

Algeria: Record low election turnout as Berbers organise boycott

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In the May 30 elections, the National Liberation Front (FLN), the party of the military elite that has run Algeria since independence from France in 1962, increased its majority in the National People's Assembly but on an official turnout of 48 percent, the lowest since independence. Even this figure is widely regarded as fraudulent, with two opposition parties estimating a turnout of 15 to 20 percent as more realistic. The low turnout was in large part due to a boycott of the election in the Berber Kabylie region, where just two percent of the population voted. A quarter to one third of Algeria's population belongs to the Berber ethnic group.

The combined seats in the assembly taken by the FLN and the Democratic National Rally (RND), another party of the military establishment, have increased since the 1997 elections, a result that is likely to be rigged. Of the parties that stood in the election, the Islamist groups, the Movement for Society and Peace (MSP), the Ennahda (renaissance) Movement (EM) and the Movement for National Reform (MRN) had been expected to win a large part of the vote between them, if not a majority.

In the Kabylie region the boycott of the election as well as a regional general strike were called by local community leaders known as the Arouche. The demands of the Arouche are for greater government accountability and the withdrawal of the despised gendarmerie from Kabylie. Although in the run up to the election the government finally officially recognised the legitimacy of the Berber language—Tamazight—this did nothing to hold back the mass protest. Taking place over the five days leading up to the election, the general strike culminated in the almost total boycott. Shops, banks and government offices stayed shut and few people ventured out into the

streets.

Local youth referred to their aim as “zero-balloting”. Polling stations were seized and ballot boxes and papers burnt. The demonstrators also blocked off many roads throughout Kabylie with felled trees, concrete blocks and burning tyres. Access to some polling stations was blocked, including the Town Hall in Beni Douala, where a student was killed in police custody a year ago, sparking the current round of unrest. Only 175 of 880 polling stations in Kabylie opened at all.

The government responded to the strike and boycott call by banning foreign media from the Kabylie region, and sending in police reinforcements. Running battles ensued in Kabylie's two main cities, Tizi Ouzou and Bejaia, throughout the campaign. Police used teargas against thousands of youth armed only with stones. There were reports of plain-clothed security officers picking up stones and throwing them back at the youths, backing local claims that the government is using *agent provocateurs* to whip up anti-Berber racism.

Responding to the unrest and high feeling in Kabylie, the two main opposition parties who support the Berbers—the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD)—along with three other opposition parties were all forced to boycott the election.

The FFS and RCD have dominated Berber politics for many years, but are now largely moribund and confine their role to attempting to limit protest action. One commentator, Abdenasser Djabi, Sociology Lecturer at Algiers University, noted that almost 70 percent of Algeria's population is under 30 years of age. Spiralling unemployment—officially 30 percent but probably closer to 50 percent—means that many towns and villages are now full of unemployed young men.

The leaders of these unemployed youth support direct (i.e. Arouche) representation rather than political representation through the FFS or RCD.

The low election turnout was not only due to the Kabylie boycott, but the result of widespread disaffection throughout the country. Most Algerians regarded the election as a cosmetic affair, with the real power in the country in the hands of the military elite. Another factor in the stay-away in some parts of Algeria was the ongoing terrorist campaign of the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), which killed 23 people just hours before the polls opened, sowing fear in the surrounding regions.

The Algerian government has actively pursued a campaign against armed Islamic militants since the general election of 1991. When the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) gained a majority, the military organised a coup d'état and declared the FIS illegal, resulting in a civil war that is still continuing—albeit at a lower level than in the 1990s. Since the September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States, the Algerian government has received active backing from the Bush administration in its war with the Islamic rebels. Algerian President Bouteflika is the first Algerian president to visit Washington in 16 years.

The Algerian press have largely credited so-called moderniser, Prime Minister Benflis, with the FLN's election success. Since the FLN will not be forced to go into coalition with the old guard RND or the Islamist MSP, the media is predicting a faster pace of privatisation and liberalisation of Algeria's economy. On June 3, the new government announced that the state-owned gas and electricity monopoly, Sonelgaz, is to be split in two and privatised. Algeria has huge reserves of oil and gas and Western energy companies are queuing up for a share. The process started last year, with foreign investors building power plants and 30 percent of the domestic electricity market opened up to private suppliers.

Little of Algeria's oil and gas revenue finds its way to the population. Debt repayments, government corruption and the fall in oil prices have led to average per capita income halving over the last 10 years of a civil war that has claimed the lives of over 120,000 people. Many survive on less than a dollar a day. There are serious water shortages, acute housing shortages and spiralling unemployment.

Amnesty International has listed its particular concerns in Algeria: the killing of demonstrators, disappearances, intimidation of human rights workers, a ban on international observers and the absence of investigations of abuses. Western governments, however, appear satisfied with the direction taken by the regime. After the election US State Department spokesman Richard Boucher said, "We have seen progress in Algeria for greater democracy." Immediately after the election, top European Union officials visited Algiers to take part in secret talks following up an agreement between the EU and Algeria in April. Under the agreement, Algeria will introduce further trade liberalisation, including lifting import duties on EU industrial products, and will introduce further repressive measures in line with the "fight against crime, money-laundering, drugs and terrorism."



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