

# Algeria's Transition to What?<sup>1</sup>

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## Algeria's Opening

Algeria's moment of crisis that prompted the first move toward greater political openness came dramatically in October 1988.<sup>2</sup> The generation that had come of age after independence, but for whom jobs were lacking after the oil-price collapse of the mid-1980s, took to the streets in a genuine youth revolt. Many Algerians who had endured the dreariness and depravations of the one-party era were willing to cheer the angry young men on. The regime, dominated since independence in 1962 by the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) and the military/security apparatus, resisted the temptation to resort to a policy of pure repression. Instead, President Chadli Bendjedid, egged on by some young reformers, decided to engage in dramatic political reform.<sup>3</sup>

A new constitution in 1989 opened the way for the end of the monopoly of the FLN, and within a short time Algeria was alive with new political organisations, a free press and a plethora of civic associations. The most popular of the new political groupings was the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) – a broad coalition grouping a small number of radical Islamists, a few veterans of the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, the traditionally pious urban classes, and the vast number of alienated youth.<sup>4</sup> President Bendjedid, incorrectly estimating the strength of the FIS, seemed to think that he could use it to weaken the unpopular FLN without endangering his own prerogatives as president, or without alarming his military backers.

## The Rise of the FIS

Algeria has held two elections that are generally believed to have been reasonably free and fair, although the electoral rules (two-round majority winner-take-all) tended to magnify the weight of the largest party. In 1990, the FIS made a remarkable showing in municipal elections, unseating the FLN in over half the country's municipalities. This set the stage for the dramatic electoral contest for the National Assembly in late 1991. Although the FIS lost nearly one million votes compared to its showing the previous year, it still won twice as many votes as the FLN and was poised to win a majority in

the new National Assembly when the military intervened in January 1992 to cancel the election, depose the president and soon thereafter ban the FIS from politics.<sup>5</sup>

It is worth recalling that the FIS, at its moment of victory, had only managed to win the votes of about one-quarter of all eligible Algerian voters. Still, given the disarray in other parties, this would have been enough to claim a major victory and to establish a dominant voice in politics. The military had expected the FLN and FIS to split the vote more or less equally, leaving the real power brokers free to govern with a weak and divided national assembly. The factions within the assembly would then have enjoyed, at most, the privilege of arguing with one another, and this might well have been the outcome if Algeria had adopted a proportional representation system, as it now has. Faced with the magnitude of the FIS victory, the military was stunned and decided to act to protect its own prerogatives and to uphold its acute sense of Algerian nationalism, a nationalism that has deep roots in the struggle for independence in which the army played a central part.<sup>6</sup>

Although the military pre-empted the FIS victory, it either could not or would not try to turn back the clock entirely. Some of the liberal reforms survived, most notably a relatively free and outspoken press and a formal commitment to a pluralistic political system. The military and security services were clearly the ultimate arbiters of power – Algerians refer to them as '*les décideurs*', the '*seraglio*', the '*nomenklatura*', or simply '*le pouvoir*'. But it would be a mistake to think that they had no supporters in society. Many Algerians had been appalled at the prospect of 'Tehran on the Mediterranean'.

## Elections

Since the aborted election in 1991, Algeria has held six more elections – for the presidency in 1995 and 1999, for the National Assembly in 1997 and 2002, and for municipal and provincial assemblies in 1997 and 2002. While none of these elections could be considered as clean as those earlier in the decade, each revealed something important about Algerian politics. For example, the presidential election in 1995 witnessed a surprisingly large turnout, reported to be some three-quarters of eligible voters, most of whom voted for Liamine Zéroual, the general who was backed by the military. But a moderate Islamist, Mahfoud Nahnah, won about 3 million votes, just slightly less than the FIS in 1991. While the reported figures were generally not believed to be precisely accurate, most Algerians seemed to accept that the election spelled a strong desire for a return to order after the very bloody years of 1994–95.

The parliamentary elections in 1997 also saw a relatively large turnout, reportedly some two-thirds of eligible voters. A new regime-backed party

took first place in what many thought was a fraudulent result; Nahnah's party placed second and the FLN was third, with about the same number of votes as it had won in 1991. While the regime's favoured party won one-third of the votes and forty per cent of the seats in parliament, it had to find coalition partners in order to govern effectively. At the outset of the new assembly, debates were often lively and the public was able to follow them on live television.

The presidential election of 1999 had all the makings of a serious return to democratic contestation. Seven candidates, of whom at least four were serious political figures with significantly different agendas, took part in the campaign.<sup>7</sup> The campaign itself seemed remarkably free and fair. Then, on the eve of the election, six of the seven candidates withdrew, claiming to have evidence that the election was being rigged. Only Abdelaziz Bouteflika remained in the race. Official figures subsequently gave him a large victory, but the real numbers reportedly were much smaller – only about 25 per cent of the electorate went to the polls, of whom some 30 per cent voted for Bouteflika.<sup>8</sup> A convincing explanation of why the other candidates withdrew has yet to appear, but presumably they were all convinced that the military would only allow Bouteflika to win and they did not want to lend legitimacy to a flawed election.

With this pattern of manipulated elections in recent years, what could one hope for when Algerians again were called to the polls to elect deputies to the National Assembly in May 2002? First, a great deal had happened in the past decade that would doubtless colour the political climate. At least 100,000 Algerians had died in a bitter civil conflict pitting radical Islamists against the regime. Most Algerians had stayed on the sidelines, one reason for doubting that the term 'civil war' fully captures the reality of this tragic conflict. In 1997, the major armed Islamic movement, an offshoot of the FIS, had reached a truce with the regime, and subsequently Bouteflika, after his election in 1999, had offered amnesty to those who laid down their arms. While this did not end the violence entirely, it did reduce the level of killing by a substantial amount.<sup>9</sup>

With the easing of the security situation in the late 1990s, social and economic issues came to the fore. Problems of unemployment, poor education, disastrous housing and a host of other issues, including corruption and lack of democracy, were all suddenly on the political agenda. In 2001, a sustained protest movement began in the Berber area of Kabylia, but the issues raised were of nationwide interest. The regime seemed unable to respond effectively, making concessions to the Berbers on demands that their language be recognised as a national one, while stonewalling on much of the rest of the agenda. Elections were held in May 2002 for the National Assembly against this backdrop of severe social crisis. Several parties, especially the two Berber-based formations, called for a boycott of the elections. Many

Algerians professed disinterest in the elections and the campaign was uninspiring, despite notable efforts by the Prime Minister, Ali Benflis, to rejuvenate the ageing FLN. A public opinion poll on the eve of elections showed that a bare majority of Algerians intended to vote and that the FLN, the party of order and stability, would win – perhaps a reminder of more peaceful days in the 1970s.

The actual election results were of considerable interest and the numbers seemed plausible, if not necessarily exactly accurate.<sup>10</sup> Only 46 per cent of the electorate turned out, of whom a large number cast blank ballots, meaning that only 41 per cent actually voted for candidates to the Assembly. In Kabylia, a near-total boycott of the election was observed. The final tally showed that the FLN, with about 36 per cent of the vote, managed to win a majority of the seats; the former dominant party, the *Rassemblement National Démocratique* (RND) suffered a major setback, winning only 8.5 per cent. Similarly, Nahnah's party lost significantly, while a rival Islamist party led by Abdallah Djaballah won about 10 per cent. The new cabinet formed by Benflis included a number of the old guard, but also a significant number of new, young personalities, including five women (Table 1).

After a decade of elections of various degrees of probity, Algerians have demonstrated several enduring characteristics. First, the society seems to be divided into at least four sizeable political blocs, each with a somewhat different ideology and agenda. There is a nationalist group, made up of officials, state workers and rural voters, that reliably votes for the FLN or other government-endorsed parties; there is a Berber-dominated bloc of some

TABLE 1  
NATIONAL ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS 2002: AGGREGATE RESULTS, BY PARTY

Party	Votes received	% of valid vote	% of electorate	Seats	% of seats	Votes per seat
FLN	2,632,705	35.52	14.65	199	51.15	13,230
RND	630,241	8.50	3.51	48	12.34	13,130
MRN	746,884	10.08	4.15	43	11.05	17,369
MSP	573,801	7.74	3.19	38	9.76	15,100
Ind.	789,492	10.65	4.39	29	7.46	27,224
PT	355,405	4.80	1.98	21	5.40	16,924
FNA	234,530	3.16	1.30	8	2.01	29,316
MN	265,495	3.58	1.48	1	0.26	265,495
PRA	162,308	2.19	0.90	1	0.26	162,308
MEN	139,919	1.89	0.78	1	0.26	139,919
Others (14)	880,218	12.00	4.90	0	–	–

Note: 'Ind.' refers to Independent (i.e. non-party lists, present in many constituencies).

Source: Minister of Interior, Algiers, 31 May 2002, as compiled by Hugh Roberts.

10–15 per cent that often boycotts elections, but nonetheless carries political weight because it is well organised; there is an Islamist current, which commands the loyalties of some 15–20 per cent of the population; and there is a scattering of democrats, regionalists and independents who probably make up much of the remainder of the society. No single group has a majority; no single group can easily govern without some support from one or more of the others.

Second, elections have revealed the main fissures in Algerian society, but they have done little either to legitimise governance or to change the real power holders. Nor have democratic procedures taken root as a way of resolving conflicts without resort to violence. While elected officials are not just puppets, they know that the military has a potential veto over major decisions.

Third, multi-party democracy is no longer a disparaged concept in Algeria, as it was in the early days after independence. Most Algerians today say they would welcome democracy, greater accountability, the rule of law and more transparency. They are tired of what they call the '*hogra*' of the rulers, the contempt with which the regime treats ordinary citizens. Algerians have become sceptical of ideologues, both within the power structure and among the Islamists.

Fourth, a vibrant free press and access to satellite dishes that bring programmes from Europe and the Middle East, as well as growing access to the Internet, have made for lively political debate within the country. Satire, political cartoons, *rai* music and a rich political slang in dialectical Arabic provide outlets for political sentiment. The existence of a large community of Algerians living in Europe insures that ideas of modernity and democracy are well understood by Algerians, many of whom are fully fluent in one or more foreign languages.

### Consequences of Institutional Choices

At several points since independence in 1962, Algerian leaders – in government and in opposition – have made institutional choices that have entailed consequences that were not always intended. At the moment of independence, Algeria's first president chose to ally himself with the regular forces of the army in order to overcome opposition from numerous sectors. Ahmed Ben Bella linked his fate to that of Houari Boumediénne and within a short period was ousted by him. Along the way he had decided to suppress debate within the National Assembly, insuring that the elections of 1963 produced an Assembly in which most opposition had been eliminated.

As president, Boumediénne built up the power of the *Sécurité Militaire*, to the point that after his death in 1978 it was widely believed to be the most powerful institution in the country. Bendjedid made a crucial decision in

1989 when he decided to legalise the FIS, despite a constitutional provision that made a party based on religion of questionable legality. Also important for the prospects of the FIS was the decision of the Prime Minister, Mouloud Hamrouche, to insist on a winner-take-all formula for parliamentary elections in 1991 instead of proportional representation. This seemingly small matter inadvertently contributed to the FIS landslide, setting in motion the harsh response of the military.

Another important institutional choice was reflected in the 1996 constitution with the creation of a second chamber, the Council of the Nation. Its members were to be chosen (two-thirds) by, and from among, the elected members of local and provincial councils; another one-third would be appointed by the president. In a measure designed to guard against the kind of outcome almost achieved in the 1991 election, the second chamber would have the power to pass, by a three-quarters majority, on all bills adopted by the lower house. While this would insure that a majority in the lower house could not impose its will without a very large majority in the upper house, it also meant that the government could not function unless it controlled three-quarters of the upper house. Since an honest election was unlikely to produce such an overwhelming majority, it became incumbent on the regime to engineer a landslide victory in the local and provincial elections of 1997 to guarantee control of the upper house. Indeed, those elections were widely believed to have been more fraudulent than the national assembly elections held earlier in the year.

After becoming president in 1999, Bouteflika spoke out against the Council of the Nation, indicating that he might seek a constitutional amendment to abolish it. But institutions, once created, have a tendency to acquire a set of vested interests, and the Council lives on, despite its peculiar place in the system. Elections for the local and provincial councils that play the major part in choosing the Council of the Nation were held in October 2002, but little change resulted. After all, if only one-third plus one of the elected members of the Council could constitute an effective opposition (assuming all the appointed members would rally to the government), all of the government's legislation could be blocked.<sup>11</sup> If Algeria is ever to become a democracy, this institution, in its present form, will have to go.

### **Explaining Algeria**

Looking to the future, what seem to be the prospects that Algeria's limited degree of liberalisation will be transformed into genuine and sustained democratisation? The society seems structurally pluralistic; the formal political system, while biased toward a very strong executive, is not the major obstacle; and popular sentiment seems to favour the idea. So where is the problem?

Some argue that the problem lies deep within Algerian culture. One version of this, commonly asserted for all Muslim countries, is that Islam and democracy are simply incompatible. Any religion that recognises the sovereignty of God is going to have trouble with the idea of popular sovereignty.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, some of the hardliners in the FIS used to make this argument, asserting that democracy was a false Western import with no value, other than perhaps tactical, in a Muslim society. Scholars now generally dismiss this form of cultural essentialism, but the argument lives on in the popular imagination. I do not think it explains the Algerian case.

A variant on the culturalist argument is a historical reading of Algeria's past that concludes that a pervasive pattern of resorting to violence to achieve political ends has prevailed for hundreds of years. This becomes embodied in an '*imaginaire de la guerre*', a legitimising of force as the way to conduct political competition.<sup>13</sup> This argument, while more contextualised than the pure culturalist one, also has the problem of explaining both too much and too little.

Closer to the mark are several features of Algeria's recent history and of its economy that make it difficult to change the locus of power. First, Algeria's nationalism was fiercely egalitarian, anti-party and populist. Parties were seen as a source of weakness from the colonial period; and the French had managed to destroy much of the Algerian elite during 132 years of colonial rule, so that the new nationalist leaders generally came from modest backgrounds and tended to believe that they were each capable of speaking authentically for 'the people' of whom they were a part. There was very little hierarchy capable of winning automatic respect in Algerian society as the country came to independence. In a sense, the revolution was won by 'the people', and no single individual should stand out above others.<sup>14</sup> The FLN very quickly splintered and power eventually ended up in the hands of the one institution in society that did have some structure and hierarchy, namely the military. It has remained there ever since.

### **The Role of the Military**

Why has it been so hard to wrest power from the hands of the military? First, the military has never split into warring factions; second, it has used the threat of internal civil war as a justification for its rule; and third, the flow of oil wealth into the hands of the powerful has meant that the military has been able to provide weighty incentives to those who collaborate with it. The small group of officers who hold the reins of power are generally believed to be extremely well off, and they are able to reward their followers quite handsomely. This is a familiar pattern in rentier states, and does indeed make it difficult to break the monopoly of those who control the flow of

rents. At the same time, when oil prices go down, as they did in the mid-1980s, the regime may feel the need to engage in at least token political opening in order to share the responsibility for the cuts in benefits that are inevitable.<sup>15</sup>

In brief, a populist form of nationalism paved the way for the military to take power in the name of the people; its relatively cohesive organisational structure compared to factionalised challenges from other sources has given it a comparative advantage in the political game; and petrodollars have helped to keep it in place by giving an unpopular regime a means of buying acquiescence from many citizens. Still, the system is under strain, and the prospects for change in the direction of greater participation and accountability should not be discounted.

For Algeria to experience a real and sustained opening toward democracy, going beyond its limited pluralism and liberalisation of the present would require the military to move to the sidelines. This could take the form of a Chilean 'pact', a deal with the democrats that offered a large degree of autonomy and immunity from prosecution; or it could follow the Turkish model, with a powerful role for the military as the guardian of the constitution, a kind of 'national security council', but with day-to-day responsibility clearly in the hands of elected politicians. As the generals advance in age, it may be possible to negotiate some kind of pact of this type. It is not clear whether the generals can or will replicate themselves as they eventually retire from active political life. Most stem from the generation that came of age in the 1950s and they are reaching the natural end of their careers.<sup>16</sup>

### Looking Ahead

If Algeria were to make a transition to democracy in the near future, it would probably be an untidy affair, as democracy often is, but there is no reason to think it would prove to be unmanageable or would throw the country into civil war. During the 1930–40s, Algeria had a fairly vigorous pluralistic national movement; it has sustained a measure of pluralism for the past decade, despite enormous challenges; and few Algerians now want to go back to the constraints of a one-party state.

Based on limited experience to date, Algeria would probably begin its democratic experience with a strong presidential model. The Constitution, which has been tailor-made by each president except the current incumbent, tends to privilege executive power, leaving the National Assembly in a relatively weak position. But the parliament would also likely be a forum in which coalitions would have to be forged in order for government to work at all. That could be a useful part of the habituation to the arts of compromise, which have often seemed in short supply in Algeria.



Algeria is not exactly a case of a potential 'democracy without democrats' – there are some convinced democrats, but there are probably many more who have an instrumental view of democracy. That is to say, democracy is viewed as a way of getting rid of a disliked political order. None of the existing political parties in Algeria, even the most ostensibly democratic in ideology, is governed internally by democratic procedures. Most, in fact, are simply groupings around a prominent personality. There is certainly no single political figure around whom democrats would rally naturally, no Nelson Mandela character or anyone even vaguely similar. Still, there are several people who could appeal to democrats: Ali Benflis, prime minister until his resignation in mid-2003, as a modern and competent technocrat with reformist inclinations; Mouloud Hamrouche, the prime minister who presided over the first phase of Algeria's democratisation in the early 1990s; and possibly Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, believed by some to be a moderate Islamist with good national credentials, although now getting on in years. A democrat could count on support from many of Algeria's alienated youth, women, Berbers, moderate Islamists and those who have been disillusioned by the alternatives to democracy.

While the military was able in the mid-1990s to claim that it needed to hold power in order to defeat radical Islamists, they now have succeeded in reducing the chance of an Islamist victory on the battlefield or at the polls to almost nil. The extremism of the Islamists, especially in the 1995–97 period, alienated most Algerians, even those who had sympathised with them initially. Fatigue has set in, the population shows a keen desire to return to a more tranquil and normal life, and the appeal of ideologues has to confront a profound scepticism on the part of many Algerians, even the young who were most inclined to seek salvation with the millenarian vision of an Islamist state.

Early in 2003, the political landscape in Algiers began to rumble with rumours that the military had decided that it would play no role in the next presidential election. The Chief of Staff had spoken words to this effect, which some concluded was a vote of no confidence in Bouteflika. Reports spread that other candidates were thinking of announcing their intentions. Names frequently mentioned were Benflis, the former prime minister, and a number of other familiar political names. Perhaps this is all an illusion, and the election in 2004 may be just as pre-determined as others have been. But Algeria is at a point in its development where one simply cannot be sure what might come next. There is genuine social and political ferment, especially in the Kabyle region; there is widespread political alienation, especially among the young; there is massive unemployment; and there are real pressures for change in the system. But it will take more than this to produce a democratic breakthrough. It will take decisions made by those who now hold power to allow the system to evolve in the direction of greater democracy; it will require some

understanding of the role that will be reserved for the military; and it will require support – and pressure – from the two outside countries who now matter most for Algeria, France and the United States.

An Algerian democracy could have several important assets. The majority of the public is politically aware and would support the change to a responsive, accountable government; the Algerian community living overseas might be willing to repatriate part of its wealth to an Algeria that seemed to be on the mend; Europe and the United States would provide tangible support; the press has established itself as robust guardians of free expression; the country has enough income from oil and gas that it should be able to address social issues of concern such as housing and education.

So, I remain a guarded optimist, not about the possibility of a sudden transition to democracy, but of an eventual change in that direction. Remember the conditions set out by Dankwart Rustow in his seminal article on the conditions needed for democracy:<sup>17</sup> a sense of national identity; a hot family feud that no single party can win; adoption of rules of the game to regulate competition; and a period of habituation where the rules provide for power to be passed from one group to another by peaceful means. Algeria today is nearing the point where the third of these conditions may be met – a set of rules regulating the political competition among the major groups in society that have been engaged in a profound struggle for decades. We may not quite know what to label the country at this point. It is still fundamentally an authoritarian system, but it is not enough to note that power remains concentrated in the hands of a few. Much else is going on in the country that suggests that Algeria's future need not resemble its past. Whether democracy is in Algeria's future is up to Algerians to decide, but those on the outside should not be dismissive of the prospects or indifferent to the possibility. A democratic Algeria, were it to happen soon, could again place the country among the pacesetters for the entire region.

#### NOTES

1. This article is adapted and updated from 'Algeria's Uneasy Peace', *Journal of Democracy* 13/4 (Oct. 2002).
2. See M'Hammed Boukhobza, *Octobre 88: évolution ou rupture?* (Algiers: Editions Bouchène 1991) pp.49–68.
3. Abed Charef, *Algérie: le grand dérapage* (Saint-Amand-Montrond: Editions de l'Aube 1994) pp.6–41.
4. Séverine Labat, *Les islamistes algériens: entre les urnes et le maquis* (Paris: Editions du Seuil 1995) pp.95–127; Ahmed Rouadjia, *Les frères et la mosquée: enquête sur le mouvement islamiste en Algérie* (Paris: Editions Karthala 1990) pp.111–39.
5. Lahouari Addi, *L'Algérie et la démocratie: pouvoir et crise du politique dans l'Algérie contemporaine* (Paris: Editions la Découverte 1994) pp.160–83. Addi, p.188, puts forward the idea of a 'regression féconde', meaning that if the FIS had been allowed to assume power it would have had the effect of demystifying and discrediting the Islamist movement,

paving the way for real democracy in future elections. In a sense, the extremism of the Islamists in the mid-1990s had the effect of discrediting them in the eyes of many, without their ever coming to power.

6. For a lengthier treatment of these issues, see William B. Quandt, *Between Ballots and Bullets: Algeria's Transition from Authoritarianism* (Washington, DC: Brookings 1998) pp.53–61.
7. Mahfoud Nahnah, the strongest of the Islamist candidates, was barred from running on a technicality concerning his participation in the revolutionary struggle.
8. William B. Quandt, 'Algerian Puzzles', EUI Working Papers, European University Institute, Florence.
9. Gilles Kepel, *Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2002) pp.254–75.
10. Hugh Roberts, 'Musical Chairs in Algeria', MERIP Press Information Note 97, 4 June 2002.
11. The Constitution does state that if a finance bill is not passed by both houses within 75 days, the president can pass it by decree.
12. Bernard Lewis, 'Islam and Liberal Democracy', *Atlantic Monthly* (Feb. 1995) pp.89–98.
13. Luis Martinez, *La guerre civile en Algérie* (Paris: Karthala 1998) pp.23–6. Martinez concludes his important book, p.377, with the following summary: 'Of the factors capable of explaining Algeria's descent into civil war after its short multiparty experience in 1990–91, the most central is the "imaginaire de la guerre". We have shown that the failure of the "democratic transition" in Algeria is explained by the belief in the virtues of violence as the means of changing leadership".
14. William B. Quandt, *Revolution and Political Leadership: Algeria, 1954–1968* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1969) pp.148–74.
15. Giacomo Luciani, 'The Oil Rent, the Fiscal Crisis of the State and Democratisation', in Ghassan Salamé (ed.), *Democracy Without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (New York: I.B. Tauris 1994) pp.130–55.
16. For a thoughtful discussion of these possibilities, see Omar Belhouchet, 'ANP et l'Algérie', *El Watan*, 24 June 2002.
17. Dankwart Rustow, 'Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model', *Comparative Politics* (April 1970) pp.337–63.