damascus: Syrian General Book Organization, 2012), p. 25.

Deputy Prime Minister. Rabah Bitat was excluded from the position of Third Deputy Prime Minister. The first Algerian government remained provisional because no constitution was yet in force. It lasted from 27 September 1962 to 18 September 1963. The context in which it operated was marked by sharp contradictions that soon developed into hostility and conflict. The administration of the country received limited attention, while personal ambitions became visible and collided. Government reshuffles and the many portfolios held by the head of government reflected the intensity of the struggle within the ruling elite. They also indicated a non-democratic method of government²³. Aboudjerra Soltani argued that the president did not understand the danger of the position into which he had been placed. In his view, opportunistic figures around Ben Bella presented the outcome as favorable and reduced complex problems to naive formulas. Yet the situation required firmness, candor, strength, awareness, depth of thought, and decisiveness²⁴.

The growing military advantage became clearer in the second government²⁵. Ben Bella introduced it to the National Assembly by declaring: 'I have formed a new government of military men—genuine military men and genuine revolutionaries'²⁶. The reshuffle of 19 September, conducted under the 1963 Constitution, gave the government a more explicitly socialist character. This orientation was already visible in the March decrees on self-management, which strengthened the revolutionary direction of the ruling authority. The second government reflected the continuation of both pragmatic and ideological conflict. It also showed the increasing importance of military figures and the declining weight of civilians²⁷. On 2 December 1964, Ben Bella appointed the third and final government of his presidency²⁸. The new reshuffle sought a degree of decentralization. Sixteen ministries were created after three large ministries were divided. The Ministries of the Interior, Finance, and Information became directorates-general attached to the presidency and supervised by the president. Ben Bella also attempted to rely on military officers while limiting Boumediene's authority. He reduced the influence of two of Boumediene's close allies, the ministers of the Interior and Foreign Affairs. He also appointed seven ministers who had no significant record of participation in the revolution. Their inclusion appears to have been intended as a counterweight to growing military dominance²⁹. These changes were short-lived. The government lasted only from December 1964 to 19 June 1965, when the army, led by Houari Boumediene, carried out a military coup that it called the Revolutionary Rectification³⁰.

3- Adoption of Socialist Ideology

The first phase ended what may be described as the revolutionary system, namely the wartime system of the National Liberation Front, which had been characterized by complete centralization. Some scholars argue that the Algerian state inherited almost everything from the colonial

²³ The Algerian Government, 1962–2006 (Algiers: Ministry of Mujahideen, n.d.), p. 31.

²⁴ Aboudjerra Soltani, op. cit., p. 32.

²⁵ According to the composition of the second government of independent Algeria.

²⁶ Abdelkader Boulssane, op. cit., p. 56.

²⁷ Al-Tahir Ben Khalf Allah, *The Ruling Elite in Algeria, 1962–1989: Between Ideological Conception and Political Practice—A Contribution to the Political History of Independent Algeria* (Algiers: Dar Houma, 2007), vol. 2, p. 23.

²⁸ Abdelkader Boulssane, op. cit., p. 63.

²⁹ Al-Tahir Ben Khalf Allah, *The Local Elite in Algeria: A Socio-Political Study of the Formation of Local Representatives under the One-Party System, 1962–1989* (Algiers: Taksij Publishing, 2011), vol. 1, p. 25.

³⁰ Abdelkader Boulssane, op. cit., p. 65.

administration. What changed most radically was the discourse used to justify political authority. That discourse became nationalist and revolutionary and pursued objectives opposed to colonialism³¹. When the FLN announced the transition from armed struggle, it identified two main objectives. The first was the reunification of North Africa. The second was the reconstruction of Algeria as a democratic and social republic within the framework of Islamic principles³². On this basis, a minority drafted the project for the new Algerian society. Not all members of that minority shared the ideas that had guided the Algerian national movement during the preparation for armed struggle. Most were strongly influenced by Marxist ideology. They did not sufficiently recognize that ideas can take root only in a social environment suited to them³³.

The socialist option extended the principles of the Soummam Charter, which called for a democratic and social state. It also drew on the Tripoli Program, which outlined a socialist economic policy and assigned the state a decisive role in transforming conditions throughout the country. This option appeared to correspond to the Algerian people's aspirations for progress and social justice and to the final elimination of exploitation and injustice³⁴. The marginalization of Islam also reflected the influence of an older leftist organizational and intellectual framework. That influence was evident in the Tripoli Program, which the National Council of the Revolution unanimously approved at its June 1962 session. The document was presented as a draft FLN program for achieving a people's democratic revolution. It was prepared in May 1962, under Ben Bella's supervision, by a group of young and educated FLN members³⁵.

The new leadership had a narrow political outlook and lacked a clear vision for restoring and revitalizing national culture. It adopted a socialist Tripoli Program that did not fully correspond to the vision of the leaders of 1 November for the future Algerian state. An influential section of the ruling elite also favored French and rejected Arabic. These factors weakened and dispersed the national forces that sought to confront the political, cultural, and human legacy of colonialism. That legacy expanded until it became a major obstacle to genuine national renewal and a source of discouragement for serious development efforts³⁶.

These factors were reinforced by the preference of some leaders for a ready-made model. Such a model spared the Algerian government the difficult work of studying postwar conditions, identifying and resolving problems, and designing an orderly path out of disorder. This marked the beginning of a dangerous historical drift. Algeria imported a model of the state instead of developing a state project rooted in Algerian realities and the people's aspirations for the future. The resulting project was therefore exposed to external prescriptions³⁷.

Reaching a clear ideological settlement was difficult at both the domestic and international levels. Ben Bella did not master an iron-fist policy toward the internal political arena, which was

³¹ Mustapha Hmisi, *How Is Algeria Governed? From Barbarossa to Bouteflika* (Algiers: Dar Houma, 2011), p. 242.

³² Mohamed Larbi Zbiri, *The Assaulted National Liberation Front* (Algiers: Dar al-Hikma, 2005), p. 8.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

³⁴ Abdelhamid Brahimi, *The Origins of the Algerian Crisis, 1958–1999* (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2010), p. 100.

³⁵ Abdelhamid Zouzou, *Historical Foundations of the Modern Algerian State: Institutions and Charters* (Algiers: Dar Houma, 2005), p. 46.

³⁶ Bachir Bellah, *op. cit.*, p. 338.

³⁷ Aboudjerra Soltani, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

dominated by the army. He may also have been unwilling to use such a policy. In either case, the army was not under his control, and he felt increasingly isolated³⁸. This isolation was also linked to the existence of diverse and conflicting intellectual and social currents. Their differences reflected the variety of their cultural backgrounds. Some defended Western parliamentarism and demanded political parties. Others regarded socialism as an unavoidable necessity. A third current opposed socialism and was supported by bourgeois interests and foreign economic forces. Even socialists were divided between radical and moderate positions. These differences reflected the external intellectual influences they had encountered during study or residence abroad³⁹.

Views of socialism differed sharply. One group regarded it as indistinguishable from communism. A second, religiously oriented group saw Islam itself as a religion of social justice and believed that its teachings were sufficient. A third group favored an extreme form of socialism that approached communism⁴⁰. Despite these differences, the monopoly of power became accepted in the name of ideological unity and the success of the socialist revolution. The Tripoli Congress had unanimously endorsed that revolution under the principle of revolutionary legitimacy. This choice was supported by a complete rejection of the colonizer, colonial values, and those associated with them. It was also reinforced by the progressivist wave that was then at its height. Socialist and leftist ideas were widely seen as the most effective and rapid means of achieving economic progress and overcoming colonialism and its consequences⁴¹. Once Ben Bella assumed power, however, he was surrounded by politically immature and administratively inexperienced figures. Many adopted competing forms of socialism without considering Algeria's traditions, customs, or social and economic conditions. Their actions harmed many honorable and committed citizens⁴².

Rabah Lounici argues that Ben Bella initially appeared to be influenced by Gamal Abdel Nasser and by Nasserism, which combined Arab nationalism with leftist ideas. Ben Bella may therefore be described as an Arab socialist nationalist. A closer examination of his ideological trajectory, however, reveals other influences. These included Fidel Castro, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, and the Trotskyists of the Fourth International. This mixture later had a significant effect on the course of the Algerian state. The state was governed through a social project that attempted to combine contradictory and ideologically inconsistent elements. This raises a central question: could Islamic principles, in which the Algerian people believed, be reconciled with Marxist ideas?⁴³

The republican system was defined through the Constitution of September 1963, the Charter of March 1964, and the FLN National Congress of 16 April. Together, they enshrined the socialist option and the principle of one-party rule. The congress, however, contributed to the breakdown of the alliance between Ben Bella and Boumediene⁴⁴. It can be argued that socialism was regarded as a necessity rather than a free choice. Democracy, whether understood as a mechanism or as a political system, requires social and political conditions that were not available at the time. It was also not

³⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

³⁹ Mustafa Tlass and Bassam al-Asali, *The Algerian Revolution* (Beirut: Dar al-Shura, 1982), p. 681.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 679.

⁴¹ Abdelhamid Zouzou, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁴² El-Hadi Ahmed Derouaz, Colonel Mohamed Chaabani: *Hope ... Pain ...* (Algiers: Dar Houma, 2009), p. 90.

⁴³ Rabah Lounici, *op. cit.*, p. 60.

⁴⁴ Bachir Bellah, *op. cit.*, p. 340.

among the priorities of a state that had only recently regained independence⁴⁵. The result was a serious political and ideological deviation. It encouraged patronage, the pursuit of private interests, and the spread of corruption. Authoritarianism was imposed forcefully, while serious social problems emerged. These included the loss of solidarity and the imposition of socialism without allowing the population a free choice. Large private fortunes were also accumulated through methods that were widely condemned⁴⁶.

4- The One-Party System:

The need to create a new political system had emerged at the Soummam Congress. The FLN decided that it would tolerate neither a political competitor nor an independent institution, even a religious one. The one-party system adopted by the congress was presented as a reaction against the democratic appearance of colonial multiparty politics. It also reflected the experience of movements subjected to broad repression, which often became clandestine and conspiratorial⁴⁷. The principle of a single party was therefore consolidated at the Tripoli Congress. The Algerian Communist Party was banned in November 1962. The new FLN that emerged from the crisis of summer 1962 then faced no organized competitor outside its ranks. In August 1963, Mohamed Boudiaf's Socialist Revolution Party was declared illegal. Every political organization other than the FLN was abolished. Political pluralism was treated as a division of the people and as a serious threat to the foundations of the state under construction⁴⁸.

Bachir Boumazza argued that it was not possible to establish political parties in 1962. The country faced severe economic and social deterioration, conflict among the wilayas, regionalism, and forms of local feudal power. Revolutionary traditions also remained strong. These traditions were expressed through the principle of revolutionary legitimacy adopted at the Tripoli Congress and through the aim of preserving the FLN as a vanguard party. This principle was deeply rooted in the thinking of those who established the one-party system⁴⁹. A comparison between the FLN's view of democracy during the revolution and its philosophy after independence reveals considerable continuity in both foundations and objectives. This does not remove the influence of political conditions, constraints, and necessities. Such factors left their mark on every party document, conference, and decision. They were also reflected in the changing order of priorities and in the issues selected for attention at each stage. In all cases, however, these policies were the actions of men who eventually acquired state power. They often differed greatly from ideas that other figures had produced and defended at earlier stages⁵⁰.

The group that governed Algeria after the summer of 1962 had to choose between political pluralism and one-party rule. The 1964 Party Charter expressed the choice of the forces that had displaced the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic. It affirmed the necessity of a single party. In its view, political pluralism would give the enemies of the socialist revolution an opportunity

⁴⁵ Abdelhamid Zouzou, *op. cit.*, p. 81.

⁴⁶ Benyoucef Ben Khedda, *Testimonies and Positions* (Algiers: Dar al-Umma, 2007), p. 208.

⁴⁷ Oussama al-Ghazali Harb, *Political Parties in the Third World* (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, 1987), p. 199.

⁴⁸ Benjamin Stora, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

⁴⁹ Mustafa Tlass and Bassam al-Asali, *op. cit.*, p. 623.

⁵⁰ Idriss Fadli, *The National Liberation Front (FLN): Constants and References* (Algiers: Office of University Publications, 2011), p. 108.

to destroy it. Political parties could also become instruments of lobbies or foreign powers. The Charter further stated that power belonged to the working classes and that party membership required belief in the socialist revolution⁵¹. The Algerian Communist Party was therefore dissolved on 29 November 1962 because it rejected the one-party principle. The FLN was presented as the organization that united all progressive national forces. An order issued on 14 August 1963 also prohibited all associations and groupings with political objectives⁵². Abdelhamid Brahimi concluded that one-party rule initially appeared capable of strengthening national unity in a country exhausted by a war of national liberation. It could confront the centrifugal forces that emerged in 1962 and mobilize the Algerian people's capacities for completing political independence and rebuilding the country⁵³. Zoulikha Zidan likewise argued that revolutionary legitimacy made this choice appear logical. In her view, multiparty politics was difficult to imagine while influential leaders and currents remained dependent on France and advanced a bourgeois economic outlook that ignored the peasants and popular classes who had sustained the revolution. The General Staff expressed this approach in the following statement: 'Independence is only one stage. The revolution is our goal, and the revolution is the National Liberation Front as the sole organization'⁵⁴. The FLN was therefore transformed into a vanguard party after independence. It assumed extensive responsibilities. The National Charter described it as the vanguard force that would lead and organize the people, realize the objectives of the revolution, and serve as the guide and driving force of society⁵⁵.

According to a statement dictated by Ben Bella to Robert Miller, 'Multiparty politics in our country can lead only to confusion, dispersed efforts, and disorder. Worse still, it may permit covert foreign intervention through elections. To work rapidly, overcome our backwardness, and reform our social and economic structures at their roots, we need a single party that unites and trains all the forces of the country'⁵⁶. Ben Bella also defended revolutionary legitimacy when Abdelali Rezzagui asked why he had not considered political pluralism. He replied in substance that it was unreasonable to emerge victorious from a revolution through an organization called the FLN and then be told to place that organization in a museum or archive. Such an act would mean bringing the revolution to an end⁵⁷. Ben Bella became Secretary-General of the Political Bureau, and the party and state were merged. Following Mohamed Khider's resignation, the government decisively adopted the one-party principle. It issued Decree No. 63-297 of 14 August 1963, published in Official Gazette No. 59. Article 1 stated: 'All de facto associations and groupings with political objectives are prohibited throughout the national territory'⁵⁸.

Years later, Benyoucef Ben Khedda acknowledged what he regarded as the mistaken ideological course of the socialist state. He stated: 'Every human being makes mistakes. The National Council in Tripoli made a historic mistake when, in addition to the socialist option, it adopted one-party rule. Like the other members of the Council, I personally approved that choice. I acknowledged

⁵¹ Rabah Lounici, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

⁵² Al-Tahir Ben Khalf Allah, *The Ruling Elite*, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

⁵³ Abdelhamid Brahimi, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁵⁴ Zoulikha Zidan, *The National Liberation Front: Roots of the Crisis* (Algiers: Dar al-Huda, 2009), p. 167.

⁵⁵ Al-Tahir Ben Khalf Allah, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Robert Miller, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

⁵⁷ Abdelali Rezzagui, *Political Parties in Algeria: Backgrounds and Facts* (Algiers, 1990), vol. 1, p. 47.

⁵⁸ Zoulikha Zidan, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

the mistake a long time ago⁵⁹. Mohamed Larbi Zbiri similarly concluded that the FLN was deeply wounded immediately after the ceasefire. It then received simultaneous and fatal blows from both its enemies and its own members. From the second half of 1963, it entered a political coma that would persist in different forms⁶⁰.

5- The Exercise of Power in the Algerian Political System under Ahmed Ben Bella:

The independent Algerian state inherited sharp political disagreements about the form and institutions of the postcolonial political order. These disagreements reflected personal rivalries and conflicting ideological visions. Work nevertheless began on institutions that would regulate political and social relations through law. In its first stage, the political system sought to establish centralized political, party, and administrative institutions. Constitutional bodies were created under the 1963 Constitution. An analysis of these institutions therefore requires an examination of that Constitution and of the legal powers it granted within President Ahmed Ben Bella's political system.

First: The Constitution of 1963

After the recovery of national independence, the Algerian authorities had to build a modern state. The Constitution organized public powers while recognizing the Algerian people's history of struggle and their Arab-Islamic identity. It also defined the domestic and international principles and objectives of the political system. It adopted socialism and one-party rule while rejecting political pluralism and a liberal political order⁶¹.

The Constituent Assembly approved the new Constitution on 3 July 1963, after which it was submitted to a popular referendum. The text clearly ended political pluralism and settled the basic questions of economic orientation and the nature of the political system⁶². The Constitution promulgated in September was the first constitution adopted by Algeria after independence. It followed the Tripoli Program approved by the National Council of the Revolution. It consisted of a long preamble and 78 articles. The preamble emphasized the construction of the Algerian state according to socialist principles. It also required the National People's Army to participate in political activity within the party framework. The army was thus granted a role in participation, oversight, and final decision-making. It was treated as both a creator and a principal support of political authority⁶³.

The Constitution was drafted by the Ben Bella-Boumediene alliance after it had seized power. The alliance feared that the Constituent Assembly might draft a constitution that did not serve the interests of the ruling group. Its members therefore prepared their own constitutional project and presented it to a group loyal to them under the claim that its members were FLN cadres. The Constitution was thus drafted by people who had not been elected and did not represent the public. The identity of many of them remained unclear. It may be described as Ben Bella's Constitution, since each post-independence Algerian president came to be associated with a particular constitutional order. One of its main features was the consolidation of personal rule and the practical exclusion of the people from decision-making. Although the text declared the people sovereign, the head of state

⁵⁹ Benyoucef Ben Khedda, *Testimonies and Positions*, op. cit., p. 213.

⁶⁰ Mohamed Larbi Zbiri, *The Assaulted National Liberation Front*, op. cit., p. 17.

⁶¹ Said Bouchair, *The Algerian Political System* (Algiers: Dar al-Huda for Printing and Publishing, n.d.), p. 21.

⁶² Zoulikha Zidan, op. cit., p. 169.

⁶³ Omar Sedouk, *Introduction to Constitutional Law and the Algerian Political System* (Algiers: Office of University Publications, 1986), p. 106.

exercised effective supremacy. He was also Secretary-General of the single party that controlled the Political Bureau⁶⁴.

The Constitution therefore formalized a new phenomenon: the concentration of state power within the Algerian system of government. This becomes clear through a close reading of its provisions. It also explains why Ben Bella excluded the Constituent Assembly from the drafting process. A constitution prepared within the Assembly could have denied the president many of the powers that he ultimately received. Ben Bella instead sought to draft the text within the party, although the party itself had not yet developed a clear institutional structure. The elected Assembly, moreover, possessed only nominal independence. The Constitution listed the protection of national independence, the exercise of power by the people, and the administration of socialist democracy among the tasks of the Algerian state. The last of these was a new addition to the state's declared objectives.

The country's first Constitution thus confirmed the supremacy of the Political Bureau led by Ben Bella. He had already marginalized his principal opponents, including Ben Khedda, Boudiaf, and Aït Ahmed. The Constitution gave formal and institutional shape to a system that allowed him to govern forcefully while maintaining an appearance of legality⁶⁵. It consolidated Ben Bella's control over the political system. It also inaugurated a constitutional order in which authority drew its legitimacy from the historical and revolutionary role of the military institution rather than from democratic popular legitimacy. The drafters also marginalized the broader project of constructing an inclusive national state based on national objectives and historical principles. They instead adopted a programmatic constitution that sought to achieve selected social and economic objectives through a socialist approach.

Second: Organization of Power in the Algerian Political System:

After the political authorities had settled the ideological question by adopting socialism and one-party rule, they distributed public functions among the constitutional institutions. The following discussion briefly examines these powers.

- **Legislative Authority:**

Legislative authority was entrusted to the National Assembly. Under the law adopted on 20 September 1962, the Assembly possessed legislative power and alone enacted laws. A superficial reading therefore suggested that it was the only body entitled to exercise legislative authority in Algeria⁶⁶. One of its principal tasks was to draft a constitution for the new national state. Several of its most influential members, however, belonged to the Ben Bella-Boumediene alliance that had seized power. Ben Bella nevertheless feared the Assembly and frequently legislated by decree even when this was unnecessary. This led a French deputy to state: 'The government deprived the National Assembly of its legislative powers and, through the device of decrees, legislated in its place'⁶⁷. The Assembly was the product of a supplementary selection conducted by the Political Bureau. The legal texts had assumed that the Political Bureau would merge into the Assembly once the latter was created. Yet the Bureau continued to act independently after the Assembly's election. It reminded the

⁶⁴ Rabah Lounici, *op. cit.*, pp. 88–89.

⁶⁵ Said Bouchair, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁶⁶ Marnia Lazreg, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁶⁷ Rabah Lounici, *Algeria's Presidents*, *op. cit.*, p. 101.

Assembly that no party organ existed outside the Bureau itself. Mohamed Khider described the Political Bureau, which should have been elected at Tripoli, as 'the holder of national sovereignty until the congress convenes'⁶⁸.

Article 27 of the Constitution provided that national sovereignty belonged to the people. They exercised it through representatives in the National Assembly who were nominated by the FLN and elected for five years by direct, universal, and secret suffrage⁶⁹. Article 28 stated that the National Assembly expressed the popular will, voted on laws, and supervised the government⁷⁰. These provisions presented the Assembly as the representative of the people and as the body that exercised sovereignty in their name. It prepared, debated, and voted on laws. It could also amend or repeal provisions that conflicted with the people's demands⁷¹. A resolution introduced by Bachir Boumaza on 25 September 1962 was treated in law as a provisional constitution. Under Article 2, it established a genuinely accountable government. The head of government and the ministers were responsible before the Assembly. The Assembly could withdraw confidence from the whole government or from one or more ministers. The text therefore rejected the absolute predominance of the head of government and allowed the Assembly to hold ministers accountable and remove them⁷².

In practice, the concentration of major political decisions in the hands of the head of government proved effective. Important changes occurred without meaningful intervention by the Assembly. One example was the appointment of the First Deputy Prime Minister. The presidential character of the system was also confirmed by the absence of cabinet consultation during the transition of 4 September following Ben Bella's election as President of the Republic. The Assembly's weakness became increasingly clear in comparison with a government that exercised effective control over legislative authority. This experience also demonstrated the difficulty of transferring metropolitan institutional models coherently to the Algerian political system⁷³. The structure of power changed after the 1964 FLN Congress. New legislative elections were held in September, and a new National People's Assembly was formed. Its candidates were carefully selected to ensure full loyalty to Ben Bella. Boumediene paid little attention to that Assembly because he knew that it had little real power while the army remained under his control⁷⁴.

- **Executive Authority:**

The President of the Republic stood at the head of the executive authority. He was elected by direct universal suffrage after being nominated by the party. Algeria thus adopted a presidential system. Article 39 of the Constitution entrusted executive power to the head of state, who bore the title President of the Republic. He was elected for a five-year term by direct, universal, and secret suffrage after nomination by the party. A candidate had to enjoy full civil and political rights and be at least 35 years old. Article 50 also regulated the President's constitutional relationship with the Assembly and stated that the latter could not reject a presidential request⁷⁵.

⁶⁸ Al-Tahir Ben Khalf Allah, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

⁶⁹ Said Bouchair, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

⁷⁰ Mahfoud Chouaib, *The Constitutional Experience in Algeria* (Algiers, 2001), p. 70.

⁷¹ Said Bouchair, *op. cit.*, pp. 51–52.

⁷² Al-Tahir Ben Khalf Allah, *The Ruling Elite*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 31.

⁷⁴ Rabah Lounici, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

⁷⁵ Said Bouchair, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–55.

The President exercised executive power and determined the policy of the executive branch. He supervised, directed, and monitored the government and was solely responsible for its actions before the National Assembly. The combination of executive and party-political authority enabled the President to dominate the Assembly. The latter operated under the unified leadership of the party and the state and remained vulnerable to executive pressure. Article 30 of the Constitution allowed the highest party body to propose the revocation of a deputy's mandate. The possibility of using this provision negatively affected the work of the legislature and prevented it from exercising its functions with full independence⁷⁶.

• **Judicial Authority:**

The Constitution stated that justice was administered in the name of the people and according to Algerian law. In performing their duties, judges were subject only to the law and to the interests of the socialist revolution. The law also guaranteed their independence through the existence of the Supreme Council of the Judiciary⁷⁷. Under the Constitution, the judicial structure included the following two councils:

1. The Constitutional Council: It consists of the President of the Supreme Court, the presidents of the civil and administrative chambers of the Supreme Court, three deputies appointed by the National Assembly, and one member appointed by the President of the Republic.
2. The Supreme Council of the Judiciary: It consists of the President of the Republic, the Minister of Justice, the President of the Supreme Court, the Public Prosecutor and Advocate General at the Supreme Court, two judges, and six members of the National Assembly.

The Constitution also provided for higher councils in Articles 67, 68, 69, and 70, including the Supreme Economic and Social Council⁷⁸. These institutions disappeared after the change of regime in 1965, the suspension of the Constitution, and the creation of new bodies. The political system under Ben Bella had been constructed to serve a particular ruling group. Socialist ideology was used as a cover for personal and authoritarian practices within a system dominated by the army. When Ben Bella attempted to reduce the army's political authority and concentrate power in his own hands, the military carried out a sudden coup. Power was then concentrated in a national governing council, and the Constitution was suspended on the ground that its legal provisions were deficient. The military institution assumed responsibility for revising its principles and correcting its perceived shortcomings.

Conclusion: Through this paper, we reached the following points:

– One year, from March 1962 to March 1963, was sufficient to entrench political deviation and undermine the foundations of the FLN. The organization was emptied of much of its ideological content. Many cadres who opposed the policies of improvisation and exclusion adopted immediately after the ceasefire were removed from its ranks. This period opened major gaps in the structure of the FLN. It also introduced practices and methods of government associated with disorder and political instability. Methods that had previously been rejected became normalized, and the foundations of military rule began to develop at the expense of the political system.

⁷⁶ According to the provisions of the 1963 Constitution.

⁷⁷ Mustafa Tlass and Bassam al-Asali, op. cit., p. 681.

⁷⁸ Omar Sedouk, op. cit., p. 14.

- After independence, the population had no opportunity to establish organizations that were independent of political authority. The revolution could have recovered its momentum and continued with renewed strength. Instead, selfish interests prevailed. The logic of personal rule spread through the political elite, while the competition for power became dominant.
- Many scholars trace the difficulties of the Algerian state and society to the first years of independence. They hold Ben Bella and Boumediene responsible for this outcome. In their view, the alliance between the two men failed to transform the inherited colonial state into an inclusive Algerian national state that served all citizens. Algeria instead moved from a state that had served a minority of European settlers to a state that served a particular group or faction. The consequences of this transformation affected successive generations after independence.

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