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Women and Politics in Algeria: One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

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Brief Analysis

Algeria's new elections law threatens to derail progress on women's participation in country politics and leadership.

After Algerian women achieved political victories by establishing a presence in official state institutions—including parliament, the main legislative body in the country—they experienced several unprecedented setbacks. In the seventh multi-party parliament in the history of the country, women's representation fell to 34 seats, comprising only 8 percent of the total 407 seats. Women had previously held 145 seats in the 2012 parliament, and 120 seats in the 2017 parliament.

In many ways, this was a predictable outcome. The amended elections law, which dropped the quota system, required gender parity only in party lists, meaning that half of the candidates on a given list had to be women. Of a total 5,744 candidates on various party-affiliated and independent lists, only 34 women were elected to parliament. So, what of the quota law? Why did Algeria abolish it? How has the new elections law contributed to a decrease in the number of women in parliament? Can Algerian women join the political sphere despite rigid social mores and customary laws?

The Gender Quota System: Superficial Political Participation

After the 2011 Arab Spring, Algeria unveiled a new elections law. One of the law's most important articles established a gender quota, mandating that one-third of the seats in parliament and in local government be set aside for women. This law increased women's representation from 7 to 31 percent, and launched Algeria into first place

among Arab countries, and 26th place globally in 2017, for women's political representation at both national and local levels.

However, the law was widely criticized. Some felt that it masked the reality for women in a country where they were wholly absent from the center of political decision-making, especially at the party level. With the first parliamentary elections in 2012, Algerians' misgivings about the law grew. The law had enabled female representatives without any prior experience in politics or civil society organizations to be elected to parliament. In fact, there were many women elected with limited levels of education who had previously worked in trades such as hairdressing, which earned the parliament the nickname "the coiffeur parliament." This recurred when the 2017 parliament was elected. While the law contributed to improving the status of women on a surface level, the large number of women in parliament did not translate into significant shifts in women's involvement in party politics or government.

Ultimately, the poor performance of women representatives negatively shaped Algerians' perception of women in politics. This view was also influenced by factors unconnected to politics. Algerians viewed women through the lens of religious beliefs and strict social norms which rejected their involvement in the political process, and in some regions of the country, even considered such participation shameful for the honor of the woman and her family.

Quota System Dropped; New Law Further Weakens Participation

In light of these negative effects, Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced in June that a new gender parity law would replace the quota law. Tebboune said that the "ignorant" era of gender quotas in politics was over, and that the new elections law, which had been announced in the Official Gazette in March 2021 and required half of the candidates on party lists to be women, would go into effect.

Article 317 of the new elections law created a loophole around Article 202 of the previous elections law, which had stipulated that gender parity of candidates was a necessary condition for candidate lists to be accepted, and that this would apply in all elections following the upcoming round of elections. Under Article 317, both party lists and independent lists that could not yet meet the gender parity standard were allowed to inform the election authority, submit lists that did not comply, and still obtain parliamentary seats.

To make matters worse, the new elections law adopted an open list and direct elections system, which meant that voters could choose the candidate they prefer from among the lists. In a patriarchal society, where there is strong reluctance to women's participation in politics, most voters are likely to choose men rather than women, severely curtailing the prospects of female candidates. Therefore, even competent female candidates became victims of the patriarchal nature of Algerian society.

By establishing an open-list system, and the Article 317 loophole, the new elections law paved the way for political parties to ignore the issue of women's participation, especially in the cities in Algeria's interior, where women were systemically excluded from political participation through social obstacles.

Laws Alone Will Not Suffice

Women's participation in Algerian politics cannot be improved through laws alone. It will require a substantial political process, and ongoing societal work to change negative stereotypes about women. This can be achieved by establishing opportunities for women to be politically active in party structures, including in the interior regions of the country, and to take on leadership roles within these structures. It is also necessary to strengthen women's participation in trade unions and civil society organizations in order to integrate women into society and demonstrate female leaders' capabilities. The media can play an important role in this regard by highlighting

examples of successful women in professional fields, especially in male-dominated fields such as politics and economics.

Improving the status of women in Algeria will also require reforming traditional educational curricula, which present women's primary purpose as being housewives, rather than holding any further role in building society. Educational curricula and strategic media campaigns, along with support for women's participation and leadership in economic institutions and civil society organizations, will pave the way for a stronger, more active role for women in the Algerian political sphere. Without this, women will continue to have a solely superficial presence, which will beautify the charade of election proceedings.



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