



Beyond Islamists & Autocrats

THE ALGERIAN CONUNDRUM Authoritarian State, Democratic Society

■ John P. Entelis

Observers of the political upheaval sweeping the Arab world since 2011 have often asked why Algeria remains ostensibly untouched by the so-called Arab Spring. The question betrays a truncated view of Algerian history, since the largest country in the Arab world arguably experienced the first, if short-lived, “spring” roughly twenty years before the latest uprisings. Following legislative elections in December 1991, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) emerged in a dominant position, and the Algerian authorities, fearful of an Islamist takeover, canceled the election results and banned the movement. The armed faction of the FIS responded by launching an insurgency, and in the ensuing civil war nearly 200,000 Algerians lost their lives. Also lost in the “dark decade” was momentum toward political democratization.

Today, the prospects for democratic-style reformers in Algeria are as complex and paradoxical as the country’s convoluted history and opaque politics. While civil society has long possessed a democratic spirit, if not a democratic political culture, rooted in its historic interaction with French republican principles, this democratic orientation is disaggregated and diffuse. Associational

life is widespread but limited in its capacity to articulate reformist principles, however much individual Algerians aspire to a democratic future. For its part, the authoritarian polity maintains its stranglehold on civil society through a military-industrial complex that monopolizes the key coercive, economic, and bureaucratic instruments of the state. No amount of externally derived pressure for democratic reform, whether economic or political, has been able to alter this stalemate in state-society relations.

This paper, the third in a series exploring prospects for political reform throughout the region, considers the strengths and limitations of democratic-style reformers in Algeria today. Following an overview of Algeria’s political landscape, the paper examines the historical roots and current contours of Algerian civil society, where prospects for democratic-style reform remain in force, however limited. The paper concludes with a cautionary note for U.S. policymakers eager to engage constructively with Algeria.

OVERSTATING THE ALGERIAN STATE

The Algerian state has long been considered institutionally “strong,” if not legitimate, vis-à-vis society, maintaining its hegemony by maximizing its economic advantages and coercive capabilities to ensure societal compliance. Yet the maintenance of state control masks a more vulnerable dynamic in which society is forever

struggling to assert its political primacy in the face of a “fierce” state, one willing and able to enforce its authority through a combination of cooptation and coercion. Thus, a putatively strong state, itself internally divided, sits atop a fragile yet highly contentious society forever on the verge of disrupting the political balancing act so purposively constructed over these many decades.

Independent Algeria has long been riddled with conflict, contradiction, and discontinuity within all its relevant sociopolitical and socioeconomic parts. Only during its nearly eight-year war of national liberation (1954–62) against French colonial occupation (1830–1962) did state and society possess a semblance of national coherence and ideological purpose. Yet even that protracted struggle could not eliminate the bitter differences among individuals, parties, and other social movements, as each projected an ideologically different post-independence future. The victory of the National Liberation Front (FLN)¹ and its assumption of single-party power provided no guarantee of stability for state and society. Indeed, the war of independence provided the structural context that allowed the military wing of the incipient Algerian government to assert its dominance over the country’s political destiny. The primacy of the military over the political became obvious virtually at independence. Three years into his presidency, Ahmed Ben Bella was overthrown in a military coup d’état on June 19, 1965, by Col. Houari Boumediene, Ben Bella’s defense minister and former head of the revolutionary Algerian Liberation Army. Whatever pretense of civilian rule at the hands of a Marxist-Leninist-type single party was permanently set aside once the military took over in 1965, a position it has yet to relinquish whether operating overtly or behind the scenes.

Until recently, presidential incumbency and executive authority have remained prerogatives of high army officers and their intelligence counterparts. In both the selection of Chadli Bendjedid as Boumediene’s successor in 1979 and the forced removal of the former in

1992, the military-security establishment—or *le pouvoir*, as it is commonly described—has been the determinative and decisive actor. This became particularly pronounced during the dark decade, 1992–2002, when the military was engaged in a brutal civil war against an Islamist insurgency that left nearly 200,000 dead and thousands more wounded. Successive national leaders—Mohamed Boudiaf (January–June 1992), Ali Kafi (1992–94), Liamine Zeroual (1994–99), and Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1999–present)—were all selected by *le pouvoir* with the aim of securing state interests as defined by a narrow band of army elites and their allies in Algeria’s military-industrial complex.

A triumvirate of state-level interests, as follows, serves as the coercive, financial, and bureaucratic instrument of state control:

1. the high army command and the security services, especially the dreaded Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (Intelligence and Security Department), or DRS;
2. the national oil and gas behemoth, Sonatrach; and
3. the presidential office sitting atop the expansive patronage network provided by the ruling FLN and its coalition partners.

Yet that state control is itself riddled with internal cleavages, factions, and fissures that find resolution through a cyclical process of cooptation and coercion, rendering state hegemony vulnerable to unpredictable power shifts among the key strategic actors. The current alteration in the balance of power between the presidential clan and its counterpart in the intelligence services is but the latest iteration of this cycle.

For its part, civil society sees itself manipulated, marginalized, or otherwise exploited by this military-industrial complex. Despite the existence of ample hydrocarbon revenues, a manageable foreign debt, and a massive sovereign wealth fund estimated at over \$150 billion, Algeria has been described as a wealthy state with an

1. The Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front) successfully overthrew French colonial rule and assumed power at independence. While its single-party status was overturned with the amended 1989 constitution that recognized a multiparty system, it remains today the dominant political party in parliament, with President Abdelaziz Bouteflika serving as party head.

impoverished society. One result is a permanent condition of social unrest throughout the country in which key groups in society—labor unions, students, farmers, industrial workers, opinionmakers, and community activists—are frequently engaged in wildcat strikes, street demonstrations, violent clashes, and public protests. While much of this militancy is motivated by a desire to acquire local public goods and services otherwise being denied or ignored by state-level officials, the overall effect is to create at the national level an environment of social turbulence and civil discontent that challenges the regime's legitimacy and political efficacy.

While wide and pronounced cleavages separate state and society, similar fault lines exist within each of the broader groupings. At the state level, tensions and divisions have long characterized inter- and intra-elite behavior. Today those tensions revolve around the question of presidential succession, the direction and control of the country's hydrocarbon resources (including the issue of whether or not to explore for and develop shale oil), and the degree to which socioeconomic opportunities and political freedoms should be sacrificed in the name of combating terrorism. At the level of the mass public, fault lines penetrate virtually all aspects of Algerian society—Berbers vs. Arabs, Islamists vs. secularists, urban vs. rural, north vs. south, east vs. west, Francophones vs. Arabophones, and so forth. These cleavages within the state-society divide prevent the state from collapsing yet simultaneously create a society forever on the brink of revolutionary upheaval.

THE ROOTS OF ALGERIAN CIVIL SOCIETY

Because of its distinctive and often traumatic experiences, Algeria holds a unique place in the political history of the Arab-Islamic world. The Algerian experience has affected several areas of civil society development, including the emergence of political pluralism and the establishment of proto-democratic institutions and practices. No understanding of today's Algeria can be had without first appreciating that country's complex political evolution. This historical complexity informs the coexistence of two powerful yet diametrically opposed

tendencies within Algerian political culture: political authoritarianism (the tendency toward centralized governance) and political democracy (the desire for choice and autonomy).

From Algeria's early modern history, the process of promoting harmony and political unanimity in its quest for freedom and autonomy has created a bifurcated political culture that can inspire both political authoritarianism and political democracy. The long period of colonial domination and the need to maintain a sense of identity at all costs, compounded by the war of independence's need to foster cooperation and solidarity in the face of a more powerful enemy, engendered an enduring sense of national identity and political purpose—so essential for the development of civil society and political legitimacy. In addition, it created a tendency to justify political control from above as necessary to combat "enemies" of the state, whether external or internal in origin.

The exposure to the Western world during the colonial and post-colonial eras introduced more modern forms of social activism and political participation. Specifically, intensive and sustained periods of travel, study, work, and personal interaction between Algerian and European societies, along with the creation of an advanced system of telecommunications and broadcasting, introduced Algerians to alternative forms of political expression. These developments challenged the authoritarian political order of the state while invigorating preexisting populist and proto-democratic tendencies.

Politicized Algerian civil society owes its origins to the pre-revolutionary period, when it absorbed much from the French notions of associational life and state-society relations. Algerians in France, and to a lesser extent in colonial Algeria, were allowed to participate in French professional and trade unions and other mass organizations. Yet this associational experience was not allowed to flower in Algeria after independence, when civil society and mass organizations were subordinated to the state-party apparatus and relegated to roles of recruitment and propaganda. Under FLN control, political activity was moderate and public demonstrations kept to a minimum. The persistence of highly centralized control of society was facilitated by a political trade-off

whereby the population at large had bargained away legal political participation and autonomy in return for a guarantee of economic opportunity and standardized welfare provisions.

This social contract began to unravel with the dramatic fall of oil prices in the late 1980s. The subsequent deterioration of socioeconomic conditions ultimately led to the October 1988 protest movement that resulted in the death of hundreds, possibly thousands, of Algerian civilians at the hands of the military. The political crisis that followed radically altered the balance between state and society, with the latter reasserting its political presence. With the approval of an amended constitution in 1989 that eliminated one-party rule in favor of a multiparty electoral system, civil society reemerged as “associations of a political character” were legalized and allowed to organize, recruit, propagate, and demonstrate. As a result, a large number of independent interest groups evolved into political parties, reflecting the pervasive associational aspect of Algerian political culture despite efforts at depoliticization and heavy government supervision. Literally thousands of independent associations, professional groupings, and political parties appeared in the next two years. It is no exaggeration to describe this period as the point where Algeria’s democratic political culture found institutional expression in a democratic political system, one in which the full range of ideological tendencies adhered to a contested and pluralistic political order, both in principle and in practice.

That Algeria was able to embark on a democratic process in a spontaneous and comprehensive way reflects the long and tortuous evolution of its nationhood, political identity, socialist consciousness, and international stature. Without these preconditions, it is unlikely that pluralist politics would have developed so quickly or as widely. As such, Algeria’s experiment in democracy went beyond anything undertaken in the region prior to the Arab Spring. The success of Islamism in such a pluralist milieu speaks primarily to the underlying participatory environment and only secondarily to the role of religion in politics, the religious state, or the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

ALGERIAN CIVIL SOCIETY TODAY

No organizations or professional groups have been as active or as integral to the vitality of civil society and promotion of democracy as journalists, feminists, Berberists, and human rights activists. Even today, these groups remain at the forefront of promoting democratic values and practices. Despite the fractured and fragmented civil sphere, the democratic imperative remains the central concern of these organizations, however much their representation now takes the form of individual actions operating outside formal institutional channels.

Established at independence, groups like the Union Nationale des Femmes Algériennes (UNFA), the Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens (UGTA), and the Ligue Algérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l’Homme (Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, LADDH) have given voice to women, workers, and human rights activists through formal institutional channels originally under FLN auspices. Today, these and similar associations are distancing themselves from state control, though for the most part they remain supporters of government policies. The UGTA is especially militant when it feels its workers are being threatened by neoliberal policies and other efforts to privatize key strategic sectors of the economy. The LADDH has never been formally legalized: it views itself as an independent human rights organization critical of the government for its failure to uphold international human rights standards.

Still, the state’s efforts to coopt long-established civic associations such as the UNFA, UGTA, and LADDH have hindered the ability of autonomous organizations to develop broad-based populist support. One result is the individualization of democratic demands, in which high-profile Algerian activists such as Abdennour Ali Yahia (human rights), Khalida Toumi (feminism), and Kamel Daoud (journalism) assume the voice of reformism, if not democracy. The nonformal, highly individualized way in which Algeria’s democratic sphere seeks to impact public discourse and policy was on display this past November, when nineteen distinguished intellectuals, political figures, former combatants in the war of independence, human rights supporters, and feminist

activists issued a public letter to President Bouteflika. Written on the sixty-first anniversary of the start of Algeria's war of national liberation, the letter demanded government accountability, political transparency, judicial integrity, and overall state responsiveness to public needs and demands.²

Despite the individualization of democratic expression in the country, one should not automatically assume that all "secularists" are "democrats," either in belief or in practice. For example, among the nineteen signatories to the Bouteflika letter are such high-profile historic personalities, political figures, and public intellectuals as Zohra Drif-Bitat, Louisa Hanoune, and Rachid Boudjedra, who are intensely secular if not vehemently anti-Islamist but barely qualify as "democratic" in any universal sense. Yet it is testimony to the fractured character of Algerian civil society that even such problematic figures are given the democratic label.

THE LIMITS OF REFORM

Broadly speaking, reform prospects in Algeria face two principal hurdles, the first attitudinal and the second institutional.

Attitudinal obstacles

Whatever else Algerian "democrats" may aspire to, relatively few would identify with the full meaning of liberal democracy, one that not only includes the usual procedural practices of contestation and participation but also provides legal guarantees of freedom of expression, association, press, and belief as well as legal protection for minorities. Moreover, while a number of individuals may hold progressive if not liberal democratic ideals, collective bodies like the UGTA share the regime's socialist and state-centered orientation, one whose commitment to pluralistic politics is tepid at best.

Even more problematic is the broader social context within which democratic reformers operate. One large-scale survey of Arab public opinion, including Algerian opinion, found that "while few people reject democracy generally, a large proportion opposes it in their country."³ Throughout the region, citizens tend to prioritize safety, economic well-being, and cultural authenticity over initiatives aimed at implanting democratic procedures like free and fair multiparty elections. But in Algeria especially, where elections in the early 1990s resulted in widespread violence, attitudes about democracy are strongly correlated with the perceived effects of elections on the stability of the country, and even Algeria's reformists demonstrate ambivalence toward democracy. These attitudinal conditions speak to the challenges of building broad support for democracy against a backdrop of economic strife, corruption, and general instability.⁴

Institutional obstacles

While an elite-level struggle takes place among aged power brokers in the army (Gaid Salah, b. 1940), intelligence services (Mohamed "Toufik" Mediene, b. 1939), and presidency (Bouteflika, b. 1937), the mass public seethes with discontent as the chasm separating state and society deepens and widens. The uncertainty of presidential succession is playing out against a backdrop of chronic social unrest, civil turmoil, terrorist threats, decaying social services, pervasive corruption, ethnic violence, and reduced oil and gas revenues. Autonomous institutional life is frozen. Opposition parties are powerless, the legislature impotent, the judiciary feeble, and the bureaucracy incompetent and corrupt. The electorate is deeply alienated and dismissive of the formal political process, believing that the real decisionmaking takes place behind closed doors.

2. The letter appeared in the Algerian daily *El Watan* on November 7, 2015.

3. Lindsay J. Benstead, "Why Do Some Arab Citizens See Democracy as Unsuitable for Their Country?" *Democratization*, September 3, 2014, p. 8. Synopsis available at <http://bakerinstitute.org/research/why-do-some-arab-citizens-see-democracy-unsuitable-their-country/>.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 20.

Deep-seated inter- and intra-elite struggles that date back decades have never been resolved through transparent or accountable public institutions. As a result, Algerian decisionmaking in the twenty-first century is little different than it was in the twentieth: a cabal of shadowy figures within the state's military-industrial complex, operating at times cooperatively and at other times conflictually, serves as the final arbiter of national policymaking and selections to high office. While the process is purposely opaque, the decisionmaking instruments are not; they range from political assassinations (Boudiaf, Ali Tounsi) to corruption charges (Chakib Khelil), arrests and imprisonments (Abdelkader Ait-Ouarab, aka General Hassan; Hocine Benhadid), forced retirements (Amara Benyoune, Abdelkader "Fawzi" Lounis), dismissals for insubordination (Ali Bendaoud), ambassadorial reassignments, and "car accidents."

The Bouteflika counteroffensive has aimed directly at the security and intelligence services formerly led by Mediene, the world's longest incumbent head of a country's intelligence services until his forced retirement in September 2015. Without explanation or justification, the heads of the internal security department within the DRS, the presidential guard, and the republican guard were all summarily dismissed. More significant was the dissolution of the Groupe d'Intervention Spéciale, the special forces counterterrorism unit within the DRS charged with combating Islamist militancy. Spreading special forces functions across different army, navy, and national guard units is clearly intended to undermine the independent coercive capacity of the DRS. A case could be made that with the disastrous failure of the GIS to prevent the terrorist attack at the In Amenas gas facilities in 2013, sufficient reason existed to disband the DRS unit. Still, the timing two years later raises suspicion that political calculations were as important as security considerations in explaining the presidential actions. The culmination of this sustained executive offensive, Toufik's removal, was accomplished in the opaque and conspiratorial style so long associated with decisionmaking at the highest level of Algerian politics.

The behind-the-scenes struggle for political dominance atop of the military-industrial pyramid comes at a particularly difficult time for the country as it confronts

an ongoing Islamist insurgency, declining hydrocarbon revenues, violence between Arabs and Berbers in the Mزاب region, and recurring socioeconomic grievances expressed through often violent mass protests across a wide swath of localities and regions.

Key questions remain. Given the current political, security, and socioeconomic crises facing the country, does the regime still have the capacity to co-opt opposition and buy social peace in the manner and style once considered "routine" for regime elites? Additionally, is the pressure for fundamental institutional reform from high-profile individuals and civil society movements sufficiently comprehensive and sustained to transition Algeria from its current "competitive authoritarian" mode of governance to a genuine democracy? Finally, does the demilitarization of the Algerian polity serve as a fundamental precondition for the advent of law-bound government, or is civilian rule as devoid of democratic propensities as its military counterpart? A glance at one measure of law-bound government, Bouteflika's one-sided electoral victories—73.79% in 1999, 85% in 2004, 90.24% in 2009, 81.53% in 2014—suggests "competitive authoritarianism" in Algeria remains alive and well. Such "victories" also reaffirm the skepticism found in the attitudinal surveys cited above regarding the general distrust shared by masses and elites toward elections as an instrument of democratic legitimacy.

The general conclusion regarding the status of democratic reformers in Algeria is that while democratic ideals and liberal attitudes pervade civil society, however ambiguous their articulation, they remain highly disaggregated, particularly among public intellectuals and other opinionmakers. These ideological cleavages reflect the broader fault lines that have characterized state-society relations in Algeria since the war of independence. In the absence of a broad consensus on the interpretation of "democracy" and "liberalism," it will be very difficult to construct a meaningful platform for democratic reform that can attract both the mass public and autonomous associations. For its part, the Algerian state remains impenetrable to societal demands for democratic reform. Any reform must be conceived, constructed, and commanded by the regime itself.

U.S. POLICY CHOICES

Beyond the hydrocarbon trade and counterterrorism efforts, the United States shares little with Algeria. Given the anti-market culture that dictates Algeria's domestic economic policy, American business presence in the country is minimal. Corruption and extensive bureaucratic hurdles also limit U.S. private-sector involvement in the economy.

Since 9/11, U.S.-Algeria relations have centered on global counterterrorism; arms transfers, intelligence sharing, and coordinated military exercises are now regular features of this exchange. However, while these security arrangements may have prevented a bad security environment from becoming worse, they may also have diminished any hesitation by Algeria's leaders about limiting political freedom in order to maintain a monopoly

of power. Algerian democratic reformers, whether individually or collectively, have had little influence on altering this state-society dynamic, and many view the U.S. role in critical if not hostile terms. Indeed, many Algerian "liberals" denounce America's democratic pretensions, arguing that Washington's democracy-promotion agenda is little more than a cover for more hegemonic ambitions in the region.

Given these structural limitations, U.S. policy should avoid public promotion of democratization, human rights, and political pluralism, since Algerians believe they are already "democratic," "promote human rights," and "advance political pluralism," however compromised or incomplete each of these areas may be in practice. As noted earlier, Algerians are extremely protective of their national sovereignty and distrustful of those who seek to interfere in their domestic affairs.

*John P. Entelis is professor of political science and associate director of the Middle East Studies program at Fordham University. The recipient of several Fulbright awards, Professor Entelis is the author or coauthor of numerous scholarly publications on the comparative and international politics of the Middle East and North Africa, including *Algeria: The Revolution Institutionalized*; *State and Society in Algeria*; and *Islam, Democracy, and the State in North Africa*. In addition, he has written numerous book chapters, articles, and book reviews for leading scholarly journals, and his analysis has appeared in the *New York Times* and *Le Monde Diplomatique*, among other publications. The former editor-in-chief of the *Journal of North African Studies*, Dr. Entelis currently serves on its international advisory board. He is past president of the *American Institute for Maghrib Studies*, the premier scholarly professional association engaged in North African studies.*

