

Hints of Crisis as Algeria Enters Election Mode

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Brief Analysis

The country avoided the tumult of the Arab Spring, but its next election cycle will bring political, economic, and social challenges back to the fore.

Although campaigning is formally set to begin two months prior, Algeria will hold presidential elections in April 2019. But the November 14 resignation of a dominant party leader has raised concerns about an impending political impasse. Furthermore, whoever assumes the presidency will face a challenging economic situation, persistent threats emanating from terrorist networks in Libya and Mali, and growing social discontent among Algeria's jobless and angry youths. The confluence of these conditions could prove highly destabilizing, particularly if domestic grievances remain unaddressed. Ultimately, the manner in which the elections are conducted—and the degree to which their outcome is accepted—will be pivotal for Algeria's future.

WILL HE STAY OR WILL HE GO?

Since Algeria gained independence in 1962, political authority has generally been understood to reside in a power-sharing triangle between the presidency, army, and pro-regime businessmen—collectively known as Le Pouvoir (The Power). Accordingly, potential candidates must ensure that key military figures and other ruling factions back their bid before running for election.

Since early 2000, current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika has steadily strengthened his office to curb the military's political influence. And during his second and third terms, he oversaw the transition from a system of "competing pyramids" (as one local outlet described it) to a single pyramid dominated by two parties, the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Rally for Democracy (RND). Both parties retain a tight grip on parliament to help protect the system while securing loyalty and support among the key constituencies necessary to guarantee social calm. Yet the sudden resignation of FLN head Djamel Ould Abbas last month, presumably at Bouteflika's request, has prompted questions about these power-sharing dynamics. Abbas was seen as a strong advocate for the president's reelection, and his dismissal likely reflects Bouteflika's attempt to alter the political landscape before the vote.

Typically, consensus over Algeria's traditional power structure has been sufficient to produce political arrangements that deliver compromise candidates. But this unanimity has broken down during certain periods in the past, resulting in instability and unpredictability. Such was the case in the post-multiparty experiment of 1988, and it appears to be the case today as Algeria prepares for a post-Bouteflika era.

Since 2013, the eighty-one-year-old leader has experienced health problems—including a stroke—that have since limited his public visibility and prevented him from addressing the people. Despite his poor health, he appears to be bracing for a fifth term, which is the presumed motivation behind a decision in late September to replace twenty-six state governors. Since governors in Algeria possess considerable power in the election process, the move was seen as preparation for the incumbent's run. Likewise, on October 28, Abbes stated that Bouteflika's candidacy "has been demanded by all the FLN cadres and activists across the country."

Although a constitutional change in 2008 removed presidential term limits, ostensibly paving the way for Bouteflika to hold the office for life, a 2016 amendment reversed the move and limited terms to two. However, since the new limit was not applied retroactively, Bouteflika would face no legal obstacle to running for a fifth time. The most likely scenario is that he will bow to calls from the ruling parties and run again. An announcement either way is expected in February.

BEYOND SUCCESSION

Regardless of who assumes the presidency, Algeria's incoming leadership will face a host of challenges, the most pressing ones being economic and security-related. On the economic front, a sharp fall in hydrocarbon revenues and a slowdown in the industrial sector forced Algeria to implement austerity measures while increasing taxation—two policies that have negatively affected middle-income citizens. An estimated 12 percent of educated youths remain unemployed, and last year's inflation rate of 5.5 percent led the World Bank to warn that 10 percent of the population could fall back into poverty. Additionally, regional disparities are expected to persist, potentially prolonging the annual cycle of protests that have been occurring since 2011 over matters such as access to housing, opposition to fracking, and civil servant salaries. The mounting social discontent stemming from the government's spending freeze, limited capital inflows, and high youth unemployment levels will undoubtedly take center stage in the upcoming elections.

Furthermore, the security vacuum in neighboring countries, most notably Libya and Mali, has created a significant threat. With the proliferation of radical organizations affiliated with al-Qaeda or the Islamic State, the Sahel region along Algeria's southern flank has emerged as what the MENARA Project called an "arc of threat" in a study released this October. Since the dramatic hostage situation at the Tiguentourine natural gas facility in January 2013, an attack carried out by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Algeria has become a top-priority target for terrorist organizations. The evolution of Islamist militancy, weapons smuggling, and human trafficking are the most pressing dangers. Meanwhile, Libya and Mali have become safe havens for terrorists and organized crime groups, facilitating radicalism and extremism in the region. All of these problems constitute a serious burden for Algeria's military, which has generally been seen as among the most well-organized and capable forces in the region.

Ultimately, the fragile security situation, coupled with political instability, weak governance, and new transnational threats, requires that the Algerian army continually adapt. While militant groups will likely continue to exploit the regional security vacuum, the need to implement a new security approach toward the region should remain at the forefront of Algerian policymakers' attention. Additionally, these challenges should be at the center of discussions and decisions in the upcoming elections, regardless of how the next president will handle this national security problem.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

Although Algeria has traditionally eschewed a robust relationship with the United States, bilateral ties have grown in recent years due to shared interests in containing the spread of terrorist networks across North and Central Africa. To the extent Algeria has emerged as a counterterrorism partner, it is in America's interest to see a smooth transition of power, even if Washington has limited leverage in affecting the outcome of that transition.

In the event elections produce either serious instability or an unexpected opening of ties, U.S. officials might consider ways to better position themselves for deeper engagement. In the meantime, if Washington quietly nudged the relevant factions to exercise restraint over succession, it could help calm tensions. Likewise, indicating a greater willingness to support young Algerians active in the political process would create a serious debate, which could in turn make a small but real impact on the election campaigns and subsequent voting. Finally, consulting with a broad swath of Algerian youths active in civil society organizations or inviting a small number of parliamentarians to visit the United States could signal that Washington intends to nurture the bilateral relationship even as Algeria heads into an uncertain period.

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