

Algerian presidential election gives Bouteflika a third term in office

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The April 9 presidential election in Algeria gave Abdelaziz Bouteflika a third term in office. Out of the 20 million eligible votes, a record high of 74 percent voter participation was officially recorded as compared to 55 percent in 2004. Bouteflika obtained more than 90 percent of votes, according to official polls, in a heavily rigged ballot.

Each the other five candidates taking part obtained less than five percent. Second, with 4.22 percent of votes, was Louisa Hanoune of the PT (Workers Party), who accused the government of various forms of fraud. Third placed was Moussa Touati of the FNA (Algerian National Front) with 2.31 percent of votes, followed by Djahid Younsi of El Islah (an Islamist party) with 1.37 percent. Ali Fawzi Rebaïne, a nationalist, obtained 0.93 percent and Mohamed Saïd of PJJ (the Islamic Justice and Liberty Party) 0.92 percent.

The two largest opposition parties, the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), with their main base in the northern region of Kabylie, had called for a boycott, citing the absence of “the conditions for a regular and transparent vote.”

Bouteflika’s re-election was a foregone conclusion. On 12 November he managed, through a change of the Algerian constitution that so far had limited the presidential mandates to two, to remove any limit on his holding office, and obtained overwhelming support for it in parliament. The French daily *Libération* wrote on April 9, “It is necessary to go back to last spring to understand the deal done at the top. On the one side the ‘decision-makers’, those Generals who run the country from the shadows, starting with Toufik (General Médiène), head of the secret services for decades... The deal was Bouteflika president for life while the ‘decision-makers’ organized the succession.”

Bouteflika’s entire election campaign was oriented towards mobilizing votes. There were reports of pressures exerted in particular on state employees to vote. The biggest fear of the Algerian political elite was a massive abstention. Doubts about the conduct of the election are reinforced by official reports of a 64 percent participation in the capital,

Algiers, where voter participation has never surpassed 35 percent.

Bouteflika, who first made his political career in the National Liberation Front (FLN) before being expelled, was elected president in 1999 as an independent candidate supported by the military and with all other candidates having withdrawn. He is closely linked to the richest sections of the Algerian bourgeoisie, as well as dominant sections of the Algerian state and military apparatus. The Algerian employer’s association (Forum des chefs d’entreprise—FCE) supported his election campaign.

Since he took power in 1999, promising to bring an end to a bloody civil war, he has implemented a program meant to create conditions for international capital to invest in Algeria as demanded by the major imperialist powers. This meant a further dismantling of state industry, which alongside agriculture was nationalized in the years following independence.

This tendency was partly reversed over the last year and a half. Recent laws now call for all foreign investment in Algeria to have an Algerian partner with a majority share. All importing companies need to have at least a 30 percent Algerian participation.

Social hardship experienced by the Algerian working class and poor peasants has worsened. Wages are extremely low, and the unemployment rate has increased. Social tensions have repeatedly exploded into conflict, as in the “Black Spring” events in Kabylie in 2001-2002, in which 90 ethnically Berber Kabyles were killed and 5,000 wounded.

Bouteflika used the high oil prices of the last period to reduce foreign debt and create important gold and foreign currency reserves. However, none of this money was used to improve the lot of the Algerian population. Bouteflika made a number of promises concerning social housing and employment during the election, but above all announced a plan of \$150 billion to improve infrastructure and encourage foreign investment. He also announced a tripling of the military budget from \$2.5 to \$6.25 billion dollars.

Bouteflika’s victory was welcomed heartily by French

President Nicolas Sarkozy, who expressed his attachment to “the construction of an exceptional partnership between France and Algeria.” France, the former colonial power in Algeria, still considers the Mediterranean area as its backyard, and the project for a Mediterranean economic union with an oil- and gas-producing country like Algeria is central to its plans.

The FLN was the backbone of the one-party state after independence from France in 1962, but began to lose its grip on power as a result of the economic crisis precipitated by a drastic fall in oil prices in the early 1980s. Algeria still depends on oil and gas exports for 98 percent of its foreign earnings. The government turned to the IMF for a bailout loan in 1988 and was obliged to implement a restructuring program, resulting in privatization and deregulation of the economy. Workers’ discontent increased, and 500 workers were killed in protests.

In parliamentary elections in 1991, the newly founded FIS party (Islamic Salvation Front) took 188 seats, with 82 percent of the popular vote, reducing the FLN to 15 seats. Initially active among students, the FIS had established a solid base among the poor through extensive charity work.

The military stepped in, closing down parliament, outlawing the FIS in 1992 and installing a military junta under Generals Khaled Nezzar and Mohamed Lamari. This resulted in a clandestine hunting down of the FIS and all opposition, leading to the massacre of 200,000 civilian victims in seven years. The FIS was itself manipulated by the government DRS intelligence services, which instigated the FIS armed guerrilla movement GIA to carry out terrorist atrocities in order to justify the military’s dictatorial rule.

Bouteflika was called in by the military to take over in 1999, enacting the National Reconciliation law, absolving the military of all blame and declaring an amnesty for the FIS.

The ruling elite now claims to be able to guide the country out of the world economic crisis, due to the state’s virtual monopoly of the banking system and its possession of the third-largest oil reserves in Africa. However, dependency on oil, whose price has plunged due to the world recession, is putting public works spending in question. Unemployment is 11.3 percent of the 10 million labour force, rising to 75 percent for those younger than 30.

In this situation Bouteflika, the FLN and the military confront no opposition from the left opposition parties or the trade unions.

The UGTA trade union (Union generale des Travailleurs algériens—General Union of Algerian Workers) supported Bouteflika in 1999, 2004 and the latest election campaign.

The PT, whose presidential candidate Louisa Hanoune came second, has 26 deputies in parliament. The party voted

to support Bouteflika’s change to the constitution, enabling him to stand for a third term. During the election campaign, Hanoune condemned the boycotting parties. She claimed that the amendment to the constitution had brought “more democracy”.

The PT is a petty-bourgeois nationalist organization, affiliated to the Entente Internationale des travailleurs et des peuples (International Alliance of Workers and Peoples), which is politically led by the Independent Workers Party (POI, formerly the PT of Pierre Lambert) of France.

The PT’s charter states that its basis for action “lies in the continuity of the Algerian national movement... It fights against any law or agreement which brings into question the unity of the republic, national social legislation or which threatens national industrial and agricultural production.”

The PT’s nationalist language did not differentiate it from the FLN, with the call for “total national sovereignty over our natural riches” and the “return of all our currency deposits held abroad, in order to protect them from the crisis and use them in a national economic policy that we will define in terms of our national needs”.

In 1995, the PT was a signatory to a document drawn up between left and right opposition parties gathered in Italy under the auspices of the Sant’Egidio Catholic community. The document appealed for negotiations around a “national contract” and for the non- involvement of the army in political affairs. Explicitly rejecting a revolutionary struggle against the military and accepting the preservation of capitalist property relations, the document called for “the rejection of violence to gain or maintain political power, and to respect political changeovers through universal suffrage and the multi party system.”

The military rejected the appeal out of hand.



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