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Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies

ASSESSMENT REPORT

The Challenges Ahead for Algeria's Newly Elected Parliament

Policy Analysis Unit | May 2017

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Introduction

On May 4, 2017, Algeria held its first legislative elections since the constitutional amendments of 2016. The elections were contested by over 12,000 candidates, standing for more than 57 political parties and electoral blocs which ran across multi-member constituencies. The results indicated a clean sweep for regime-aligned groups—Bouteflika loyalists—that represent vested interests in the country. The ruling National Liberation Front (FLN), together with the National Rally for Democracy (RND), the Algerian Popular Movement, the Rally for Hope for Algeria (TAJ) and the National Republican Alliance won 305 of 462 seats, totaling over two-thirds of parliamentary representation.

In contrast, parties within the formal opposition which had participated in the polls acquired no more than 59 seats (less than 13%). The remaining seats were won by a collection of small groups on the leftist fringe. This includes the Socialist Forces Front (14), the oldest standing opposition party and the Workers' Party (PT) led by Louisa Hannoune (11). Abdelaziz Beleid's Future Front, which had taken third place in the last presidential elections held in Algeria, took 14 seats. Other, smaller groups took between one and three seats.

These results not only give the ruling power brokers in the country an outright majority and a mandate to retain power, but also reflect the declining power of the opposition groups. This has spurred many in the opposition to contest the outcome, alleging electoral fraud.

The Economic Backdrop

These elections took place against the backdrop of an economic crisis, triggered by the sharp decline in crude oil prices, the main source of income for the Algerian state. A series of measures brought in by Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal have been widely regarded as unjustified austerity measures, while the 2017 budget has further tightened the already stringent budget of 2016. Fiscal measures brought in by the Sellal government incited public resentment, as well as charged political discussion in parliament. Nonetheless, the majority of parliamentarians loyal to the ruling party ensured that the budgets passed. As a result, many Algerians blamed their legislators for their economic hardships, and thus boycotted the polls. Even the Algerian authorities has acknowledged that of over 23 million registered voters, only 8

million cast their ballots on May 4. This year's participation rate of 38% declined from the 43% of registered voters who took to the polls in 2012.

Another distinctive feature of the 2017 poll is the generally balanced tone of political rhetoric on the part of political leaders: the media was free of the charged bombast which marked the 2014 presidential elections. Adherence to this level of restraint was ensured by a circular distributed by the Algerian Ministry of Information, which had reminded media institutions, and especially television broadcasters, of the need to remain neutral, at the same time reminding them not to give proponents of an election boycott any airtime. Some of the very few exceptions to this general rule came, in fact, from two distinct parties in the pro-regime camp, with leaders of FLN and the RND trading recriminations over their rights to claim loyalty to sitting president, the octogenarian Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Beyond that, however, electoral platforms were largely free of substantive political aims.

Public Apathy

A reading of the election results illustrates that an earlier public disenchantment with parliament, and non-participation in the polls, has in fact translated into an all-out boycott. The Algerian public hold their legislators responsible for rubber stamping economic plans which have upset the quality of life for a majority of the country's citizens. While 63% of eligible voters shunned the polls to begin with, 10% of those who did vote cast spoiled ballots. The groups boycotting the polls included not only political operatives and civil society activists, but also members of the general public who resented the process.

In fact, while a coalition of 19 political parties, ranging from secular leftists to Islamists, called for the formation of an independent electoral commission during their meeting on March 30, 2016, no clear directive was issued on whether or not to boycott the polls. In the end, most of the constituent groups within the coalition did indeed take part in the elections. Two prominent boycotters included a movement led by former Prime Minister Ali Benflis and the Jil Jdid movement, which called on their followers to boycott the polls as a means of remaining true to the aims of the opposition.

Jil Jdid initiated the call for a complete boycott of the polls, on the premise that that the new electoral law did entail the formation of a new and independent electoral commission to oversee voting. Benflis' "Vanguard of Freedom" later decided to join the boycott first called for by Jil Jdid. In addition to the electoral law's shortfalls, the Vanguard of Freedom concluded at a

meeting of its Central Committee that, with all power concentrated firmly in the presidency, even taking part in parliament was useless.

Algeria's Party Political Landscape

The general contours of the Algerian party political landscape witnessed broad changes recently. These include the formation of new political blocs loyal to the ruling clique, including TAJ, the Popular Movement and the National Republican Alliance. These medium-sized, recently formed parties have joined the traditionally loyalist FLN and the RND in backing incumbent Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

In contrast to these groups, a new spate of opposition blocs also formed during the spring of 2014. This new coalition took shape for the first time during the first Mazafran Congress that brought together a number of prominent opposition figures under one roof for the first time. They included the leaders of political parties that had earlier declined to take part in Algeria's presidential polls, including the Coordinating Committee for Democratic Transition which brought together the Movement of Society for Peace, the Ennahda and the Rally for Culture and Democracy. In addition to Benflis, former Prime Minister Ahmed Benbaitur was also a member.

Some parties on the left, such as the PT, chose to maintain their focus on economic issues without openly declaring their stance on the existing government one way or another. The Front of Socialist Forces, meanwhile, chose to present a conciliatory approach based on dialogue with the government, calling for a nation-wide consensus. The Beleid-led Future Front also opted for a non-confrontational tone, seeking to play down the differences between the Algerian government in power and the opposition. All of these opposition groups were motivated by the need to avoid the fate of Syria and Libya.

Party Political Participation

Algeria's last electoral law, passed on August 25, 2016, set out clear rules for participation in the elections. In order to field candidates in a specific constituency, political parties would have to either have secured 4% of votes cast in that district during the previous elections, or have secured the signatures of 250 voters for each of the seats in any given electoral district. This debilitated smaller political parties, effectively barring them from contesting many seats. A last-

minute government decision allowed some of these smaller groups a chance to participate by forming electoral coalitions in which the total of votes won by each of the constituent parties could be counted towards a single tally. This allowed the Movement for the Society of Peace and other smaller groups to take part.

By making this decision, the Algerian authorities were able to attract a wider range of political movements to the vote, in a move to guarantee the constitutional cover, and the political legitimacy they need to pass their economic plans. In light of diminishing oil revenues, when the powers in Algiers are likely to resort to unpopular measures such as raising subsidies on essential items, this was sorely needed. Today, the Algerian government knows what it needs: a compliant parliament which will pass the 2018 budget while preserving social calm to the greatest extent possible until the end of Bouteflika's fourth term as president.

Conclusion

For those who dreamt of a genuine democratic transition following the constitutional amendments of 2016, this month's elections in Algeria were a bitter disappointment. The results merely consolidated the power of the same coterie of people. Yet others can see an important step towards the selection, finally, of a successor to Bouteflika. The conduct of the campaigns merely served to heighten rumors in this regard: Ahmed Ouyahia, a former regime insider, was seen by many to have run a campaign with presidential ambitions. He would be an obvious contender for the leadership of the executive.

Similarly, Mouloud Hamrouche, another former regime insider who had previously presided over a governmental reform program when the country was transitioning to political pluralism, was seen by many to present a rhetoric which was conciliatory to the military and the state apparatus. This is clearly intended to prove that he can be trusted as a caretaker president, with the backing of the barracks, in a post-Bouteflika transition. Finally, the aspirations of Ali Benflis, who twice challenged Bouteflika—in 2004, and 2014, are noteworthy. Benflis has been in a constant state of preparedness for any chance to succeed to the presidency. In the midst of all this confusion, a group of presidential advisers and businessmen have also suggested that Bouteflika's brother Said might also be a contender for the presidency in the future.

In other words, while the latest elections haven't entirely dispelled the myth and doubts surrounding who will replace Abdelaziz Bouteflika, there is no doubt that Algeria's parliament will have its work cut out in balancing the different contenders for power, and deciding who will be anointed.