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Trends. Terrorism in Algeria: The Psychology of Extinction

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In January 1992, the Algerian Government cancelled parliamentary elections that the Islamic Salvation Front seemed sure to win. The rationale for this cancellation was that the Front--especially forces associated with and behind the Front--was using the democratic process to gain political power for the purpose of subverting democracy and establishing a theocracy in some ways similar to what now exists in Iran, Sudan, and most of Afghanistan and to what is being sought in Egypt by the perpetrators of the recent murders in Luxor at the Temple of Hatshepsut. Thus, to save democracy from extinction by those using democracy to subvert it, the Algerian government engaged in the extinction of elements of the democratic process. Although paradoxical, this phenomenon certainly was not unique. Elements of democracy have undergone extinction in efforts to save democracy in many countries during what are termed national emergencies, e.g., the United States' (US) intensification of censorship and attenuation of freedom of speech during World War II.

After the extinction of the Algerian parliamentary elections, political violence has intensified--both among and between elements of succeeding governments and factions remaining within, breaking away from, and never belonging to the Front. The worst political violence--by many accounts largely at the hands of perpetrators still seeking to establish a theocracy--has comprised the murder of between 60,000 to 75,000 people including atrocities such as decapitation, the slitting of throats, evisceration, and being burned alive. The targets have often been children, old men, and women. Casting doubt on a sincere intent of establishing a theocracy, some perpetrators of political violence also have kidnapped women for the purpose of making them sex slaves. These women usually are later murdered as well. So, in a conflict wherein the many sides all are contributing to the extinction of elements of democracy, there is massive extinction of life, the rule of law, human rights, and a transcultural sense of decency as well.

Although many nonviolent groups, individuals in opposition to and supporting the current Government, as well as representatives of the European Union and the US believe that the political violence continues to spiral out of control, the Government has insisted that the violence is only residual terrorism--that things will soon be better. Leaving aside questions like whether the Government intentionally allows atrocities to occur in order to discredit some opposition factions or perpetrates or incites some of the atrocities, one might wonder who is right? What predictions can be made about terrorism in Algeria?

In developing an answer, one might benefit from consulting the operant conditioning theories of behavioral psychology. Most of these theories elucidate a number of conditions through which successful attempts to engage in extinction of a behavior are characterized by an exacerbation of that behavior--in frequency and intensity--before a state of extinction is reached. If this is occurring in Algeria, the Government may be correct about residual terrorism. That is, the current atrocities are actually a signal that things will get better. Unfortunately, political pressures--as well as moral ones--may function as impediments to letting extinction take its course. In this last case, some Algerians who sincerely desire the extinction of terrorism may--through their sincere concern--be contributing to the extinction of the extinction process, inoculating terrorist perpetrators against the extinction process, or at least prolonging the extinction process. A further consequence may be that the political fortitude

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necessary on the part of the Government to ride out an exacerbation of terrorism on the route to extinction may as well be on a similar route. In Algeria, meanwhile, the extinction of life goes on. (See Algeria marks a holy month in killing wave. (January 5, 1998). The New York Times, p. A6; Lalli, J.S., & Casey, S.D. (1996). Treatment of multiply controlled problem behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 29, 391-395; Lerman, D.C., & Iwata, B.A. (1996). Developing a technology for the use of operant extinction in clinical settings: An examination of basic and applied research. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 29, 3545-382; Morgan, D.L., & Lee, K. (1996). Extinction-induced response variability in humans. *Psychological Record*, 46, 145-159; Piazza, C.C., Fisher, W.W., Hanley, G.P., et al. (1997). The use of positive and negative reinforcement in the treatment of escape-maintained destructive behavior. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 279-298; Whitney, C.R. (January 7, 1997). Algeria rebuffs European concerns on reported atrocities. The New York Times, <http://www.nytimes.com> .)