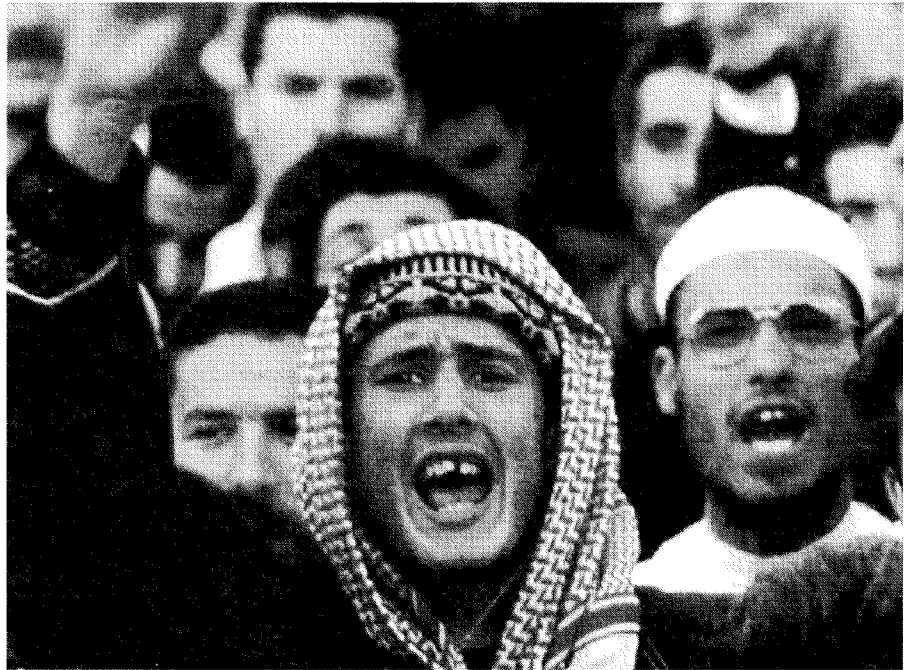


Sanhaja Akrouf describes the terror facing women in Algeria

"The Islamic fundamentalists are not anti-imperialists"

For some people on the left in Britain, Islamic fundamentalism in Asia and Africa is a revolutionary or semi-revolutionary movement, wrong-headed but basically anti-imperialist. To socialists and trade unionists in the countries where fundamentalism is a big force, it looks different.



Fundamentalism can be the cry of oppressed, but it offers no answers.

Sanhaja Akrouf is an Algerian Trotskyist, a member of the PST (Socialist Workers' Party — no relation to the British SWP). She has been living in France for two years, but before that was active in Algerian politics for over ten years, firstly around the Communist Party and then as a Trotskyist. She came to speak at the Workers' Liberty 95 summer school, and while here told us about politics in Algeria.

Elections in December 1991 looked certain to give power to the fundamentalists of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). Before the second round of the two-stage elections could take place, the army staged a coup d'état (in January 1992). It pushed aside the discredited regime of the National Liberation Front (FLN), which had ruled since leading Algeria's struggle for independence in 1954-62, and set about trying to defeat the fundamentalists by military terror.

Since then socialists have faced both repression by the military regime and — even worse — a terror campaign by the fundamentalists. According to figures collected by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, there were more political murders of trade unionists in Algeria last year (three hundred) than in all the rest of the world added together.

Sanhaja explained how both the left and the fundamentalists grew in the 1980s.

After independence in 1962, all parties outside the FLN were banned. The Communist Party had a semi-legal existence, and was very influential among workers and students; but it subordinated the demands of the workers and students to support for the government.

This meant that there was no visible left-wing alternative to the government, which called itself socialist. That created an opening for the fundamentalists, starting from the 1970s.

The regime went for crash industrialisation in the 1960s and '70s. It would have been good if they had really had the means to carry it through, but in fact it was a sham: they just wanted to pose as a great power.

Social policy was sacrificed. More and more people lived in terrible conditions and had nothing to lose.

The Berber movement in the early '80s opened up the situation for the left. The PST was set up. In the student movement of 1985-6 the PST grew further, to about 600 members in 1989. The PST has always been very much based on students.

The "Lambertist" PT also grew from the student movement. They have always been smaller than the PST, though since they became legal their leader Louiza Hanoune has become very well-known, and popular with rank-and-file FIS supporters.

Today the PST and the PT are very much weakened by the polarisation of politics between the army and the fundamentalists.

The PT is for a coalition government of the fundamentalists, the FLN, and the FFS. They went to Rome for the meeting of opposition parties with the FIS, the FFS, and the FLN.

The PST is on principle against such discussions with the fundamentalists. Today they will discuss with you in Rome, but only in order to kill you tomorrow. They say, black-on-white, that no other party should exist.

We can, for example, demand the release of all political prisoners including the fundamentalists, but we should not work with them. We should denounce them.

The fundamentalists mainly target the people who backed the coup d'état — the Stalinists, the military, the police, left-wing trade unionists, journalists. Over 100 Stalinists have been killed. In some villages the fundamentalists impose a reign of terror. There is a climate of fear.

The government, for their part, have razed whole villages suspected of fundamentalism. Last summer seventy per cent of the forest in eastern Algeria was destroyed because it might be a shelter for the fundamentalists. Fundamentalists

are ruthlessly tortured in jail.

There is a mysterious organisation called the OJL, Organisation of Free Youth, which is probably a creation of the State. It threatens that every time a woman is killed for not wearing a veil, it will kill a veiled woman. And it does kill.

Some leftists, I think, have been killed by the government in order both to get rid of them and to discredit the fundamentalists, who get blamed for the murders.

The PT's politics obviously make life easier for them. Members of the PST have been killed because they are against the FIS. Others can no longer go to work because of the danger of being killed. They live in terrible conditions, conditions hard to appreciate for us in England or France who take it for granted that we have our cup of coffee and our glass of wine.

The PT say that the FIS represents the people — and you cannot be against the people — and that it is "anti-imperialist".

The fundamentalists are not really anti-imperialist. They are anti-West, anti-Christian, anti-semitic. For them, the West is Satan. They are in favour of a deal with the IMF, in favour of cooperation with the capitalist multinationals. They support free-market economics on the grounds that "God gives to whom he wishes". Fundamentalist Saudi Arabia has close ties with the USA. But for the fundamentalists, socialists and democrats are simply enemies of God.

As everywhere, the leaders of the fundamentalists are middle class. The fundamentalists have been strong in the colleges since the 1970s. They are also very strong in the poorest areas, where they get most of their votes.

But they are not a force in the trade unions. It would be wrong to say that the workers are consciously anti-fundamentalist, but the UGTA, which is anti-fundamentalist, got ninety per cent support for a strike it called in March 1990, while the separate Islamic trade union could get fewer than five per cent of the workforce out.

Attitudes to the fundamentalists, Sanhaja explained, are now the major difference between the two groups of the Algerian revolutionary left, the PST and the PT.

In Palestine, our view is that there is now an Israeli Jewish nation in Palestine, and the territory has to be shared between them and the Palestinian Arabs. This used to be the main dividing line between the PST and the PT: they were for the destruction of Israel and we were for two states. Their representative Louiza Hanoune would appear on television and explain the differences in those terms.

Where can the revolutionary left look for alliances and support? Sanhaja explained:

The Stalinists, the RCD — a mainly Berber-based organisation which is close to the Gaullist RPR in France — and the trade union organisation, the UGTA, support the military government, with various criticisms.

The UGTA used to be part of the FLN machine, becoming independent only

since the late '80s. But it does really represent workers. Its ability to bring workers out on strike proves it.

It is a bureaucratic organisation. But it has clearly opposed fundamentalism, and it is the only force which represents the workers in any way.

Recently it has been publishing a newspaper which is more radical than the revolutionary left, demanding, for example, a minimum wage of 2000 dinars.

The UGTA leadership will not take the struggle forward. And at present neither the revolutionary left groups, the PST and the PT, nor those Stalinists who remain on the left and are the only real political force in the trade unions, have the strength to give a lead. Yet the trade unions remain the only hope for the working class.

The PST majority, Sanhaja explained, says we must build a workers' party to lead the revolution. A minority, including me, says that at this stage we should build a broad front against the fundamentalists and the regime.

But, we said, don't socialists in Algeria

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have to offer the workers and the unemployed an alternative social programme? And doesn't that imply a workers' party?

We need an electoral front. It would not include the anti-fundamentalist right, for example the RCD, who are for the IMF. To beat the fundamentalists it is not enough to say that we are for democracy. To the masses, that means nothing. The front has to include demands for the right to housing and the right to work.

The main forces should be the UGTA and the FFS. The FFS — Socialist Forces Front — is a party based mainly in Algeria's Berber minority (thirty per cent of the population) and led by a former FLN leader, Ait Ahmed. The FFS has a real base among the poor. In some big cities, like Algiers — which is fifty per cent Berber — it has a social base similar to that of the FIS. And it is the main political force among Algerian workers in France.

If that's so, shouldn't the revolutionaries work as a faction inside the FFS?

It should be considered.

The Berber question has been very important for the left in Algeria. Ever since independence the Berber population centred in Kabylie (in western Algeria) has demanded the right to its own identity, which was suppressed by the government. Today Kabylie is the most militant area against the fundamentalists. In some places they have village militias against the fundamentalists.

Sanhaja herself grew up in eastern Algeria, with a Berber father and an Arab mother. She explains that she did not speak Berber until the rise of the Berber movement in the 1980s — like millions of others, she had had it drummed into her that Berber was inferior to Arabic. It was a tremendous liberation, to want to speak Berber, to be proud of being Berber.

But the fundamentalists grew faster than the left. In the 1970s the fundamentalists hardly existed. They started doing systematic work in the schools and colleges, and it bore fruit. Some of the first fundamentalist leaders were people from Egypt expelled by Nasser.

The fundamentalists began to grow fast in the 1980s. It is not just because I am a Marxist that I say that the material situation determined this growth — the rise of unemployment, poverty, poor housing, and despair among young people.

As late as 1988 the fundamentalists were still a minority in the opposition to the regime. But to jobless young men they said that Islam would bring them a job, marriage, and a good life. More and more young men believed them.

Of course, Islam is like all religions. Everyone interprets it in their own way. I was frightened when I first stopped my Muslim religious observances. But then nothing happened, and I am sure now that I was right to reject Islam.

I know there are people who can see positive things in the Koran. My sister is a Muslim, though she does not wear a veil, she goes dancing, she enjoys herself. If some people think the Koran is positive for them, all right. I know that it is negative for me as a woman.

But the fundamentalists derive all truth, about politics or about details of everyday life, from the Koran. There is no room for discussion.

We have taken part in student strikes alongside the fundamentalists, and in workers' strikes too. We went on demonstrations against the Gulf War with the fundamentalists, although they insisted on having separate men's and women's marches. But there is no basis for debate.

In France, I disagree with the government policy of banning the veil in schools. But we should not work with the fundamentalists on such issues. They pretend to be democrats only because it suits their purposes. They are still anti-semitic, anti-democratic, and anti-women.

London is an important base for the fundamentalists. Many of the Algerian fundamentalist leaders were educated in England. One of the fundamentalists' demands in Algeria is that English should be the second language in place of French. They even say that England is a more Muslim country than Algeria, because in England girls can go to school with veils.

The role of the fundamentalists in Algeria is similar to that of the fascist far right in France, England, or Germany. But while for the fascists the enemy is Arabs, or Asians, or Turks, for the fundamentalists it is women. ■