

Algeria after Elections:

What Next?

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Brief Analysis

The results of the Algerian election suggest that about 80 percent of the Algerian people (at least those who voted) favor separating "mosque" and "state." This outcome is significant because it indicates that Algerians are successfully resisting "Islamic totalitarianism." Many Algerians have said that the vote wasn't as clean as they would have liked it to have been. But while credibility is important when conducting elections, a certain amount of cheating occurs in every democratic election, including those in our own country. So, while there were certainly shortcomings in the Algerian election, it is important to note that pluralistic, competitive elections were held there, which alone is a major victory.

Those Algerians who believe the election will not produce significant changes are not giving themselves enough credit. Many Algerians risked their lives in order to get to this new stage in their country's political development. This new reality was not just handed to them; they worked hard for it. Those who criticize the recent elections should recognize the difficulty Algerians face every day, and we in the West should not be more critical of Algeria's politics than Algerians themselves. The many democratic parties that participated in the elections have, through their hard work and courage, brought about an important change in the political landscape of that part of the world.

This election is important because it shows the Algerians that political and religious power are and can be separate. Furthermore, the fact that voters—both pro- and anti-regime—voiced their opinions through the ballot box is indicative of a relatively open, free environment in which people are able to express their views without undue fear of retribution for their actions.

Conclusion. The new majority party in Algeria—the National Democratic Rally—is like any big party. As with Republicans and Democrats in the United States, its supporters range across the political spectrum; some are more inclined to compromise than others. This make-up resembles parties in all liberal democracies, a development which is extremely encouraging. Algeria is evolving towards a liberal society and the newly elected political majority is committed to this evolution. Due to the Algerian people's determination to resist it, episodes of terrorism may still recur but terror itself has finally been defeated. The courage of Algerians has set into motion an evolution towards an open society in Africa, North Africa and throughout the Arab and Islamic world.

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Algeria's election can only bring about lasting peace if it is followed by a true political opening. While the election was not without fault, it provided Algerians an opportunity for a new beginning. The Algerian government must seize the opportunity it now possesses and allow full political participation from across the spectrum, so that the peripheral elements of society will not be marginalized.

Environment Prior to the Elections. The security environment in the weeks leading up to the election was plagued by daily massacres and bombings. The impact of this violent atmosphere on the election is not clear. Some might argue that it may have served to intimidate people from voting, though the perilous security environment may actually

have been the driving force propelling Algerians to cast their votes in an effort to end the violence. While the election has positive implications for the future of Algeria, it is important to bear in mind that they were not held without significant human rights violations; indeed, the Algerian security forces have been accused of torture and killings.

The Political Environment leading up to the election was mixed. An independent electoral commission was established by the government in order to supervise election preparations and to monitor the polls. Opposition parties were granted air time on radio and television, though some speeches were censored. Nevertheless, it is a great improvement from the past, when opposition parties faced a virtual blackout. Financial pressure was reportedly used in an effort to force the closure of some newspapers run by the opposition. In all, approximately 600 complaints were submitted to the independent electoral commission, largely complaining of government favoritism towards the government-backed National Democratic Rally (RND). It is in this context in which the elections must be viewed.

Assessment. On the positive side, despite the pre-election violence, the voting took place in an environment of relative peace, and the turnout was good, though not nearly as high as the turnout in the 1995 presidential balloting. Another important change was the shift to a proportional voting system, as opposed to the former majority-take-all system. Also, the new parliament is drawn from a broad spectrum of Algerian society, which offers hope for the future. On the negative side, the numerous accusations of fraud cast a dark shadow over the validity of the entire exercise; with more than 30,000 voting stations and a much smaller number of monitors, no independent assessment of the vote was really possible. And constitutional changes in place for this elections sharply reduce the power of the parliament vis-a-vis the presidency. Nevertheless, despite these problems, the opposition has announced it will take its seats in the parliament and refrain from violence as a way to protest alleged vote-rigging. Such action on the part of the opposition offers new hope for Algeria's future.

Toward a Peaceful Future. The election constitutes an important first step out of Algeria's crisis, but it will only be meaningful if the government takes further steps. These should include: giving fraud allegations a serious hearing so that the opposition feels as though its grievances are being addressed; restoring basic freedoms by eliminating censorship; ending human rights violations; appointing a new prime minister as a signal that the elections truly mark a new beginning; and disarming civilian militias once terrorism has further receded. In sum, the elections, though not without faults, were a step in the right direction. It is important for the U.S. and French governments to encourage this positive movement.

1997 Election Results

- voter turnout, 65.5 percent (turnout in 1995 presidential election, 75 percent))
- National Democratic Rally (pro-regime): 155 seats (40%)
- Movement of a Peaceful Society (Islamist): 69 seats (18%)
- National Liberation Front (FLN): 64 seats (16%)
- Socialist Forces Front (FFS) (secular/Berber): 19 seats (5%)
- Rally for Culture and Democracy (pro-regime): 19 seats (5%)
- Worker's Party (PT) (secular/leftist): 4 seats (1%)
- Misc.: 50 seats (13%)

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Hillary Ebenstein.

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