Invisibility and Negrophobia in Algeria

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The Hirak, a massive popular protest movement for democracy in Algeria which began in February 2019 and continues to challenge military authoritarian rule in the country today, is most potent when it can sustain mass mobilization against the regime across cultural, ethnic, linguistic, ideological, class, and racial lines.¹ This was largely the case throughout 2019 as the Hirak gathered millions of protesters in weekly demonstrations across Algeria, initially spurred by the cynical announcement of the candidacy for president of military-backed, aged, and seriously ill Abdelaziz Bouteflika for a fifth term.² The Hirak’s peaceful, unified, and sustained pressure against Algeria’s military-dominated political system led to the ousting of Bouteflika and two cancelled presidential elections, before regime candidate, Abdelmajid Tebboune, won the December 2019 presidential elections, in which less than 24% of eligible Algerians participated amidst the Hirak’s call for a boycott.³ Giving up on presidential elections to legitimize the regime domestically, apparently the military persisted in staging the December election – with all pro-regime candidates – in order to re-establish intra-regime stability (by purging the clan surrounding Bouteflika) and resolve the long-standing need to transition from the aging president.⁴

In post-independence Algeria, autocratic elites have chosen to characterize the Algerian people as a homogenous block with a single culture (Arab-Islamic), religion (Islam), and language (Arabic) because they consider diversity to be a source of division and a threat to the country’s stability and their hold on power. Identity issues, which the regime insists on controlling, are also used to divide and rule. Aware of this, from the beginning, the Hirak downplayed identity and difference within the movement while focusing on getting rid of le pouvoir (Algeria’s military elite and their civilian allies that rule and exploit the country) as a whole, root and branch.

The regime retaliated, characteristically, with a partly successful effort to weaken the Hirak’s capacity to maintain a unified front against it. The state diminished the Hirak’s fragile unity in opposition – across planned presidential elections and a referendum on creating a new anti-corruption body – by placing pressure on existing tensions between Arabs and Amazighs (Berbers) and between Islamists and secularists, while also attempting to maintain overall regime control over questions of identity.⁵ Elements of the Hirak countered with a demand for open...
public debate and civil society engagement in order to produce an inclusive constitution, real democracy, and an Algerian society that is at peace with its diversity, in all its forms.  

Here, I discuss the absence of Black Algerians in these on-going debates about democratization, national identity, and belonging in Algeria. Black Algerians find themselves in a perplexing situation during the current slow-moving peaceful Hirak for democracy. Concentrated in the Saharan south of the country, to an extent, Black Algerians are literally not visible to other Algerian citizens – self-identified white Arabs and Amazighs – who are overwhelmingly found on the northern Mediterranean coast. Nevertheless, Black Algerians are indigenous to Algeria’s Sahara, and hundreds of thousands of others, across 13 centuries, were enslaved and forced across the desert to Algeria from sub-Saharan Africa. The history of servitude has stigmatized Black Algerians, generated Negrophobia, and fostered a need – so far unrealized – for the mobilization of civil society organizations and the Algerian state to combat anti-Black racism in the country. The government needs to provide affirmative educational and economic policies, and programmes to raise the consciousness of the public to help Black Algerians overcome slave legacies, and become a fully recognized component of Algeria’s national identity. Anti-Black racism has only increased in Algeria with the arrival of tens of thousands of sub-Saharan Black, largely clandestine, migrants over the last two decades, who enter Algeria for educational or economic opportunities, or more often, to travel through the country en route to Europe.

**Algerian state control over identity**

The excellent article “Identity, Belonging, and Constitutional Reform in Algeria,” by Yacine Abderahmane addresses identity issues during the Hirak in Algeria and prior to it. The article emphasizes Amazigh struggles for equality and state acceptance of Algeria’s diversity. 20-25% of Algerians are native Amazigh speakers (Tamazight), and many more are Arabized Amazighs. The indigenous Amazighs have been struggling for equality since independence against a state determined to impose an Arab Muslim identity on the country’s entire population. The first post-independence constitution in Algeria, passed by referendum in 1963, inscribed Islam and Arabic as the only constitutionally recognized components of
Algerian identity. In each constitutional iteration since, the Algerian state, despite public pressure, has never strayed far from ‘Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis’s, *cri de coeur* cementing Algeria’s Arab and Islamic identity in the face of assimilationists who, after more than 100 years of settler colonialism, looked to France as Algeria’s fatherland.

Amazigh activists have challenged the state’s assertion of Arab-Muslim homogeneity. Amazigh activism, in the form of mass protests and the undertakings of Amazigh-dominated political parties and civil society organizations, has pressured the state to constitutionally accept Amazigh identity as one of the components of Algerian identity, integrate the Amazigh language in secondary education, and recognize the Amazigh language as a national and later an official language of the state, in addition to Arabic. This constitutional progress has however, not insured the deliverance of the resources and government support needed to fully and adequately implement the amendments expanding Algeria’s national identity to equally include the Amazigh component.

As an example of positive-sounding legal steps betraying full equality, in April 2020, the Algerian government rushed through two laws – one criminalizes “fake news” deemed harmful “to public order, state security, and national unity”; a second penalizes discrimination and hate speech – that in practice operate as censorship and repression of Amazigh activism. Critics claim that the law criminalizing fake news is an excuse to allow the government to crack down on the freedom of press and expression. The law against “fake news” by Algeria’s government came after Algeria’s anti-establishment protest movement suspended its street rallies in a voluntary bid to stem the spread of coronavirus. It also came amid increasing repression of opposition and media in the country.

To Amazigh activists, the law on the Fight Against Discrimination and Hate Speech also does not support full equality in practice:

“Irrespective of the swift passing of the laws, the content is of deep concern, particularly for Amazigh activists. The Law on the Fight Against Discrimination and Hate Speech calls for the creation of a National Observatory for the prevention of discrimination and hate speech, placed under the authority of the President of the
Republic. Many consider it very vague, leaving the judge a margin of interpretation which allows the regime to repress in a judicial system that is considered far from independent.”

Citing concerns about national unity, after a draft version of the anti-discrimination law was passed, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune declared that “the law is a response to attempts to fragment Algerian society, especially through the use of social networks… adding that, freedom of expression does not mean the freedom to insult, defame, discriminate, and propagate hatred and division.”

Black Algerians have not been a part of post-independence national identity debates in Algeria, including the escalating current one, other than being praised for keeping themselves out of them.

Part of the invisibility of black Algerians is due to geography and demographics

Black people are indigenous to southern Algeria. Since at least the neolithic era, two types of populations have peopled Algeria: one with Mediterranean characteristics and the other with “negroid traits”. Thus, Black people, who were present in southern Algeria even before the 13-century-long trans-Saharan slave trade, can be considered to be as indigenous to Algeria as the Amazigh population. However, following a regional trend to repress diversity issues, the Algerian government has never taken a census to ascertain the total number of Algerian black citizens in the country, most of whom remain concentrated in the Saharan south. Ninety-one percent of the Algerian population lives along the Mediterranean coast on 12% of the country’s total land mass. Black Algerians have also established communities in northern cities like Algiers and Oran. One is left to speculate about the total number of Black Algerians today. In 2009, there was an estimate of 3.5 million out of a population of 35 million.

Because most black Algerians are scattered in the vast southern Sahara, an area of the country about which many Algerians are not familiar, white Algerians may be only dimly aware, if aware at all, that they have black compatriots. Certainly,
many black Algerians have reported that they face incredulity when claiming their national identity in northern Algeria at police roadblocks, airports, and even in doing everyday ordinary things like responding to a request for the time, “When I walk in the street and someone wants to ask me the time, he does it in French, convinced that he is dealing with a Nigerien or a Chadian, a way of indicating that an Algerian cannot be black.”

**Algeria is post-colonial and post-slavery**

When Algerians think of “racial” discrimination, it is likely that they first think of the treatment Algerian Arabs and Amazighs received at the hands of the French during the colonial period (1830-1962), and afterwards in France. The debate over Algeria as a post-colonial society has been fully engaged. However, in another sign of the invisibility of Algeria’s black citizens, consideration of Algeria as a post-slave society – and what that means for black Algerians today – has not. Notably, leaders of Algeria’s nationalist movement ignored the country’s history of internal slavery and anti-Black racism. These elites were also leaders of Third Worldism, and officially believed in pan-Africanism. Ahmed Ben Bella, Algeria’s first post-independence president, declared in Accra, Ghana, in 1963: “It was the imperialists who tried to distinguish between the so-called white and black Africans.”

Still, recognized or not, the enslavement of black Africans is part of Algerian history. The thirteen century-long trans-Saharan slave trade brought 65,000 black Africans to Algeria between 1700-1880 alone. Despite abolition by the French elsewhere in Algeria, for political reasons discussed below, in Saharan areas, the slave trade continued throughout the period of French settler colonialism (1830-1962).

Patterns of slave utilization in Algeria differed between the Mediterranean coast and the Algerian Sahara. In the northern regions of pre-colonial Algeria, black slaves were mainly exploited for domestic work and as concubines. In the Algerian Sahara, slavery took a harsher form. Arab-Berber whites constructed an economy that relied on black slave labour from their Haratins (enslaved or recently freed Islamicized and Arabized Blacks, who are still susceptible to forced labour practices). Today Haratins, mostly sharecroppers, work under harsh labour
conditions that some have described as a modern form of slavery, they “dig and tend wells, excavate and maintain the underground channels of foggara, irrigate gardens, tend to flocks, and cultivate dates”. Some argue that without the labour of enslaved Black people, the Sahara would never have been habitable at all. The arduous and relentless work to irrigate in a desert includes digging channels tens of feet into the sand with the risk of being drowned under it.

Slavery died a slow death in Algeria. Colonized in 1830, slavery was legally abolished in Algeria by the French in 1848. In 1906, the French took firmer steps to abolish the practice, though practical considerations of colonial rule led to some acceptance of the institution. The French accommodated slavery in the Algerian Sahara more than anywhere else. Slave masters and merchants were given permission to trade in slaves and keep those they owned well into the twentieth century. In exchange, slavers and merchants provided intelligence on far-off regions to colonial authorities.

For the most part, agricultural and domestic slavery gradually ended in the twentieth century in Algeria. However, there is reason to believe that enslaved black people continue to be exploited for agricultural work in the southern oases of Ouargla and Ghardaia provinces to this day (among wealthy families, owners of large palm trees, fields, and farms) and in some instances among semi-nomadic Tuareg. Notably, “there is little doubt that the southern Algerian oases were built by slave labour, mostly imported from West Africa.”

The Algerian state has never adopted any policies, including any affirmative action policies, to help their black community emerge from the impact of generations of servitude and brutalization. Instead, it has sought to legitimize the country’s white Arab-Muslim identity only. Claims of discrimination are disputed by the assertion that racial and ethnic discrimination are impossible because the constitution enshrines equality between all Algerian citizens. Yet, descendants of freed Black slaves (Haratins) in Saharan regions of Algeria often remain dependent upon former “masters.” Most work as sharecroppers in conditions similar to slavery. Black Algerians also face discrimination in urban areas of the country. They encounter the same racist attitudes and racial insults as any other person with dark skin within Algerian borders. Many highlight – in another version of invisibility – a nearly impenetrable glass ceiling blocking Blacks from a range of
high-status and well-paid positions in the economy, the military, the government, and as actors and models.  

Visibility and negrophobia

“Social stigmatization involves language in many ways. Language can mark individuals with a social, racial, and regional defect. We should probably see the most radical defect when this language designates the individual as other, thereby causing rejection, all the more so if the otherness is coupled with a greater proximity.”

Algeria is still a society which sees itself as having suffered from external colonial racism more than as a society capable of enslaving a minority of its population and subjecting it to racism; thereby treating black Algerians as if they were strange Algerians, ghost citizens. When black Algerians are visible to their white compatriots, words and looks can separate and attempt to subordinate. They are publicly identified in various negative ways:

Either by their colour, k’hal, which is twisted into kahlouche (blackie), mer ouba (charcoal), guerba kahla (a black gourd to hold water made out of goatskin), nigro batata (big nose that resembles a potato), haba zeitouna (black olive), babay (nigger), akli (Black slave in some Berber areas), rougi (redhead or Swedish to imply that the black person is culturally and socially white, as everyone must want to be), saligani (from Senegal) or by direct references to past servile status: hartani (dark black slave or ex-slave forced to work outside the master’s house), khadim (servant), ouacif (domestic slave), ‘abd (slave), ‘abd m’cana (stinky black slave). Using these terms against a black Algerian passerby establishes difference, contempt, strangeness, rejection, distance, and exclusion.

Negrophobia takes many forms in Algeria. In addition to racial insults, a black Algerian academic has noted, “Our community continues to symbolize bad luck. Worse: in the stories of grandmothers, we play the bad roles, kidnappers of children, looters, or vagrants. [While Arabs and Berbers can both point to a proclaimed noble history in Algeria] there is no place for a black hero in the collective memory of my people.” Instead, Blacks in Algeria are more likely to be held in contempt and treated as second-class citizens, often with an emphasis on
the folkloric and pejorative. As elsewhere in the Arab world, in children’s tales, Blacks are given the role of ogre (el Ghul) and eater of souls. The fascination of white Algerians with Gnawa music, and black-centered ritual festivals (diwan) fit this framing of the folkloric over Blacks as ordinary Algerian citizens, just like everybody else.

Interracial marriages remain rare and are considered taboo by many if not most white Algerians. If a “white” Algerian woman or man marries a black Algerian, there is a strong possibility that he or she will be rejected by his or her family. Reportedly, a black Algerian nationalist fighting against the French was criticized by his comrades for marrying a French woman. His response was, “Who among you would want me to marry your sister?” Even today, it is almost a given that attempts by “white” Algerians to marry black Algerians will be rejected by white families; sometimes snidely with the remark that, “there are many whites to marry. If you want, I will find you one.” In addition to rejection of interracial marriages, an Algerian intellectual has reported cases of “white” Algerians refusing to room with Blacks or study with them at university.

A step forward in reducing Negrophobia, the selection of Khadija Benhamou, a black woman from the Algerian Sahara, as Miss Algeria in 2019 has been marred by the subsequent deluge of posts on social media virulently claiming that she did not represent the beauty of the country, with many direct attacks against the colour of her skin.

The hyper-visibility of black sub-Saharan migrants

Negrophobia in Algeria has been accentuated and aggravated by the arrival of “other Blacks” from sub-Saharan Africa, tens of thousands of whom have migrated to Algeria in the last few decades. Many are fleeing violence, corruption, poverty, civil war, or state collapse. Most seek a clandestine passage to Europe. Others come for education or better economic opportunities in Algeria. For the most part, these black migrants have not been welcomed. However, they have been noticed. Partly due to pressure on Algeria to control its borders from the European Union, Black sub-Saharan African migrants have been vilified by the Algerian government.
and some of the press; accused – usually falsely – of violence, selling drugs, promiscuity, spreading venereal diseases, perpetuating anarchy, and raping Algerian women.

Without irony, some graffiti and social media posts called on the migrants to “Go back to Africa.” By the thousands, these black migrants have been rounded up by the Algerian government and transported to the deep Sahara, at border zones or across them, where they have been tossed without the wherewithal to survive in the desert. International outrage against this treatment of Black African migrants has led the Algerian government to begin to address their legal status. Still, in late 2020, this headline in a Human Rights Watch report affirms that the issue has not been resolved, “Algeria: Migrants, Asylum Seekers Forced Out, Thousands, Including Children, Expelled to Niger Without Due Process.”

These “other Blacks,” from other countries, suffer the most from racial discrimination in Algeria. Their labour is exploited as they carry out gruelling work at the fraction of the pay acceptable to any Algerian. Many places will not rent to them. They are vulnerable to both verbal violence and real violence.

Conclusion

Three generations after independence, the Algerian state is still resisting the open public debate and civil society engagement needed to reflect the country’s pluralism and to begin to reckon with slave legacies and racial discrimination. Instead of trying to impose a white Arab Muslim identity on all Algerians, national unity and stability are more likely to be found in recognizing and accommodating diversity. Black Algerians need to be a part of the conversation about identity and belonging in Algeria. All Algerians need to be educated about slavery and anti-black racism in both schools and through consciousness raising by the government and civil society. A campaign to combat the banalization of racist language is urgently needed. Affirmative actions by the state are necessary for more black Algerians to emerge from the shadows of slavery, especially in the Saharan regions of the country.
Endnotes

1. Elsewhere, I discuss the importance of sustained, cross-cutting mobilization in efforts to end military authoritarian rule. See Stephen J. King, The Arab Winter: Democratic Consolidation, Civil War, and Radical Islamists (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).


3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.


8. Abderhmane, op.cit.

9. Abderhamane also discusses ideological conflicts between Islamists and Secularists.

10. Abderhmane

11. The leader of the Islamic Reform movement in Algeria between the two world wars ‘Abd al-Hamid Ben Badis’s cri de coeur cemented Algeria’s Arab and Islamic identity: “We, too, have searched history and the present and have determined that an Algerian nation was formed and exists in the same way as all other nations were formed and exist. It has its religious and linguistic unity, its culture, its traditions, and its good and bad traits like all other nations on earth… This Muslim Algerian nation is not France, cannot be France, and does not wish to be France… Islam is our religion; Arabic is our language; Algeria is our country.


13. Ibid.


15. Middle East Online

16. Ibid.

17. Bessadi, op.cit.


21. Ibid.

22. Demographics of Algeria, Wikipedia.


26. Ibid, quoted in Ouzani.


28. Quoted in Seloua Luste Boulbina


31. These ambiguously freed black slaves in Saharan areas of Algeria are also called Bella or Ikelan if they were enslaved by Amazighs, including Tuaregs.


33. Ibid.

34. Brower, op.cit.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.

37. With some possible exceptions in the Sahara


40. Brower, op.cit.

41. Ouzani, op.cit.


43. Ibid.


45. Seloua Luste Boulbina, op.cit.
46. Khiat, op.cit., Calling black Algerians Saligani (from Senegal) has a different history. It refers back to the early decades of the 20th century when the French utilized black West-African soldiers in their colonial army to do the dirty work of colonialization, including brutalizing members of the population that resisted French rule, taking food from farmers, and rape.

47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Quoted in Ouzani, op.cit.

50. Khiat, op.cit.

51. Ibid.


53. Seloua Luste Boulbina, op.cit.

54. Seloua Luste Boulbina, op.cit.

55. Brower, op.cit.

56. Seloua Luste Boulbina, op.cit.

57. Seloua Luste Boulbina, op.cit.

58. Ibid.


61. Abdi Latif Dahir, “Yes, to Africans: Algeria is giving legal status to black African workers but a nasty anti-migrant campaign is growing,” Quartz Africa 2017 https://qz.com/africa/1021423/algeria-to-grant-legal-status-to-african-


64. Human Rights Watch, op.cit.
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