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## **Algeria's Presidential Election: The Enduring Stagnation**

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Algeria's September 8 presidential election turned the international spotlight, however briefly, to North Africa's largest country in size and population (over 45 million). Although there was never any doubt about the vote's outcome, in which the incumbent 78-year-old president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, won 84 percent of the cast votes,<sup>1</sup> the election highlighted many of the country's longstanding political ills and wider, festering challenges. These include a stagnant, aging political leadership lacking a cohesive vision for the country's future; an increasingly restless, detached young population seeking to find its place in society; an unstable economy; and consecutive diplomatic setbacks that have further eroded Algeria's regional and international standing.

Algeria is less known internationally than its other North African neighbors. Unlike Morocco and Tunisia, it has refrained from developing tourism and is not very welcoming to foreigners who require entry visas. The initial impression of those who do visit is of an old, faded place. The internal strife between the government and radical Islamists in the 1990s, in which the regime retained power, further isolated the country throughout the "dark decade," as it became known. Algeria remains distant and misunderstood to many, while observers and analysts seek to decipher its opaque political structures.<sup>2</sup> This paper outlines the recent presidential election and its outcome, linking the vote to broader issues that underpin contemporary Algerian politics and society.

The presidential election capped the recent chapter of Algeria's political history, which followed the forced resignation of its former president, Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika, in April 2019. Mass protests demanding his removal erupted earlier that year after it was announced that Bouteflika would seek another presidential term despite his poor health condition. Bouteflika reportedly suffered a debilitating stroke in 2013, after which he was rarely seen in public and was allegedly unable to speak. By most accounts, the president was a mere figurehead, controlled by a coterie of close family members and advisers, with the backing of the Algerian military. The swelling protests, organized by the *Hirak* grassroots movement, succeeded. Bouteflika withdrew from the upcoming elections in

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier figures claimed that Tebboune garnered over 94 percent of the vote. "[Algeria's President Sworn In For A Second Term After Lopsided Election](#)," *Associated Press*, September 18, 2024; "[Algeria's Court Certifies President Tebboune's Landslide Re-Election Win](#)," *Al Jazeera*, September 14, 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Böhm, "[The Revolution Failed, But Some Still Believe in a New Dawn in Algeria](#)," *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, September 13, 2024.

March, and, a month later, under pressure from the Algerian military, resigned from his position after serving in office for twenty years. He retreated from public life and died in 2021.

The military and security establishment in Algeria wields substantial influence in the political arena, though removed from the public eye. Although officially a republic since gaining independence from France in 1962, the military maintains an unofficial, dominant, behind-the-scenes role. While the scope of its involvement is often unclear, the military is widely recognized among Algerians as *Le Pouvoir*, the true power that manages state affairs. That recognition deters many Algerians from taking an interest in political life and contributes to widespread apathy among the population.

Throughout Algeria's tumultuous political history, the *Pouvoir's* position has remained intact. Most members of this establishment, many now around eighty years old, are veterans of Algeria's independence movement. They continue to be influenced and guided by their experiences during that era.<sup>3</sup> The dominant narrative in Algeria's political history is based on the sanctity of the *Pouvoir* as the guardian of Algeria's independence. This narrative both shapes and limits Algerian politics today. The country's leaders strongly believe in pursuing long-term goals rather than seeking more immediate remedies to the country's challenges. They firmly believe in their causes and guiding principles and see no reason to compromise them. Algeria's leaders are largely disinterested in discussing issues with foreign leaders, diplomats, or analysts, or resorting to public relations to promote their positions. Perseverance over the long term is a key factor in understanding Algeria's policies, which can be confusing and contradict the country's current needs.<sup>4</sup> For younger Algerians, respectful as they may be of the independence generation's sacrifices, that era is less relevant to the country's contemporary challenges. Indeed, the 2019 *Hirak* protests also reflected the growing frustration of Algeria's new generations, clamoring for a voice in a largely closed, insulated, and opaque political system. *Hirak* activists presented diverse demands, with some who sought a mere change in Algeria's leadership while others called for a broader institutional makeover.<sup>5</sup>

Bouteflika's removal did not alter the political landscape or usher in a new era. The veteran military establishment's position was not diminished, and the aging independence generation remained at the helm. The *Pouvoir* rejected calls for widespread change, opting to "elect" a new president instead. The military's appointed candidate, Tebboune, had a less than stellar political record, including serving as Algeria's shortest-serving prime minister in 2017. Protesters boycotted the vote, and Tebboune was elected in December 2019 with a record-low voter turnout of less than 40 percent.<sup>6</sup> Tebboune's presidential term was far from a rising success. The COVID-19 pandemic hit Algeria hard, overwhelming the country's health system (Tebboune himself sought treatment in Germany after falling ill). Inflation remained high, reaching 9.3 percent in 2023. Export growth did not meet expectations. Backed by the military, Tebboune cracked down on the *Hirak*, effectively neutralizing the movement. Dissidents and journalists were arrested, and more restrictions on media outlets were imposed. A new constitution further strengthened presidential powers by determining that key appointments would be in the hands of the presidency, allowing the president to effectively veto

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<sup>3</sup> Andrew G. Farrand, "[Algeria Has Never Seen A Smooth Transfer of Power. It Won't In This Election, Either.](#)" *Atlantic Council*, August 8, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> Geoff D. Porter, "[Algeria's Foreign Policy Pillars](#)", *NARCO Analysis*, June 26, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew G. Farrand, "[Algeria Has Never Seen A Smooth Transfer of Power. It Won't In This Election, Either.](#)" *Atlantic Council*, August 30, 2024.

<sup>6</sup> Jason Burke, "[Thousands March In Algeria After Controversial Election Result](#)," *The Guardian*, December 13, 2019.

legislation passed in parliament and supervising all regulatory bodies, including those responsible for government spending.<sup>7</sup>

The one stroke of luck that benefited Tebboune's presidency was the Ukraine war and the rising European demand for oil and natural gas, previously secured from Russia. Algeria's oil and gas exports expanded, and this financial windfall helped Tebboune gain support through increased social spending, which improved the lot of many Algerian citizens. However, the government was unsuccessful in harnessing Algeria's power in global energy markets to promote its foreign policy goals and improve its international standing. Algeria suffered increased setbacks to key foreign policy pillars. These included a failed bid to join the BRICS economic coalition in 2023 (largely due to economic factors, weak GDP figures, and a reliance on oil and gas revenues). More significantly, Algeria has lost leverage on the Western Sahara issue, with more and more countries siding with Morocco and disregarding Algerian interests in the contested region.<sup>8</sup> For example, France's recently approved (July 2024) the Moroccan autonomy proposal (under Moroccan sovereignty) as the basis for settling the region's future, distancing itself from Algeria's interest in securing independence for the region. In short, Tebboune had few achievements to be proud of as the election approached. This record notwithstanding, he remained the *Pouvoir's* candidate, with the backing of other major parties, including the leading *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), and had little to fear from his few competitors in the run-up to the election.

Although 26 people applied to participate, only two were ultimately approved as candidates along with the incumbent<sup>9</sup>: Abdelaali Hassani Cherif of the Islamist Conservative Movement of Society for Peace and Youcef Aouchiche of the Socialist Forces Front. These are two historic opposition parties with limited influence beyond their immediate supporters. The presidential campaign was a lackluster event, with few election rallies and scant public interest. "Uncle Tebboune," as he was presented to voters, emphasized his economic and social achievement. He also asserted unsubstantial claims that Algeria was under foreign attack and that he would be able to deliver a "victorious Algeria." Cherif's campaign slogan, "Opportunity," promised to introduce moderate, inclusive political reforms. Aouchiche promised to revive the country's politics and amend legislation limiting political participation. None of this resonated with ordinary Algerian voters, who remained largely indifferent to the campaign. One analyst contended that voters wondered what the point of voting was, with all predictions favoring Tebboune.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, Tebboune's main effort was to try and increase voter turnout compared to the previous election. A larger turnout would confer greater legitimacy on the country's president. But most voters, particularly younger ones, were not impressed. One Algerian told a foreign reporter that he did not care at all about the election: "The whole thing is a joke."<sup>11</sup> Another opined that it was not the election

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<sup>7</sup> Ramy Allahoum, "[In Algeria, A New Constitution Protesters Did Not Call For](#)," *Al Jazeera*, October 14, 2020; Ankita Mukhopadhyay, "[Algeria's President Approves Country's New Constitution](#)," *DW*, January 2, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew G. Farrand, "[Algeria Has Never Seen A Smooth Transfer of Power. It Won't In This Election, Either](#)," *Atlantic Council*, August 30, 2024.

<sup>9</sup> The government, with the military's indirect supervision, approves candidates.

<sup>10</sup> "[Timing, Tactics, and Tebboune: Decoding Algeria's Upcoming Presidential Elections](#)," *Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy*, September 4, 2024; "[Understanding Algeria's Presidential Election](#)," *Situation Assessment*, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, Doha Institute, September 15, 2024; "[Algeria Presidential Election Sees Low Turnout As Tebboune Poised For Victory](#)," *France24*, September 7, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Böhm, "[The Revolution Failed, But Some Still Believe in a New Dawn in Algeria](#)," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, September 13, 2024; "[Algeria's President Sworn In For A Second Term After Lopsided Election](#)," *Associated Press*, September 18, 2024.

that concerned the public but rather the whole country: “People just want to get out of here.” These sentiments played out on election day. Official turnout was later certified at 46.1 percent (earlier reports claimed it was 23 percent).<sup>12</sup> This figure was higher than the last presidential vote but still low. Most Algerians expressed little faith in the election’s importance, suggesting that much of the energy that propelled the Hirak protests was still simmering beneath the surface.

Tebboune was sworn in as president on September 17. Once in office, the Algerian president faces many familiar challenges, including a continuing dependency on oil and gas revenues, an eroding diplomatic standing, and a frustrated, restless population. Apathy, disgust, and a general disconnect from political life still reign supreme in Algeria, with new chapters in the country’s troubled political history waiting to be written.

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<sup>12</sup> “[Final Results of September 7 Presidential Election: Voter Turnout Reaches 46.10%,”](#) *Algerie Presse Service*, September 14, 2024; Farid Alilat, “[Algeria: Tebboune’s Electoral Victory Marred By 23% Voter Turnout,](#)” *The Africa Report*, September 9, 2024.