

Algerian voters embrace political Islam

Today, it all seems a lifetime ago. The Battle of Algiers. Gen. Massu's paratroopers hunting through the warrens of the Casbah for rebels of the FLN, the Algerian liberation movement. And French interrogators casually smoking Gitanes cigarettes as they sent intense bursts of electricity through electrodes attached to the genitals, noses and tongues of captured FLN suspects.

After 130 years of French colonial rule and a decade of rebellion, in which one million Algerians died, Gen. Charles de Gaulle finally saved the honor of France by giving Algeria its independence in 1962. Algeria's bitter struggle for freedom began the long process of decolonization in Africa.

It also inspired youthful idealists like myself to help the FLN in its long battle. I organized pro-FLN student demonstrations in Europe and, for my pains, was targeted for death by La Main Rouge, a terrorist organization secretly run by French intelligence. But, as always, youthful idealism quickly turned to dismay, and then cynicism. The revolution soon devoured its young.

The FLN's most famous leader, Ahmed Ben Bella, the Nelson Mandela of the day, was imprisoned by his FLN colleagues. Nearly all the other heroes of the revolution were either murdered or jailed as factions fought for power in post-independence Algeria. Revolutionaries turned to venal socialist bureaucrats as Algeria became a dreary North African copy of East Europe's Marxist states.

Since then, the FLN regime has fought a losing battle to feed, clothe and provide jobs for 25 million Algerians, half of whom are under the age of 15. A surging birth rate, growing unemployment and faltering economy finally produced an explosion of popular anger in late 1988 in which hundreds died in violent rioting.



The badly shaken regime of President Chadli Benjedid then did something quite unique in the Arab world: It promised free elections.

In spite of widespread skepticism, a fair election was held this week for provincial and municipal offices. In a stunning upset, the Islamic Salvation Front — a Muslim fundamentalist movement — scored a lopsided victory over the FLN. This dramatic event is sending shock waves across the Mideast.

Algerians turned to the Islamic Front for two reasons. First, in protest over the FLN's mismanagement, corruption and ineptitude. Voters said it was time for a drastic change. Second, because of a growing trend in the Muslim world to embrace political Islam as a salvation from the economic, political and social failures of its westernized dictatorial regimes.

For most North Americans, Islamic fundamentalism is a bogeyman, conjuring up visions of turbaned fanatics, hostages and terrorism. This is the result of intense propaganda from the American government, which always seems to need foreign devils, and from Israel, which uses the issue to divert attention away from the Palestinian question. It is also due in good part to the antics of some of the wilder fringes of Islamic funda-

mentalism who confuse medieval obscurantism with social progress. But for much of the youth of the Muslim world, Islamic government seems the sole way out of the degenerate state into which their nations have sunk.

So far, only Iran has established an Islamic government — and one that is painfully groping to find its way. Now Algeria, the most important North African state, is moving in the same direction.

Powerful Islamic political movements are also at work in Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Egypt. All are being severely suppressed by the regimes of these North African one-party states. Violent clashes have lately occurred between Islamic fundamentalists and police in Egypt and Morocco — both of which nations are American protectorates and key pillars of U.S. strategic domination of the Mideast.

The rulers of North Africa are now face a sharp dilemma. Denied any form of democracy, people in their one-party states are turning to Islamic fundamentalism as the only means of expressing opposition. Yet if North Africa's leaders allow some free political choice, as Algeria just did, chances are that the fundamentalists will win. Which suggests that the regimes of North Africa will now take fright and crack down even harder on Islamic movements rather than allow even limited democracy.

They will certainly be encouraged to do so by the U.S. which understands that political Islam, though no threat to America, could very well undermine America's modern Raj in the Mideast — just as it brought down Washington's favorite satrap, the shah of Iran. So all eyes will now be on Algeria to see if the Islamic Front winds up in the presidential palace — or in jail.