The Revolution will take place from 11 o'clock until noon

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"If that's a march for change, then I have one of those every day!" In Algeria, unhealed social conflicts make a united front an unlikely proposition: to the advantage of the despotic regime. Ghania Mouffok listens to protesters but hears little revolutionary optimism.

Ali Yahia is a lawyer and, at 90 years of age, both venerable and courageous. That all counts for nothing with the young recruits of the Algerian police, who don’t know his name and don’t recognize his face. They just brutally shove him out of the way. The “March for Change” on 12 February in Algiers turned out to be an opportunity for these police recruits to try out the new repressive techniques devised by a dictatorship that is henceforth going to have to look to its image. Obama is watching.

The demonstrators, numbering around two or three thousand, were treated to a veritable ballet by the boys in blue, a silent opera coordinated with near-perfect precision. For an overture, there was the arrest of the most determined or audacious of the demonstrators. Five or six bruisers, having picked out their victim, threw themselves on top of him, grabbed him and forced him to run, yelling “Run, run!” until they reached the paddy wagon parked a few yards away. All of this beneath the dumbfounded gaze of the demonstrators, who parted to let them through. Then it was the turn of the girls in blue, who, conscientious policewomen that they were, meted out the same treatment to the female demonstrators. Nothing had been left to chance. Around a hundred people were arrested in this way, at the speed of light, and although they were given a rough time, they were later released. No sooner had these lightning squads done their work than human dragnets of police officers began to advance, surrounding the rest of the demonstrators, kettling them and stopping them getting away. Each human dragnet was made up of about 100 members of the CNS, the Algerian riot police, with their transparent shields at the ready, wearing helmets and boots, armed with wooden clubs. In three rows, they advanced and withdrew, shoulder to shoulder, on every side, like the body of some giant, many-headed serpent, encircling the demonstration in a black hedge of robocops. Meanwhile, other police officers maintained a watching brief, using their short-wave radios to pass on intelligence about the slightest movement by demonstrators, so that the moment it was spotted they could be prevented from breaking out of this hellish circle. It was impossible to move. Despite this, what had been a march turned into
a rally between the buildings in the 1 May Square and the bus stop.

To cross this besieged square is to encounter one small part of Algeria that reveals all the contradictions and hatreds still at work in this country; a country that, when there are calls for it to “join in” and mount “its own revolution”, still remembers the fifth of October 1988. That was when its first experience of democracy tragically founndered and turned into a murderous, destructive civil war, a war from which no society could have escaped unscathed. Every Algerian has kept a register of accounts from that time: accounts that have still not been settled.

A woman, clad in a black hijab, weeps for the people of Algeria, expressing her sorrow in an improvised poetry recital spoken in magnificent literary Arabic. Some man says: “Poor thing, she’s crazy.” She stares coldly at him and replies: “You can have reason; leave me my foolishness.” There is a group that is yelling its heart out in Kabyle: “Oulach smah oulach” until someone gently points out to them that it might be better to say it in Arabic. So, in the end, everyone agrees that the right thing to shout would be “Algerians, Algerians!”, the rallying cry of the opposition. And while everybody tries to find his place in this march that might not be moving but is going places nonetheless, a group of local youths decides to fool about rather over-enthusiastically and to poke fun at the demonstration’s slogans. As the demonstrators, like those in Tahrir Square in Cairo, shout “The people want the government to go!” , these kids, perched on top of the bus-shelters, reply: “The people want a bit of chemma (chewing tobacco)”. Then they decide to chant at the demonstrators: “Bouteflika is not Moubarak”, whilst the demonstrators shout back: “Bouteflika resign!” The youths tell the women to stay inside their hijabs; they tell the Kabyles to go back to their douars (a North African nomad camp) and to “Go and observe Ramadan”, picking up elements of the insidiously racist propaganda that is pumped out by television channels controlled by the regime. So as not to yield so much as an ounce of its despotic power, it has become a past master in the art of dividing the nation.

Meet the pro-Bouteflika youth of Algeria: aged between fifteen and twenty-five, they are lively and daring and bellow at the venerable public figures that had come out to save them from this “murderous power”. “Where are your children?” they challenge. Shocked by encountering such an unexpected adversary – children – the worst kind of adversary, and feeling threatened by the violence of their response, some of the demonstrators lose their tempers and call them “yobs”. One former member of the mujahideen that freed the country from colonialism is overcome by rage and shouts: “Bastards!”

For the opponents of Bouteflika, it is all quite obvious: these people are “thugs, paid by the government” to break up the march. But 22-year-old Mabrouk, an operational research student, speaks in their defence: “It’s just that we’ve had it up to here. Why can’t they go and fight their quarrels somewhere else? This is our district and this is our country. If we hold a demonstration they call us a rabble, they call us yobs. Well, let me tell you, I don’t like that; I’m a human being just like they are. So where’s the difference? It’s because they’re intellectuals; they’ve got a superiority complex. Why are they coming and bothering us today, anyway? When we demonstrate for a couple of days at least we get the price of oil and sugar brought down. But what are they trying to achieve? These parties are just using us as a route to getting themselves into positions of power.” And he goes on to mention Khalida Toumi: “She used to go and shout in the 1 May Square as
well, but once they gave her a job in the government she shut up; nowadays she minds her own business. Then there’s Louisa Hanoune, how much does she earn these days, now she’s a member of parliament?"

Khalida Toumi used to be an opposition member of the RCD, the only party represented on this march, and is now Minister of Culture, whilst Louisa Hanoune is a Workers’ Party member of the Assembly.

Yacine, who is 15 and in her final year at school, joins in to explain: “We just want peace. My brother lived through the years of bloodshed; he was afraid; he would never go out in the evening, whereas I can sleep outside”. Another one, a fifteen-year-old, adds: “What’s Bouteflika ever done to them? He brought back peace. Look at me: I’m wearing Nike trainers, I can eat Kinder eggs. I don’t have to pay for my education, I don’t have to pay for my books and, God willing, I’ll be a competitive athlete; all that comes free.”

Yesterday they were rioters, today they are counter-demonstrators. They are the adults of tomorrow, their consciences twisted this way and that, sometimes treated as cannon fodder, sometimes as nothing but bellies to be filled. “You mustn’t hold it against them, they don’t know what they’re doing”, says one man, apologising for them. He’s in his thirties and lives on the same apartment-block floor as them. “Obviously there are people who are paid to stir things up; the local mayor is FLN, but those people, they hide away in the shadows.” They listen to what he says, fall silent, bow their heads and slope off.

These adolescents did not have big brothers, either that or their big brothers were paralysed with fear. They have inherited a recent history that is violent; it is our recent history but they were not taught it, and so they constructed it themselves from bits and pieces they picked up between the school of dictatorship and the enduring fears of their parents. These working-class areas that members of the elite are trying to rally can still remember how they had to mourn their dead, still remember the price that they had to pay, back in the Nineties, for being members of the FIS, the Islamic Salvation Front: violent death, disappearances, torture.

“People don’t know Ali Belhadj,” says the older boy, Mabrouk, “but he has the blood of thousands of Algerians on his conscience”; and he watches impassively as Ali Belhadj, with his little white cap on his head, is led away under arrest just like any ordinary demonstrator. Neither Ali Belhadj’s now banned FIS and its Islamic Republic, dawla islamiya, nor its sworn enemy, the RCD (Front for Culture and Democracy), which supported the army behind its tanks during the council elections of 1991, “in order to save the Republic”, find any favour in their eyes; worryingly, they will have nothing to do with any of the parties. When Ali Belhadj arrived in the square he was surrounded by a few dozen admirers, who embraced him enthusiastically, but in this district where he once would have practically caused an earthquake, shopkeepers, even the ones sporting beards, just carried on doing business, totally unperturbed. Shared memories within the body of demonstrators do not all produce the same effect: a woman of about fifty, practically fainting on the spot, cries out: “What’s he doing here? I don’t want to see him. I don’t want to see him.”

The police, however, manage to get everybody on the same side by playing out, as a finale, their Cold War ballet: now there are three circles of serpents. One circle to contain the Islamists, who have agreed, after negotiation with the National Coordination for
Change and Democracy, to be there only on an individual basis and not as a party. One circle to contain the democrats and, finally, one circle to contain the “yobs”. This is Algeria exploded, dissected, its wounds gaping and all its cordial hatreds on display. It is midday and the march that was due to start an hour ago is declared to be at an end. The members of the National Coordination withdraw after having called international opinion to bear witness via the forty foreign media representatives. The latter have been accredited, strangely enough, by the Algerian authorities to cover the “forbidden march”, for fear of “terrorism”. The demonstrators, having been thus orphaned, kick their heels. These are decent people: lawyers, academics, journalists, trade unionists trying to protect what is left of this country’s public services, members of the professions, sincere militants of the kind that have, for at least 20 years, stood in this square as representatives of an unfortunate Algerian ambition.

Mme Nacéra Dutour of SOS disparus, whose son has been taken away by the security forces, doesn’t understand: “But why are they withdrawing? Is that what they call a march for change? If that’s a rally, then I have one of those every day!”

Gradually the square empties, with just a few people maintaining the pretence of a popular movement. When, strangely, the same people who just a few moments ago were pro-Bouteflika occupy the square, it is their turn to shout threateningly: “Echâab yourid taghyer anidam, the people want a change of regime”. The ballet of the boys in blue carries out a little skid-turn and recovers by improvising a classic move: just the merest souçon of tear-gas grenade. It is as though the departure of the self-styled avant-garde, having punctually kept their date with the Revolution from eleven o’clock to midday, like the decent public servants that they are, had restored to reality all the world’s brutality.

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