Algeria:

Facing Presidential Elections

Apr 14, 1999

Brief Analysis

With the 1999 elections, Algeria is the only Arab country to have had two presidential elections that included more than one candidate. The seven candidates running in the 1999 presidential elections represent a wide range of views, minus the two most extreme, that is, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the so-called "eradicators" who propose physically to eliminate the GIA. The authorities seem to have recognized the public need for a legitimate election, and the resulting atmosphere has been sufficiently positive that all seven presidential candidates decided to conduct vigorous campaigns. Most likely, Abdelazziz Bouteflika, the leading candidate and secular statist, will win, but he may not secure an absolute majority; this would necessitate a run-off, most likely against Mouloud Hamrouche, a secular reformist, although possibly against Hocine Ait Ahmed, a nationalist Berber.

The military has undeniably been involved in the election, through its role in ensuring who is and who is not running. The seven approved candidates have been carefully balanced such that each natural constituency -- each ideological perspective, each regional interest group -- is divided. That is, each candidate faces competition in his base constituency. The resulting division of the electorate removes the likelihood of any candidate winning such a strong mandate that he would be in a position to challenge the military's major role in the power structure. For instance, consider the Islamist vote. The military used a new clause in the 1997 presidential election law to prevent the candidacy of Mahfudh Nahnah, the leader of the Movement for Islamic Society, who in the 1995 presidential election received 25 percent of the vote; his party's brand of moderate peaceful Islam is too popular for the military leadership. That left two less-popular Islamist candidates, Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, a Islamist/reformist, and Abdallah Djaballah, an Islamist/radical. The main Islamist group, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), has encouraged its voters to support Ibrahimi, while Nahnah, whose own standing in moderate Islamic politics is challenged by Ibrahimi, has encouraged his voters to support Bouteflika. The net result is the division of the potentially strong moderate Islamist vote.

Whereas politics in the past has been dominated by those from eastern Algeria, this year's candidates come from all over the country. Indeed, at least one comes from each of the five original wilayas (provinces). These regional divisions are expected to be the focus of candidates' campaigning and then election support. Ait Ahmed began his campaign in the Berber Kabylie region and then moved eastward. Hamrouche is expected to do well in the East, while the power base of his main rival Bouteflika is in the West. The secular technocrat Mokdad Sifi has been campaigning in the South, an area largely ignored by politicians in the past.

The leading candidate, the secular statist Bouteflika, has the backing of the majority of the ruling RND party and also of the FLN, party of the old revolutionary guard,. He is also popular with the UGTA, Algeria's main labor union, because he does not support rapid restructuring to the same extent as does Hamrouche. Yet, some factions with the RND support the secular technocrat Sifi, while certain factions within the FLN back Hamrouche, as does a coalition of small parties named Groupe des Forces Nationales. Each candidate also has his patron generals. In short, it appears that the power elite is not insistent on the victory of any one candidate. Meanwhile, the relative freedom of

the press has allowed it to roundly criticize the state and the army for pushing the candidacy of Bouteflika. Hopefully, the press will block any brazen abuse of the electoral process. Certainly the Algerian press reports more about the country's problems and its leadership than does the press in most of the countries of the region.

The candidates all agree that dialogue with Islamists should continue in one form or another. The candidates have not been overly concerned with foreign policy or policy toward the all-important oil and gas industry, although in general those who are closer to Islamism are more Arab-nationalist and less sympathetic to the West.

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The seven presidential candidates are all serious candidates and represent a broad spectrum of regional loyalties and political views -- some even in real opposition to the current ruling party. This in itself is a notable contrast to the 1995 presidential elections. Nonetheless, these positive changes are still occurring only within a narrow framework determined and closely monitored by the military. The military is attempting to fine-tune the election result -- especially by keeping out moderate Islamist Nahnah. No matter what the result of the election, no winner will emerge strong enough to provide a real challenge to the powers-that-be.

Three significant changes may make these elections more free and fair. First, the number of mobile polling stations, a source of fraud in previous elections, has been significantly reduced. Second, candidate representatives will be allowed to monitor voting at military installations, something they could not do before. Finally, candidate representatives will be given a signed tally of votes at each polling station before the votes go to the next administrative level, thus hindering attempts at fraud later on. There are still, however, some serious problems. Most notably, there will be no international observers monitoring the elections. Of the four elections since 1995, those without international monitoring also witnessed the most obvious fraud. Similarly, there is doubt whether the candidate representatives themselves can monitor all 47,000 polling stations, even though some of the smaller parties have come together to pool resources to this end. Finally, there is much concern about voter turnout. Although there have been no broad-based calls to boycott the election, it remains to be seen whether voters will have enough confidence in the fairness of the system to bother voting at all. Such apathy is strongest among the unemployed, alienated youth of Algeria. If turnout is low, the populace may lack confidence in the new president. This in turn would undercut his ability to end the endemic violence, which is by now less ideological and more diffuse (for example, it is sometimes motivated by revenge or economic disputes).

Whoever is elected president will be faced with a dire economic situation. Unemployment is 30 percent to 50 percent, and housing is in short supply. Any elected president will have to find a way to appeal to the country's jobless and angry youth, who serve as a ready reservoir for violent elements.

Algeria is at a real turning point in its history. It has weathered seven years of civil war resulting in more than 75,000 deaths and $2 billion in infrastructure damages. Recent years have witnessed a dramatic improvement in the country's situation. With these elections, Algeria could finally turn the corner on violence and bloodshed and begin down the road to a more stable political order. If the elections are perceived to be free and fair, they could mark a real end to the conflict and a real move toward democracy. If not, the result could be even more instability and autocracy. In practice, the election is not likely to produce either democracy and stability or autocracy and chaos. Nonetheless, the manner in which the election is conducted as well as how its outcome is accepted could determine how soon the instability and violence of the last seven years can be ended.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lucie Butterworth and Harlan Cohen.

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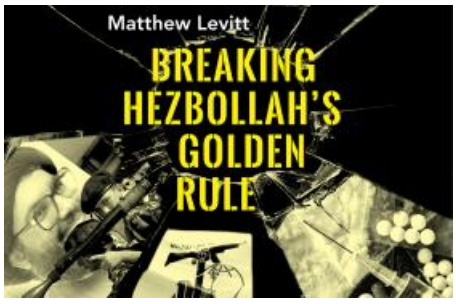

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