

Special Report

Algerian Voters Prefer Problematic Status Quo to Possible Return to Black Years

By Marvine Howe



Accompanied by his daughter, a streetcleaner in the Algerian village of Tipasa casts his ballot. (Photo M. Howe)

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Algeria's recent presidential election was a victory of continuity over the specter of chaos, the fear of a return to the past violence that still haunts this oil- and gas-rich Mediterranean country, and the fear of unknown violence that has engulfed much of North Africa and the Middle East since the Arab Spring.

After three weeks of a well-organized if listless campaign in favor of the visibly ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, heated debate, and protests by oppositionists, Algerians went to the polls on April 17 and voted a fourth term for Bouteflika. The minister of interior announced the re-election of the president by an overwhelming 81.53 percent of the vote, a score described as "Breznevian" by the opposition daily *El Watan*. "It was a vote for stability and security," declared Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal, who headed the president's campaign, waged by six prominent proxies for the 77-year-old incumbent, who suffered a stroke a year ago and is confined to a wheelchair.

The big winners of the contest, however, were the abstentionists, who opposed the polls on the grounds that they were heavily skewed from the start with the full weight of the administration working for the Bouteflika campaign. Despite appeals for a massive turnout, participation was a disconcerting low 50.7 percent, compared to 74.5 percent in the last presidential elections of 2009, according to the official tally. Critics contested even this count as being inflated.

Although foreign policy did not figure much in the election—most Algerians agree on the government's robust multi-dimensional relations with the Arab world, especially Palestine, and with Europe, China, Africa and the United States—Bouteflika's campaign was heartily attacked for resorting to what appeared to be foreign backing. During the campaign, the reclusive president received successive visits from U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the emir of Qatar, Spain's Foreign Minister Jose Manuel Garcia-Margallo y Marfil, and U.N. Syrian mediator Lakhdar Brahimi, who is an Algerian citizen. Algerians were also annoyed at the president's complaint to the Spanish diplomat of verbal "terrorism" from his main adversary, former Prime Minister Ali Benflis.

While Bouteflika, who came to power in 1999, is widely credited with restoring peace and stability to Algeria after a decade of sectarian violence, a large sector of the population now demands change. There are widespread complaints of pervasive corruption in ruling circles, continued dependence on hydrocarbon resources and failure to develop industry and agriculture, high youth unemployment, poor quality education and a dearth of housing. The important Berber or Amazigh minority has become increasingly vocal in its struggle for equal language rights with the Arab majority, and the militant Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylie demands even more. Even some members of the military leadership that has dominated politics since independence half a century ago fear the uncertainty of a physically weakened president, and openly sought an alternative to Bouteflika's re-election.

Nevertheless, the Bouteflika organization remains a powerful force. This was evident the last day of the campaign at a mass rally in the huge Olympic Stadium pavilion on the outskirts of Algiers. One of the worst traffic jams in the history of this traffic-clogged city was caused by countless buses bringing Bouteflika fans from municipalities all over the country. Thousands of people milled around the pavilion, which had topped its

capacity of 10,000. Banners displayed names of sponsors of the event, mostly entrepreneurial groups, but there was also a strong contingent of women, some carrying Bouteflika posters, others wearing the organization's white baseball caps.

The crowd enthusiastically showed its support with whistles, shouts, applause and traditional youyou's—although Bouteflika was absent and the main speaker, Prime Minister Sellal, is not very popular. Bouteflika's only public appearances since his stroke were a glimpse through a car window when he presented his candidacy, and in the polling station, where he voted from a wheelchair. Visitors who have been in contact with the president recently say that while he is physically diminished, his mind is still sharp.

“The president is very popular with women's organizations because of all he has done for women, particularly changes to the Family Code, which ended the practice of repudiation,” said Naama Abbas, director of the pro-government daily *El Moudjahid*. She believes that the criticism and cartoons about the president's poor health has produced a groundswell of support for him. “Algerians are sentimental and don't like to see the president attacked when he's down,” she said.

Bouteflika's main rival, Benflis, came in second with 12.18 percent of the 11,307,478 votes. A former premier and justice minister, Benflis rejected the results, declaring: “I forcefully condemn the massive use of fraud to perpetuate the current regime.” A campaign spokesman said some of Benflis' poll-watchers had been prevented from carrying out their tasks, but stressed that “the first fraud” was a violation of the Constitution, which excludes a president not medically fit for the job.

The only woman of the six candidates, Workers' Party leader Louisa Hanoune, came in fourth, with a mere 1.37 percent of the vote and a stunning loss of 400,000 votes compared to her performance in 2009. “Our voters preferred to vote for Bouteflika against Benflis,” Hanoune explained in an interview, adding that young people, women and workers were “afraid of instability.”

Among the five parties boycotting the election was the Society Movement for Peace (MSP), formerly part the governing coalition. Dr. Abderazzak Makri, president of the moderate Islamic-rooted party, declared that they had supported Bouteflika's policy of national reconciliation until the return of stability in 2012. “But we saw the country was not moving toward democracy,” he said in an interview at party headquarters in Algiers. “We want change at all levels—particularly economic—and an end to dependence on oil and gas revenue.”

Commenting on the elections, Makri claimed that mathematically, participation couldn't have been more than 20 percent, but stressed it was impossible to control the results because the authorities refused to present the lists of voters.

Elections in Algeria have not enjoyed a good name since 1991, when the army cancelled the country's first multiparty legislative elections, in which the Islamic Salvation Front had won a landslide first round vote.

“Things have changed now,” emphasized Abdelkader Messahel, the amiable minister of communications. He noted that the 2012 Election Law provides guarantees against irregularities, namely that all candidates have the right to post observers at all polls. Even the counting process is open to citizens, he said, adding that “fraud is impossible.” Messahel also boasted about the freedom of the Algerian press, although he said “there is a lack of training and professionalism; this leads to numerous libel suits, but it should be corrected by the new Press

Law.”

The center of abstention was the Amazigh region of Kabylie, where the participation in the capital province of Tizi Ouzou was officially said to be 20.01 percent. There were reports of clashes between youths burning tires, damaging polling stations, blocking the highway and security forces responding with tear gas. Some 60 people were injured. A number of militants were detained and released the following day.

A tour of numerous polling stations, mostly in schools, in cities along the coast east and west of Algiers revealed a calm, orderly election process with no reports of incidents. No lines were visible and only a sprinkling of voters could be seen exercising their civic duty, confirming the statistics on the low turnout. In the showcase city of Boumerdes, rebuilt after the devastating 2003 earthquake, poll-watchers were present for the main candidates—Bouteflika, Benflis and Hanoune—but there was little to observe. Visitors were told that women were busy with household chores and would vote in the afternoon; there was no explanation for the absence of male voters. It was a similar scene west of Algiers, at the seaside resorts of Zeralda and Tipasa, where men were said to have shown up earlier and women expected later.

Disinclined to Vote

The capital of Algiers traditionally shows a high abstention rate. In the suburb of Hydra, however, the mayor boasted that voting was up, with 20 percent participation as of early afternoon over 12 percent in 2009. Overall participation for Algiers was said to be 37 percent, again with many largely empty polling stations in late afternoon. Near one poll in the center of the city, a group of seniors was seen enjoying the mild sunny day and playing dominos. When asked, several people said they had not voted because “the results were known in advance.” While a group of three service workers said fatalistically that the election wouldn’t change anything, two women employees in the Justice Ministry who had just voted expressed the hope that the government would fulfill campaign promises to resolve the urgent housing, unemployment and youth problems.

At the Café Theatre L’Escalier des Artistes in downtown Algiers, there was a continuous flow of young people and a few elders, enjoying the election day holiday and the live band lustily playing blues, jazz and rai. A group of youths in their 20s acknowledged they hadn’t voted. “It won’t change anything, but people prefer to stay like this than to return to the Black Years [the local expression for the decade of blood-letting in the 1990s that left some 200,000 dead],” said a political science student. A free-lance decorator noted that elections were useless, that it was necessary “to change people’s mentality.” A Ph.D. student in mechanical engineering said that young people are sick of unfulfilled promises, adding bluntly: “Honest men don’t go into politics and if they do, they have conflicts with the leadership.” A different view came from a 24-year-old woman who works for a telephone company: “I didn’t vote for the president because he is sick, but I adore and respect him. He has done a lot for women, like improving the divorce law; now he has to give priority to jobs for young people.”

A new group of young people called Barakat, or “Enough is Enough,” sprang up prior to the election and is determined to continue its protest demonstrations, which have been forcefully repressed by the police. Led by a heretofore unknown gynecologist, Amira Bouraoui, Barakat is described as a “citizen’s movement.” Co-founder and journalist Mehdi Bsikri, 31, said following the election: “We want to change the system peacefully and are now drafting our platform.”

Several days after the election, Benflis announced that he was pursuing his struggle for change and in coming months would set up a new political movement with supporters of his campaign. Nazim Zouioueche, an adviser, said Benflis hopes to unite all the different political trends, including Nationalist, Islamic, liberal and centrist, around a program to extricate Algeria from its present crisis.

In the Maison de la Presse, a media compound established for the press in 1990, when journalists were special targets of the reign of terror, Omar Belhouchet, director of the leading opposition newspaper *El Watan*, declared that despite irregularities, the 2014 election is different. “For three months, we’ve seen a real political debate,” the prize-winning journalist said, pointing out that for the first time, prominent figures from the regime, both civilian and military, have spoken out publicly on the need for change. He mentioned specifically former Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche, who refused to support Bouteflika’s candidacy for re-election. Several generals also opposed a fourth Bouteflika term, namely intelligence chief Gen. Mohamed Medienne and Gen. Tahar Yala. At the same time, Benflis seems prepared to fight the system. “We’re in a new situation and could see the construction of a real counter-power,” Belhouchet concluded.

Then, a couple of days after the election celebrations, two violent incidents occurred in Kabylie. First a military bus was ambushed late at night in Tizi Ouzou province by a group of terrorists said to belong to AQIM, or al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. According to a Defense Ministry communiqué, 11 soldiers and 3 terrorists were killed in the 4-hour combat that ensued. In an unrelated event, riot police violently disbanded a peaceful march in Tizi Ouzou called to celebrate “Berber Spring,” with numerous arrests, on the pretext that the rally wasn’t authorized. This march is organized annually on April 20 and was held without incident in other Kabylie towns.

It’s as if Algerians needed a reminder that the Black Years can return. 