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# Does Bouteflika's Candidacy Preclude Change in Algeria?

Policy Analysis Unit

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Series: [Situation Assessment](#)

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### Policy Analysis Unit

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In a message directed to the general public, Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika (82 years old) announced his candidacy for the fifth presidential term in the elections to be held on 18 April 2019. This may be a clear signal that he will be staying in power, after speculation that he may step down from the elections this year given that his health could hinder his ability to execute presidential duties. This decision could lead some of the most prominent opposition candidates to reconsider their candidacy. Many see that there is no real opportunity to win given that Bouteflika's candidacy is supported by the two major parties and the army. There are also doubts about the neutrality of the electoral supervision authority.

## Candidacy Announcement or Electoral Program?

In his message, President Bouteflika presented a list of the achievements of his administration over the past two decades. He reminded the Algerians of his efforts to end the bloody conflict of the 1990s (referred to as the “black decade”) following the annulment of elections won by the Islamic Salvation Front in December 1991. He also recalled his economic successes, represented in “freeing the country from debts, the collection of exchange reserves and the creation of significant public savings” in a way that enabled “Algeria to withstand the collapse of oil prices in recent years and allowed it to continue down the path of development”.<sup>(1)</sup> He also brought up the social achievements of his administration, speaking about the provision of housing, water, energy, education, health and employment opportunities, combating unemployment and supporting the ascension of women in the political, economic and social sectors. He expressed his determination to continue his presidential duties, despite acknowledging his health, recalling his role in the war of national liberation that led to Algeria's liberation from French colonialism in 1962.

The president acknowledged the many challenges he would have to confront; most crucially building a “competitive and productive economy” to free the country of excessive oil dependency. He also recognized the erosion of the country's resources, the spread of corruption and low productivity, and called for national political consensus to meet these challenges. He promised that if he were to win in the 2019 presidential elections that “in the course of this year, all the political, economic and social forces of the populace will convene a national symposium that will establish a consensus on the reforms and transformations that the country should undergo in order to go further than ever in building its destiny”. He also called for greater participation of civil society in the fight against corruption, enhancing the citizen's contribution to the conduct of local affairs, and a greater role for the private sector in job creation and increasing the country's income.

The insistence of Algeria's ruling establishment on the nomination of Bouteflika, despite widespread popular criticism that has touched on ridicule, indicates that there is no “natural” alternative agreed upon by the ruling elite and subsequently a desire to postpone the conflict on this issue. Indeed, the

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1 “The full text of the message from President Bouteflika to the nation to announce his candidacy for the presidential elections”, Radio Algeria, 10/2/2019, last accessed 13/2/2109 at: <https://bit.ly/2Sm6Q74>



issue concerning Algerians (despite the discontent and indignation from limiting candidacy to one person as if there is no other option) is not to replace one person from the ruling elite with another, but rather reforms and the nature of the next regime. The most important legacy that Bouteflika can leave behind, apart from curtailing the political role of the army, to a large extent, is the political and economic reforms that he can enforce during his presidency.

## Election Mechanism

This is the first presidential election following Algeria's constitutional amendment of March 2016, in which presidential mandates (lasting 5 years) were redefined to be renewable only once. The elections of April 2019 are regulated by Organic Law No. 10-16, issued in August 2016,<sup>(2)</sup> which prescribes that the presidential elections be held by single-majority suffrage by absolute majority, with the possibility of moving to a second round in which the most successful candidates will participate in the first session in the case of failure to achieve absolute majority.<sup>(3)</sup> The presidential elections, according to the organic law, undergo four main stages:

- The first stage: Invoking the electorate by presidential decree (Article 136). This shall be done no more than 90 days of the polling.
- The second stage: Submitting a candidacy file to the Constitutional Council. The file must contain a collection of personal documents and a list of at least 600 individual signatures of elected members of municipal, state or parliamentary councils distributed across at least 25 of the 48 states or at least 60,000 individual signatures of people registered in the electoral register, with no less than 1,500 signatures in each state. This shall be submitted 45 days after the publication of the presidential decree calling for the electing of the electorate (Article 142).
- The third stage: Examining the validity of the nominations and a decision by the Constitutional Council thereon, within 10 days of the files being submitted. The decision shall be published in the official journal.
- The fourth stage: voting begins.

## Most Prominent Competitors

Around 172 candidates submitted their nominations by the end of January 2019, including party leaders and independents. The Constitutional Council still has to consider the validity of their nominations, but the competition will likely be limited to three candidates:

<sup>2</sup> Republic of Algeria, Ministry of the Interior, Local Communities and Urbanization, Organic Law No. 10 - 16 dated 22 Dhu'lqa'dah 1437, corresponding to 25 August 2016, relating to the electoral system, *Journal Officiel* No. 50, last accessed 8/2/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2SLIEVY>

<sup>3</sup> Articles 137-138



## Abdelaziz Bouteflika

Abdelaziz Bouteflika is the strongest candidate in the upcoming presidential elections. He is the candidate in Algeria known for the presidential alliance uniting the National Liberation Front (FLN) party that has ruled since independence and the National Democratic Rally (NDP), the secretary-general of which is Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia. The alliance also includes parties Tajamou Amel el Djazair and Algerian Popular Movement.<sup>(4)</sup> Bouteflika also enjoys the support of the army. His main strength is his control of the administration, due to the penetration of the presidential coalition in the government, and the locally and federally-elected councils. In addition, he holds strong influence within the Constitutional Council, which consists of 14 members, a third of whom are appointed by Bouteflika, including the president and his deputy.<sup>(5)</sup> A new president will be appointed to the council in the coming days following the death of its former president, Mourad Medelci.<sup>(6)</sup>

Bouteflika is also the candidate of the business class that supports the regime. President of the Algerian Business Leaders forum, Ali Haddad, made clear his support for Bouteflika if he ran for a fifth term. The importance the pro-Bouteflika presidential alliance having control of the administration comes down to the following two points:

- His ability to secure a positive decision from the Constitutional Council: The task of passing a file to nominate the incumbent president for the fifth term appears routine, despite his health problems. The law requires a medical certificate indicating the health status of those wishing to run.<sup>(7)</sup> Bouteflika, however, managed to get the council's approval when he ran for the 2014 elections.
- Harnessing the state bureaucracy and resources in support of Bouteflika's campaign: All candidates benefit from the state bureaucracy and resources during their election campaigns. But President Bouteflika will be the biggest beneficiary by virtue of the parties of the presidential alliance being so deeply entwined with the elected councils, departments and the official media, which are transformed into propaganda devices in the service of the president's campaign.

## Abderrazak Makri

The Movement of Society for Peace party (MSP) decided to participate in the presidential elections with the nomination of its president Abderrazak Makri. This reflects their return since their absence from presidential elections since 1995, in which the movement's founder Mahfouz Nahnah came

<sup>4</sup> Othman Leahyani, "Algeria: parties of the presidential alliance officially announce Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term," *The New Arab*, 2/2/2019, last accessed 10/2/2019 at: <https://bit.ly/2HX6cYG>

<sup>5</sup> Article 183 of the Algerian constitution.

<sup>6</sup> Asma B., "President of the Algerian Business Leaders forum, Ali Haddad: I support the fifth term if Bouteflika is nominated," *Al-Shorouk Online*, 3/1/2018, last accessed 10/2/2019.

<sup>7</sup> Article 139 of the Electoral law.

in second place after former president Liamine Zéroual with 26% of the vote. While the movement supported President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in the elections of 1999, 2004 and 2009, the party boycotted the 2014 elections in protest against Bouteflika's candidature.<sup>(8)</sup>

The MSP (affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood) is one of the strongest Islamic political groups in Algeria. But that does not make Makri a consensus among all Islamists. On the contrary, his candidacy comes amid severe divisions within Islamic political parties over contrasting views regarding the regime and the opposition. The differences between Islamist movements has led to the nomination of two candidates to challenge Makri. El Binaa (Mouvement de construction nationale) nominated its president Abdelkader Bengrina, Al Islah MRN (Movement for National Reform), supports the nomination of Bouteflika, and Abdallah Djabballah, president of the FJD Adala (Justice and Development Front) has not yet announced any nomination.<sup>(9)</sup>

Makri's candidacy reflects a sudden change in MSP's reading of the political arena and the importance of participating in the elections. Makri, just months before elections were set, argued that MSP participation would be difficult if the president planned a fifth term.<sup>(10)</sup> This opens the door wide to questions about the guarantees received by the movement, especially with regard to its post-election position.

## Ali Benflis

Ali Benflis began collecting signatures but the final division of validity for the candidate files has not yet been completed, delayed further by the Bouteflika announcement. The Talaie el-Hourriyet party, headed by Benflis, is split between two points of view regarding the elections. The first agrees with the participation and sees it as a marketing opportunity the party, its objectives and its manifesto. The second rejects a repeat of the 2014 elections won by Bouteflika, preferring to boycott since real competition is practically impossible in the light of Bouteflika's candidacy and the lack of neutrality of the authority responsible for organizing the elections.

Ben Felis was popular when he declared his candidacy against Bouteflika in 2014, although he was part of the ruling regime, and at that time appeared to be better positioned to confront the president because he was part of the regime and was aware of its internal structure. However, he was unable to win because his party, was new on the scene at the time. He had no significant influence or support from the state bureaucracy or the military. Nor did he enter into alliances with other parties. He still has no strong media connections to speak of.

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<sup>8</sup> Final Communiqué of the Second Ordinary Session of the National Shura Council (January 2019)," The Movement of Society for Peace, 26/1/2019, last accessed 2/10/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2GADECK>

<sup>9</sup> C Solomon, "The Islamists are closer to Bouteflika than they are to each other," Khobar, 3/2/2019, last accessed 10/2/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2SsCGPK>

<sup>10</sup> The Movement of Society for Peace, "Movement leader Abderrazak Makri: Presidential Elections of 2019 and the current crisis," last accessed 10/2/2019, at: <https://bit.ly/2TGI8ft>



## Conclusion

Bouteflika's nomination has been considered a political shutdown, leaving the election outcome seemingly predetermined. Bouteflika is the candidate of the ruling party and the presidential coalition that controls the bureaucratic apparatus of the Algerian state and enjoys the support of the army and the business class, betting on people's desire for stability. In light of this, it is not unlikely that the most prominent candidates will withdraw from the race (Benflis or Makri) in the coming days as they are unable to compete with the coalition resources behind the president, financial or media, or with his influence in governance and administration.