



المركز العربي للأبحاث ودراسة السياسات
Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

Situation Assessment | 15 September 2024

Understanding Algeria's Presidential Election

Unit for Political Studies

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Series: **Situation Assessment**

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On 7 September, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune was re-elected for a second five-year term. The initial results showed that he won with more than 94 per cent of votes cast, according to the electoral board ANIE. These results have since been revised and reduced to 84 per cent of the votes cast. This was the second presidential election in the North African country since the mass protest movement, *Hirak*, in 2019, which forced President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to step down after 20 years in office.

Tebboune's first term saw profound shifts in Algeria's political landscape, most notably the decline of the opposition and a growing trend of parties and other political forces supporting the central authorities. Most of those parties also elected new leaders, while state institutions were also restructured under a constitutional amendment approved by referendum in December 2020.

Pluralistic – in Principle

The September poll was contested by the smallest number of hopefuls since Algeria's first multi-candidate presidential election in 1995. Two of them represented political parties: Abdelaali Hassani Cherif (58) of the Islamist/conservative Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) and Youcef Aouchiche (41) of the Socialist Forces Front (FFS). The third candidate was the incumbent Tebboune, 79, who – like the victors in all Algeria's presidential elections since 1995 – ran as an independent but with quiet support from the country's key power brokers, namely the military and the state bureaucracy.

Four parties that had previously fielded candidates in 2019 (the National Construction Movement, the National Democratic Rally, the Future Front, and the Vanguard of Liberties Party) opted to back Tebboune's run for a second term. They joined the National Liberation Front (FLN), which leads a bloc holding a majority in the People's National Assembly, and 14 other parties to back the president's efforts to "complete" his political and economic program.

It was only the MSP's second presidential poll. Its founder Mahfoud Nahnah ran in 1995 and came second to Liamine Zéroual, with a quarter of the vote. The FFS ran in the 1999 elections, but eventually withdrew in protest, along with the rest of the candidates, claiming the entire contest had been rigged in advance in favour of the military's candidate, Bouteflika.

The MSP is the only opposition party in the current parliament, and the only other party that backed the MSP's candidate was the small Islamist party Ennahda. The FFS, Algeria's oldest opposition party, had boycotted the 2019 elections as well as the June 2021 parliamentary polls, arguing that the *Hirak*'s demands had not been met, and that any election held under the conditions at the time would not be fair or transparent. This, and its general stance as an opposition party, meant that its Secretary-General's decision to contest this year's elections came as something of a surprise. The party's new leadership, shifts in Algeria's political environment and its fear of losing its symbolic status may all have contributed to its decision to abandon its policy of boycott.



Multiple Manifestos

President Tebboune campaigned under the slogan “For a victorious Algeria,” talking up his economic, social, and political achievements since his election in 2019. His supporters emphasized the social gains purportedly delivered by his redistribution measures, wage and unemployment benefit hikes, and support for government housing programmes. Tebboune pledged to continue “implementing the various reforms and development programs that he initiated during his first term, such as the development of marginalized areas, job creation and housing.”¹

During the election campaign, Tebboune and his supporters repeatedly claimed that Algeria was under attack and that foreign powers were conspiring against it. The president himself promoted these messages in a speech at his last election rally in the capital on 3 September, saying that “Algeria has become a target” and stressing the need for the country to be “strong, to defend its inviolability and its voice.”²

Cherif ran on what he called a “national, centrist, unifying message, aiming for reform and change through a democratic, peaceful, non-confrontational, moderate, non-extremist, inclusive and egalitarian approach.”³ Unlike the incumbent’s programme, Cherif’s “*forsa*” (Opportunity) manifesto pledged to enact constitutional and institutional reforms, identifying five policy areas he would prioritize if elected: reforming the political system, creating a broad political partnership, establishing an effective and appropriate institutional environment, deepening the social character of the state, formulating a progressive economic model, and raising Algeria’s status on the international stage.⁴ The movement’s emphasis on the political dimension reflected a widespread belief that the margin of political freedom in Algeria has shrunk in recent years.

Aouchiche’s manifesto emphasized that the FLS was taking part in the elections in order to protect the state, revive the political process and work to create a national, progressive and democratic political camp.⁵ He planned to do this through a radical overhaul of political and institutional life, including the adoption of a semi-presidential system that would give greater powers to parliament, in order to achieve a more effective balance between the branches of government.⁶ Aouchiche also proposed to amend legislation on political participation, such as a law on elections, parties, associations and the media, and pledged to hold early general elections on the basis of the new law before the end of 2025.

1 “Mourad: ‘Candidate Tebboune will continue his efforts to protect the dignity of Algerians,’” Radio Algeria, 27/8/2024, accessed 9/12/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/3MDPY5w>.

2 “Independent candidate Mr. Abdelmadjid Tebboune pledges to give the youth a ‘decent status’ and review many laws”, Algeria Press Service, 3/9/2024, viewed on 12/9/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/4ekOAQO>.

3 “Election manifesto,” Abdelaali Hassani Cherif’s campaign website, accessed 12/9/24 (in Arabic) at: <https://bit.ly/4d2cgZd>.

4 Ibid.

5 “A Vision of Tomorrow: The Manifesto of the Socialist Forces Front for the Presidential Election of 7 September 2024,” accessed 12/9/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://bit.ly/47lzOHx>.

6 “Algerian Presidential Elections: The Main Points of Candidate Youcef Aouchiche’s Manifesto,” *AL24 News*, 14/8/2024, accessed 14/9/2024 (in Arabic), at: <https://tinyurl.com/23nnyxce>.



The candidates differed little on their approaches to the economic and social challenges facing Algeria, especially the questions of job creation, food security, economic diversification, and reducing the country's dependence on rent from fossil fuel exports. Their views also converged on how to manage Algeria's foreign relations, addressing the threats posed by its troubled neighbourhood, and supporting the Palestinian and Sahrawi causes.

The election campaign passed off calmly, with no major violations recorded except for accusations that state media were biased and gave more airtime to the incumbent than to his rivals. The candidates did not exchange direct public accusations, with the exception of the two opposition candidates' implicit criticisms of Tebboune's political and economic record.

Tebboune only took part in three electoral rallies in person, in Constantine, Oran, and Algiers. His campaign manager, Interior Minister Ibrahim Mourad, and leaders of his political party backers did the rest of the campaigning. By contrast, Cherif and Aouchiche visited all 58 provinces of the country, trying to mobilise the "silent majority" of voters who abstained from voting in previous elections (who amounted to 60 per cent in 2019). Yet Tebboune's rivals realized the scale of their challenge, given the amount of support and resources enjoyed by the president.

Results and Turnout

Tebboune was able to clinch the election in the first round, as had been widely expected. Yet his share of the vote raised some eyebrows; preliminary results suggested that he received more than 94 per cent of the vote, over 381,000 votes more than he received in 2019, while Cherif and Aouchiche received 3.17 per cent and 2.16 per cent, respectively. These numbers have been revised later but have not changed the outcome in any major way.

These results can be partly explained by the fact that Tebboune's rivals are still relatively unknown, having only recently risen to the leadership of their parties. This meant he had no competition from heavyweight political figures. Yet a large number of parties and civil society organizations mobilised behind the president, who has also enjoyed the support of Algeria's military leadership since his first, successful run in 2019.

All three candidates' campaigns condemned what they said was "ambiguity" in the election results announced by the ANIE, especially discrepancies between the announced results and those recorded in vote counting records.⁷ However, this unlikely to affect the final result in any significant way.

Perhaps what is most striking about the election is the large number of abstentions and blank ballots. According to preliminary figures announced by the ANIE the day after the polls, only 5,630,000 Algerians cast ballots – about 23 per cent of registered voters. It may be that voters refrained from

⁷ "Tebboune and his rivals condemn 'opacity' in announcing election results in Algeria," *Independent Arabia*, 9/9/2024, accessed 12/9/2024 (in Arabic) at: <https://tinyurl.com/4aapcyth>.



taking part as they believed the outgoing president was set to win regardless, with neither of his rivals having sufficient political weight to mount a successful challenge. However, casting blank ballots is also a form of boycott, one which expresses a loss of confidence in the country's institutions and political process, despite President Tebboune's repeated claims that trust in the system has been restored thanks to the "constitutional reforms" he pushed through during his first term.

Tebboune's Challenges

Despite having decisively beaten his rivals, President Tebboune faces major challenges in his second term. First, he needs to complete his programme of political reforms. Secondly, the country's continued dependence on energy export revenues may cause an imbalance in government revenues and a decline in public investment if energy prices fall, as is expected. The impact of this will also extend to social policy and government allocations to less developed regions and the most vulnerable groups.

The president also faces challenges in foreign policy and Algeria's international alliances, especially after the country's request to join the BRICS group was rejected in 2023. Furthermore, it faces continued instability in neighboring Libya and in other areas across the Sahel. Algeria's relations with France and other European Union countries remain tense on the political level, despite their intertwined economic interests. Algeria has played a surprisingly minor role against Israel's ongoing genocidal war against the Palestinian people since October 2023, apart from its activity as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. The question of Algeria's relations with its Maghreb neighbours will be at the top of the president's priorities during his new term, as he seeks to strengthen relations with Tunisia and Mauritania and to support a political solution in Libya. Algeria's perennially strained relations with Morocco are not expected to improve, as the underlying causes of their differences have not gone away.

Finally, given the nature of the Algerian system, the president is expected to begin grooming potential candidates to lead the country when his second term ends. Starting with the upcoming parliamentary elections, this could sow divisions among the parties making up Tebboune's coalition, as they barter over who should lead parliament and over the distribution of ministerial portfolios. The president must also manage his special relationship with the military, to avoid any tension and to ensure he continues to enjoy the backing of the country's most powerful institution as he pursues his agenda.