



Volume 6, Special Edition No. 2

May 21, 2012

## **Algeria's Parliamentary Elections: Apathy, Irregularities, and Agony**

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Algeria's recent parliamentary elections elicited widespread commentary in the region and beyond that emphasized the political defeat of the Islamist current, contrary to expectations. This outcome strengthened the view that Algeria is somehow immune from the "Arab Spring" protests that have challenged regimes across the region, including North Africa, and brought formerly marginalized Islamist movements into the very heart of political life. These analyses reflect a lack of familiarity with Algeria's complex history, politics and society. As Algeria celebrates fifty years of independence this year, its internal political mechanisms remain opaque and difficult to discern. Algeria's troubled and violent past continues to overshadow its future prospects. Against the backdrop of a continuous political stalemate, and a detested ruling elite, many Algerians were apathetic toward the elections and their results. The low voter turnout and the highly questionable results indicate that the political status quo remains in force, and that the country is most certainly not moving in the direction of genuine reform.

The key to understanding current political trends is the ferocious bloodletting that wracked the country during the 1990s, following the newly legalized Islamic Salvation Front (FIS)'s electoral victories which brought it to the verge of control of parliament. To avoid such an outcome, and the FIS's likely subsequent bid for the presidency of the republic, the country's military leaders intervened, canceled the electoral process and outlawed the FIS. Hundreds of thousands of Algerians were killed in the ensuing violence. In that sense, Algeria's version of the "Arab Spring" occurred nearly twenty years ago. Although the military and its civilian allies (frequently referred to in French as *Le Pouvoir* - "The Power") ultimately prevailed, delivering a crushing blow to the FIS, the issues that underpinned the country's deterioration into violence – corruption, economic disparities, youth

unemployment, widespread alienation, and profound disagreement over what Algeria's essence should consist of – remained unaddressed. Under these circumstances, every electoral contest in Algeria since the mid-1990s has merely been a tool for the authorities to consolidate their preeminence and achieve a measure of official legitimacy.

The Algerian public, for its part, has repeatedly indicated its mistrust and disdain towards *le pouvoir*. While few Algerians favor a reversion to armed conflict, the public's support of the country's president, 'Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika, who was elected in 1999 with the promise of reviving Algeria's revolutionary spirit and restoring its past achievements, is on the wane. Despite early efforts that signaled a move towards weakening the military's stranglehold over the country and introducing more genuine pluralist politics, Bouteflika has in fact strengthened the power of the presidency while leaving the military's preeminence intact and ensuring that parliament remained little more than a rubber stamp. Algeria's political parties -- even those who oppose the regime and the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) party -- are generally viewed as ineffective organizations serving the regime's interests. Accordingly, voter interest and turnout in past elections has been extremely low. For example, in the 2007 parliamentary elections, only 35 percent of registered voters actually cast ballots.

This tableau of an exhausted public reeling from years of internal violence is further compounded by Algeria's economic woes. Most Algerians, particularly the younger generation which make up the majority of the country's 37 million people, are deeply pessimistic about their economic prospects. This younger generation has little or no sentimental attachment to the FLN, and views the remaining Islamist-oriented parties as cronies of the regime. While Algeria, which exports oil and natural gas, is not a poor country, economic development is lagging and unemployment remains high. Allegations of widespread corruption among the ruling elite only add to the public anger and mistrust of the government. The impact of the internal violence of the 1990s, and what could be described as a deep-rooted sense of Algerian national pride, has led much of the public to distance itself entirely from a corrupt political system unworthy of their attention and impervious to change. The result of all this is widespread apathy, which was on display once again in last week's vote.

Seeking to bolster its credibility, the Algerian government invited, for the first time in the country's history, a delegation of European Union observers to oversee the vote. New ballot boxes and other voting equipment were acquired in an effort to promote transparency, as government ministers and Bouteflika himself called on Algerians to vote. But the weeks leading up to the elections did not reveal a shift in the public's indifference. Algerians bristled at the prospect of

participating in an electoral process that would merely validate candidates and parties already screened by the authorities. Election campaign rallies did not attract much interest. Critical articles in the Algerian media, which has remained surprisingly pluralist during the last two decades, anticipated that in one way or another, the vote would be rigged by the regime.

The official results went beyond these pessimistic forecasts, generating a chorus of criticism and rejection in Algeria. One Algerian politician contended that they were "neither acceptable, nor logical, nor reasonable". For starters, the official voter turnout figure of 42 percent sharply contradicted eyewitness accounts of sparse public participation. The ruling FLN increased its number of seats, winning close to 48 percent of the vote. The National Democratic Party (RND), closely allied with the regime, came in second. The state-approved Islamist parties did not make significant gains in the 462 seat National Assembly. The government's pride in noting that half of the newly elected members of parliament are women does not in any way suggest that the elections are part of broader program of social reform. Given the limited public trust in the elections, this outcome merely validated the regime's negative image among the public. International reactions, by contrast, were more favorable. The EU Observer Delegation endorsed the vote, citing some "technical shortcomings", but also praising it "as a first step on the path to reform". US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stated that the elections were a "welcome step in Algeria's progress towards democratic reform". None of these statements, however, are likely to alleviate the Algerian public's apathy or ameliorate the festering grievances and underlying *ennui* among the country's citizens.

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The Moshe Dayan Center publishes TEL AVIV NOTES, an analytical update on current affairs in the Middle East, on the 10th and 26th of every month, as well as occasional Special Editions.

TEL AVIV NOTES is published with the support of the V. Sorell Foundation.

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