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# The Algerian Political Scene ahead of Legislative Elections

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May 3, 2021

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Brief Analysis

## Islamist influences, independent candidate lists, and low participation rates all threaten the success of Algeria's upcoming legislative elections.

In 2020, Algerian lawmakers revised the country's constitution, adding the first electoral law of its kind since the [end](#) of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's rule (1999-2019). Now, in June 2021, Algeria will hold its [first legislative elections](#) since the passage of that law, with elections set to proceed after the dissolution of the People's National Assembly, the lower chamber of the Algerian parliament. Regardless of their outcome, these elections will stand as a test for the ongoing Algerian effort to create stable, lasting democracy and peace.

The elections come against the backdrop of an unusual political scene in Algeria, defined by a range of competing factors. One aspect of this complicated political scene is a change in political parties—as traditional parties active in the previous era's elections continue to decline, a new set of political parties is coming to the fore. And even the success of those parties is contested, with Algerian civil society movements and independent lists emerging as a rising political force, using recent supportive media coverage in their aims to compete with political parties and oust them from the forefront of the Algerian political scene. Finally, looming over the entire process is the ongoing [Hirak movement, which continues to demand serious change](#).

As a result of these competing pressures, many independent candidates are touting apolitical backgrounds in an effort to appear like refreshing alternatives to the status quo. As mentioned above, dozens of independent lists of candidates seeking to participate in the legislative elections have been submitted in every Algerian province. Most candidates on the lists are young people, academics, and some professional elites who lack expertise and experience in the political field but seek to present themselves as alternatives to the usual political candidates, or at least express themselves as representative of the demands of the Hirak movement in the political process.

In this context, the electoral process is witnessing severe ideological polarization. As many political candidates vie to best represent the interests of the Hirak movement, they have come to represent a critical flaw of the movement, which is that it never organized itself within specific political frameworks and never gained the support or representation of any single party.

Several aspects of this polarization, however, are particularly concerning for many Algerians. One is that the Hirak

movement has also recently seen an [escalation in radical rhetoric](#), led on one hand by some members of Islamist currents like the remnants of the dismantled Islamic Salvation Front and the Rachad movement, and on the other hand by parties espousing ethnic demands of a separatist nature, such as the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylie.

The crisis created by the activity of the Rachad movement and other Islamist groups in the Hirak movement has left many Algerians concerned about the results of the upcoming elections. The decline and collapse of the former ruling party, the National Liberation Front (NLF), could leave a vacuum allowing other well-organized and well-structured political forces, such as Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood-oriented Movement of Society for Peace and the influential National “Binaa” Movement, to achieve strong results and claim a majority of the seats in the coming parliament, allowing them to form a government.

Although such a result could resemble what took place in Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco after 2011, when moderate Islamist parties took the reins of executive authority after legislative elections, the Algerian context may be different. In Algeria, the prospect of Islamist leadership immediately revives memories of events in 1991, when the Islamic Salvation Front won the majority in legislative elections before the electoral process was canceled and the [country entered into a grinding, 10-year war](#). Consequently, there is a worry that an Islamist victory could lead to a departure from the constitutional process launched after the rise of the Hirak movement in 2019, potentially pushing the country into a critical transitional phase with an unknown end. This phase, [many Algerians fear](#), could resemble the violence of the 1990s.

Moreover, this ongoing debate about the Islamist parties is not the only case in which Algerians are worried about the revival of past crises after the election. If free list candidates and civil society movements form an alliance after the elections to form a presidential majority for power, some Algerians fear that it could result in a repeat of the 1997 legislative elections. In those elections, a united front of independent candidates called the Democratic National Rally (DNR) formed a few months before the date of the [1997 elections](#) and won a majority in elections that were not fair or transparent. Today, an eerily similar bloc has suddenly emerged called El Hisn El Matine, adopting some of the stances of the previous regime and the practices of former officials in the state apparatuses. This bloc could become the driving force that leads to the formation of a framework or coalition like the DNR. This scenario would also resemble what happened in [Egypt's 2015 parliamentary elections](#), when non-party lists of candidates close to the regime were formed in order to win the majority of seats that had been controlled by the National Democratic Party during the Mubarak era.

Nonetheless, whether the Islamists take power, the free list candidates form a winning bloc, or the NLF achieves a surprise victory, the greatest threat to the elections will be the participation rate and the transparency of the electoral process. The critical component of these elections is the ability to convince the Algerian public of the benefit of going to the polls as a peaceful and civilized method of realizing change and building strong institutions that prevent the monopolization of rule. Critical in this process is the transparency of the electoral process. The establishment of an independent elections authority is a big step forward, but there must be more effort to encourage confidence in the results of the ballot box.

In the end, the outcome of elections will either lead to a democratic transition by establishing a peaceful transfer of power or lead to violence and/or authoritarianism through the reproduction of old practices with new names. In the same right, the Hirak movement, using protest as a parallel method (beside elections) for change, could help apply pressure in support of a negotiated democratic transition, or its resistance to formal organization could lead to chaos and the reproduction of old crises.

On that basis, there really is no ideal solution to the complicated political scene in Algeria. The Algerian people cannot go around the challenges of this election—they can only face them head on. Therefore, the logical and rational

solution is to pursue the courageous and constructive steps towards finding common ground and making the elections an entry point for the realization of the Hirak movement's demands. In that sense, it is vital that Algeria not to lose this opportunity. ❖



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