

Africa Report by Jacques Cheminade

Compromise and isolation in Algeria

The new prime minister, Sid Ahmed Ghazali, has not lived up to the promise of his new administration—by a long shot.

When Sid Ahmed Ghazali was named prime minister, this column wished him “fair winds,” hoping that his government marked a new step toward democracy, development, and economic independence for Algeria (see *EIR*, June 21,). Today, we have to state clearly that we are disappointed: At home, Ghazali has not broken with the “classical” methods of his predecessors, and internationally, he has adopted the International Monetary Fund’s (IMF) systematic policy for austerity and deregulation.

The “structural reforms” he has introduced follow the model of Poland’s Finance Minister Leszek Balcerowicz: deregulation, price hikes for food and industrial products, currency devaluation (in order to “stabilize” it), and anti-social measures across the board. To highlight his willingness to impose this program, on Oct. 16, he took over as economics minister. Worse still, he took offense that Algerians dislike the bitter potion poured for them: He complained that the “reforms” introduced at the top hadn’t been rigorously applied on the ground, “where they have been far less painful than they appear on paper.”

So, Ghazali has decided in a first phase to organize a “large-scale public information campaign” on the role of the IMF and its good relations with Algeria! In a second phase, if Algerians don’t get the message, might he not try to “make them happy despite themselves,” by force?

That would be catastrophic, because the credibility of what appears

to be the strongest opposition, the fundamentalist Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), would be greatly increased.

Further, instead of restoring order, Ghazali has installed his own clan, just like his predecessor. Petroleum Minister Ait Lahoussene, for example, is far from being a man of matchless virtue, since he is in the running for the man with the largest overseas nest egg.

Goya’s etchings show that “the sleep of reason creates monsters.” It remains to be seen what the meditative snoring of the interior minister means for the country.

In any event, Ghazali, whose words of Arab solidarity and friendship for the Iraqi people are so touching, has let it be known that he cannot under any circumstances support the efforts to convene a tribunal in Algiers to try President Bush for “crimes against humanity committed in the Gulf war.”

As for organizing elections, Ghazali claims he defends an honest system, but he kowtows to the Algerian Assembly, the rump parliament appointed by the former government of the FLN, which does not want elections. The gerrymandering will continue, as well as the overrepresentation of rural voting districts acquired by the FLN. Nor is it clearly established that the vote of men on behalf of their wives, who need simply present a family register and without even a power of attorney, will be abolished!

Voters have only one of two disastrous alternatives to fall back on: FIS

or FLN, despite the innumerable cabals held that discredit policymakers in the eyes of the country.

The tragedy is that the man with the bowtie around his neck runs the risk, acting as he is, of putting the hangman’s noose around that of his country. Thinking, like his predecessor, that he is solidly anchored in power thanks to the IMF, the White House, and French Finance Minister Pierre Bérégovoy, he does not notice that he’s set up housekeeping on the edge of a volcano: the discontent of the Algerian people, whose flames the IMF, the American government, and the Saudis are fanning with one hand, while flattering Ghazali with the other. Their aim is to use the threat of chaos against both the Algerian government and France, which would also be destabilized by severe disruptions on the opposite side of the Mediterranean.

Any awakening of independence—as we saw early this year with the “scandal” over Algeria’s nuclear program—is immediately penalized, and the pressure is increased. That is the first excuse which Ghazali might avail himself of. The other is the complicity of France with the Anglo-American financial policy, which offers Algeria no other option in a universe where the Soviet Union no longer exists.

In conclusion, we reaffirm that it is high time that France, Algeria and the assembled countries of the Arab Maghreb Union—along with Italy, Spain, and Germany—get moving on a common plan for mutual development of Europe and the Mediterranean as a whole. Algeria cannot by itself get out from the Anglo-American grip. France and Europe must help it, and it is the Schiller Institute’s program for a European Productive Triangle which would give an alternative to Algeria.