

Algerian elections: FLN provides political cover for military regime

Jean Shaoul
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As Algerians went to the polls yesterday to elect their first civilian president after seven years of military rule, President Lamine Zeroual abruptly announced that six of the seven presidential candidates had stood down. The six candidates were protesting against ballot rigging in mobile polling stations and military barracks, where voting started on Monday.

The resignation of the six dealt a final blow to the efforts to present an outward show of democratic elections. Even before this, few seriously believed the poll would bring an end to government by the military, a bloody civil war or the precipitous decline in Algeria's economic and social conditions.

President Lamine Zeroual, a retired general, stepped down 18 months before the end of his term of office because of policy clashes with the army. The sole purpose of the elections is to bestow a cover of legitimacy on the army's apparent nominee, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was left as the sole candidate following Wednesday's resignations.

The election takes place against a backdrop of wretched social conditions. "Economic reforms" have led to the axing of 400,000 public sector jobs. Official figures show that 30 percent of the work force are unemployed, but the true figure is closer to 50 percent. A staggering 70 percent of young people have no work. There is a drastic shortage of housing--2 million new homes are needed for a population of less than 30 million. Hundreds of thousands of people live in rat-infested shacks in the cities, without access to clean water.

The collapse in oil prices--oil and gas account for 96 percent of Algeria's exports--has forced the government to slash welfare and education spending. Some \$4 billion of the \$10 billion earned from oil goes to the civil war. There is growing bitterness over military service: 80 percent of the army's frontline troops are conscripts. The army dominates the state institutions and senior commanders are the real "decision makers". They are conducting a civil war against what they call Islamist "terror". Estimates of the resulting damage to the country's infrastructure range between \$3 billion and \$16 billion.

The last seven years of conflict have left more than 100,000 dead or injured, created thousands of orphans and refugees, and forced the civilian population to live in a permanent state of fear and insecurity. In unusually strong language, the United

Nations Human Rights Committee's report characterised the situation as a "widespread human rights crisis". Security forces, the report said, were implicated in torture, forced disappearances, arbitrary killings, and extra-judicial executions that can only be described as systematic. Men and women, young and old, have been brutally slaughtered by armed groups. Insurgent groups have organised a campaign of terror and intimidation against women and girls in particular, many of whom have been abducted, sexually assaulted and sometimes mutilated by these armed gangs. The report also called attention to a number of massacres where the authorities had failed to intervene to protect the population or catch the perpetrators. It considered that the allegations of involvement or collusion by the security forces themselves in these atrocities were widespread and persistent enough to warrant independent investigation.

The Committee reported other human rights abuses, including the lack of an independent judiciary, media censorship, and restrictions on the right to form political parties. It was concerned about the government's encouragement of the formation of local militia known as "legitimate defence groups" operating without any control. It recommended amending the Family Code to eliminate "important areas of inequality" for women and revising the Penal Code that had increased the number of offences requiring the death penalty. The Arabic Language Decree that made Arabic the compulsory and exclusive language, was cited for limiting the rights of large numbers speaking Berber or French to free expression, to exchange and receive information and participate in public affairs.

How could all this happen when political independence from France in 1962 promised so much in a potentially prosperous country?

The bitter eight-year war cost more than 1 million lives and left many more displaced. Immediately after independence in 1962, over 1 million European *colons* left Algeria, plunging the economy into chaos. With left sounding rhetoric, the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN--National Liberation Front) took power and established one-party rule under Ben Bella. In 1965, after continuing economic upheavals and factional in-fighting among the FLN, one of the government ministers, Colonel

Boumedienne, organised a palace coup--deposing Ben Bella, who was then imprisoned.

Boumedienne presided over Algeria's rapid industrialisation, organised by state-owned enterprises and financed by the proceeds of oil and gas. In the power struggle that followed Boumedienne's unexpected death in 1978, Colonel Chadli Bendjedid became president. Bowing to the dictates of international finance, he opened up the economy to private enterprise. Economic liberalisation and the dismantling of the state enterprises gained pace after the 1985-86 oil price crash. Adverse effects soon became manifest, with an ever-widening gap between a few super rich and the overwhelming majority who were impoverished by rising prices and cuts in social benefits and public sector jobs.

The country was hit by a wave of strikes and riots in 1988, organised by the Union Generale des Travailleurs Algeriens (General Union of Algerian Workers), the national trade union affiliated to the FLN. The strikes were brutally suppressed by the FLN/military government. According to official figures, 159 people were killed between October 6 and 11 alone. According to well-documented unofficial sources, there were many more deaths. Twenty-six years after independence, the newly enriched FLN had turned decisively against its own working class. It marked the end of an era.

In the continuing turmoil that followed, workers abandoned the FLN and joined various opposition groups, in particular the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS--Islamic Salvation Front). When, after winning municipal and provincial elections, it looked as though the FIS would win the 1991-92 parliamentary elections, the army stepped in to depose Bendjedid and cancel the elections, sparking Algeria's bloody civil war. The FIS was banned and its leadership imprisoned or forced into exile. In June 1992, President Muhammad Boudiaf was murdered when he tried to steer a course independent of the generals.

Since then, a series of unelected military-backed regimes have run Algeria . They have all faithfully implemented the International Monetary Fund's "Structural Adjustment Programmes", opened up the south of the country to Western oil companies, dismantled the nationalised industries, slashed welfare programmes and prosecuted a ruthless civil war against its Islamist opponents.

None of the former candidates in these elections represented any real alternative to the Algerian people. Of the seven candidates, four were discredited ex-government ministers who head rival FLN factions. The rest have close connections to the military. The Islamist opposition has splintered into rival factions. As all the candidates are supporters of free market reforms, they were remarkably coy about explaining their economic policies in any detail--a public debate over them was cancelled.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika, widely seen as a front man for the military, has the backing of a cabal of soldiers, businessmen and the national trade union UGTA. He was foreign minister in

the 1960s and 1970s and went into exile in Switzerland amid allegations of embezzlement. He has barely opened his mouth in what can only loosely be called an election campaign, particularly since rioting youths made it impossible for him to deliver his campaign speech in Kabylia, in the heart of the Berber region. He was pelted with stones and accused of involvement in the murder of two opponents in the 1970s.

Mouloud Hamrouche, prime minister from 1989 to 1991, carried out the demands of the IMF for "market reforms" and "liberalisation of the economy" that have led to the present economic catastrophe.

Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, a former government minister in the 1960s and 1970s, has received the backing of the outlawed FIS as has Houcine Ait Ahmed, leader of the Socialist Forces Front. Both have called for the release of Islamist prisoners and the legalisation of the FIS.

Few ordinary people showed any interest in the elections. The principal candidates had nothing to offer the mainly young voters--two out of three are under 30. The FIS remains banned, despite the fact that its armed wing declared a cease-fire more than a year ago, in an attempt to reach a deal with the military regime.

Well before Zeroual's announcement, critics had questioned the fairness of the campaign. Four other candidates were barred from the final list. They included three opposition leaders--Mahfouth Nahnah, Louisa Hanoune and Nouredine Boukrouh. Nahnah was disqualified because he had not taken part in Algeria's war of independence, while the others, including former Prime Minister Sid Ahmed Ghazali, were disqualified because they had failed to get the necessary 75,000 signatures of support from at least 25 of Algeria's 48 administrative regions.

Despite Algeria's record, British Foreign Minister Derek Fatchett earlier expressed "satisfaction and optimism" about prospects for democracy in Algeria. In an interview published in the daily Echarq *Al Awsat* newspaper, Fatchett said Britain "did not see the need for foreign observers if Algeria itself does not call for them."



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