



Arab Reform Brief

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Algeria's Presidential Elections: The Stakes Have Been Set in Advance

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On the 9th of April, Algeria will hold the country's fourth multi-candidate elections since 1995. The elections are seen as a formal confirmation of the extension of Mr. Abdelaziz Bouteflika terms as president, and thus little is expected in the way of surprises. The other candidates who have been certified to run by the Constitutional Council are supporters of President Bouteflika, or as Algerians refer to them, his "rabbits." An amendment passed to the constitution in 2008 predetermined the outcome of the elections, despite criticisms and protests against the "constitutionalization of authoritarian rule." Many leading politicians have declined to run in the elections, convinced that matters have been decided in advance; they have not fallen into the trap of the 2004 elections, which led some of them to believe that they might have some relative room for maneuver. The rising oil profits of recent years, along with the international situation associated with the "war on terror," have helped the authorities to undermine the opposition. This it is now apparent that the only challenger to President Bouteflika in the elections will be abstentions by the electorate, in what has become a deeply-rooted phenomenon and a clear expression of the gaping chasm between the current political regime and the citizenry.

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A constitutional amendment decided the outcome of the elections

The presidential elections will go ahead on April 9th, 2009, even though the outcome was determined in advance on November 12th, 2008, when the constitution was amended to abrogate Article 74, which had previously limited the number of presidential terms to two. The amendment has allowed President Bouteflika to serve out his two terms in office (1999 – 2004 and 2004 – 2009) and then run for office once again.

Since the Algerian political system remains closed and the country's political life lackluster, commentators have all drawn the conclusion that the game is over. The elections of April 9th have become a mere formality, given that no other candidate is able to rival the president's tight grip on the state media or the monopoly he has held for years on the country's audio and visual media. No discussion has taken place on the advantages or otherwise of amending Article 74, as the authorities did not want this discussion to take place. And as the opposition has been marginalized and cannot access the country's major media outlets, it was unable to put forward its arguments against the amendment.

Despite their conviction that setting a limit on the number of president terms represents progress towards the principle of the transfer of power and towards avoiding a presidency for life, there is a prevalent sense among the educated elites of the futility of opposing the authority. However, in 2007 a group of academics and journalists launched the "Civil Initiative for Respect of the Constitution" with the aim of countering attempts to "constitutionalize authoritarian rule." The group issued a letter condemning "the ongoing breach of the constitution as a means of governance, which has exacerbated the country's problems: a suicidal level of desperation among the young, the rise in terrorism, the proliferation of corruption and the entrenchment of poverty.

The result is that Algerians have stopped believing in the elections or in the institutions of state."

This initiative managed to cause some discomfort to the regime, but proved unable to dispel the prevailing sense of political apathy, since the entire political landscape and all the major media outlets are monopolized by the parties of the ruling political coalition and organizations within the orbit of the regime. Thus the debate on the merits of amending the constitution did not take place. And this despite the fact that the two-term limit had been introduced into the 1996 constitution by the regime itself, during the presidency of Liamine Zeroual, in order to show some democratic intent in compensation for the revocation of basic provisions of the constitution of February 23rd, 1989.

The constitutional amendment significantly reduced the authority of the directly-elected National People's Assembly and created a second chamber, the Council of the Nation, a third of whose members are directly appointed by the President of the Republic. Three-quarters of the Council of the Nation's members are needed to approve provisions, and consequently this institution allows the president – via its appointed members – to watch over the National People's Assembly. Thus the limit imposed on the number of presidential terms came to make up for the reduction in the powers of the National People's Assembly, as a token of respect for the principle of the rotation of power. However, this "progress" was reversed with the constitutional amendment of February 12th, 2008. The regime justified the amendment on the basis that it was, "the right of the people to exercise its legitimate right to select its leaders and to renew their confidence in it with full sovereignty." However, the debate was one-sided, as it was impossible for the opponents of the amendment to present their views in the audiovisual media. And while it was sometimes possible for the opposition to express its position in some of the private

newspapers, this did not allow it to compete seriously with the official discourse.

However, with this same constitutional amendment the regime acknowledged that its real rival is not the marginalized and frustrated political opposition, but the behavior of the voters, who have become increasingly reluctant to take part in the elections.

Unlike Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, who took a risk by asking the citizens for their opinion in a referendum, constitutional change in Algeria was made through the parliament, and was carried through the two chambers by 500 votes to 21, with 8 abstentions. These Soviet-like results in a country where opinions vary across the different sectors of society are an indication of a lack of genuine pluralism within the state institutions. And this was how the constitutional amendment was passed: without a discussion beforehand and by a show of hands. Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia defended the amendment as “the right of Algeria to bolster its stability.”

The three parties of the Presidential Alliance (the National Liberation Front, the National Rally for Democracy, and the Movement of Society for Peace) and the Workers’ Party (a Trotskyist party with 26 deputies in the parliament) endorsed the amendment. The only exceptions to the rule were the representatives of the Rally for Culture and Democracy, who voted against it before walking out of the chamber. The party’s chairman, Mr. Said Sadi, condemned what he described as a new coup d’état.

Constitutional change was not restricted to the abolition of the two-term presidential limit, but also revoked the position of Prime Minister, replacing it with that of “First Minister.” The change was not in name only: according to the former constitution the Prime Minister was accountable to the National People’s Assembly, whereas under the amendment the First Minister answers to the President alone. In

practical terms, this has meant that the National People’s Assembly lost the only means at its disposal of monitoring or challenging the actions of the executive authority. The undermining of the role of the National People’s Assembly is an indication of an undermining of the role of the political parties. Algeria has adopted the logic of concentrating power at the presidential level, which has been an enduring goal of President Bouteflika since 1999 and was secured by the amendment to the constitution. Irrespective of the person or name of the president, this tendency reflects a deep-seated fear within the regime of a new scenario akin to the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in the legislative elections of December 1991. Since then it has been an abiding policy of the regime to reconsider the political and media openness that emerged following the youth rebellion of October 1988, an event that shook the foundations of the single-party regime.

To reconsider this openness, exemplified by the constitution of February 23rd, 1989, which the leading figures of the regime accused of having plunged Algeria into a bloody crisis, the authorities strove to establish an “exclusive democracy.” Thus despite the external appearance of pluralism (in the form of political parties and a private press), it is subject to censorship and lacks any significant margin of action. Algeria is no innovator in this regard, as many authoritarian Arab regimes strive to soften their image by presenting an outward appearance of democracy, while in parallel taking measures to bar any prospect of change. In the immediate aftermath of the ratification of the constitutional amendment, President Bouteflika underscored his firm belief in democracy. But he asserted that democracy cannot “constitute a single, universal model for all nations, a model that must be adhered to and applied at all times and in all places.” As far as the opposition was concerned, with this rejection of the global model, Algeria had

adopted the “Arab model” of the presidency for life.

The constitutional amendment finally persuaded most prominent politicians that there was no contest, which made them largely reluctant to run in the elections. The lack of prominent national figures among the candidates has proved to be a real problem for the regime.

Regaining status as a higher goal than democracy

Abdel Aziz Bouteflika, in power since 1999, has already won the elections, since all the authorities’ efforts to induce Algeria’s leading political figures to nominate themselves have come to naught. The public media and all the state’s resources are in the hands of the President, which virtually rules out any chance of a break-through by any of the other candidates. Elections are usually the crowning moment of a competitive political process in which the voting citizens are able to hear the political platforms of the various parties and politicians. However, in Algeria the political arena has effectively been frozen, in the name of the state of emergency that has been in effect since 1992 and due to the need to implement the policy of national reconciliation. In the circumstances, there is nothing for the candidates to do – since Algeria has reverted to the situation that prevailed prior to 1988 during the era of single party politics – other than to play the role of rabbits.

As explained by the former Secretary General of the National Liberation Front, Mr. Abdel Hamid Mehri, the Algerian political regime stands opposed to the genuine practice of democracy, but is concerned to maintain a democratic façade. Thus the fact that there are candidates of standing in the election lends credibility to the vote and acts as an incentive for Algerians to head to the polling booths.

This time however, the regime has failed, against the norm, to draw major figures to run

in the elections. In 1999, the candidacy of Abdel Aziz Bouteflika, who enjoyed the backing of the military, came up against first-rate candidates like Hussein Aïat Ahmad, Mouloud Hamrouche, Ahmed Taleb al-Ibrahimi and Abdallah Jaballah. These politicians entered the battleground following assurances made by President Liamine Zeroual of an open ballot, but then withdrew from the race, condemning massive vote rigging in favor of Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

In 2004, former Prime Minister Ali bin Fliss was “persuaded” to submit his candidacy. A large portion of the press and “civil society” fell for a well orchestrated campaign of misinformation that claimed that the army had abandoned President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The campaign succeeded, despite clear indications that the result had been predetermined, and that bin Fliss and the other candidates had been assigned the unenviable role of “rabbits.” Some of the newspapers biased against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika helped to generate an atmosphere that lent some sense of credibility to the elections.

The presidential elections appear to have been entirely devoid of competition, save for some disagreements within the regime. In 2004, Chief of Staff General Muhammad al-Amari was presented as an opponent of the extension of Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s mandate and as a supporter of Mr Ali bin Fliss behind the scenes. The newspapers that backed Ali bin Fliss against Bouteflika saw the position of General al-Laamari – who was a genuine adversary of Bouteflika – as evidence that the army as an institution had taken its stance. And they in turn arrived at the wrong conclusion regarding the regime as a whole. The misjudgment made in 2004 (on the part of certain politicians, such as bin Fliss and Sadi, or the newspapers) was the result of the regime’s extraordinary ability to orchestrate the external appearance of democracy.

Objectively speaking, all indicators pointed towards the extension of Bouteflika’s term in

office. The strong arm of the regime, in which the army and intelligence apparatus play major roles, took a very negative view of the democratic openness that developed after October 1988! Between 1989 and 1991, Algeria entered a period of extensive political and economic reform in the midst of a severe social crisis. On December 26th 1991, this fraught political situation gave rise to the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front in the legislative elections. The party's victory brought about a major crisis within the regime, which led to the resignation of President Al Shadli bin Jadid and the calling off of the elections, and drew Algeria into a prolonged cycle of violence. Since that period, and after the removal from power of the reformist camp, represented by Mouloud Hamrouche and Abdel Hamid al-Mehri, the regime has abandoned the process of deepening democracy, and instead sought to consolidate its own tenuous position. The purpose of the constitutional amendments introduced in 1996 and 2008 was to remove what little democratic progress there was from the constitution of February 1986. The lack of excitement surrounding the upcoming elections attests to the fact that this time around the various elements of the political regime, or what Algerians refer to as the "real power" or decision-makers, are in unison over the extension of the term of the current president. The minor disagreements that surfaced in 2004 have disappeared and Abdelaziz Bouteflika is now the uncontested head of the regime. And herein lies one of the most salient lessons of the upcoming elections: Bouteflika, as the founder of the regime alongside the late President Houari Boumediene, has an intimate knowledge of its mechanisms and the internal rules of the game. He knew how to balance between the various centers of power and to stabilize a regime that had been in the grips of a crisis since the fall of Al Shadli bin Jadid in January 1992. And indeed since that time no head of state, whether appointed (such as Mohammed Boudiaf) or elected (like Liamine Zeroual) had

been able to serve out a full term in office. And if the equilibrium reached by President Bouteflika was based on his knowledge of the regime, then the economic and international conditions were also critical in supporting his efforts.

Two significant events helped to consolidate the position of President Bouteflika and his regime, namely a sustained increase in petroleum prices from 1999 until 2008 and the events of September 2001. The first bestowed the state with unprecedented financial resources, while the second turned the way in which western states viewed the Algerian regime.

Financial prosperity and an international setting defined by the "war on terror" allowed the regime to continuously undermine the opposition. However, this undermining has been accompanied by a restoration of confidence among the citizenry. For just as the opposition parties have no margin for action, so the ruling parties do not represent institutions to which citizens engaging in ongoing acts of rioting and violence to voice social demands, can resort. Moreover, these citizens are translating their lack of conviction into an increase in the number of abstentions and boycotters; indeed, abstention represents the only competition to Bouteflika and his regime in the elections of April 9th, 2009.

Bouteflika: Five allies, one rival

The scene is now set for the presidential elections. In addition to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, five other candidates are standing: Louisa Hanoune of the Workers' Party, Moussa Touati of the Algerian National Front, Ali Fawzi Rebaine of the 'Ahd 54, Mohammed Djahid Younsi of the Movement for National Reform, and independent candidate Said Belaid Mohamed Oussaid. Together they are supposed to speak for the various political and ideological currents within the country, even if they do not represent them. Three candidates (Fawzi

Rebaine, Moussa Touati and Mohamed Said) classify themselves as part of the nationalist camp, along with President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Ali Fawzi Rebaine and Mohamed Said Belaid originate from the tribal area of Amazigh, and are supposed to offset the boycott by the two ruling parties there, the Socialist Forces Front and the Rally for Culture and Democracy.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika is standing as an “independent candidate,” backed by the parties in the Presidential Alliance and countless organizations within the orbit of the regime. This line-up of representatives is replete with members of what is referred to as the nationalist stream, and is further bolstered by the fact that Louisa Hanoune, the Workers’ Party candidate, is also of a nationalist stripe.

Djahid Younsi, who gained control over the leadership of the Islamic party “Reform”(الإصلاح) following a controversial judicial decision against Abdallah Jaballah, very loosely represents the Islamic stream, which remains powerful within the community.

Mohamed Said, a close ally of former Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmed Taleb al-Ibrahimi, has hinted that in return for his candidacy he expects to be able to establish a political party. All the candidates whom the Socialist Forces party has labeled a support committee for Bouteflika do not criticize the president, but instead direct all their criticism at the proponents of the boycott.

The phenomenon of abstention took root during the legislative and local elections held in the spring and autumn of 2007, when according to official figures the voter turn-out rate failed to reach 35%, the lowest level of participation recorded since the introduction of multi-party politics in 1989. To persuade Algerians to go to the ballot boxes the authorities tried to spread some good news, announcing an increase in wages to follow the elections, a rise in student grants, and the writing off of debts owed by farmers. The sensitivity of the authorities towards abstaining voters was confirmed by

Minister of the Interior Yazid Zerhouni, who asserted that those calling for a boycott had no right to conduct activities in the public sphere. First Minister Ahmed Ouyahia also accused them of threatening the stability of the country. Even the mosques have been drawn into the campaign to mobilize voters, with the Minister of Religious Affairs and Awqaf issuing a fatwa that the advocates of the boycott are “advocates of corruption.” All this bears out the fact that whether or not voters turn out to vote is the only issue at stake in the upcoming Algerian elections. Algerians, who are living in difficult circumstances, have distanced themselves from political life and become indifferent to political discourse, and abstaining is their way of expressing their discontent. The desire to abstain, while it may not necessarily ensure that the voice of the opposition parties is heard, certainly does highlight the huge gap that lies between the regime and the citizenry.

More ominously, after fifteen years of violence, the lack of openness within the regime has entrenched the belief among a portion of the younger populace that violence is the sole means of effecting change. Mr. Abdel Hamid al Mehri has accurately depicted this state of affairs: “In every democratic country, elections are an instrument of peaceful and consensual change on the part of society, and this peaceful instrument of change is more vital than others for Algeria, because for more than fifteen years the country has been living the tragedy of attempts to bring about change through violence. This peaceful instrument of change was supposed to be safeguarded and given the chance to carry out its functions fully. However, our elections have been designed in such a way as to preclude any change. The elections have been organized for a number of years now so as to block all avenues of peaceful change. This constitutes a lack of appreciation for the heavy responsibility that falls to public officials, particularly given the severe ordeal that the country has endured as a result of

attempts to bring about change through violence.

Some basic conditions must be met if the presidential or legislative elections are to exercise their function as a means of peaceful change that brings an end to the violence: an open political space to allow for competing political platforms, independent political parties that are able to undertake activities on a regular basis, and a free media (radio and television). The above comprise the minimum conditions required for a diverse political landscape that

allows voters to exercise their right to select their leaders. Do these conditions obtain in Algeria, to allow change to be achieved through means other than violence? The answer seems to be negative, even though the Algerian regime – in line with the trend among all authoritarian Arab regimes – is keen to furnish a veneer of pluralism. The question of reform as an alternative to violence remains on the table, and the preservation of the status quo cannot provide the answer.