



# Arab Reform Brief

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## **Algeria's May 17, 2007 parliamentary elections or the political representation crisis**

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**What is most notorious about Algeria's May 17, 2007 parliamentary elections is the fact that they were boycotted by almost 65% of the electorate, a historical threshold never crossed since independence. The following study analyses the electoral exercise in light of realities on the ground: a voting process devoid of democracy. To make this game more politically attractive and attract more support for it, the Algerian Government relies on political clientelism and the distribution of political and material favours (rent). However, the formula that turned the National People's Assembly (NPA) into a rubberstamp chamber, devoid of any prerogative of debate and parliamentary control, also turned the lower house of parliament into an instrument of co-optation, and a place where gain from rent accrues and privileges to deputies abound. Pushed to the limit by Bouteflika's presidential style of government, this governance system set in motion a perverted process: the moral and political de-legitimation of the NPA. By refusing to set up a party system that brings different social groups closer together and represents the interests of parties to conflict, this political game of parliamentary electioneering without representation leaves the voter with only one option, now that loyalty has been eroded and the right to be heard blocked: defection. This is, at the core, the obvious manifestation of the political representation crisis that has beset the Algerian political system since the collapse of "revolutionary legitimacy" in October 1988.**

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On Thursday, May 17, 2007, some 19 million Algerian voters went to the polls to re-elect the 389 members of the National People's Assembly, the lower house of parliament. The elections – the third of their kind since the first multi-party parliamentary elections were interrupted in 1991 – were highly anticipated. They were taking place a month after the double terrorist attack of April 11 that targeted government headquarters – in the heart of the capital – and a police station near Algiers' International Airport causing, according to official sources, 33 deaths and over 200 injuries. Weakened by this murderous attack claimed by "Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb", President Bouteflika's regime should have been able to seize the opportunity of these elections to validate his legitimacy among the people. However, in response to the "referendum against terrorism", which the authorities wanted these elections to represent, the voters chose to demonstrate electoral dissatisfaction – while relentlessly condemning jihadism. According to official figures released by the Interior Ministry, around 65% of registered voters boycotted the polls, preferring abstention to voting and defection to participation.

The elections, boycotted by the Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS) of Hocine Ait Ahmed produced the same political configuration as before. The National Liberation Front (NLF) led by the Prime Minister Abdelaziz Belkhadem, remained the majority party, followed by the National Rally for Democracy (NRD) of former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia and the moderate Islamist party, Harakat Mojtm'a asSilm (HMS) under Bouguerra Soltani, the three parties that supported Bouteflika since he came to power in 1999. Nevertheless, compared to the parliamentary elections of June 2002, parties within the presidential alliance registered a drop of 34.36% in the number of votes received, and 14.05% in the number of seats won. The NLF thus lost 63 seats and nearly one million voters, and won 136 seats with 1315686 votes. If, on the other hand, the NRD won 14 extra seats over 2002,

it still showed a decline of 3.14% in the number of votes received, and won 62 seats with 591310 votes, while the HMS got 52 seats and 552104 votes. Independent deputies, on their part, continued their advance and got 33 seats. The Workers' Party of Louisa Hanoune saw 26 of its candidates win seats with 291312 votes, and the Rally for Culture and Democracy of Dr Said Saadi, which boycotted the elections in 2002, won only 19 seats – just like in the 1997 elections. The Islah Movement – whose leader was deposed – was the main loser of these elections: from the 43 seats in 2002, only 3 remained, and his followers ran under the banner of a small party and won 7 seats. The Islamist party al-Nahda that left empty-handed in 2002, won 5 seats, and the representatives of "moderate Islam", in addition to their dismemberment into smaller entities, showed clear signs of regression: from 2 468 600 votes and 103 seats in 1997, they got only 900 000 votes and 67 seats in 2007. The new party map is, however, more widely dispersed than the previous one; from 10 political groupings in 2002, there are today 22, most of which are "political parties" devoid of both a popular base and a political machine.

All the same, the electoral process as a whole was stigmatized no less by this public estrangement from the polls: in fact, not since independence have the Algerian people boycotted an election so massively; according to semi official sources, the real level of participation was actually under 25%. In fact, this tendency towards abstention from the polls did not start with these elections: in the 2002 general election, participation was down to 46.09%. What could the reasons behind such massive abstentions from the ballot box be? What could their significance possibly be? What repercussions could they have on the political process in the country?

### **Elections without democracy: the ultimate aim of the May 17, 2007 elections**

The May 17, 2007 elections were the fourth in Algeria since pluralism was introduced to the country in February 1989. To understand

what is at stake, it is a good idea to look back at the underlying structure that underpins the current system: the practical terms of reference of the Algerian political game put in place after the failure of the “democratic transition”. The first multi-party parliamentary elections of December 1991, won by the Islamic Salvation Front (French acronym FIS), a neo-fundamentalist party whose dedication to the Sharia was matched only by its hatred of pluralism, were cut short halfway through by the Army. Rejecting the brazen verdict delivered at the ballot box, the military had successively forced President Chadli Bendjedid to resign, established the High Council of State (an institution not provided for by the Constitution), cut short the election process, decreed a state of emergency and dismantled the FIS. Aghast at the prospect of an Islamic state, military officials high in the hierarchy of power immediately turned their backs on the “political liberalisation” put in motion by the “reformist government” of Mouloud Hamrouche, to reconnect forthwith with authoritarianism. The political deal they proposed would no longer aim at power sharing but rather at the resumption of the country’s political system, and the Constitution adopted by referendum on November 28, 1996, conferred upon this political game just the constitutional cover it lacked. Furthermore, and to better denude any political representation of meaning, the authors of this new but rehashed constitutional formula erected an institutional structure to prevent any eventual sharing of power. This is where the choice of a bi-cameral parliament comes into play: a lower house (National People’s Assembly NPA) and an upper house (National Council). If, on the one hand, members of the NPA are chosen in a general election, on the other one third of the senators are appointed by the President of the Republic. Thus, in the eventuality that an opposition party wins a majority in the elections, the votes of the presidential third can act, if necessary, as a blocking third since to be adopted all draft laws have to obtain at

least three-quarters of the National Council’s votes.

The disruption of the open parliamentary game does not stop here; it also foresees, if not specifically plans, the manipulation of parliamentary elections from below. Its arsenal comprises a large array of restrictive measures on public liberties (political, associative and unionist), imposed under the decreed state of emergency which, decreed at first for one year, is still in effect today. If it is still in effect fifteen years later, it is because it provides governments with all the powers they need of to quash freedom of speech from every direction.

Furthermore, the state of emergency contributes considerably to the general sense of electoral dissatisfaction: it creates a police state atmosphere that eventually promotes militancy, prevents the development of a political class and an independent civil society and, finally, contributes to bolstering the authoritarian system through the establishment of extraordinary modes of government. By justifying the violation of rights, the state of emergency allows the creation of a state where facts are non-constitutional, and absolves governments – already shielded from the law – from the obligation of being accountable to the governed.

The state of emergency also sees to it that public debate does not become a common practice. This being the case, the May 2007 election campaign provoked no debate, not even round any of the socio-economic problems that plague the lives of the Algerian people. The unemployment problem and the housing and purchasing power crises are less bearable to the Algerians (32 million citizens) than the rentier state is; the latter has demonstrated – constantly since the increase in the price of petrol in 2000 – a remarkable tendency towards financial wellbeing not seen since independence. This was the picture at the end of 2006: \$75 billion in foreign reserves (or 25 months of imports), \$42 billion of available resources from the

Revenue Regulation Fund, and \$4.7 billion in foreign debt. The Algerians who are well aware of these figures cannot explain the shortage of milk, the increase in the price of vegetables, youth unemployment, etc. However, instead of debating the reasons behind the underperformance of the national economy, the weakness of Algerian productivity (classified by the World Bank in 2003 as 85th among 93 countries), the weak level of productive investment and the flight of capital, the official Algerian election campaign chose instead to compose patriotic verse. Never has the gap between governors and governed been greater.

Authoritarianism, however, cannot totally annul political representation single-handedly. The manipulation of parliamentary elections made it necessary to set up a political machine to coincide with the launch of the elections without democracy: the National Rally for Democracy. Established under the government of Ahmed Ouyahia barely three months before the June 5, 1977 elections, the NRD emerged the winner with over 3.5 million votes and 156 parliamentary seats – well ahead of the rest of the “political class”. A creature of the administration, the NRD machine is designed to function based on client networks eager to benefit from the advantages of the rentier state. It encompasses “mass organisations”, such as the General Union of Algerian Workers GUAW, representatives of the so-called “revolutionary family” (the National Organisation of the Children of Shouhada – martyrs of the liberation war -, the National Organisation of the Mujahidin-Resistance Fighters, etc.), Organisation for the Victims of Terrorism, medium-level cadres, members of the tribal elite and high-level government employees. In creating such an electoral machine, the regime had a dual objective in mind: to dominate the above-mentioned political game from the centre, and ensure an increase in public support through the distribution of privileges to their clientele from the periphery. According to President Bouteflika’s wishes, in the May 2002

parliamentary elections the role of government machine fell to the NLF. The latter planned to reproduce for Bouteflika what the NRD had accomplished for Zeroual: a hegemonic party at the service of the president. The old single party, led at the time by Ali Benflis - who also effectively functioned as head of government – had won with 35.52% of the votes cast, i.e. with an absolute majority of the National People’s Assembly’s seats.

Rulers though, gauge very precisely the flimsiness of their support. Ever since the breakdown of the “revolutionary legitimacy”, on which the state was built, after the October 1988 riots, the authoritarian system has been suffering from a severe political and moral de-legitimisation process. However, if the tight closure of the political arena is designed to prevent the airing of partisan opinion, it is incapable of stopping defection and its fallout, i.e. abstention from the polls, from gaining ground. This is why the government puts in place opaque measures to ensure its control before the fact over results determined outside the ballot box.

Manipulation of the elections necessarily involves the maintenance of direct government control. Since authority is the law, this extraordinary government has turned the Algerian administration into part of its survival mechanism; in its capacity as the largest employer, the administration of the Algerian rentier state is the main conduit through which resources are channelled. Vast, dependent and ravenous, the Algerian public administration could not be further away from the norms that usually govern the work of a legal and rational bureaucracy. Its means of fiscal, auditory and regulatory collection are weak and inefficient.

Likewise, and because it was established by the state, the credibility of the statistical apparatus is more than dubious. The official number of “civil war” victims went up from 26 563 (not a single digit more) in February 1998, under the Ouyahia government, to 100 000 (a perfectly round figure) a year later,

under President Bouteflika. Similarly, the unemployment level fell miraculously from 28% in 1999 to 15% in 2004. Neither does the counting of votes depart from this practice: if the results show certain instances of objectivity, a symptom of the weakness of the statistical apparatus, they also contain in general at least as many instances of wilful obliqueness designed to leave sufficient margins of manoeuvre for the redistribution of votes according to pre-set codes. In the absence of a political class that appoints a representative at every polling station, and of impartial control by independent parties over the process, vote counting will remain the domain of the state and, for the time being, largely out of the control of party representatives. With no one looking over its shoulders, the state could stuff the ballot boxes at will – as happened quite openly during the parliamentary, but mainly the local, elections of 1997, in favour of the RND. Persons charged with this very task would slip ballot papers belonging to fictitious voters into the box – as was the case in the 2002 local elections, where participation levels were falsified and results embellished. The May 17, 2007 elections did not escape a similar fate: according to the National Committee for Election Monitoring, the electoral process in several areas of the country was marred by serious violations.

### **Parliamentary elections of May 17, 2007: failures of the Algerian political regime's client system**

Even if worried about a potential opening of the political game, Algerian rulers never slacken in their search for support. Thus, to compensate for authoritarianism and lower the level of absenteeism from the ballot box, they find themselves having to relax the electoral game somewhat, from below and the periphery, to make it as attractive as possible. The question as far as they are concerned remains how to mobilise the voters behind the elections when the process is devoid of any kind of genuine representation, and the NPA, robbed of all its prerogatives, has become a mere rubberstamp chamber.

To solve this conundrum and mobilise the electorate, the regime relies on political clientelism and the distribution of rent. This is where the electoral reward package, sustained by the parliamentary game and involving a basket of benefits allocated by the rentier state, comes into play.

To begin with, there is the sum granted by the Interior Ministry for running the election campaign; its size is commensurate to the number of lists put forward by various political groupings: the more lists the party puts forward, the better rewarded it will be. In the May 2007 elections, 1144 candidate lists were registered covering all 48 electoral districts of the country.

There is the remuneration given to members of the National Committee for Election Monitoring (one national committee, 48 departmental and 1541 communal committees): AD 60,000 (€ 600) – or six times the minimum guaranteed inter-professional salary (SGIM – for each party representative and independent members of the National Committee.

There is also the compensation paid to “supervisors” appointed by various parties and independent candidates to monitor the progress of the electoral process at polling stations (2500 persons).

Finally, there is the compensation paid to government-appointed personnel charged with manipulating the results on the day of the elections (AD 4000 to the leader of the polling station).

The elections provide stakeholders the opportunity to rent villas, apartments, garages and other space for full time assistants, and allow merchants, caterers and printing press owners to increase their income. Elections are also an opportunity for “private entrepreneurs”, who more and more often run for election to acquire parliamentary immunity, political protection or social prestige, but also to pay staff and display generosity in the form of gifts and feasts.

For those who pursue a loyalist strategy, becoming a member of the NPA is an opportunity to negotiate over ministerial positions, ambassadorial posts, operate in close proximity to the centre of power and build networks at the top of the administrative hierarchy. Earning a parliamentary seat also helps a given party gain access to the rewards of the rentier state: the more elected representatives it has, the more vital it is to satisfy its quest for rewards. The lower house provides party apparatuses with an additional source of finance: the compulsory dues they collect on behalf of their own deputies.

The lure of the electoral package comprises additional attractive benefits: while the SGIM is at AD 10.000 per month, the NPA offers each deputy a monthly compensation worth AD 100 000, a housing stipend of AD 50 000 per month, a housing allowance stipend of AD 50 000 per month, and 25.000 as daily expenses allowance. The lower house also advances its deputies an interest free credit line of one million dinars to buy a car the first week after taking up their positions. The vice-president of the NPA and leaders of parliamentary committees receive even more privileges than the others do; the use of a state-owned home, a business car and a number of official visits. That is not all: a deputy's status affords him, on and above parliamentary immunity, a very attractive retirement package; in granting these benefits, the NPA allows its chosen members to accumulate benefits even as social inequities continue to bite.

The uninterrupted flow of available resources plays an important role in electoral mobilisation; it allows parties that adhere to the rentier system to attract individuals and social groups, i.e. clients, into a relationship of favours (promise of potential gain, a job or a promotion, protection) in return for votes. A client who really wants these benefits will unflinchingly support the party, or candidate that dispenses them. The composition of candidate lists is a social game, the end-result of a relationship of power between various players in the electoral game; each of these

plays in the name of his/her own narrow interests (local, tribal, brotherhood or association), their relative power and their weight within the system.

The enthusiastic involvement of highly motivated candidates in the candidature game took place in the hinterland two months prior to May 17. Clientelism was an unequivocal success in the first round of the de-liberalisation elections of June 1997: the enthusiasm surrounding the return to the polls, the participation of opposition parties and the promise of adequate representation all played a considerable part. Things however did not go so well in the 2002 elections in which the level of participation dropped to 46%. Two different factors could explain this regression: quashing the riots of Kabylie (2001/2002) that resulted in approximately 100 deaths created an atmosphere of uncertainty and compelled the FIS and RCD to call for a boycott, and the globally negative balance sheet of the "first pluralistic Assembly" totally neutralised by the NRD and its allies (the NLF and HMS). Badly damaged by election manipulation, on the one hand, and robbing parliament of its prerogatives, on the other, the formula of elections without democracy lost its effectiveness by the third elections of May 17, 2007. There are many reasons for this failure.

The first is Bouteflika's style of government: not content to increase his presidential prerogatives, he went as far as legislate by decree using this abusive constitutional procedure to turn the NPA into a chamber that rubberstamps but does not legislate. The NPA, filled to the brim by the absolute majority of the NLF, never exercised control over the actions of any government (Benflis, Ouyahia, Belkhadem) between June 2002 and June 2007. It never even held a parliamentary inquiry on issues of corruption, such as the El Khalifa Bank scandal, that caused great harm to the public treasury. Neither, did it try to control the very opaque Revenue Regulation Fund, established by the President in 2000 to take advantage of the differential between earnings from petroleum, budgeted on the

reference price of \$19, and actually earned sums that boasted \$42 billion at the end 2006. Under presidential pressure, the NPA even had to adopt, without any debate, a draft law on hydrocarbons that was once unanimously condemned for its ultraliberal principles harmful to national sovereignty. Then, in an about turn, legislators were compelled, a few months later, to abrogate these same principles. Thus, the rentier state has turned upside down the famous term of reference of the modern state, and made “no representation without taxation!” the order of the day.

This governance system has produced a perverse outcome: the political and moral delegitimisation of Parliament. Muzzled, robbed of its prerogatives and discredited, the NPA is no more than a means of co-optation and profit from revenues accruing from rent, and from the accumulation of privileges by deputies. However, caught in a patronage system where the Rais (leader) wants to be the direct and exclusive distributor of benefits to the people, the deputies see escaping from between their fingers their only remaining social usefulness, that of mediators within the clientele system. Today, the latter are seen collectively as profiteers and parasites.

The second reason behind the strong absenteeism from the polls is related to the terms of reference of the Algerian political system: the rejection of a party system that brings various social groups closer together, and represents the interests of parties to conflict. Caught between terrorism and authoritarianism, political parties are the very first victims of defection. Held in the clutches of an authoritarian system that confines political life to the activities of officialdom, they care as much about controlling the masses as playing opinion mongers. Emptied and used, they are reduced more often to simple machines.

Massive and structural electoral defection is no longer the exclusive domain of large urban centres; it has now spread to the hinterland, to places where the regime has traditionally enjoyed a strong base of support. Abstention

in these areas goes hand in hand with urbanisation, demography and riots. The high unemployment level, lack of local development and pauperisation, that beset new urban centres in the interior of the country, prod dissatisfied youth to go on the rampage. Abstention from the polls follows denial of self-expression very closely.

By staying away en-masse from the ballot boxes, the electorate not only expressed a certain indifference vis-à-vis a single event; it laid bare the inanity of parliamentary elections without political representation. By emptying the elections of all forms of power-sharing, and turning the NPA into a chamber that lack the prerogatives of debate and parliamentary control, the Algerian regime has finally cast its lot with the only option remaining for the electorate, now that loyalty has eroded and self expression has failed. At the very heart of the matter, abstention is the manifestation of the political representation crisis besetting the Algerian system of government since the collapse of “revolutionary legitimacy” in October 1988. By assuming the mantle of governmental responsibility, Bouteflika’s regime seems to be trying to trivialise the event. Historic irony: in his press conference the day after the parliamentary elections, Interior Minister Yazid Zerhouni expressed the opinion that on May 17, 2007, the people had demonstrated “political maturity”. This is how the general configuration of the economy, the all-important informal economy within it, the exclusion phenomenon, the precarious situation, mass unemployment and demographic transformations affect, to a very high degree, the nature and pace of political change.