

Political Detainees in Algeria

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IN A REVIEW of recent events in Algeria (THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST, No. 23, page 68) it is stated that 'Almost all of those so summarily arrested were released shortly afterwards, without any public explanation.' Unfortunately this is not the case.

At a press conference held last September, the Minister of Information in the Boumedienne government, Bachir Boumaza, announced the arrest of a number of militants belonging to the Organization of Popular Resistance, indicating that names of all those arrested would be made public at an early date. Pending this disclosure, he gave the names of three detained leaders: Hocine Zahouane, member of the political bureau of the F.L.N., Bachir Hadj Ali, former secretary of the Algerian Communist Party, and Mohammed Harbi, member of the central committee of the F.L.N., who were arrested several weeks before the others. At that time Boumaza laid stress on the allegation (which was untrue) that most of those arrested were Europeans, some of whom had acquired Algerian nationality, and who, he alleged, were the instigators and leaders of the movement.

More than three months have passed, and in spite of the Minister's promise, no official list of the militants detained in Algiers and elsewhere has yet been published. The reason is fairly easy to guess—to publish such a list would destroy the allegation made by the men responsible for the putsch, that opposition to the regime was organized by 'foreigners allied to the Algerian Communists who penetrated the F.L.N.'

In fact the Europeans who are still detained and those who have been expelled from Algeria constitute only a minority. It is difficult to accept that all Algerians who take a position against the military dictatorship, thereby remaining faithful to the Algerian Constitution and the political principles of the Charter of Algiers, are necessarily former members of the Algerian Communist Party.

Another promise which has not been kept by the regime is that they would publish a White Paper on the Administration of the former President. No more has been heard about it—for the good reason that most of the former Ministers are still in their jobs. If they were to criticize the previous administration, it is their own

mismanagement which they would have to expose. They would also have to explain why all the difficulties which were hysterically attributed to Ben Bella have only got worse as the revolutionary principles were abandoned. Failing to find political arguments, the men of June 19th have chosen silence and silent repression.

However in spite of censorship and the climate of terror being imposed in Algeria, the truth is filtering through. It reveals a sinister picture. Arbitrary arrests, search raids accompanied by brutality and plunder of apartments visited; assaults and torture during interrogation of suspects—all these bring back a past which it was hoped had gone for ever. At this point we must admit that torture had not completely disappeared with the ending of the colonial regime. But at least, during the former government, Ben Bella had the courage to condemn these barbaric practices which were openly attacked on several occasions within the F.L.N. Unfortunately, as was proved by later events, he did not have the power to make his police and military security respect the constitution, and they have emulated the colonial para-commandos.

Today these methods are given official cover. The members of the government merely deny these charges or hypocritically regret them, whilst it is the 'Revolutionary Council' which collectively decided the measures against President Ben Bella (detained for many months without anyone being able to contact him) and against those who have been arrested since.

After weeks of detention in secret caves where the prisoners are brought blindfolded, about fifty prisoners accused of belonging to the opposition and charged (as once were members of the F.L.N.) with 'criminal association' were brought before the Algiers Courts. To this procedure they owe the privilege of being held at the El Harrash prison (formerly the Square House, well known to the patriots of the liberation struggle). These prisoners have been able to see their lawyers and families. They have all confirmed what was already known. There is hardly one of those arrested who has not been tortured, often on numerous occasions. The Public Prosecutor has on his files as many cases of assault as prosecutions against the accused.

Here is one of the cases: that of Gilberte Taleb, secretary of *Alger Républicaine*, former anti-fascist resistance member, tortured by the Vichy police and imprisoned in the same women's jail in which she finds herself today. After her arrest by members of the Military Security, she was beaten, undressed, and tortured by electricity and water techniques. When her torturers failed to break

her silence, they forced her to witness the tortures used on one of her friends.

For the others who have not had the 'good fortune' to be transferred to an 'official' prison, the horror goes on. It goes on for twelve militants of the Organization of Popular Resistance, considered by the authorities to be the leaders of the opposition. Amongst these twelve, of whom nothing has been officially heard for over three months except that they are in the grip of their guards, are Hocine Zahouane, Mohammed Harbi and Bachir Hadj Ali, who have been particularly singled out by the torturers. It has been learnt unofficially that these twelve have been transferred to the prison of Lambése, in Constantine. Some of them are in a serious condition as a result of assaults in detention.

The aim—cynically acknowledged in Boumedienne's entourage—is to hold them incommunicado for as long as possible, in violation of elementary international principles of law and of the Algerian Constitution.

During this prolonged silence, their files will be 'completed'. Rumours are circulating in Algiers that they may be charged with planning the assassination of certain high personalities of the regime; that they would be tried by special courts; and that the judges, specially selected, would then pronounce the death penalty in camera.

The lives of these men are therefore seriously threatened, particularly those of Hocine Zahouane, Mohammed Harbi and Bachir Hadj Ali, who are especially hated by the leaders of the putsch. Their lives and those of their comrades must be saved by international democratic opinion intervening on their behalf with the Algerian authorities, demanding respect of their normal rights as accused persons, particularly their right to legal representation.

In France a Committee for the Defence of Ahmed Ben Bella and Political Detainees in Algeria has been formed. It already has over three hundred members, amongst whom are François Mauriac, Jean Paul Sartre, Louis Martin Chauffier, Robert Merle, Michel Butor, J. M. Domenach, François Châtelet, Marcel Cohen, Françoise Sagan, Louis Daquin, Claude Bourdet, Nathalie Sarraute, Yves Montand and other well-known personalities. New signatures are arriving each day (from Great Britain, Bertrand Russell has just sent his support) but the protest should grow yet louder, so that they can hear in Algiers the voices and the deep feelings of all those who were the faithful friends of struggling Algeria in its

darkest hours, and who cannot conceive that she should once again become the land of arbitrary arrests and violence.

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(We hope to publish, in our next issue, a full analysis by Henri Alleg of the present situation in Algeria.—Editor, THE AFRICAN COMMUNIST.)

*Somehow we survive
and tenderness, frustrated, does not wither.*

*Investigating searchlights rake
our naked unprotected contours ;*

*over our heads the monolithic decalogue
of fascist prohibition glowers
and teeters for a catastrophic fall ;*

boots club on the peeling door.

*But somehow we survive
severance, deprivation, loss.*

*Patrols uncoil along the asphalt dark
hissing their menace to our lives,*

*most cruel, all our land is scarred with terror,
rendered unlovely and unlovable ;
sundered are we and all our passionate surrender*

but somehow tenderness survives.

DENNIS BRUTUS.