



Arab Reform Initiative

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# The Crisis of The Algerian Presidential Elections: Candidates, Stakes, and Scenarios

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On 17 November, the presidential campaign, which the Algerian authorities insist on organizing on 12 December, officially started. This is despite opposition from large segments of Algerians, expressed through rallies across the majority of provinces in Algeria. These protests strongly express the widely held perception amongst the protesters that the upcoming elections will only renew the system (le pouvoir) and anchor the survival of the military regime imposed on the country since 1962.

Two prominent slogans sum up this refusal, across all the protests, "no election with the gangs", highlighting the corruption of the regime, evident through the presence of the figures from the era of the resigned/removed president Bouteflika. The other slogan is, "Civilian, not a military, state", meaning that the protesters demand the building of a civilian state, not a military one. It is this slogan that confirms the necessity of breaking, on an epistemological level, with the militarization and securitization on which the political regime was built since Algeria's independence from France in July 1962.

Departing from an attempt to understand the popular movement's refusal of the 12 December elections, and the authorities' rigidity to impose its will and pass the election by force, this paper tries to analyze the trajectories of the five candidates in the election, the calculations of the authority, and those of the popular movement, before moving on to some likely scenarios in case the authorities succeeded, or failed, to impose the ballots.

## Candidates trajectories: faces from the system that served Bouteflika, and who don't wish to change the regime

By looking at the trajectories of the five candidates whose files were accepted by the National Independent Elections Commission, out of 23 candidates who applied,<sup>1</sup> we notice several points in common between them, that can be summed up in the following key points:

- **All the candidates are the product of the pouvoir** and its mechanisms,



agencies, and composition before and after Bouteflika took office in 1999. They were all prominent faces in the central backbone and networks of the regime. Four of them began their political career in the structures of the one-party system or were at least convinced that they were doing the right thing when they joined this system to be able to hold positions of responsibility, before February 1989, because any responsibility in any institution was then conditional on joining the National Liberation Front Party (FLN). Four of the candidates were either ministers, or in the position of prime minister in Bouteflika's governments, while the fifth was an MP of the FLN, which supported Bouteflika during the phase of absolute support for the president. They all supported Bouteflika at different times, and most supported him until his very last day in office.

- **The other common feature is sociological.** All five candidates grew up in rural areas. Two candidates come from the countryside of Batna, in the east, another comes from the south, the countryside of Ouargla, and another hails from a non-coastal area in the east: Ain Khadra, M'Sila province. The last comes from Mechria, Naama province in the southwest. All candidates are old: three were born before independence, and two were born after independence. The latter's biological age does not necessarily reflect a developed and flexible political awareness. All the candidates are males. This is the first elections in Algeria since 2004 to be held in the absence of any female candidates, knowing that the first female presidential candidate across the Arab world was Algerian: Louisa Hanoune, who headed a Labour Trotskyan party.<sup>2</sup>
- **All candidates come from parties loyal to the regime or affiliated to it:** There is just one candidate, Abdelmejid Tebboune, who is running his campaign as an independent, although he belongs to the FLN. The other four candidates are officials in parties that are connected the regime in a way or another, or can be seen as an extension to it. Three of these parties supported Bouteflika, and two of the four parties were founded after the so-called Arab Spring and supported within the framework of the political marketing strategy for reforms, announced by Bouteflika in the spring of 2011, to build the façade of change in the context of confronting any winds of change and protests that started in Tunisia and then spread to Libya, Egypt, Syria, Yemen, and Bahrain.



- **All candidates have no issues with the current governance system and the regime.** They do not condemn or refuse the processes of “appointing” the president, totally controlled by the real authority. It is the system that Mouloud Hamrouche, the director of the so-called “reforms cabinet” from the 1990s, says is still alive. This turns elections into mere procedures because the real authority is the actor that decides who gets to be a president then paves the way for him, turning the voting day into a formality. None of the candidates is engaged with a vision for changing the nature of this regime. None of them declared an epistemological break with the process of militarization demanded by the public. On the contrary, most of them are very keen to “personalize” the military, instead of talking about it as an institution that needs to be built. The platforms and speeches of the candidates never bring up either explicitly or implicitly the necessity of opening discussions about the role of the military in the regime, nor the challenges this institution faces in the context of the accelerating international transformations. All their statements so far are either to thank the commander of the army, or to commend his statements and decisions.

In order to scrutinize the trajectories of each candidate, and on which basis each is introduced to the platform enabling the occupation of office – if elections happen – we will list below, briefly, the trajectory of each of them:

### **Abdelaziz Belaid: the youngest candidate, but a believer in the one-party doctrines**

Abdelaziz Belaid was born in the village of Haydousa in Batna, in eastern Algeria, on 16 June 1963. He was at the beginning of his political career that started with the one-party system, the National Union of Algerian Youth, when, thanks to his connections to the officials at FLN, he secured a seat as a member of the Central Committee at the age of 23. At the time, the party was controlled by Mohamed Cherif Massaadia (1924-2002). Belaid also served all the faces of the party's old guard, including Bouteflika, from the one-party era to the phase of pluralism.



Thanks to that, Belaid was placed at the helm of students' unions, and the National Union of Algerian Youth, between 1986 and 2007. He made it through the terms of Chadli Bendjedid (1929-2012), Liamine Zéroual (1941), and Abdelaziz Bouteflika. This is a good indicator to show how far this candidate can cope with all the cards held by the real authority in the country, before coming out safe from the one-party to the multiparty system.

Belaid was an MP for two terms, representing FLN between 1997 and 2007. In 2012, and under the pressure of the so-called Arab Spring, he established the Future Front Party, formed mainly of his ex-colleagues at the Youth and Students' Unions and networks. He criticizes the popular movement, saying that “it became a problem after it was a solution”.<sup>3</sup>

## **Ali Benflis: the manager of the Bouteflika campaign in 1999, waiting to succeed him since 2004**

Ali Benflis was born in April 1944 in Batna, in the east of Algeria. In 1968 he graduated from the faculty of law, then became a judge, a general attorney, then an MP, then shifted to practising law in the 1980s.

Benflis started a career as a minister of justice, in November 1988, and did not leave this position until 1991, in spite of the many changes in cabinets across these years.

After Bouteflika made it to the presidential palace, he appointed Benflis a general secretary for the government on 26 August 2000, until 5 May 2003. Then he removed him after his presidential ambitions became clear.<sup>4</sup> He was at the same time the secretary-general of the FLN, but Bouteflika removed him from this position too.

In all of his statements to the media, Benflis describes himself as a “fierce dissident since May 2003”, the date he was removed from the cabinet by Bouteflika. When he ran for office in 2004, with the tacit support of the then-Commander in Chief, Mohammed Alamyar (1939-2012), he managed to get 6% of the votes.



Ten years later, Benflis returned to the presidential elections of 2014, this time with the support of the then-head of Intelligence, Mohamed Madin (Taufik), who had lost much of his power at the time. He got 12% of the votes.<sup>5</sup> In order to stay relevant and keep his new supporters, he founded his party in 2015, and after that Mohamed Madin was removed in September 2015.<sup>6</sup>

Benflis thinks that in the upcoming elections on 12 December, he will be the most credible candidate because of his opposition to Bouteflika in comparison with the other candidates who stayed on board Bouteflika's boat until the last moment. While this reason is important, it is not enough for Benflis to become a president given the context of the presidential "recruitment" mechanisms stated above. The rules of the game since 1995 indicates that the candidate that will win the election is not affiliated with any party in particular. Also, the current Commander in Chief keeps saying throughout his speeches that there is a conspiracy by the so-called "gang", that started in 2015, the year Mohammed Madin was removed from the intelligence service, whom political and media networks were supporting Benflis in the 2014 elections.<sup>7</sup>

## **Abdelkader Bengrina: the Muslim Brotherhood figure affiliated with state institutions**

Abdelkader Bengrina was born in 1962, in the countryside of Ouargla, south of Algeria. He received a degree in electronics and was a member of the Society for Peace Movement (harakatu mujtama'i al-silm), an Islamist party founded by Mahfouz Nahnah in May 1991.

He was a member of the transitional council that was appointed in 1994, as an interim parliament after the cancellation of the democratic path in January 1992. He was elected as an MP for two terms, between 1997 and 2007. He was then appointed a Minister of Tourism under Zéroual and Bouteflika.

He broke away with a group of members of the Movement of Society for Peace, to establish, in March 2013, a party called the Binaa Movement (harakat Binaa), which was accepted by the regime as part of the political manoeuvring against the Arab



Spring. Bengrina entered the ranks of advocates of Bouteflika's fifth term.<sup>8</sup>

# **Abdelmejid Tebboune: an independent candidate supported by the pouvoir and part of the Bouteflika networks**

Abdelmejid Tebboune was born on 17 November 1945, in Mishriah (Naama province), southwest of the Algerian Republic. What distinguishes Tebboune from the other candidates is that he ran as an independent candidate, for the first time, as he had never run for office before. All his career was in the public service and all the positions he held were through appointments, from an employee in the administration to a secretary-general in several provinces (governorates), to the governor of more than one region, then a minister and finally a prime minister.

Tebboune also stands out from other candidates in that he was a governor, a minister of Interior in two different Cabinets (one of which was during the early years of Bouteflika), and as such he is the first person running for office, since 1962, who had a career as a governor.

The first ministry Tebboune headed was as the acting Minister of Local Communities (1991), as a deputy of the Minister of Interior General Larbi Belkhir, who is said to be one of his godfathers within the ranks of authority. He didn't leave this position until 19 July 1992, after Ali Kafi was appointed the head of the Supreme State Council, after the assassination of president Mohammed Boudiaf, on 29 June 1992.

Tebboune returned to the cabinet as minister during the reign of Bouteflika, with the return of the influence of Larbi Belkheir, who was behind the nomination of Bouteflika in 1999. He took several portfolios, including Housing and Construction, for more than seven years.

Tebboune was appointed as Prime Minister on 24 May 2017, only to be removed two months later, under pressure from some circles in the business community, because of a speech in which he talked about the separation of money from politics.<sup>9</sup>



Tebboune enjoys the support of some networks that supported Bouteflika, including parties, associations and businessmen.<sup>10</sup> He may also have the support of the army leadership (although the Commander in Chief has denied this on many occasions), simply because he has the confidence of those who control the processes of recruitment and formulating the results of elections.<sup>11</sup> These are the same people who never imposed a partisan president since the November 1995 elections that brought General Liamine Zéroual to the presidential palace.

### **Azzedine Mihoubi: supported Bouteflika and the secretary-general of his party is accused of corruption**

Mihoubi was born in 1959 in Ain Khadra (M'Sila), an interior province. He moved to Algiers where he studied at the National School of Administration and graduated with a diploma in public administration in 1984. He began his career as an official in the government press and state television in the late 1980s and 1990s.

Mihoubi is a founding member of the National Democratic Rally (RND), which was set up on 20 February 1997 with substantial support from the state. The party got a majority of the seats in parliament and local councils in the 1997 elections. These elections are the ones that the state itself acknowledged as rigged. Thanks to these elections, Azzedine Mihoubi was able to become a member of parliament.

Under Bouteflika, and since 2006, Mihoubi had a career of official appointments by presidential decrees. Over the last 13 years, he has been appointed repeatedly and uninterruptedly in various positions, from Director General of National Radio to Secretary of State for Communication, to the Director-General of the National Library, then the President of the Supreme Council of the Arabic Language. He then moved into the position of the Minister of Culture, until the fall of Bouteflika, and his Prime Minister and Secretary-General of his party, Ahmed Ouyahia.

After the outbreak of the February 22 uprising and the arrest of party's secretary-general, Ahmed Ouyahia, on corruption charges, Mihoubi was appointed acting party secretary-general, and he is running for president under its banner. His campaign is no more than a formality, making him a race rabbit, given several



considerations related to the rules of appointing/recruiting the president.<sup>12</sup>

### **Political calculations: saving the regime or saving the state and liberating society?**

The political calculations of the regime regarding these elections cannot be understood without stopping at the nature of the regime, the vast constitutional powers of the president's position in Algeria, and the fluidity the regime is suffering due to the conflicts between powerful figures and networks, which has led to the arrest of dozens of high-ranking officials in the state apparatus. Prime ministers, ministers, intelligence directors and high-ranking military officers were arrested over grave charges.<sup>13</sup> These conflicts have been exacerbated by the pressure and demands of the protest movement that refuses all the regime manoeuvres that have repeatedly tried to penetrate and use the movement in its favour. When it failed, the protest movement became a threat to the continuity of the regime, and even a threat to its strategic depth, which might lead to the failure of attempts to reproduce the regime.

Since the cancellation of the democratic process in January 1992, Algeria has had five presidential elections.<sup>14</sup> In all elections, the military has imposed their candidate for the presidency, a candidate unanimously agreed on by the various networks of the regime. Since it was difficult to agree on a person other than President Bouteflika in the elections scheduled for April 2019, the regime networks kept Bouteflika "as a candidate for continuity", as demonstrated by the support of all political, media, trade union, and the security, including the Commander in Chief of the army, towards the option of a fifth term of a sick and disabled president. Bouteflika became the candidate of the status quo, because opinions did not converge on who will take over after him.

When the uprising erupted in February 2019, the regime, under pressure from the street, had to sacrifice Bouteflika on 2 April 2019. The regime, however, kept resisting any real change in its ranks. In spite of the popular movement that



managed to cancel elections that were supposed to be held in April then on 4 July, called for by the interim president Abdelkader Bensaleh according to the constitution, the real authority insisted on the 12 December 2019, and it sought to organize these elections even by force if needed. Why this insistence? What are the political calculations behind the insistence of the authority to hold elections in the context of growing popular refusal?

The answer can be found in the “either-or” options available: to renew the regime or change it. Since the beginning of the crisis, the authority asserts from the speeches of the Commander in Chief of the army and all civil political and media facades of the regime that the constitutional solution is the way out of the crisis, and that the elections are the constitutional solution, and no solution outside the elections. It said that those calling for democratization are seeking to return Algeria to the terrorism of the 1990s. Even the official discourse carried much verbal violence, based on the idea that all political factions and elements of the popular movement who refuse the coming elections are traitors.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore, the basic bet of the authority is to impose elections, which may give the next president “legal” legitimacy, even if incomplete, to enable him to take some measures that the authority believes will lead to the division or fragmentation, or to weakening of the protest movement. Consequently, elections for the authority have become an end in themselves that may contribute to solving their crises, which has been exacerbated, with the compromise and disintegration of many of its networks due to the strength of the popular movement and the weak vision and strategy of those in power. So the regime’s calculations can be seen as: elections are an end in itself, building the lost legal legitimacy since 4 July 2019 with the end of the interim’s presidential term, in order to bring the regime out of its internal crisis, and to find an exit by changing its façade without changing its substance.

The popular movement and some actors, civilians and activists in it, responded to the authority's discourse, which focused on imposing constitutional options to resolve the crisis. They said that the Constitution speaks of popular sovereignty and the People as a source of power, and that the people have the foundational power by virtue of Articles 7 and 8 of the Constitution.<sup>16</sup> They announced that the upcoming elections cannot take place without a political consensus on the need to change the nature of the regime and break with the system of militarization and



securitization imposed on the country since its independence. As such, the elections turn into a means in the course of a comprehensive change in the nature of the system and not a process of changing faces, by imposing a new president from the same system that imposed presidents since 1962 and until the moment.

Therefore, the popular movement in all its marches, chants slogans such as (we demand freedom, and will bring freedom), which shows that the issue of liberating society from all laws, rules and mechanisms depriving it of freedom is at the heart of the popular demands. The grassroots levels do not believe that the organization of elections in the context of the deprivation of liberties and the closure of media and political spaces and imposing elections by force will solve anything. They believe that the elections - as intended to be imposed - will change faces but not the system. The authority may find a temporary exit in the coming elections, but it may threaten the state as a political entity, as a social fabric, and as a territorial unit.

As such, the basic bet of the movement is to continue to refuse the 12 December elections, which is simultaneously working towards enacting a democratization process that can change the political system, a strategy that many politicians and actors from the civil society think might be the only plan to save the state and free society.

## Expected scenarios: power of politics or politics of power?

Where is Algeria heading? It is the question all circles interested in Algerian affairs are asking, but it is difficult to answer accurately. However, it is almost certain that all the scenarios expected may fall under two main headings: the power of politics and politics of power.

**First scenario:** This is the scenario that follows the logic of the politics of power. In this scenario, the 12 December elections will happen, with the risk of imposing it in spite of a total boycott in major cities and across many regions, with the



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intensification of arrests and attempting to quell protests. This scenario is expected so far, but it will be costly to the authorities and to their political and media facades, and to Algeria as a nation.

In this scenario, it is possible to impose elections with a meaningless participation rate, with blatantly inflated numbers and an unreliable propaganda machine, a process that could even threaten the social fabric. The result of this suicidal scenario would be the appointment of a weak president in front of the authorities that imposed him and who won't be even able to manage the contradictions of power and internal problems. Moreover, his weak popular support will stop him from enjoying minimum legitimacy and popular legitimation. Here, Algeria is expected to move towards a Venezuelan-style bankruptcy scenario by 2021 at the latest. With the depletion of foreign currencies, economic and social problems, the collapse of purchase power, and the accelerating international transformations in North Africa, all these factors combined can lead to a situation where it is really hard to gauge the enormity of the catastrophes to come, and that will spill over outside Algeria.

**Second scenario:** The popular movement will manage to intensify pressures through all available peaceful and organized means. We will head to the third cancellation after striking down attempts to organize elections on 18 April and 4 July. This means that the current faces on the stage will leave, including both civilian and military characters, and new faces that are not announced yet will rise. They might be from within those watching and waiting in the halls of powers. It is hard, however, to be concrete here regarding who they will be because the disintegration of authority today makes it difficult to understand who is standing with and against who? Who is fighting who? Who is in alliance against who and with who? What are the new alliances? What are the strategic and the tactical alliances? In this scenario, we can expect the best and the worst, which means that we might be going towards the direction of the politics of power *or* the power of politics.

**Third scenario:** It is a scenario that is consistent with the political mind that imposes the power of politics, which is about the success of the popular uprising in preserving its peacefulness while it escalates political pressure. At some point a new route will appear inside the structures of the regime, building bridges of



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dialogue outside the networks of loyalty and corruption in order to save the state and to protect the social fabric of Algeria. In this scenario we will see bridges leading to a clear and concise roadmap based on a historical agreement for a new contract that sets the rules of the political game, and the building a state of the rule of law. It is an agreement that will set a clear agenda for cancelling all freedom-depriving laws, then moving on towards a foundational or electoral route that will build a state of sound institutions that break radically with the current regime. It will provide the building blocks of a political reason in Algeria that breaks with the securitization ideology. This is what many actors who criticize the options of the politics of power expressed.

Regardless of the scenarios and routes taken, between the politics of power and power of politics, the only truth we can confirm is that the governance system in Algeria is done for life and will not be back. It became a danger threatening the state and the integrity of the social fabric. The only thing we do not know for sure so far is how transition to a new regime will unfold, and what is the cost of change and how will it impact the region.



## Endnotes

1. The rest of the candidates, according to the head of the Elections Commission, Mohammed Charafi, did not manage to collect the minimum amount of signatures needed for running for elections. It is also noteworthy that at the outset, 143 initial candidates drew 10 million forms, then 23 candidates submitted 900,000 forms.
2. Louisa Hanoune participated in all elections held since 2004. She was one of the fiercest defenders of Bouteflika in spite of accusing his close circle of being corrupt, and of forming what she described as “the oligarchic state”. Recently she was sentenced to 15 years in prison after being accused of conspiring against the commanders of the army, with the ex-intelligence Agency Director, and the brother of Bouteflika. See details on this link: [aawsat.com](http://aawsat.com)
3. For more details about the career and trajectory of Belaid, see: [atlas-times.com](http://atlas-times.com)
4. Cherif Ouzani, "Bouteflika-Benflis", Jeune Afrique, 4 janvier 2004 [jeunefrique.com](http://jeunefrique.com)
5. Malik Tahir, "Présidentielles: Ali Benflis, jamais deux sans trois?" Huffpost Maghreb, 20 janvier 2019, [huffpostmaghreb.com](http://huffpostmaghreb.com)
6. He was arrested in May 2019. A court sentenced him to 15 years in prison for conspiring against the state, and conspiring against a military commander, with support from Sa`id Bouteflika and other political figures.
7. For more on the trajectory of Benflis and his career, see: [atlas-times.com](http://atlas-times.com)
8. For more in-depth information about Bengrina, see: [atlas-times.com](http://atlas-times.com)
9. Radwan Bujum'a, [in Arabic] : [assafirarabi.com](http://assafirarabi.com) 2019 12 [assafirarabi.com](http://assafirarabi.com)
10. They include the funder of his campaign, businessman Omar `Alilat, who was recently arrested under suspicion of corruption. The head of the National Committee for supporting his nomination, and the member in his campaign, is Soliman Karouch, from Tizi Ouzou province, who is also the ex-director of the National Employers Organization. He is one of the most important supporters and funder of Bouteflika campaigns.
11. Akram Belkaïd et Lakhdar Benchiba, "En Algérie, les décideurs de l'ombre", Le Monde Diplomatique, avril 2019, [monde-diplomatique.fr](http://monde-diplomatique.fr)
12. Mihoubi was appointed the secretary-general of his party by instructions from powerful figures in the regime, because this party is a political apparatus established in 1997, and many observers of the Algerian affairs name it « the party of the administration ». As such, the nomination of Mihoubi is based on these givens, also because of his prominent role in organizing the elections and determining their results. More details on Mihoubi : [atlas-times.com](http://atlas-times.com)
13. For information about the arrests of high-ranking officials and their accusations, see: [alarab.co.uk](http://alarab.co.uk)
14. For more about earlier presidential elections since 1995, see [in Arabic]: [assafirarabi.com](http://assafirarabi.com)
15. See examples of this in the speeches of the Commander in Chief, and his interventions to impose the elections, inviting the elections commission, and his accusations against those refusing the election, as being in alliance with parties and entities that work against the country: [elbilad.net](http://elbilad.net) and [almasdar-dz.com](http://almasdar-dz.com)
16. Articles 7 and 8 of the Constitution: [elkhabar.com](http://elkhabar.com)



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