Elections in Algeria:

Bouteflika Wins, Legitimacy Loses

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Brief Analysis

On April 9, Algerians go to the polls to elect a head of state. A constitutional amendment engineered by two-term President Abdulaziz Bouteflika in November 2008 allows the septuagenarian to vie for a third term. Running with no credible opponents -- and unopposed by the military and security services (DRS) -- there is little doubt he will be reelected. Although Bouteflika's ongoing tenure represents continuity in Algiers, it will not enhance the country's stability. Instead, for a largely disaffected burgeoning youth, the nature of this election will further erode confidence in an already shaky system, a development that could impact local U.S. business interests and strengthen al-Qaeda's presence in the Maghreb (northwest Africa).

Background

Although rumors of a third mandate for Bouteflika had been circulating for years, until late 2008 the regime did not fix a date for the parliamentary vote on the constitutional amendment, presumably as a result of lengthy negotiations among Bouteflika, the army, and the DRS. Earlier talk of holding a national referendum on the constitution was disregarded, with Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia explaining that holding a referendum and an election shortly after would be "tiring."

The amendment, which essentially guarantees another term for Bouteflika, was finally voted on in November 2008 by a joint session of the upper and lower houses of parliament, in which 500 out of 529 legislators supported the move. Only the Berber-based opposition party Rally for Culture and Democracy opposed the amendment. Pro-Bouteflika forces were mobilized through backroom deals, most notably a reported 300 percent salary hike for parliamentary deputies in September 2008. This coopting of political parties extended to civil society organizations, such as the National Organization of Mujahedin, which entreated Bouteflika to run before he announced his candidacy.

Although the constitutional amendment was enacted in November, Bouteflika did not announce his candidacy until mid-February. It appears the delay was a result of waiting for credible -- though not competitive -- candidates to run, in an effort to confer legitimacy on the election. In stark contrast to the less-than-democratic election of 2004, however, some of the bigger names in Algerian politics have abstained from running this time. Opposition leader Said Saadi, who ran in the last two presidential races (garnering 10 percent of the vote in the 1999 election), called the upcoming election a "pathetic circus." Indeed, so far, only marginal opposition politicians, nicknamed "rabbit

candidates" by the Algerian public, have agreed to participate. The most prominent of the "rabbits" is Louiza Hanoune of the Trotskyite Workers Party, who, though once well respected, still received less than 2 percent in 1999. For some time, rumors swirled that credible candidates, such as former president Lamine Zeroual and Shaikh Abdallah Djaballah, a moderate Islamist who competed in previous elections, would participate. Both, however, declined to throw their hats into the ring.

Islamist political parties -- such as the former Islamic Salvation Front, whose victory in the 1991 elections, and the army's refusal to acknowledge it, helped plunge the country into civil war -- are prevented from running, as are Islamist candidates with real grassroots popularity, such Talib Ibrahim from the Wafa party.

Facing this dearth of candidates, Bouteflika's allies have tried to persuade politicians to participate. Abdulaziz Belkhadem, the secretary general of the National Liberation Front (FLN), Algeria's founding and only party until 1989, publicly exhorted those with "political weight to become candidates." Indeed, Belkhadem reportedly met with Djaballah in late November to try to induce him to compete.

The Role of the Army

These presidential elections highlight a change in Algerian politics since roughly 2004. Under Bouteflika, the presidency has gained strength vis-a-vis the army -- the real locus of power in Algeria -- causing a shift in the balance of power.

This alteration is visible in the political parties. In 2004, certain factions in the army encouraged the FLN's Ali Benflis to challenge Bouteflika in the elections. Faced with this challenge, Bouteflika acted quickly by dismissing coalition ministers loyal to Benflis. Indeed, many who did not support Bouteflika were not selected for the party list in the 2007 legislative elections. As such, the FLN no longer offers avenues for voicing opposition. Together with two other parties, the FLN is now part of a coalition called the Presidential Alliance, which openly backs Bouteflika.

The army will play a crucial -- if behind-the-scenes -- role in this election. In the past, the army has selected and replaced presidents. Unlike 2004, the army has kept silent about the elections, but this silence does not indicate political progress: rather, it underlines how Bouteflika defanged opposition factions in the army. By replacing opposition figures such as General Mohamed Lamari with his own people and by adhering to the army's red lines -- allowing the army to escape criticism for the "dirty war" waged during the 1990s -- Bouteflika has somewhat coopted the army as a rival. This has enhanced civilian authoritarianism and strengthened Bouteflika.

Algeria's Ossification

If the 2007 legislative elections are any indication, turnout for this presidential contest will be the lowest ever -- a major worry for the regime. Two years ago, just 37 percent of the electorate showed up to vote, according to official figures. Faced with this prospect, the regime has tried various tactics to get out the voters and legitimize Bouteflika's third term, including mobilizing patronage networks. In addition, the Minister of Religious Affairs recently called voting a "religious duty" and the state secretary for communications, Azzedine Mihoubi, urged the media to cover the election campaign to generate more interest.

Bouteflika is seventy-two years old and reportedly in ill health. He has neither identified a successor nor established a mechanism for producing one. This lack of institutionalization is problematic for the political system, especially as those following in Bouteflika's footsteps are likely to have less legitimacy and national credibility. This dynamic does not bode well for the civilian-military balance of power and for long-term stability.

Speculation about succession takes place against the backdrop of an uncertain socioeconomic outlook. Algeria currently has $120-140 billion in reserves, the result of an oil industry that employs few people. But Energy Minister Chakib Khelil announced in October that should oil fall under $50 a barrel, which it has since, Algeria's

infrastructure development plan may be in trouble. Coupled with a lack of economic diversification, this is a worrisome trend for a country in which 22 percent of the population is living in poverty, according to 2004 figures.

Political stagnation and lack of development in Algeria's impoverished areas have contributed to a high level of frustration among large sectors of the population. This bitterness has been manifested in numerous ways, especially among the youth, through illegal and perilous immigration to Europe, growing clashes with security forces, and an increasingly receptive recruiting environment for groups like al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Trade and Terrorism

The United States found an excellent counterterrorism partner in Bouteflika's Algeria, which continues to crack down on AQIM with U.S. encouragement. AQIM maintains a presence in North Africa and the Sahel (the vast, sparsely populated region that includes the Sahara desert and adjoining areas), and as noted by the U.S. director of national intelligence Admiral Dennis Blair, the group "presents a significant threat to U.S. and Western interests." Since its 2006 merger with al-Qaeda central, AQIM has begun to direct its activities toward Western targets, striking UN installations in 2007 and attacking French contractors in June 2008. Links to emigre communities in Europe are also worrying, as AQIM may capitalize on these networks to launch attacks on U.S. targets there. Washington's interests in Algeria are broader than just counterterrorism cooperation: U.S. imports from Algeria amounted to nearly $20 billion in 2008, making it one of the largest U.S. trading partners in the Arab world.

The U.S.-Algerian relationship, however, benefits from Algeria's relative stability in the short term. Yet, the current political situation may have negative long-term effects on U.S. interests. Algeria's political stasis, its lack of strong political institutions, and its mounting social and economic challenges hint at future instability. If current trends continue, Algeria's restive and burgeoning youth will face rising unemployment and frustration -- and some will look to AQIM for the answer.

This prospect stands to undermine Algerian and U.S. counterterrorism efforts as well as U.S. commercial interests. As the Obama administration develops its policy toward Algeria, it should take steps to ensure that it promotes reform, development, and economic diversification. With brewing volatility on the horizon, the United States should not sacrifice its long-term interests in Algeria and the Maghreb for short-term gain.

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