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Hirak and Feminism: An equation with two unknowns

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Women's liberation, just as national independence, must be taken by force. The colonized, the proletariat who have freed themselves in recent decades, owe their salvation to themselves. Fadéla M'rabet, *The Algerian Woman followed by the Algerian Women*, Paris, François Maspéro, 1983.

The history of the feminist movement and democratic struggle is that of a crossover. If the first considers its claims to be consubstantial with the second, the opposite is not so obvious. Within the so-called *democratic* forces (a fuzzy term bringing together modernist, secular, and leftist currents), the issue of feminism is not quite settled. While official statements are largely in favour of feminism, this support becomes more discreet in practice as soon as it compromises the sacred union between forces of opposition to the regime, regardless of their ideological leanings. Thus, even among those who are supposedly their natural allies, in the name of a common conception of social progress,¹ feminist activists find it difficult to impose their agenda. Whether part of political parties or working independently, favouring a reformist approach or defending a revolutionary position, they must constantly deal with political actors, far from having won their cause. A structure like the Algerian Hirak popular movement makes it possible to observe more closely these tensions.

Feminism is perceived as a minority movement in Algeria; neither the regime nor the opposition gathered under the Hirak seems interested in supporting it. Out of clientelism and a need to maintain a balance between progressive elites and pro-regime Islamists, the state avoids to clearly position itself vis-à-vis feminism and favours instead phrases such as “the place of women in society”, a term usually coupled with a vision of social integration. Taking feminist demands into account would amount to undertaking legal reforms that would be widely contested in Parliament, as well as by a predominantly conservative electorate. Opportunistically, the Hirak maintains this same logic. Integrating ideological claims as divisive as feminism would weaken the general anti-regime consensus. Unlike identity and social issues, this particularity of feminism is not exploited by the regime. It is considered both an opportunity and a weakness: it is an opportunity because the movement, due to its "unpopularity", is unlikely to be co-



opted by the regime; but it is a weakness that complicates the building of strategic alliances within the Hirak.

At this stage, a clarification is in order: a distinction is needed between women who are part of the popular mobilization and those who, in addition to being opposed to the regime in power, take action specifically as feminists. The latter, physically gathering in a "feminist square" or marching individually among protesters, try to combine the demand for a constitutional state with the call for equal citizenship between the sexes. In the Hirak, feminist slogans remain a minority despite the increase in the presence of women over time. This clarification helps refrain from any hasty optimism that would maintain the easy confusion between female protesters and feminist activists, though it should not be seen as a way of opposing these two entities in order to widen the gap between them.² We prefer, therefore, to use the term "co-presence" to refer to the different feminine and/or feminist trajectories within the protests.

The Hirak: A historical opportunity

From the first weeks of pro-democracy protests, many feminist organizations joined the Hirak. On 22 March 2019, a "feminist square" was set up in Algiers, bringing feminist activists together under one umbrella. This self-managed, non-partisan, and autonomous action is supported by the initiative "Algerian Women for a Change Towards Equality" (FACE). Some of its members come from civil society (Wasilla network, NGOs, etc.). FACE also includes intellectuals, activists, and students. In their [statement](#),^[3] the first signatories took a stand in favour of the Hirak and sought to link the fight against the regime to the fight for equality.

The national and international media echoed this progress and presented women as protesters "on the front lines" of the Hirak. While some of these statements may be exaggerated, the presence of feminists is no longer under question. While their numbers are relatively small, they are still taking to the streets under the banner of feminism. We are also witnessing a reappropriation of the feminist fight by the new generation, especially as new members have sought to radicalize it by defining themselves as "radical feminists" and exploring questions such as the relationship between feminists and state institutions and punitive justice.



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Since then, the “feminist square” has been placed in front of the Central Faculty of Algiers, at 2 Didouche Mourad Street. In line with the transfer of the struggle between the feminist veterans and their heiresses, they held a banner with photos of female Algerian fighters against colonialism, terrorism, and patriarchal violence. Among them, we find the fighter against French colonization Lalla Fatma N'Soumer (1830-1863), the heroine of the Battle of Algiers Hassiba Ben Bouali (1938-1957), the *moudjahida* Baya Touhami, known as "El Kahla" (1936-2017), the Algerian feminist Nabila Djahnine (1965-1995), killed during the Black Decade, as well as the photo of Amina Merabet, a 34-year old Algerian who was burned alive in the middle of the street in August 2016. This communication strategy serves to stress the historical legitimacy of the feminist struggle and to anchor it in a rebel and revolutionary tradition.

Most feminist activists subscribe to a legalistic approach to repeal the Family Code as they consider it unconstitutional. This code, established in 1984 during the time of the single-party rule (National Liberation Front) and later amended by presidential decree in 2005, is perceived as a personal statute law that reduces the Algerian woman to the status of "a minor for life." By doing so, it crystallizes the original misunderstanding between the proponents of secularization of the family law and those in favour of maintaining a religiously inspired code. For some of these women who have been on the ground for several decades and have observed a change in the status of women, this discourse looks dated. The growing role of women in universities and on the labour market has contributed to improving their material living conditions to progressive and real social change. However, the obsession to repeal the Family Code is less the sign of a first feminist wave that could not have adapted to the new challenges facing women and more that of an increasingly glaring gap between the legal provisions of this code and the evolution of society. In this, feminists also demand a better legal arsenal to protect women as well as more means for the effective implementation of existing laws.

Formulated in this way, the equation is simple: There can be no collective emancipation without equality between men and women. However, while the Algerian Constitution enshrines legal equality between citizens³ in the private and family spheres, legal provisions continue to discriminate against women; one of



the main injustices is the imposition of a legal guardian that keeps women in a subordinate status. This focus on formal equality might seem dated. Indeed, the evolution of feminism around the world and in MENA today goes as far as to question the framework of the nation-state or even heteronormative paradigms linked to gender. In comparison to Tunisia, Lebanon, or Palestine, the demands of Algerian feminists seem timorous. However, the simple questioning of the Family Code⁴ in Algeria raises strong reactions in the street.

Since 29 March 2019, the feminist square has suffered physical and verbal assaults by unidentified men as well as smear campaigns on the internet. In a video, an Algerian internet user living in London went as far as to call for people to spray feminists with acid. Activists are threatened and their placards destroyed. Between the reactionary opponents openly opposed to any change in favour of women's rights and those who try to reconcile feminists and “hirakists,”⁵ the issue becomes, in fact, eminently political.

The Hirak: A balance of power

This mistrust in feminist activists is also the result of representations strongly anchored in society. Even today, the feminist community is seen to be linked to post-colonial stigmas, reducing it to a limited circle of French-speaking, urban, and educated petty-bourgeoisie. Accused of promoting an elitist non-representative discourse, feminists are seen as disconnected from the material living conditions of most Algerian women and as undermining Algeria's national identity. Unsurprisingly, it is also associated with state feminism under the reign of the one-party system due to direct agreements between certain associations such as the National Union of Algerian Women and the National Liberation Front.

Consequently, while the Hirak has allowed certain female mobility and a subversion of dominant norms (occupying public space on Fridays on the same schedules and routes as men), feminism is largely considered by society as a civilizing, even colonialist, project that seeks to depersonalize Algerian society and strip it of its identity. In this sense, one of the first successes of the Hirak from this point of view is the (positive or negative) popularization of the word feminist in the press and the national media. More broadly, the popularization of the word in civil

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society and the debates it sparks on social networks show a definite step forward in terms of recognition. The term that has long been used to disqualify⁶ women's struggle for equality thus incorporates the "hiraki" vocabulary.

We are also witnessing the promotion of a discourse to reclaim the streets. While the Hirak, as a public and political space, may have yielded to a form of recognition of the feminist movement, this concession has not led to adherence: the movement seems legitimate at best, but not a priority. Thus, the feminist cause, which, like social or even identity issues, is not considered "political" in the sense of institutional change, becomes a cause of division for the Hirak, or even a problem that should be resolved later within the framework of a Second Republic.

However, despite a very limited response to them, compared with the Hirak's general slogans, feminist slogans have remained strong. They demand, every Friday, that the gap between the fight for equality in law and global political demands be filled: "My place is in the Hirak, not in the kitchen;" "Democracy will be achieved with women or not at all!"

But this is a perilous attempt to maintain a precarious balance. The women of the square are keen to assert their place as agents and stakeholders in the anti-regime fight, and not limit their role to guaranteeing diversity or a cosmetic performance. Thus, while the women of the Hirak are able to serve as a bulwark to protect the crowd from the police or to reinforce the non-violent nature of the protests (some commentators qualified them as the "cement of the Hirak"), they are cautious not to fall into a "folklorization" of their presence.

Asserting political autonomy

On 15 June 2019, a First National Conference on Civil Society Dynamics bringing together associations and unions was launched in Algiers. Its participants tried to agree on solutions to end the crisis, proposing a roadmap for the period of transition. Feminists boycotted the meeting, deeming that their demands were not taken into account. Among those who boycotted was Wassila network, which withdrew from the initiative one day before the event and made [a statement](#) on its Facebook [page](#).

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Despite the smear campaigns, even within the so-called *progressive* circles, meetings have been organized at the national level, such as the ones in Oran held from 17-19 October 2019. On this occasion, a feminist declaration was issued to condemn the crackdown on protesters, oppose the holding of presidential elections and call for the release of prisoners of conscience.⁷ For months, feminist groups were born or consolidated in the wake of the Hirak. This was the case of the Free and Independent Women's Collective of Bejaia or the Women's Collective of Constantine. Solidarity and awareness campaigns on violence against women were organized throughout the country. Also, various independent initiatives supported the feminist struggle, such as the collaborative project "Archives of women's struggles in Algeria," which seeks to "make known the militant documents produced by Algerian feminist groups and associations, and to constitute a digital archive accessible to all."

On social media, "the Algerian Feminist Newspaper" has paid special attention to feminist news in the context of the Hirak. In addition, the "Féminicides Algérie" website voluntarily identifies the number of femicides through monitoring and documentation. Also, transnational solidarity actions allow symbolic connections in the form of petitions, such as the "Algerian women and feminists supporting the Palestinian feminist movement Tali3at," which collected hundreds of signatures. More recently, a video campaign entitled "Algerian Actresses United Against Femicides" was widely celebrated, creating buzz beyond Algeria. Borrowing the register of denunciation and using Dardja (Algerian dialect), they condemn the contradictory restrictions imposed on women and the violence inherent in the patriarchal education of girls.

Feminists at the intersection of struggles

Denouncing police violence, showing solidarity with prisoners of conscience, condemning the detention conditions of political prisoners and attacks on freedom of expression, the approach of feminists aims to be inclusive, as they position themselves as citizens of a country where arbitrariness spares no one. Such a position will allow them in particular to eliminate any suspicion of selective condemnation.

⁷ [Hirak and Feminism: An equation with two unknowns](#)



However, these efforts are insufficient and encounter obstacles linked to the ephemeral nature of these demands. Feminists encounter a growing hostility as the noose tightens on the Hirak and in a context where each ideological divergence is interpreted as an attempt to divide the movement, polarize debates, or become subservient to the regime. However, the reluctance to embrace and support feminism is not just to preserve conservative currents. Since 2019, a radio show (known for its progressive views) went even so far as to use the headline: How to fight for equality without scaring the Hirak?

The Hirak as a space for citizenship and solidarity has acted as a reflection of Algerian society and the issues it is struggling with. This exposure of the ideological fractures that divide the Algerian society is more than necessary; it prevents the Hirak from falling into the trap of a unique narrative that would deny and undermine the existence of other components and orientations within it.

For the moment, the dominant speech within the Hirak equates democracy with a roadmap that relegates corporate, ideological, or social grievances to the backburner. By refusing to include the feminist issue on its agenda, supporters of a hierarchy of struggles within the Hirak reproduce the same authoritarian reactions as those used by newly independent states, when they confiscated individual and collective freedoms in the name of the putting of "development" first over democracy. As a result, this stage-by-stage incremental attitude destroys freedoms and works towards reducing democracy to a concept with specific boundaries rather than a daily practice; it also denies feminists their right to full citizenship.

In this sense, feminists are fully aware of the trap of the hierarchy of political demands that simultaneously emerged during the Hirak. Strong in their autonomy, they did not give in to the strategy that would prioritize slogans calling for the ousting of the regime over all other proposals for change.

For instance, the women's protests that took place on 8 March 2021 exposed the great unease surrounding this question. Chanting "we came out for change, not to party", most women turned the 8 March event into an opportunity to showcase a female and anti-regime Hirak, and they were soon joined by men. Feminists, on the other hand, have insisted on messages of a feminist nature. The idea of a



convergence of the two protests would have sent a strong message to the groups that try to divide them. While the two protest groups can practice acts of resistance in different ways, the demands of women are not mutually exclusive. So, rather than joining each other's ranks at the end of the course, a dividing line has isolated feminists who have found themselves unheard compared to the women's protest. The reason for this is that agreements require certain conditions: these include spaces for dialogue and debate, as well as the right of citizens to speak freely. At the moment, the autonomy of the feminist movement remains the only factor capable of guaranteeing its sustainability.

Although civil society is still struggling to acknowledge feminism as a significant fight in Algeria, the perseverance of activists on the ground and their loyalty to the Hirak undoubtedly contribute to increasing the political visibility of feminists. The challenge facing them is therefore one of legitimacy, as they need to build a presence in remote regions in the country. Democratizing feminism would thus amount to giving speeches, building networks, and mobilizing beyond the big cities of the north as well as supporting local, regional and transnational feminist solidarity.

For now, the wait-and-see attitudes that invite feminists to dissolve their presence in the crowd are reminiscent of those of Algerian leaders who, at the dawn of the independence, urged activists to be patient while they build the new nation-state. This paternalism and these orders are limited to feminist activists. Male domination, because it is trans-ideological and transclass, expects all women to stay in the places assigned to them by the patriarchy. If there are any lessons learnt from the relationship between the Hirak and feminists, it is that the Algerian feminist movement, scolded by past experiences, no longer allows itself to be lured by the speeches that condition any social demands on prior institutional reform. The determination of feminists is a political lesson for the collective action of the Hirak.



Endnotes

1. Algerian feminism, assuming that a specifically national feminist tradition exists, is historically secular.
2. This is particularly the case with certain conservative movements that seek to disqualify feminist demands, while defending the place of women within the Hirak.
3. Article 32. Citizens are equal before the law, without any discrimination on grounds of birth, race, sex, opinion or any other personal or social condition or circumstance. Chapter IV of Rights and Freedoms.
4. Known for decades as the “Code of Infamy.”
5. In particular in the so-called *democratic* camp.
6. See *Feriel Lalami. The Algerian Women Against the Family Code. Fight for Equality*, Paris, Sciences Po University Press, 2012.
7. Statement of the National Movement of Algerian Feminists, Reporters.dz, October 23rd , 2019 .



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