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DIIS Brief

Algeria: President Bouteflika's second presidential term

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Abstract

For the second time, the Algerian president, Bouteflika has been elected president. He has now another five years for restoring the economy and for demonstrating that the army and the security forces no longer will be the hidden puppeteers of politics. The Algerians are asking themselves whether Algeria is on the way to further democratization after the sacking of the influential army Chief, Lamari. This Brief discusses whether there is a possibility of withdrawal of the army to the barracks due both to Bouteflika's and the army's wish to getting closer to the EU and to the US.

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On 8 April 2004, the Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika gained a second five-year term with a surrealistic 84.99 per cent of the votes cast. Bouteflika therefore claimed a landslide general election victory even if the turnout among Algeria's 18 million voters was only 59.26 per cent. In the Berber region of Kabylia, the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), a party associated with the region and the Berber organization *La Co-ordination des Archs, Daira et Commune* ('The co-ordination of the tribes, the districts and the municipalities'), had called for boycotting the elections. As a result of the general mistrust of the regime because of its ever-brutal repression of Berber opposition, the number of votes cast was only recorded 17 per cent. Nevertheless, this result is to a certain extent a success for Bouteflika who feared a total abstention.

When Bouteflika first ran for presidency in 1999, all opposition candidates dropped out on the eve of the election, claiming the vote was marred by fraud. This time Bouteflika was running for re-election against five other contenders. The frustrated five other candidates claimed that gerrymandering and ballot-rigging contributed to Bouteflika's victory. Topping their list of complaints was that Bouteflika had already been handpicked to win by a shadowy military structure that many Algerians call 'the power' or 'the deciders'. Many of the main national dailies had campaigned against the re-election of Bouteflika and the legitimacy of Bouteflika's electoral triumph was called into question in numerous editorials. They complained that Bouteflika had kept several serious opponents out of the election and manipulated the campaign to his advantage. None of the opposing candidates were given air time on Algeria's state-run television until March 18 and even then Bouteflika and his cabinet ministers dominated the TV-broadcasts. Some newspapers therefore described the result as 'worthy of Kim II Sung' (*el Watan*) and 'an electoral hold-up' (*Liberté*). But the international election monitors declared the electoral process both fair and devoid of any serious problems¹.

It is the first time in Algeria's history of independence that the army has permitted a president to be re-elected. It was a surprise for the public when in mid-June 2003 the very influential former army chief-of-staff General Mohammed Lamari announced that the army would not have a preferred candidate in the presidential elections and that it would be prepared even to accept an Islamist as president if he were committed to upholding the democratic institutions of the Algerian state. The army's neutral posture in the elections and Bouteflika's considerable electoral victory suggest that there might be a window of opportunity with regard to reduction of the army's political role and thereby to furtherance of democratisation. But the possibly decreased military influence on politics is accompanied by a presidential authoritarianism that might result in suppression and repression of all kinds of opposition.

The fate of the five presidential candidates

The election monitors called the election fair. However, in the run up to the election more or less subtle political ploys were used in order ensure the re-election of Bouteflika. The state funds, state-owned radio and television, and public administration were at Bouteflika's disposal. Spitefulness of the press, divide-and-rule politics especially towards the most influential party, the National Liberation Front (FLN), and use of the Constitutional Court in order to eliminate a strong candidate were among the regime's means to control the outcome of the election.

Eventually, five candidates were deemed qualified. According to the presidential electoral law, candidates are required to collect 75.000 signatures in 25 of Algeria's 48 provinces, with a minimum of 1.500 from each province. The State Council reserves the right to dismiss signatures it deems illegal. In March 2004, the Constitutional Council rejected the candidacy of Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, the moderate Arabo-Islamist leader of the party Wafa (Party of Loyalty and Justice) with supposedly close ties to the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). His candidacy

was rejected even though he had succeeded in collecting about 90,000 signatures. Many dailies considered Ibrahimi a strong challenger who could have forced Bouteflika into a second round of voting. Being considered a dangerous challenger and a 'cover up' for the Islamic Salvation Front has possibly resulted in his rejection².

The five candidates all scored very low and therefore contested the outcome of the election. The result was especially a defeat for the FLN. The party only scored 6.42 per cent of the votes despite the fact that the leader of the party, Ali Benflis, a former Prime Minister (1999-2003) and Bouteflika's campaign leader in 1999, constituted the most serious challenge to Bouteflika, mainly because of his credentials as a technocrat and proponent of economic reforms.

In 2001 Benflis was elected secretary general of the FLN, the main party in the government, which under his leadership came to gain control of parliament in the Parliamentary elections of 2002, in which the FLN won 199 seats out of a possible 389. But Benflis's rise in the party was being seen as laying the ground for a challenge to the president. At the Congress of the FLN in March 2003 Benflis openly declared that the FLN would be independent from the regime tutelage. This decision provoked a political tug-of-war between Bouteflika and Benflis.

Bouteflika's reaction came quickly. He dismissed Benflis from his post as Prime Minister in May 2003. In September 2003, Bouteflika sacked six Ministers known to be close to Benflis. In October 2003, Benflis confirmed his candidacy and the FLN split up into two fractions: one supporting Benflis and one Bouteflika. Bouteflika's supporters asked the court to freeze the activities and funds of the FLN which the court ordered to be done. The low score and the fratricidal split within the FLN resulted in Benflis's resignation as secretary-general of the National Liberation Front. Thus, the formerly prestigious FLN, the founding party of independent Algeria, are in ruins. Saïd Sadi, the leader of the Berber-based Rally for Democracy and Culture (RCD) who is a secularist in staunch opposition to legitimisation of the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), could

not attract votes even in Berber-dominated regions. He only received 1.94 per cent of the vote. This was due to the fact that the militants of the Berber cause discredited the RCD and succeeded to a certain extent in organizing a boycott of the elections in the Kabylia region. The only Islamist party to challenge Bouteflika by presenting its own candidate was the Islamist Movement for National Reform (MNR). Its leader, Abdallah Djaballah got 5.02 percent, only improving slightly the electoral result in relation to 1999 (3.96 per cent). The result can therefore be judged as a setback for constitutional Islamism. The Trotskyite Workers party (PT) of Louisa Hannoune, the first Algerian woman to run for presidency, received 1.16 per cent. Finally, the party AHD 54 got 0.63 percent. This relatively unknown party is led by Ali Fawzi Rebaine, an advocate who claims to restore the national pride of Algeria by re-launching the original political values incarnated in the struggle for independence that began in 1954.

The five candidates were knocked out because the population attributed the markedly improved security situation to Bouteflika. He had a very important asset in not having been part of the regime when Algeria descended into the horrific violence in the 1990s. He represented himself as the only person who could guarantee the eradication of terrorism and the accomplishment of ‘national reconciliation’ that started with the law on the ‘Civil Concord’ in 1999. This law made it possible to grant amnesty to thousands of armed Islamists from AIS, the armed branch of the banned FIS in exchange for their surrender. During the electoral campaign Bouteflika promised a ‘true national reconciliation’ that would imply rehabilitation of the authority of the state and reestablishment of the precedence of law³. The stressing of the need for a strong and legitimate state points indirectly to the political role of the army and thereby to the relationship between the army, the executive power and the law. Thus, Bouteflika both promised continuity with regard to further improvement of the security situation and gradual change as for the army’s role in politics.

The army and Bouteflika

At the end of July 2004, the chief of staff General Mohammed Lamari resigned. Officially, Lamari retired for reasons of health. But many Algerian newspapers saw political reasons for the retreat of one of the leading members of the group of generals who were behind the cancellation of the Parliamentary elections in January 1992. Lamari stood for the policy of eradication of the so-called Islamists and he disagreed with Bouteflika's Civil Concorde law. Lamari and Bouteflika were thus antipodes with regard to how to deal with political Islamism and thereby how to interpret the causes of the violence that started in 1992.

Violent Islamism is no longer a threat to state security in Algeria, but the old guard of the army and Bouteflika still disagree on how to deal with the banned FIS. Bouteflika is more inclined to co-opt the FIS than the old guard. But the army and Bouteflika agree that the army has to play another role than in the 1990s. Still, more officers have criticized in newspapers the way the army functions and its role as a hidden political actor. These critics have become more outspoken since the publication of a very controversial book *La sale guerre (The Dirty War)*, written by a former Algerian officer in 2001. He brought to light the cruel methods of the army and of the security forces in dealing with suspects. Since then, newspapers have openly discussed the role of the army in politics, its repressive methods and involvement in the disappearance of thousands of persons suspected of being Islamists. This discussion has put into question the legitimacy of the army's double function as military and political power. The Algerian newspapers therefore have asked whether Lamari's resignation was a sign of the beginning of a new age⁴ marked by an attempt at slowly giving precedence to politics over military. The army's quest for re-legitimation might result in a gradual withdrawal to the barracks.

It is an open secret in Algeria that a power struggle between Bouteflika and the military top has been going on ever since Bouteflika came to power in 1999. At that time,

Bouteflika declared that he would not be a ‘three-quarter president’, hinting at the army’s intermingling in politics. In his struggle for becoming a ‘four-quarter president’ Bouteflika used his first presidential term to put his personal and political friends at top posts in the ministries, especially in the very important Ministry of the Interior. He furthermore tried to limit the generals’ informal political importance by underlining his constitutional prerogatives to the full.

The 1996 constitution stipulates that the president is the supreme chief of all the armed forces of the Algerian Republic and that he appoints to military posts and high officials of security bodies. But usually, it is the highest-ranking generals that submit their proposals for appointment in the Ministry of Defence. Bouteflika has disregarded the generals’ recommendations by appointing himself the general secretary of the Ministry of Defence and furthermore he has promoted some military persons to high ranks without referring to the Army High Command.

On Bouteflika’s agenda is a gradual limitation of the army’s function and role is. He thus declared during the presidential campaign that according to the Constitution, the army is an institution of the Constitution, in other words: it has to be within the Constitution. Yet according to Bouteflika, the army had arrogated important extra-constitutional responsibilities in exceptional and painful circumstances⁵. This statement serves a twofold purpose: to assure the army that it will be considered an important player as it had been before the violence in the 1990s, but also that if it does not behave in a constitutional way, it runs the risk of losing legitimacy. Bouteflika thereby postulates that the army was within the Constitution from independence in 1962 until 1992, when the military took over power and decreed a state of emergency. While Bouteflika is right to stress the extraordinary role of the army since 1992, he overlooks the fact that the real power has ever since independence been vested in the military, even if all Constitutions have stipulated that the army is an institution dependent on the Presidency. The gap between the army’s formal dependency of the Presidency and the real political independency of the Presidency has never been

recognised in the official discourse. Bouteflika has neither admitted that there exists a gap between the institutions that formalise the relations of authority and the capacity of the informal politico-military networks for influencing the decisions of the Presidency and of the state administration. The question is therefore whether Bouteflika really intends to institutionalise the army, thereby revolutionising the whole system, or whether he only will put his own handpicked staff at the top of the armed forces and in the Ministry of Defence. This question will be answered if Bouteflika carries out his intention to replace the Constitution from 1996 with a new one.

Since Bouteflika came to power in 1999, and especially during the presidential campaign in spring 2004, much discussion about professionalisation and modernization of the army has taken place. High-ranking officers agree on the need for modernization in order to participate more effectively in the fight against international terror that has made Algeria an ally of the US. The Pentagon has since 9/11 2001 started an active cooperation with the Algerian armed forces which has resulted in closer relationship to NATO and to joint American-Algerian air-naval manoeuvres. In December 2003, Colin Powell visited Algeria on his trip to North Africa. He praised the country's exceptional cooperation in the war on terrorism. Since then, there have been rumours that the US will establish military bases in the Sahara in order to trace down international terrorists who might find shelter in the desert. Powell also called on Algeria to enter into direct negotiations with Morocco about the thorny issue of Western Sahara. Algeria's position has so far been that Morocco should negotiate directly with the Polisario independence movement, which is backed by Algeria.

Bouteflika has since 1999 played the international card as he did in the 1970s when he was Minister of Foreign Affairs. International terrorism put Algeria on the international agenda because of its knowledge of how to fight terrorism. In this fight, Bouteflika needs the army, but the army also needs Bouteflika because of the role he plays internationally. Both parts have an interest

in showing that Algeria is a trustworthy international partner that is not sullied with the army's crimes and with its hitherto intermingling in politics. A possible scenario for the relationship between the army and the presidency could therefore be the Turkish one. That is to say that the military's political power will slowly be handed over to civilians and the army will be pulled back into a guardian role.

There is a window of opportunity for the withdrawal of the armed forces to the barracks because of the changed international strategic landscape, and because the army is looking for rehabilitation. But it remains to be seen whether the army permits Bouteflika to deal with the question of legalization of the FIS and the question of Western Sahara. The army considers both issues as their 'domaine réservé'. Another question is whether the state of emergency will be lifted. The end of this state belongs to the president's prerogative and not to the army. But it was the army that dictated the state of emergency in 1992, and it was above all Lamari who had been advocating the continuation of the state of emergency. The Algerian newspapers therefore interpret the resignation of Lamari as a sign of the will to put an end to the state of emergency, and there are other more both within the army and amongst the Parliamentary parties that support this view. The debate on this question will certainly be put high on the political agenda in the future.

Future challenges

Bouteflika used his first presidential term for the amelioration of the security situation. But apart from this, Bouteflika is confronted with a multiform political, social and economic crisis. A great part of the population mistrusts the whole political system. As for the three great reforms Bouteflika announced in 1999 (justice, education, and the administrative reform), after a first stage of expert reports they are all still awaiting decisions and concrete action. The widespread demand for justice has not been met by any reforms. Bouteflika has been unwilling to start an investigation of the

destiny of the thousands of disappeared during the 1990s. Bouteflika has not given in to the Berbers' demand for cultural equality with the rest of Algeria. The Bouteflika governments have not adopted proactive measures to improve the population's lot. They have postponed all of the reforms that could have negative effects on the socio-economic status quo,⁶ and this in spite of the rise of in international hydrocarbon prices that has doubled the value of Algeria's export and has made Algeria's net foreign financial position positive. In sum, Bouteflika has not rocked the boat during his first presidential term. He has now five years for ameliorating the population's socio-economic conditions and for changing the military-political system. There are reasons to fear that Bouteflika will be tempted to act with authoritarianism that leaves no room for opposition. But on the other hand, Bouteflika is keen on demonstrating to the international community that Algeria is on the right democratic track. Thus, the status quo is no longer possible whereas a possible positive scenario for the future will be a mixture of authoritarianism in order to control the process of democratisation, and of a step-by-step empowerment of the political parties.

NOTES

¹ 'Le ministre de l'Intérieur annonce les résultats', *El Watan*, 10 April 2004.

² 'Algeria's Elections: No Democratic Turning Point' *Arab Reform Bulletin*, April 2004, Volume 2, Issue 4, <http://www.ceip.org/files/Publications/ARB-4-15-04.asp?from=pubtype>.

³ Beur FM, http://www.beurfm.net/article.php3?id_article=963, 23 March 2004.

⁴ 'Génération ALN – Génération ANP', *L'Expression*, 4 July 2004

⁵ 'Bouteflika: mes trois priorités pour l'Algérie', <http://www.european-security.org/article.php?id=4472>, 27 March 2004.

⁶ Iván Martín, 'Algeria's Political Economy (1999-2002): An Economic Solution to the Crisis?', *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Summer 2003, pp. 34-74.