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Algeria: The Man and the Regime

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President Bouteflika won a fourth presidential term on 17 April, 2014, despite his fragile health and the fact that many Algerians had thought the elections would be an opportunity for change in Algeria, in line with the transformations taking place across the region. This paper attempts to explain and identify the social and political forces that President Bouteflika relied on during his nomination process and victory. He conducted an electoral campaign using several means: some traditional (such as the mixed use of public and private funds) and some new (such as private satellite TV channels that gave full support to his candidacy). This paper will also highlight the personal role of President Bouteflika in the victory and the relationships that he established with the political elite and institutions following his ascendance to the presidency in 1999. These include political parties, parts of the military, trade unions, and civil society organizations.

1) Introduction

Algeria's president, 77 year old Abdelaziz Bouteflika, "won" his fourth term in office on 17 April, 2014, after already holding power for 14 years. This victory was a reflection of the balance between the country's institutions and the political and social forces inside the Algerian political system; although not completely new, it became more apparent during the presidential elections with the emergence of different influential political players such as businessmen, the heads of small political parties (involving ministers), civil society organizations, and the latest arrivals to the Algerian political and media arena: new media. Public funds were used by all parties at the time that Bouteflika came to power in 1999, as funds were abundant. This permitted the financing of a social policy that had a significant impact on the results of the elections and on the alliances established during those elections.

The new balance of power started to take shape within and between Algerian political institutions some time before the elections. To understand how the new balance of power functioned during the recent presidential elections, it must be linked to the Bouteflika's personal traits, political direction and relations with the political apparatus and elites, both

from his time as president and before. He spent a period of exclusion away from power (1979 – 1999) when he was threatened with imprisonment on charges relating to alleged financial violations during his time as Minister for Foreign Affairs (1963 – 1978). During his time as Minister for Foreign Affairs, Bouteflika was convinced that he was the legitimate heir to the regime of Houari Boumediene. When Boumediene died in December 1978, Bouteflika went into voluntary exile in Europe and the Gulf with the feeling that he had been deprived of a legitimate right. Thus, when he returned in 1999, he was determined not to give up this right under any circumstances.

Bouteflika came to power practically at the end of the civil war. As the financial situation of the country improved, he presented himself as the man of national reconciliation and the saviour of Algeria. He exploited his credit in international relations and his extensive diplomatic experience in handling turbulent regional conditions after a civil war in which many Algerians had suffered.

The possibility of President Bouteflika running for the presidency for a fourth term was not even considered by many observers of the Algerian political scene in early 2014.¹ His health had deteriorated to the point that he had disappeared for months and was hospitalized at a military hospital in France several times after 2006.² Despite his poor health, he seized the initiative in the fall of 2013 and took decisions that made it clear that he had no intention of removing himself from the political arena.

2) Building support within the government

The president implemented several steps to impose a balance of power in his favour in Algerian state institutions. He appointed a new prime minister, Abdelmalek Sellal, in September 2012 and amended his government in September 2013. It was a government where President Bouteflika imposed his control over the main ministries that oversee the electoral process, such as the Ministries of Justice, Interior and Information. The Constitutional Council was headed by individuals personally loyal to Bouteflika in a system of partisan relations that is common in the Algerian political system. The new aspect with Bouteflika was that after his return to the presidency he promoted this policy to its utmost with a strong presence from his family. Bouteflika appointed his younger brother as Advisor to the President, making him practically second in control, after the president, with a status more important than many elected and appointed officials.³

¹ Former foreign minister and current President of the Constitutional Council, Mourad Medelci, when asked by the French press in February 2011 about the possibility of Bouteflika running for president, said such a possibility was a silly joke that no Algerian would accept.

<http://www.chouf-chouf.com/actualites/bouteflika/mourad-medelci-le-4-mandat-de-bouteflika-est-une-blague/>

² The last time he was hospitalized was in March 2014, just prior to the elections being announced.

³ Many rumours were spread about the possibility of his brother acting as Bouteflika's successor during the latter's absence, but the rumours were soon dismissed in the climate of the Arab Spring and opposition to the inheritance of power in Egypt and Libya. See *Algiers News* newspaper on December 21, 2010 and the denial issued the following day in the same newspaper.

In addition to important and sensitive positions at the executive level, in the Constitutional Council and in the parliament,⁴ President Bouteflika appointed the joint chief of staff, General Gaid Salah, as his deputy and as minister of defence. This was a first in the history of the military for a military official to combine these two positions. This situation granted the president power inside and outside military institutions to counter the head of the intelligence services.

President Bouteflika succeeded in imposing a balance of power in his favour through the appointments he introduced in the government, the Constitutional Council and the command of the joint staff, in addition to previous appointments. He was able to impose the appointments of his choice because of the length of his stay in power. He had amended the constitution in 2008 to enable him to stay in power, removing the term limitations stipulated in the 1996 constitution. This balance of power became more visible once the president announced his intention to run in the presidential elections for a fourth term and compete with five other candidates, including the former prime minister, seen by many sources as a serious competitor who could take the president to an unprecedented second round of elections.⁵

A second round of elections only became a prospect after the spread of rumours and news of “reservations” expressed by the chief of intelligence regarding the president’s nomination. This was not only because of the president’s illness, but also because of the international situation in which pressure was being exerted on Algeria to introduce change and ensure a peaceful transfer of authority rather than fall victim to the violent transformations in the region. The alleged call of this influential intelligence chief for a smooth transition of power was mirrored by the bulk of Algerian public opinion, especially after the January 2011 protests which had prompted the president to introduce political reforms and state, in his famous speech in the city of Sétif, which his generation had performed its role and should step down.⁶ It was assumed at that time that the president, after three terms, would not run in the forthcoming elections and that the possibility existed for a smooth transfer of authority in Algeria.

The covert conflict between the president and the chief of intelligence soon became public. The recently elected secretary general of the National Liberation Front, Amar Saidani,⁷ who was loyal to the president’s brother, criticized the intelligence chief in public and demanded that he resign after several security failures in political cases, including cases with international ramifications such as the assassination of French monks in 1996. Saidani also demanded that the intelligence apparatus desist from interference in the internal affairs of political parties and associations. The confrontations continued between the chief of

⁴ The Speaker of the Parliament is second in authority since the Speaker should assume power in the absence of the President or the President’s failure to perform his duties.

⁵ During a TV interview with KBC channel immediately after the announcement of the election results, candidate Ali Benflis said that negotiations had taken place between President Bouteflika and the security services prior to the announcement of the results on the possibility of a second round, but Bouteflika refused and demanded a high majority vote as in previous elections. See the references to negotiations with these parties during the 1999 elections and Bouteflika’s actions to declare a victory with a high majority: Mohamed Benchicou, *Bouteflika, une imposture algérienne*, éditions le matin, Alger 1999, p.17.

⁶ On May 1, 2012, See our study on generations and transfer of political power in Algeria: <http://www.dohainstitute.org/release/4b67864c-4156-4748-9c75-7235c201c9ee>

⁷ <http://www.elkhabar.com/ar/politique/384122.html>

intelligence, the joint chief of staff and the deputy minister of defence on appointments, dismissals and changes inside military and security institutions during that period. All these conflicts aimed to weaken the power of the intelligence chief, who had held his post since 1990.

President Bouteflika exploited all his political weight and alliances during the vicious campaign against him by his adversary, former prime minister Ali Benflis. As a presidential candidate, Bouteflika recruited businessmen and demanded that their unions endorse him;⁸ this caused problems in the union with resignations and protests taking place among its members. The same applied to employers like the Haddad Institute for Public Employment, which obtains most of its contracts from the state and was made responsible for many projects following the launch of public investments. Ali Haddad, an influential economic figure, can be viewed as representative of this new base of the political system that emerged during these elections. Many sources have described his role in mobilizing the support of businessmen for the president's candidacy, just as he had in the 2009 presidential elections.

3) Building support with business, unions and private TV channels

Bouteflika believed that it was not enough to invest in public employment, which was his launching point, but moved into the political media scene and published¹⁰ two daily newspapers¹¹ and one TV channel.¹² In addition, he headed one of the largest sports clubs in the Algerian capital (Ittihad al-Asema). These steps were to enable him and other businessmen who adopted the same strategy to continue to play major political roles in Algeria even after the presidential elections of 2014.

Support for the president's candidacy was also requested from the National Organisation of Mujahedeen, who were subjected to pressure that made the general secretary of the organization change his stance and start to express support for the president. The same happened with the leadership of the al-Zawaya National Assembly, which retracted its position and stood behind the president following pressure by the organizers of the president's electoral campaign.

In addition to mobilizing support from the executive and administrative apparatus (governors and heads of local government departments), influential figures in the army (chief of staff), businessmen and traditional religious institutions and mujahedeen, the president's supporters also went as far as recruiting several political parties of various sizes and influence, plus civil society organizations such as the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA – Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens).

This union had always been close to the Algerian political establishment, whether when only one trade union existed (1962-1990) or following the constitutional recognition of multiple

⁸ Lyas Hallas, "Les patrons qui financent Bouteflika 4 ne cachent plus leur connexion," *Maghreb Emergent*, 11 March, 2014. <http://www.maghrebemergent.info/actualite/maghrebine/item/35588?tmpl=component&print=1>

¹⁰ <http://www.wakteldjazair.com>

¹¹ <http://www.letempsdz.com>

¹² <http://dztubetv.blogspot.com/p/blog-page.html>

political and trade unions and the right to strike in 1990. On this occasion, what was new was the support for the official candidate at a time when the UGTA was finding it difficult to consolidate its identity on the ground in the face of the competition resulting from the many independent trade unions.

The shrinking labour base and weak recruitment coincided with the UGTA leadership taking the decision to move closer to the political regime. This was a leadership that had not held its national conference since 2000, causing it to lose legitimacy in the eyes of many workers. If we add the suspicions of corruption that overshadowed some union leaders, the rationale for the union leadership to support the president is clear. Although this step was unlikely to assist in mobilizing labourers,¹³ it is significant symbolically due to the historical status of the UGTA and its traditional role in supporting official policies. One must not forget the social policy adopted by President Bouteflika, albeit short-lived, to boost the social ladder for youth and employees.

Weak mobilization and the symbolic status of these unions were apparent in the results of the elections; the leaders of the president's campaign were forced to focus on influential actors such as the administration (governors), political money (whether public or private), and private TV channels that were blatantly biased in favour of the president. This bias was not apparent on the public TV channel, which attempted to abide by some semblance of neutrality during the campaign.

Political parties¹⁴ that supported the president were also weakened by semi-permanent internal splits, as in the case of the National Liberation Front. New parties were formed as a result of these internal splits, including the party of Minister Amar Ghoul, who split from the Movement of Society for Peace to form the Rally of Algerian Hope, or the Algerian Popular Movement formed by Amara Benyounes after a split from the Rally for Culture and Democracy. These parties were headed by figures who led the electoral campaign of the president under the supervision and orders of Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal,¹⁵ who also performed this task in the past. This resulted in an unusual leadership heading an electoral campaign. The individual concerned (the president as candidate) was absent and failed to show up or address his supporters on any occasion, while the heads of competing parties with no political cohesion¹⁶ between them, and who were no longer leading their parties, were commissioned to talk on behalf of the presidential candidate.

Prime Minister Sellal caused confusion about the president's campaign in various statements, some of which were broadcast on the new private Ennahar TV channel without his knowledge

¹³ If we exclude the major trade unions and some public companies in the field of oil and electricity such as Sonatrach and Sonelgaz.

¹⁴ The Central Committee introduced a vote of no confidence against the former secretary general of the National Liberation Front, Abdelaziz Belkhadem; Ahmed Ouyahia withdrew from the leadership of the National Rally for Democracy.

¹⁵ Sellal announced the nomination of President Bouteflika while he was prime minister; he resigned a few days before the launch of the campaign in order to lead it, then became prime minister once again on April 18, one day after the official announcement of the results.

¹⁶ See the article on these men in Jeune Afrique:

<http://www.jeuneafrique.com/Article/JA2759p050.xml2/fln-abdelmadjid-sidi-said-abdelmalek-sellal-ugtaalgerie-bouteflika-et-ses-vrp.html>

or consent. Some of his statements concerned the Al-Shawiya region, the hometown of the competing candidate, Ali Benflis. As a result of these statements, residents of that region, which enjoys a symbolic status, prevented Sellal from organizing activities in the region despite several apologies. This brings us to the role played by private TV channels, and the political forces and funds that supported them, for the first time in the history of Algerian elections. The authorities closed down Al-Atlas TV¹⁷ channel for unknown reasons as rumours circulated about its close relations with Ali Benflis. Yet the president was able to establish Wiam TV channel during the elections to promote his manifesto as a result of the support he obtained from businessmen and private TV channels.¹⁸

4) Mobilization: the 2014 elections and 1970s mosques

Even if the officially announced results were credible, the usual doubts and scepticism surrounded them and several trends were apparent, including a rise in the boycotting of elections.¹⁹ This could not be attributed entirely to the calls for a boycott of the elections. The official results confirmed the fall in popularity of the president, who lost five million votes compared with the elections of 2009, and confirmed once again that the poor participation rates in the major cities and tribal regions were based on political demands and mobility.

The elections also confirmed low participation and lack of interest by young people and the middle classes, in contrast with older people and voters in rural areas where the highest participation rates were found. These results prompt the conclusion that the Algerian elections mobilized votes similar to those mobilized by the mosque in the 1960s and 1970s prior to social diversification, while the election process has remained the same.

5) Embezzlement, stability and contracts

The days are long gone for the Algerian political regime to depend on teachers and employees to act as ideological mouthpieces and to organize and promote elections. Presidential and legislative elections in recent years²⁰ have demonstrated that new influential political actors have appeared in the arena. This is a logical result of the deep economic and social transformations that have impacted Algerian social structure over more than three decades. These new actors sent a clear message to the Algerian public that the elections were not a means for a peaceful transfer of authority and that Algeria would not be the exception in the Arab world where the president cedes his authority, even if he is physically incapable of performing his constitutional duties, as shown when President Bouteflika appeared on TV to

¹⁷ Rumours persist that the channel is partly owned by the son-in-law of a general in the intelligence services whose post was terminated during the conflict between the president and the chief of intelligence prior to the launch of the electoral campaign.

¹⁸ Ennahar and new media TV channels supported the president's campaign and were instrumental in creating a climate of harassment around the other candidate, Ali Benflis.

¹⁹ The Ministry of Interior announced that the participation rate in the elections was 50.17% with more than one million invalid votes.

²⁰ Many political groups complained before and during the 2012 legislative elections against the emergence of political money in the elections or, as it is called in Algiers, *al-Shakara*.

vote on the day of the elections. The optimistic scenario of peaceful change collapsed as the Algerian political system fell into a state of crisis.

Nevertheless, the presidential election with all its complexities led to the formation of strong opposition. More importantly, a new political mobility not seen in decades has appeared in the Algerian street in the form of trade union alliances and the emergence of the Barakat movement. The Barakat movement took its initiative onto the streets despite its limited capacity to mobilize people and its primarily middle class nature to date.²¹ Another coalition was brought together by Ali Benflis, the Forces for Change coalition of eleven small and medium sized parties, while the Coordination for Freedom and Democratic Transition was formed by several national parties and figures. These coalitions of partisan groups included parties and personalities from different intellectual schools that had refused to work together in the past, such as between the National Rally for Democracy and the Movement of Society for Peace or Ennahda (Muslim Brotherhood). Political splits along cultural lines within the political elite had caused their ineffectiveness and delayed change for years.

Finally, President Bouteflika focused his electoral campaign on the security conditions in the regions as an attempt to blackmail Algerians and make them choose between security and instability; this is tantamount to stagnation and keeps him in authority even when he is physically incapable, on the grounds that the alternative is to face the chaos and instability seen in neighbouring countries.

The presidential candidate also succeeded in blackmailing the West, whose exhausted economies benefited by signing contracts with Algeria (notably Spain²² and Italy).²³ In addition to the guarantees of stable political conditions inside the country and the completion of what was asked from him on the southern and eastern borders to reduce the ramifications of the crisis of the Sahel and Libya, he also promised to keep oil and gas flowing to longstanding commercial clients. This scenario was the temporary choice of the West. With Algeria, all options are possible following this fragile victory achieved by the man who is the face of the system.

The presidential elections were organized and completed, but what actually needed to happen was not achieved. The elections effectively sent a message to the Algerian public that they could not rely on elections to achieve peaceful change and the transfer of authority. Nevertheless, these elections were a real opportunity to allow the emergence of various opposition forces that tried to overcome the traditional splits among the Algerian political

²¹ The sociological structure of the Barakat movement, at least in its initial steps, was very like other Arab political movements such as the Kefaya movement or April 6 movement in Egypt. The nature of their mobilization is based on young middle class individuals living in urban areas; these are qualified people such as doctors and journalists, like Amira Bouraoui who initiated the Barakat movement.

²² The Spanish Foreign Minister made an official visit to Algeria during the electoral campaign and was welcomed by the president, as a candidate, who complained to the minister on public TV about his contestant, Ali Benflis.

²³ Soft-toned criticism was expressed by the European Union and the USA in the form of boycotting the elections and refraining from sending observers, although some experts were sent. This criticism resulted from the rejection of the recommendations presented by EU observers after the 2012 legislative elections such as to publish the lists of eligible voters.

elite; some of these forces took to the streets and instigated political mobilization that had been absent for decades.

The failure to achieve change through elections caused frustration among significant sections of the public and elite groups. These elections were anticipated as a landmark in Algerian politics. The frustration may indicate the fear felt by many citizens for the future of a country that may be headed towards the settlement of political disputes in the streets, partially through violence, and outside of official institutions.

This partial violence is a possibility, especially if there is no harmony between the political mobility witnessed in the elections and the social movements seen very clearly in the Algerian street in recent years. This is seen not only in the cities and northern parts of the country but also in the south, despite the favourable financial situation in the country. With financial resources expected to dry up and economic imbalances widen in the medium term, how will Algeria's political situation evolve?

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