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**The Endeavors of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema Toward
Unification via the Algerian Islamic Congress Movement (1936–1938)**

مساعي جمعية العلماء المسلمين الجزائريين للوحدة من خلال حركة المؤتمر الإسلامي
الجزائري 1936-1938

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Abstract:

The decade of the 1930s in colonial Algeria witnessed intense political mobilization across diverse contemporary ideological factions. This socio-political dynamism was significantly catalyzed by the ascension of the Popular Front to power in France, which initially demonstrated a relative openness toward the grievances of the Algerian political class. Within this shifting paradigm, the Algerian national forces converged for the first time during a historic assembly held in Algiers in June 1936, establishing the Algerian Islamic Congress (*Le Congrès Musulman Algérien*). This milestone event facilitated a rare convergence among reformist Ulema, secular elected officials, communist activists, and various grassroots social groups, attempting to forge a unified national consciousness and a collective socio-political strategy. This article examines the strategic contributions of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema within the structural framework of the Algerian Islamic Congress, recognizing it as the premier institutional experiment in nationalist coalition-building during this interwar period. By tracing the historical trajectory of the Ulema's mobilization efforts, organizational leadership, and regional expansion, this study evaluates the mechanics and eventual limitations of this seminal unifying movement.

Keywords: Algerian Islamic Congress; Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema; Federation of Algerian Muslim Elected Officials; Algerian Communist Party; Abdelhamid Ibn Badis.

الملخص:

شهدت الساحة السياسية في الجزائر المستعمرة خلال حقبة الثلاثينيات من القرن العشرين حراكاً نضالياً مكثفاً، قادته مختلف التشكيلات والاتجاهات الوطنية القائمة آنذاك. وقد تضاعف زخم هذا النشاط تزامناً مع صعود الجبهة الشعبية إلى سدة الحكم في فرنسا، والتي أبانت في بداياتها عن مرونة نسبية وانفتاح تجاه مطالب النخبة السياسية الجزائرية. وفي سياق هذا التحول الاستراتيجي، توحدت القوى الوطنية لأول مرة في اجتماع تاريخي مشهود انعقد بالعاصمة في جوان 1936، مسفراً عن تأسيس ما عُرف بـ "المؤتمر الإسلامي الجزائري". ويمثل هذا المؤتمر حدثاً تاريخياً مفصلياً نجح في صهر التوجهات الوطنية المتباينة—من علماء إصلاحيين، ونواب منتخبين، ومناضلين سياسيين، وفئات اجتماعية وشعبية مختلفة—في بوتقة كفاحية واحدة، سعياً لتشكيل وعي وحدوي وإطار عملٍ نضالي مشترك. وفي هذا الإطار، تروم هذه الدراسة تسليط الضوء على المقاربات الاستراتيجية والجهود التنظيمية لـ "جمعية العلماء المسلمين الجزائريين" داخل فضاء المؤتمر الإسلامي الجزائري، باعتباره التجربة الوحيدة الأولى والأبرز التي عرفتها الساحة الجزائرية خلال تلك المرحلة الحرجة من تاريخ النضال الوطني.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المؤتمر الإسلامي الجزائري؛ جمعية العلماء المسلمين الجزائريين؛ النواب المسلمون الجزائريون؛ الحزب الشيوعي الجزائري؛ عبد الحميد بن باديس.

1. INTRODUCTION

The First Algerian Islamic Congress convened in Algiers on June 7, 1936, at the Majestic Cinema (currently the Atlas Cinema) in the Bab El Oued district. This landmark assembly occurred amidst exceptional domestic and international developments. Globally, this period witnessed a surge in transnational Islamic solidarity, characterized by the hosting of

several key Islamic conferences across the world, including the Caliphate Conference in Cairo, the Muslim Conference of Europe in Geneva, and the Islamic Conference in Jerusalem—where the intellectual Ibrahim Atfich exerted a notable influence. Furthermore, the pan-Islamic and anti-colonial discourses of Prince Shakib Arslan, which emphasized cultural preservation and political emancipation for the Islamic nation,

resonated deeply within the contemporary Algerian intelligentsia.

Domestically, the Algerian socio-political landscape was undergoing rapid institutional transformation. The Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema (AAMU) had established its institutional footprint in 1931, followed closely by the formal restructuring of the Algerian Communist Party (PCA) in 1936. Simultaneously, the Federation of Algerian Muslim Elected Officials (*Fédération des Élus*) consolidated its political influence following significant victories in the municipal elections of 1934. The contemporary ascension of the *Parti du peuple algérien* (PPA) in metropolitan France introduced a reformist agenda, exemplified by the proposed Blum-Viollette legislation.

Concurrently, a massive wave of industrial actions and labor strikes swept through the administrative departments of Algeria in 1936, resulting in the complete shutdown of colonial institutions in the cities of Oran, Sidi Bel Abbès, and Mostaganem. The active mobilization and support of Algerian port workers fundamentally altered the historical trajectory of the indigenous working class within colonial Algeria broadly and the Oran sector specifically, resulting in significant structural concessions such as the institutional recognition of trade unions, the proliferation of professional syndicates, and incremental wage increases (Guenaneche, 1985, p. 95).

2. THE ASSOCIATION OF ALGERIAN MUSLIM ULEMA AND THE GENESIS OF THE CONGRESS

The organizational timeline of the first Islamic Congress coincided with the public celebrations of the Prophet's Birthday (*Mawlid al-Nabi*). This cultural event provided a venue for diverse national figures, including reformist theologians, municipal deputies, communist organizers, and various Sufi sheikhs representing traditionalist *zawiyas*. A notable exception to this coalition was the *Étoile Nord-Africaine*,

which boycotted the initiatives due to its structural rejection of any assimilationist framework or compromises with metropolitan France, as well as its refusal of parliamentary representation in Paris (Alouane, 2012-2013, p. 176).

Historical consensus attributes the initial conceptualization of the Islamic Congress to Sheikh Abdelhamid Ibn Badis. In late 1935, Ibn Badis convened an emergency session of the permanent bureau of the AAMU, articulating his strategic vision:

"Due to the general deterioration of the situation in Algeria, the prevailing political confusion, and the differences between national parties and organizations causing disunity, I saw fit to call for a general Algerian Islamic congress that would bring people together, unite ranks, and determine goals. The reference in matters concerning the nation belongs to the nation itself, and the means to achieve this are conferences and forums that examine matters and reach results. Consensus (*ijma'*) is one of the principles of our Islamic legislation, so why not practice it in politics? Therefore, I have gathered you to seek your opinion and request your approval to invite, on behalf of the President of the Algerian Muslim Oulamas Association, thinkers who speak Arabic and French, as well as deputies and parties, and all those concerned about our country and its people from various sects and national organizations..." (Kheireddine, 1985, pp. 327-329).

In a subsequent statement delivered in January 1936 to the French-language reformist journal *La Défense*—then managed by Sheikh Lamine Laamoudi—Ibn Badis advocated for the immediate consolidation of all Algerian political factions into a unified national front or an Islamic congress to present a comprehensive charter of demands to the French state (Sâad Allah, 1992, p. 152). Echoing this account, Sheikh Mohamed

El Bachir El Ibrahimi affirmed in an editorial titled "Algeria's Day" (published in *El-Chihab*, July 1936) that contemporary history must credit Ibn Badis as the primary intellectual architect of the Algerian Islamic Congress movement (*El-Chihab*, July 12, 1936).

The AAMU performed the most prominent and significant role in the preparatory work for the assembly, which held its preliminary sessions at the *Cercle du Progrès (Nadi al-Taraqqi)* in Algiers—the venue where the title "Algerian Islamic Congress" was officially adopted. To establish a broad consensus, a faction within the Association led by Sheikh El Ibrahimi recommended that participating parties temporarily shelve their individual, exclusionary political platforms to avoid restrictive ideological framing (Lounici, 2019, p. 98).

To operationalize this initiative, Ibn Badis initiated direct dialogue with the Federation of Muslim Elected Officials of the Constantine Department to convince them of the project. This diplomatic outreach led to the publication of a joint manifesto on May 16, 1936, which urged the Algerian population to establish local preparatory committees and draft grievances (Mehdid, 2015, p. 122). Concurrently, on June 1, 1936, the "Bloc of Islamic Organizations" was established within the Oran Department under the stewardship of Sheikh Saïd Zahirî, a prominent member of the Ulema. This regional bloc sought to coordinate a network of cultural, religious, athletic, labor, veteran, and charitable associations to ensure the grassroots implementation of the forthcoming political demands, expanding the movement beyond the formulation of a mere text.

The alignment of the reformist Ulema with secular factions was driven by a pragmatic expectation that the Popular

Front government would dismantle institutional discrimination and grant equal civic rights to indigenous Algerians (Bakkar, 2013, p. 89). The colonial state monitored these developments closely. An administrative report from the government-general in Western Algeria described the political climate as fluctuating between active unrest and deceptive calm, advising the central authorities to counter the nationalist coalition by sponsoring an Islamic party managed by loyalist *zawiyas* to divert the youth from joining secular political parties or trade unions (Departmental Archives of Western Algeria [D.A.W.O], Box No. 2260, April 1935).

Despite these counter-measures, the inaugural Congress attracted significant popular participation. While contemporary French media estimated the attendance at approximately five to six thousand individuals, internal organizer reports indicated that over seven thousand delegates and citizens packed the Majestic Cinema (El Ibrahimi, 1997, p. 231). The assembly featured prominent public figures, including Dr. Mohammed Salah Ben Djelloul representing the *Fédération des Élus* and Ben Ali Boukort representing the Communist Party, though Mekki Bezaghoud, president of the Oran municipal delegation, was notably absent (Mehdid, 2015, p. 126). The session concluded with the election of a temporary administrative committee tasked with executing the resolutions across the colony's three departments (*Al-Basa'ir*, July 31, 1936).

Describing the social composition of the historic gathering, Sheikh El Ibrahimi observed:

"As the scheduled time for the conference approached, the Magisterial hall, with its spacious room, luxurious hallways, and balconies, was overflowing with attendees from the three regions. It was a moving sight, and

at first glance, the observer could see that all sectors of the nation were represented at the conference: workers, students, farmers, rich and poor, prominent and obscure figures, young and old, were all intertwined and mingled together. One could instinctively conclude, regardless of age or prosperity, that this was the first spectacle of its kind witnessed in the history of the country... this day was momentous, Algerian Day, which marked the beginning of a new history, where the solidarity, brotherhood, and unity of the Algerian Muslims were evident" (El Ibrahimi, 1997, p. 250).

The French colonial administration, through its rigorous monitoring of the conference's activities, realized that the Ulema Association, led by Imam Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, had played the most prominent role in inviting, preparing for, and organizing this conference since early January 1936 (Lounici, 2019, p. 95).

3. THE CHARTER OF DEMANDS AND THE DIPLOMATIC MISSION TO PARIS

The comprehensive grievances of the Algerian Islamic Congress were serialized in the press, notably within the pages of *El-Chihab* under the title "The Rights of the Algerian Nation Demanded by the French Nation: Assembly, Language, and Islam" (*El-Chihab*, July 1936, pp. 210-213). The demands were structurally divided into specific reformist tenets advocated by the Ulema and broader civic rights championed by the secular coalitions. The individual demands of Ibn Badis focused on the right to equality between Muslim Algerians and Europeans in parliamentary councils and the abolition of special laws like the Native Code (*Code de l'Indigénat*), while the Ulema demanded the separation of religion and state, the liberation of the Arabic language and religious education, the independence of the judiciary, and the creation of schools to train Sharia judges (*El-Chihab*, July 1936, pp. 210-213).

The general demands submitted to French Prime Minister Léon Blum encompassed:

- The absolute nullification of all discriminatory and exceptional laws imposed exclusively on Muslims.
- The administrative integration of Algeria into France, alongside the complete abolishment of the Algerian Government-General, the Council of Representatives, and the mixed municipal system.
- The strict protection of the Islamic personal status system, coupled with a genuine structural reform of the Sharia courts.
- Comprehensive socio-economic and political reforms, including a general political amnesty decree, the total unification of the electoral college system, allowing indigenous voters to nominate themselves, and securing direct representation within the French Supreme Council of the Nation.

To advocate for this Charter directly before the French parliament, a highly representative cross-factional delegation was assembled, comprising regional delegates from across the territory: The central delegation featured figures such as Sheikh Tayeb Al-Oqbi (representing the AAMU), the independent architect Abderrahman Bouchama, and municipal counselors Ibn El-Hadj, his son, and Abderrahman Boukerdenna. The Oran municipality chosen representatives included Abd al-Salam (lawyer and financial commissioner), Haj Hassan Bachtarzi, and labor leader Ammar Ferchouh. The Constantine department featured a powerful alliance comprising Sheikh Abdelhamid Ibn Badis, Dr. Mohammed Salah Ben Djelloul, Farhat Abbas, Larbi Tahrat, and Ibrahim Ibn Qaliya. Additionally, Dr. Sâadan and Amin Laamoudi were selected as representatives of the Sahara, while three younger individuals—the son of the Algiers municipal advisor, Ibrahim Ibn Qaliya from Constantine, and Abderrahman Bouchama from Oran—were integrated to represent the

youth demographic across each municipality.

Prior to the delegation's departure, a young representative from the *Étoile Nord-Africaine* requested an audience, urging the executive to integrate Messali Hadj into their metropolitan negotiations. Dr. Ben Djelloul responded pragmatically, affirming that the delegation's mission encompassed the collective welfare of all Algerians and would welcome any cooperative effort serving the public interest (*Al-Basa'ir*, July 24, 1936). The Congress explicitly conditioned its advocacy on achieving the Charter of Demands within a framework that simultaneously preserved Islamic personal status and protected workers' rights (Guenaneche, 1985, pp. 80-81).

The French government attempted to placate the delegates with vague promises of reform while executing administrative maneuvers to undermine their leverage. Chief among these subversions was the establishment of a counter-delegation led by Sheikh Ghoulem Allah, the financial commissioner of Tiaret, which was dispatched to Paris to pit the traditionalist Marabout factions against the demands of the Congress. Concurrently, internal anxieties regarding the growing influence of the Communist Party prompted Ben Djelloul to expedite the dispatch of a joint delegation to Paris on July 22, 1936, a move that diluted the original demands (French National Archives Overseas [FR.A.N.O.M], Algiers Coast 4I 21).

Upon the delegation's return, a massive reporting assembly was held on August 2, 1936, at the Municipal Stadium in Algiers. Members of the *Étoile Nord-Africaine* attended this rally to inject their independent nationalist perspectives. As reported by the *Al-Basa'ir* newspaper, the floor was given sequentially to executive committee member Benali Ouzegane, Dr. Ben Djelloul, Dr. Bachir, and the delegation treasurer, Abderrahman Boukerdenna. Following them, Sheikh Ibn Badis and Sheikh El-Bachir El-Ibrahimi addressed the crowd. Messali Hadj was also permitted to speak, articulating the foundational independence

principles of his association. To prevent colonial crackdowns, organizers concluded the rally by urging the thousands of attendees to maintain strict discipline and avoid provocations from counter-demonstrators (*Al-Basa'ir*, August 7, 1936). Following this capital success, regional assemblies were organized in Oran and Mostaganem in October 1936.

Notwithstanding these achievements, the Islamic Congress quickly faced internal divisions with the formal exit of the Federation of Muslim Elected Officials of the Constantine sector, alongside fierce opposition from right-wing colonial organizations like the Federation of Municipal Elders of Algeria under Gabriel Lambert, parliamentary blocks, and the colonial administration itself (FR.A.N.O.M, cote Alger 4I 21). Nevertheless, regional branches maintained high levels of activity, organizing rallies supportive of the Popular Government and the extended Blum-Viollette proposal (FR.A.N.O.M, cote Alger 4I 21; FR.A.N.O.M, code 92 1F 251). Concurrently, the director of *Al-Basa'ir* publicly conveyed his dissent regarding the absolute independence proposed by Messali Hadj, arguing that the Algerian community still lacked the necessary educational standard and self-governing experience, making them vulnerable to older traditional bondages, and reasserting that the immediate goal remained civic equality and freedom within the current legal structure (*Al-Basa'ir*, January 22, 1937).

4. THE NATIONAL AND UNIFYING DIMENSION OF THE CONGRESS MOVEMENT

For the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema, 1936 marked a pivotal ideological and organizational leap. The establishment of regional congress committees catalyzed nationwide structural development. The administrative core of this movement was the Committee of Sixty-Six (Committee 66), which acted as the executive organ of the Congress. This body was tasked with printing the Charter of Demands in both Arabic and French, touring the country to

establish localized operational branches, and assigning national roles to various conference figures (Aggoun, 1984, p. 27). Initially conceived by a temporary committee, its framework was finalized when regional delegates convened in Algiers on July 5, 1936 (Aggoun, 1984, p. 27). On January 17, 1937, the Committee of Sixty-Six met at the *Cercle du Progrès* to formalize the internal bylaws of the Congress and evaluate the changing political climate. The executive bureau was commissioned to draft a definitive legal charter, and plans were laid for a secondary diplomatic mission to France on February 1, 1937, to directly lobby French parliamentary commissions. This secondary delegation comprised:

- **President:** Dr. El-Bachir Abdelouahab
- **Deputies:** Lamine Laamoudi and Djillani Ben Taleb
- **General Secretary:** Ibn El-Hadj
- **Treasurer:** Abderrahman Boukerdenna
- **Delegates:** Sheikh Abdelhamid Ibn Badis and Professor Tahar

To solidify this national network, a general circular was distributed across the three provinces, prompting supporters to expand their grassroots bases (*Al-Basa'ir*, January 22, 1937).

However, this national unity was soon threatened by deep political fractures. Following the publication of controversial statements by Dr. Ben Djelloul in the *Marseille Matin* newspaper, the Ulema Association fiercely debated his stance. Ben Djelloul's refusal to retract his comments exposed a growing ideological rift between the elite elected officials and the reformist Ulema. This fracture was documented in the press, notably via an analytical piece in *Al-Basa'ir* (Issue 40, October 23, 1936) titled "How was the Algerian Islamic Congress Formed? And Why Did Dr. Ibn Djelloul Abandon it?", as well as critiques in the journal *Al-Zahra* (*Al-Zahra*, October 16, 1936). This political drifting, compounded by the stalling tactics of the French

authorities, forced the Congress leadership to seek a secondary general mobilization.

Despite these emerging rifts, the initial Congress was hailed by the Ulema as a foundational milestone for the Algerian nationalist reform movement. It successfully synthesized disparate socio-political elements—aligning secular politicians with religious reformists, and bridging elements of traditional Sufism with conservative and progressive political currents—into a single, recognizable nationalist entity. Communist leader Ben Ali Boukort observed that the true significance of the Congress lay in its cross-class mobilization, drawing active participation from port workers, merchants, teachers, artisans, and postal employees, thereby marking a profound structural turning point in Algerian history (Boukort, 1986, p. 61).

5. THE SECOND ALGERIAN ISLAMIC CONGRESS (1937)

By early 1937, popular optimism had waned as the promises of the French government yielded little more than administrative delays and bureaucratic commissions. In March 1937, a French parliamentary commission led by Lagrosilière arrived to investigate Algeria's socio-economic conditions (FR.A.N.O.M, cote Alger 4I 21, May 31, 1938). In response, the Congress committee organized specialized sub-committees to draft expert testimonies on pivotal issues and appointed specialized speakers to re-mobilize the population (*Al-Basa'ir*, March 14, 1937). Sheikh Ibn Badis, alongside Lamine Laamoudi and Secretary Belhadj, initiated an extensive regional tour. This intense mobilization triggered immediate counter-actions from rival secular factions. Anxious over communist and reformist dominance within the movement, pro-Blum-Viollette socialists in Western Algeria broke away to form the Committee of the Islamic Movement of the Oran Sector (C.A.M.O.) in March 1937. Backed by the French Section of the Workers' International (S.F.I.O.), C.A.M.O. sought to redirect Muslim alignment directly toward French assimilationist platforms. Undeterred, the

Committee of Sixty-Six decreed in May 1937 that the Second Algerian Islamic Congress would convene on the exact first anniversary of the pioneer assembly (FR.A.N.O.M, 10H88, February 1938).

The Second Congress took place in early July 1937 at the *Cercle du Progrès*, gathering approximately 156 formal delegates (FR.A.N.O.M, cote Alger 4I 21). A primary objective of this session was expanding the movement's popular base by institutionalizing a youth wing, known as the Algerian Islamic Congress Youth (FR.A.N.O.M, cote Alger 4I 21). This youth apparatus integrated young activists from various political currents, anchored heavily by the Association of Ulema. During a mass gathering at the *Cercle du Progrès*, the prominent Ulema intellectual Fodil El Ouartalani (1900–1959) formally assumed the leadership of this youth wing, a position yielded to him by the senior secretariat in recognition of his dynamic organizational capacity and growing influence among the younger demographic (Bakkar, 2008-2009, p. 127).

The Islamic Congress Youth mobilized rapidly, establishing 20 operational branches nationwide and boasting over 4,000 active members by the end of 1937. Under the core leadership of figures like Rachid Kartoubi and Hamouda, the organization prioritized political literacy, literacy education, and community training. This rapid expansion incited fierce competition with rival youth groups emerging in Blida and Constantine. As noted by the contemporary newspaper *La Défense* (September 10, 1937), the Ulema Association served as the epicenter of these youth collectives, sparking colonial anxieties that these youth cells would eventually coalesce into a singular, revolutionary Algerian Islamic nationalist party.

6. STRUCTURAL OBSTACLES, IDEOLOGICAL RIFTS, AND DECLINE

Despite its structural ambitions, the composition of the Second Congress was increasingly fragmented by competing ideological currents, with individuals split

between Ulema supporters, communist sympathizers, and independent activists leaning toward the newly formed Algerian People's Party (PPA), who had entered the Congress ranks following the dissolution of the Etoile Nord Africaine. Furthermore, the Constantine Federation of Muslim Elected Officials strongly advocated for transforming the Congress into an official, unified political party; however, this structural mutation was rejected. Instead, a compromise was struck to replace the bulky Committee of Sixty-Six with a streamlined 45-member Executive Committee to oversee the bureau (FR.A.N.O.M, 10H88, February 1938).

The most debilitating blow to the movement came from localized fractures, particularly within the Oran department. On February 14, 1937, the socialist-dominated C.A.M.O. openly opposed the Bloc of Islamic Organizations due to deep-seated resentments against communist influence and the dominance of Sheikh El-Bachir El-Ibrahimi. Concurrently, personal and tactical disagreements erupted between El-Ibrahimi and Sheikh Said Zahiri. During a lecture delivered on March 23, 1937, at a traditionalist Morabitin club in Tlemcen, Zahiri pushed to base the Islamic Organizations Bloc at the Achaachi Club—a known structural rival to El-Ibrahimi's faction. This alliance was heavily condemned by communist factions.

In response, El-Ibrahimi established a competing loyalist base in Oran, the Fellah's Association, under the leadership of Zeddour Miloud Al-Mahadji. He also launched the newspaper *Al-Maghrib Al-Arabi*, edited by one of Ibn Badis' star students, Sheikh Hamza Boukoucha. However, severe financial distress forced the paper to cease publication in August 1937. As these bitter internal squabbles spilled into the public sphere, grassroots support began to evaporate. A precise metric of this decline was observed during the Congress Workers' Committee meeting in Relizane (March 23–24, 1937), which drew a mere 300 attendees on the first day and plummeted to just 30

listeners on the second (Lahouari, 1984, pp. 395-396).

Nevertheless, it can be argued that if young people remained the dominant and active force within the Islamic Congress, they could have functioned as the primary engine behind nationalism and the concept of unity, especially since approximately 55% of those actively engaged within the movement were under the age of 25 (Soufi, 1988, p. 182). However, the fundamental strategic objectives of the participating factions were inherently contradictory. The primary concern of the secular elected officials remained the immediate implementation of the Blum-Viollette project, an initiative designed specifically to benefit their corporate and electoral classes.

The Ulema, conversely, displayed highly constrained enthusiasm for French structural integration; their strategic focus remained fixed on freeing the Islamic infrastructure from colonial state control and preserving the Arabic linguistic identity through independent local funding. For the communists and socialists, the Congress was primarily a tactical apparatus to mobilize the Algerian masses behind the broader geopolitical interests of the French Popular Front, making a unified list of demands structurally impossible (Sâad Allah, 1992, p. 152).

The final institutional retreat accelerated as the internal strength of the movement dissolved, and the political stance of the Constantine Federation declined, reducing the overall leverage of the Algerian Islamic Congress. Furthermore, the Algiers department lost its leadership; its structure fractured and its role declined significantly as many demonstrators withdrew from the Congress, including its regional president, Dr. Bachir.

CONCLUSION

The historical trajectory of the Algerian Islamic Congress (1936–1938) marks a pivotal paradigm shift in the socio-political evolution of colonial Algeria, representing the first programmatic attempt to construct a

counter-hegemonic nationalist coalition. Conceptualized through the reformist vision of Sheikh Abdelhamid Ibn Badis and sustained by the institutional mobilization of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulema, this short-lived experiment successfully challenged the fractured nature of contemporary Algerian politics. By engineering a cross-ideological bloc that temporarily reconciled the socio-religious principles of the Ulema, the integrationist framework of the *Fédération des Élus*, and the working-class mobilization of the Algerian Communist Party, the Congress redefined anti-colonial resistance. It shifted the struggle from isolated group grievances to a centralized, collective discourse demanding cultural autonomy and civic parity.

Ultimately, however, the structural decline of the Congress underscores the inherent vulnerability of building a heterogeneous coalition under the surveillance of a colonial state. The demise of this unifying movement was dual-faceted:

- **External Subversion:** The French administrative apparatus successfully executed stalling tactics, weaponizing bureaucratic inertia and sponsoring traditionalist counter-delegations to deplete the political momentum of the Congress.
- **Internal Ideological Incompatibility:** The strategic visions of the constituent groups proved structurally irreconcilable. While the secular elected officials viewed the Congress as a vehicle to secure immediate electoral integration via the Blum-Viollette proposal, the Ulema prioritized structural immunity for Islamic institutions and Arabic linguistic identity. Concurrently, the communist groups sought to subordinate indigenous grievances to the metropolitan geopolitical agenda of the Popular Front.

These systemic tensions, aggravated by localized rifts within the Oran department

and the eventual alienation of key figures from the Constantine Federation, paralyzed the executive capabilities of the Committee of Sixty-Six.

Nevertheless, the institutional retreat of the Algerian Islamic Congress should not obscure its profound legacy as a socio-political laboratory. By institutionalizing the Algerian Islamic Congress Youth under the dynamic leadership of figures like Fodil El Ouartalani, the movement catalyzed a crucial demographic and ideological transition. It successfully socialized a rising generation of activists into a unified national consciousness that bypassed assimilationist compromises. Consequently, while the Congress failed to achieve immediate programmatic reforms, it radically transformed the infrastructure of Algerian dissent. It laid the essential institutional, psychological, and grassroots foundations that would decades later underwrite the modern revolutionary struggle for total self-determination.

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