

Algeria's Presidential Elections amid the Bickering of a Polarized Regime

by [Yacine Boudhane \(/experts/yacine-boudhane-0\)](/experts/yacine-boudhane-0)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Yacine Boudhane \(/experts/yacine-boudhane-0\)](/experts/yacine-boudhane-0)

Yacine Boudhane is an Algerian journalist.



Articles & Testimony

Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fourth term blocks a historic opportunity to achieve a safe and peaceful transition of leadership.

Since the Arab Spring first swept the region, many have predicted that Algeria too would witness broad social movements demanding deep, radical reforms to the establishment, particularly given the country's social and political composition. Yet this has not been the case, and instead Algeria has become a regional exception. With presidential elections scheduled to take place on April 17, and in light of the political contentions between factions of the regime, can Algeria continue to avoid vast social upheaval?

Algeria avoided the popular revolution of other Arab countries, including neighboring Libya and Tunisia, for a number of reasons. While some Algerian provinces have seen protests over the rising cost of certain consumer goods, the government has quickly contained the situation by subsidizing the prices of these products. Algeria's history of democratic transition is a painful one not marked by success. Algerians believe themselves to be pioneers of revolution and reform, given the October 1988 demonstrations and their demands for pluralism in the media and politics. Yet after the Islamic Salvation Front won the 1988 polls, it plunged the country into a spiral of bloody violence, halting the electoral process. The country witnessed huge economic losses, and more than 200,000 people were reportedly killed. Algerians will not allow this experience to be repeated, fearing any social movement that could lead to another such tragedy, yet they still hope for a safe way to change the regime.

Many Algerians see the Arab Spring as a foreign conspiracy, the embodiment of a greater plot against the Middle East aimed at dismantling Arab countries. Although Algeria has successfully avoided the Arab Spring, Algerians are deeply concerned by the intense political disputes about the coming presidential race now raging between rival factions within the regime. People fear that the security situation may deteriorate at any point around the elections, particularly as this conflict extends beyond closed doors and into the public realm, something unprecedented in the country's history. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's delayed announcement of his candidacy for a fourth presidential term helped to ignite -- or perhaps illuminate -- a conflict between the intelligence services (the Department of Intelligence and Security, led by Gen. Mohamed Mediene, known as "General Toufik") on one side and, on the other,

a close associate of the president, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Gaid Salah, the president, deputy defense minister, and chief of staff of the People's National Army.

This conflict was made public when President Bouteflika returned from a medical trip to Paris last July, after suffering a sudden transient ischemic attack (minor stroke). Upon his return, he initiated a series of changes to the security services, placing a number of its departments under the leadership of Ahmed Gaid Salah. Prior to this, the president had made a number of governmental changes and appointed men close to him as ministers in the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Justice, which are both tasked with overseeing the elections. He also appointed Mourad Medelci, another close associate, as the head of the Constitutional Council. With these changes, it seemed clear that Bouteflika was paving the road toward a fourth term.

Some think that these changes to the security services were intended to weaken General Toufik, an opponent of Bouteflika's candidacy, citing as evidence the president's delayed announcement of his candidacy and a vitriolic attack on Toufik by Amar Saadani, the secretary-general of the National Liberation Front (the ruling party, of which Bouteflika is the honorary chairman). Meanwhile, intelligence head General Toufik has openly accused Bouteflika of failure and urged him to resign.

This conflict has overshadowed disputes within the National Liberation Front (FLN) between supporters of Saadani and supporters of the "Corrective Movement," which initiated former secretary-general Abdelaziz Belkhadem's removal. Efforts to remove Saadani from his position are under way, and his opponents attempted to hold an emergency session of the party's leadership in order to appoint a new secretary-general to succeed him. Saadani's opponents have been thwarted, however, by the Ministry of Interior, which has thus far refused to grant them a license to hold the meeting.

People following the matter have said that Saadani is backed by a faction within government representing the presidency, which has thus pushed Saadani to the front lines of the president's conflict with the intelligence services. It is worth noting that no politician has ever criticized General Toufik to this degree, even opposition politicians. This gives the impression both that Saadani is backed by a deeply entrenched current within the Algerian state and that General Toufik is no longer as strong as he once was.

Against this backdrop lie growing fears that the conflict will escalate, and that security in the country will diminish, whether before or during the elections. This seems to be what prompted President Bouteflika to deny any conflict between himself and the intelligence in his letter to those celebrating Martyrs' Day on February 18. Bouteflika added that analysis of restructuring the Department of Intelligence and Security presumes a crisis within the state that does not exist, and that such a reading of the situation is malicious and lacking in objectivity. He also stressed that the Department of Intelligence and Security is an integral part of the army, and that claims of internal disputes are no more than a contrived fiction. Bouteflika furthermore accused unnamed parties of trying to destabilize Algeria, and of waging a war against the country in the media, which he accused of promoting this imaginary conflict between the army and the president.

Bouteflika's message can be read a number of ways. It can be interpreted as a declaration that the war between various factions of the regime is over; in other words, that these factions reached a political solution. At the same time, the president's message came one day after a statement by former prime minister Mouloud Hamrouche, breaking the former leader's silence of more than fifteen years. Hamrouche presented himself as a consensus candidate who can maintain the balance between various factions of the regime. Therefore, it could be that the president's message was a statement from Bouteflika to Hamrouche saying, "I am here, I am still politically influential, and I will run for presidential office."

However, the regime's determination to encourage the idea that the conflict between the presidency and intelligence

is a fictional plot supported by foreign parties could signal another strategy. The regime may be trying to change the people's apathy toward the electoral process by convincing Algerians of a threat to their country's stability and the need for the current regime to remain in power. A portion of the population that chooses to boycott represents a threat to the elections, which explains why Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal began a series of visits to the governorates six months ago.

This last scenario is likely the closest to the truth. The prime minister announced by proxy last Saturday that President Bouteflika would be running for a fourth presidential term -- an announcement that provoked angry reactions from the opposition. The opposition responded, claiming that Bouteflika's reassurances of conducting fair elections by issuing a memorandum to structure the electoral process had gone out the window and weren't worth the paper they were written on. After all, Sellal -- the person chosen to make the announcement on the president's behalf -- is the acting chairman of the committee tasked with organizing elections, demonstrating the department's lack of neutrality and bias toward the establishment's candidate.

In light of Algeria's current political situation, it is clear that Bouteflika's decision to run for a fourth term does not offer the country any stability, either politically or economically, as many believe that he has failed the country in such regards. Corruption has reached record levels during his three terms in office. Bouteflika has allocated more than \$600 billion over fifteen years to provide a boost to the economy, yet 98 percent of the economy is still based on oil revenue alone. The government will continue to apply its policy of buying social stability. This was demonstrated by the government's promise to raise workers' wages in 2015, which was introduced during the tripartite meeting earlier this week between the government, private sector employers, and the General Union of Algerian Workers. Some consider this wage increase to be either a deal with the workers or a form of blackmail, meaning that it is a quid pro quo in exchange for the workers' votes, as their benefits are dependent on the current authorities remaining in power.

With Bouteflika running, Algeria has missed a historic opportunity to achieve a safe and peaceful transition of leadership that takes advantage of regional and international changes to systems of government. More than ever before, this decision closes off the political arena, stifling the opposition, bolstering parties loyal to the establishment, and paralyzing parliament, preventing it from playing a real role in government oversight.

Algerians are still waiting to hear whether former prime minister Mouloud Hamrouche will run. If he joins the presidential race, a change in the balance of power within the establishment hierarchy could take place. Hamrouche will certainly not enter the race unless he obtains firm guarantees from elements within the establishment, particularly the military, which would signal internal divisions coming to the fore.

Yacine Boudhane is an Algerian journalist. ❖

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