

# **PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS IN ALGERIA - IN THE NAME OF STABILITY**

## **ELECTORAL FRAUD AND THE ABUSE OF AUTHORITY ALLOWS PRESIDENT ABDELAZIZ BOUTEFLIKA TO TAKE UP A CONTROVERSIAL FOURTH MANDATE**

By Sofian Philip Naceur

As expected, Algeria's head of state Abdelaziz Bouteflika won the presidential elections on 17 April 2014 by a high margin. This is the fourth time he holds the country's highest office. According to [official figures](#) he gained 81.5% of the vote, ahead of his biggest rival Ali Benflis who received only 12.2%. The results are not surprising. Electoral outcomes in Algeria are usually forged, with results negotiated behind closed doors, long before polls have opened. However, the presidential elections in 2014 were controversial. Bouteflika is widely believed to suffer from severe health problems. With the polls set to open, opposition forces already warned that the ballot might be manipulated.

Both prior to and during the elections several protests took place in the coastal area of Algeria. Several rallies in the capital Algiers were violently dispersed by security forces. The Kabylie province, located east of Algiers and mostly populated by Berbers of the Kabylie minority, has already witnessed numerous protests before the elections. During the polls violent clashes between security forces and protesters took place around the city of Bouira in the same region. Local newspapers reported around 70 injured and some dozens arrested by police forces.<sup>1</sup>

Most opposition parties have alleged ballot-tempering, and refused to recognize the official results while Bouteflika's clan continues to assert its influence. In Europe and the United States no critical comments were heard about the electoral process or Bouteflika's controversial presidential bid. Finally, Bouteflika's clan, well-known as a reliable partner by his western allies, stays in power. Beside its role as the second biggest and most crucial crude oil and natural gas exporting country in Africa, Algeria is the most important partner for the West when it comes to international security policies in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, with Bouteflika in power, Europe and the US assure the predictable management of their interests in the Maghreb region. Nevertheless, even more important than the presidential election itself is who will be Algeria's next vice-president. This is the key question concerning the political stability of the country.

## **SHARP CRITICISM OF BOUTEFLIKA'S CANDIDACY**

Abdelaziz Bouteflika is Algeria's head of state since 1999. At the same time he is minister of defence and head of the National Liberation Front (FLN), which has remained in control of the country since Algeria's independence from France in 1962. He is part of the old generation of the former unity party FLN, whose political influence in the state apparatus remains unchallenged. His latest candidacy for the post of the head of state has caused strong criticism in the North African country after he spent three months in the French military hospital Val-de-Grâce in Paris, recovering from a stroke he suffered in spring 2013. It is suspected that he continues to suffer from severe health problems. His appearance in a polling station in the early morning of the election day was his first public appearance in almost two years.

During the election campaign Bouteflika remained invisible. Ahead of the elections he appointed a team of six close confidants who represented him in the campaign; individuals charged with promoting his re-

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Fedjkhi, Amar: «Bouira: Situation très tendue à Raffour et Haizer, affrontements sporadiques», El Watan 4/17/2014.

election in the country: Abdelmalek Sellal, a former Prime Minister who had to step down from his post after he was appointed by Bouteflika as the director of his election campaign, the FLN Secretary General Amar Saïdani, the two former Prime Ministers Ahmed Ouyahia (National Democratic Rally, RND) and Abdelaziz Belkhadem (FLN), the Minister of Industrial Development Amara Benyounès (Algerian Popular Movement, MPA) and Minister of Public Works and Transport Amar Ghoul, head of the Rally for Algeria's Hope (TAJ). Beside the support of the FLN, RND, MPA and the TAJ, Algeria's entrepreneurs' associations and the former unity trade union federation UGTA backed his re-election campaign.

Due to his ailing health, the opposition has voiced strong doubts concerning Bouteflika's ability to execute the duties of the Presidential Office. Furthermore, they have repeatedly criticized Algeria's rigid power structure. 52 years after the country's independence from France, Algeria is still politically dominated by the so called «Bouteflika Clan» originally based in Western Algeria. This clan is by far the most powerful faction within the FLN as well as in the state apparatus and has even expanded its influence since Bouteflika came to office. However, even from the ranks within the party the [call for its modernization became louder](#), especially referring to the replacement of a select group of long serving figures in the party.

## PALLID CANDIDATES, DREARY ELECTION CAMPAIGN

Despite opposition to his bid, Bouteflika ran again for Algeria's presidency. It was clear from the beginning who would win the polls. None of his competitors had the backing of the powerful military or Algeria's intelligence service. Although [twelve candidates applied for taking part in the elections](#), only [six of them were approved by the Constitutional Council](#). Moussa Touati, Ali Fawzi Rebaïne, and Louisa Hanoune, head of the leftist Trotskyist Workers Party (PT), ran for the third time in presidential elections against Bouteflika. The only newcomer in the race was Abdelaziz Belaïd. All these four candidates were without any chance. Only Ali Benflis was given a chance for achieving a respectable result. He led Bouteflika's presidential campaign in 1999 and became Secretary General of the FLN and Algeria's Prime Minister in Bouteflika's first term. After their controversy, Benflis ran against his former ally in the [presidential election in 2004](#) and lost the contest considerably.

Bouteflika's clan started its election campaign already in the fall of 2013 when Amar Ghoul announced a large-scale construction program for social housing. RND-chief Abdelkader Bensalah referred to Algeria's political stability and highlighted Bouteflika's «achievements». Sellal promised that constitutional changes would create a «broad democracy» if Bouteflika would be re-elected. Remarkable, however, was that the recognition of the Berber language Amazigh became a dominant subject in the election campaign. Almost all candidates adopted this demand. Ali Benflis promised «Amazigh [Emancipation](#)». Months of unrest between Sunni Arabs and Mozabite Berbers in the southern Algerian city of Ghardaïa in the province of Mزاب had apparently ensured that the recognition of cultural rights of minorities in the country became one of the most dominant issues in the election campaigns.<sup>2</sup> As accusations of possible electoral fraud were made by Rebaïne, Benflis, and Touati, Bouteflika accused Benflis of destabilising the country and called his allegations a form of «[terrorism](#)». Bouteflika's competitors did not stop their criticism and accused his clan of [abusing their control of state media](#) to gain a political advantage for the Bouteflika campaign.

## CLASHES OVERSHADOWED THE BALLOT

Already ahead of the elections, the country witnessed [numerous protests and clashes in the Northern provinces](#). In Algeria's Kabylie region, protesters interrupted several campaign events. Bouteflika's campaign manager [Sellal had to cancel a speech in Béjaïa](#) after protesters stormed the venue. Also [Benflis' campaign](#)

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<sup>2</sup> Since December 2013, Ghardaïa repeatedly witnessed violent clashes between Sunni Arabs of the Chambaa tribe and Mozabite Berbers. At least eight people died in the riots and hundreds were injured. In early April, a new wave of violence erupted in the province, which is mostly populated by Mozabites. Arabs and Mozabites clashed against each other again, set houses on fire and devastated a cemetery. In the beginning, the bloody events were downplayed and largely ignored by the government, but in February 2014 the Minister of Interior Tayeb Belaiz and representatives of the security apparatus travelled to Ghardaïa. The conflict between Arabs and Mozabites in Mزاب is an ongoing conflict since Algeria's independence. At that time, the Sunnis gained the support of the ruling National Liberation Front and attacked the Mozabites as reactionary profiteers of the old colonial order. Conflicts between Berbers and Arabs are not new in Algeria. Under the rule of President Houari Boumediène, a government-sponsored Sunni islamization of the country went far. Since then, the Berber minority intensified their struggle for political and cultural rights and freedom in other parts of the county as well.

[was affected](#). Shortly before the elections, about 4000 people took to the streets in Tizi Ouzu, the biggest city in the Kabylie. They argued against Bouteflika's presidential bid and called for an election boycott.<sup>3</sup> A day before the elections, a [sit-in organised by the protest movement «Barakat»](#) in Downtown Algiers was violently dispersed by police forces. Protests were ongoing during the elections. In Béjaïa und Bouira, anti-government protesters stormed polling stations. Ballot boxes were set on fire. Since 1991, protests and rallies are required to obtain an explicit permission from the authorities, while demonstrations in Algiers are generally banned based on a presidential decree issued by Bouteflika in 2001. In the context of increasing police brutality against protests in Algeria, the human rights organisation [Amnesty International](#) sharply attacked the human rights situation in the country only a few days ahead of the poll. The right of public demonstrations is severely restricted by Algerian authorities, the freedom of association denied for independent trade unions and freedom of expression curtailed, said Amnesty in a statement.

Some days after the vote, the city of Tizi Ouzu witnessed a terrorist attack on a military post. 14 soldiers were killed. The region had always been a target for terrorist groups that continued to perpetrate regular attacks in the country since the end of Algeria's bloody civil war in the late 1990s.<sup>4</sup> However, for some years terrorist attacks in Northern Algeria were all but unheard of. With the exception of the Kabylie and Algiers, the presidential elections took place in a quiet environment. On election night, Bouteflika supporters celebrated his victory in Algiers and Mascara in the North West while some Benflis supporters claimed the victory for themselves in the city of Tizi Ouzu. But the [official results](#) were no surprise. With 81.53% of the vote, Bouteflika was declared elected President. Benflis gained only 12.18%. Abdelaziz Belaïd won 3.36%, ahead of Louisa Hanoune, who came in fourth with only 1.37%. Rebaïne scored 0.99 and Moussa Touati 0.56%. According to official figures, the turnout dropped significantly and reached only 50.70%, compared with 74% in 2009.

## ELECTORAL FRAUD ALLEGATIONS LOUDER

Immediately after the ballot, electoral fraud allegations intensified. Even before the announcement of the official figures, [Benflis published a statement](#) in which he accused Bouteflika's clan of «large-scale electoral fraud». [Benflis, Rebaïne and Touati](#) do not recognize the results. Louisa Hanoune was the only candidate who recognized the final figures. She stated that the elections are a «great victory for the Algerian people» and called its results «legitimate and untouchable» compared to 2009 when she loudly opposed the official numbers.<sup>5</sup> Three weeks before the elections, though, the Algerian daily newspaper El Watan wrote «[Fraud has already begun](#)». The paper expressed serious doubts about the allegedly collected four million signatures by Bouteflika that were submitted to the Constitutional Council for registering Bouteflika's nomination. All signatures were collected in only eight days, a logistic impossibility. Furthermore, El Watan reported that employees of state-owned companies such as the airline Air Algérie or the Gas and Oil company Sonatrach as well as public servants were forced or bribed by Bouteflika allies to sign these forms and support Bouteflika. Moreover, the official figures about the turnout are not credible. Journalists on the ground reported about empty polling stations and expressed doubts concerning the reliability of the official numbers.

## ISLAMIST AND SECULAR OPPOSITIONS CALL FOR AN ELECTION BOYCOTT

As the numerous protests around the elections indicated, the opposition still enjoys considerable throng. In March, about 5000 people gathered in Algiers. They chanted against Bouteflika's presidential bid and called for an election boycott. The Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), largely supported by Berbers and inhabitants of the Kabylie, and the moderate Islamist Movement for the Society and Peace (MSP), called for

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. «Marche du RCD à Béjaïa: Près de 4000 manifestants dans la rue», El Watan 4/15/2014.

<sup>4</sup> In January 2013, Islamist extremists had ambushed the natural gas facilities in In Amenas close to the Tunisian border. They took hostages. Algeria's military forces stormed the ground, dozens of Islamists and hostages were killed. The incident was the heaviest and bloodiest attack for a long time. Mainly due to the activities of groups such as Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Algeria has an enormous importance for Europe and the US when it comes to security policies in the region. Algeria's intelligence service DRS was directly involved in the activities of extremist groups in the 90s, though. The DRS provided direct and indirect support for such groups, ensuring the supply of weapons and equipment by its Western allies by maintaining the danger of an extremist threat in the region.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Amir, Nabila: «Le choix de Bouteflika était un vote-refuge», El Watan 4/20/2014.

the gathering. But [Algeria's anti-government opposition is still strongly divided](#). The divisions between Islamists and secularists remain deep. The perception of all opposition parties being more or less co-opted by the regime has diminished their credibility in the country and explains why an increased number of Algerians have neither joined the opposition parties nor boycotted the recent elections.

Like the PT for many years, the RCD was an opposition force in Parliament tolerated by the regime. With its presence in the chamber the party legitimized the system. The RCD withdrew from the legislative body ahead of the parliamentary elections in 2012 and announced that it intends to boycott the next elections. The RCD and its biggest rival in the Kabylie, the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), have in fact switched their positions in dealing with the regime. While the RCD did not recognize the elections in 2012 and 2014, the FFS ran in both. This was the first time since the launch of the multi-party-system in the early 1990s that the FFS took part in elections. However, in the presidential elections in 2014, the stance of the FFS was ambivalent. Although, it described the elections as a «play» and indicated beforehand that the ballot might be manipulated, the party refused to join the boycott campaign.<sup>6</sup> Many people are still sceptical about the RCD because of these shifts, but the MSP grew even more unpopular when the party joined the government coalition with the FLN and the RND in 1997. This three-party-coalition ruled the country until 2012, when the Islamist party's results dropped significantly in the parliamentary elections, prompting its subsequent departure from the government. Nevertheless and for the first time since the early 1990s, in 2014 no candidate from the Islamist current ran for president.

Due to popular disillusionment with many of the opposition parties, it is not surprising that «Barakat», a non-partisan protest movement founded in 2013, stirred up the most attention among the Algerian people with its protest campaign. Some have already compared «Barakat» with Egypt's influential Kefaya movement, which laid the groundwork for the Egyptian revolution in 2011. In contrast to that, Prof. Dr. Rachid Ouaiassa, Professor for Political Science at Marburg University in Germany, emphasized that «Barakat's» influence is largely limited to the urban areas in Northern Algeria. The sociologist [Nasser Djabi](#) explains that a movement like «Barakat» will only become dangerous for the regime when it is capable of extending its influence from the middle class in the urban North to the lower class in the rural areas. But for the moment, this is not the socio-political reality in Algeria.

The independent trade unions also opposed Bouteflika's bid for a fourth term. The president of the independent trade union federation for public servants (SNAPAP), [Rachid Malaoui](#), called the elections a “masquerade” and announced SNAPAP's support for anti-government protests. Independent unions and syndicates are not well received by Algerian authorities. Strikes and labour protests were widely deemed illegal by the government and for some professions the establishment of independent unions remains prohibited. In autumn 2013, [Human Rights Watch](#) (HRW) sharply criticized Algeria for its repressive policies against independent trade unions, calling upon the government to amend laws and cease its prosecutions of independent trade unions and their members across the country.

## INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT FOR BOUTEFLIKA'S CAMPAIGN

The [election observers from the African Union and the Arab League](#) certified that the presidential elections were held in line with international standards, while the European Union abstained from sending its own observers. Instead, some Western top politicians travelled to Algeria shortly before the elections. All official visits were covered by Algerian state TV. Bouteflika's ailing health was evident in his appearance on TV, but the symbolic gesture behind this was simple: despite his health problems, this candidate is able to rule the country. Beside U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, the Spanish Foreign Minister Manuel García-Margallo met with Algeria's head of state in mid-April. [García-Margallo made no secrets of his ambitions](#) to extend natural gas imports from Algeria to Europe in the near future. The Spanish government [described the country as a «reliable partner»](#) and irreplaceable for the stability that it provides in this strategically important region. The Spanish government described Algeria's presidential elections as “transparent and pluralistic”.

After Russia and Norway, Algeria is Europe's third biggest supplier of oil and gas. Amid the ongoing crisis in Ukraine, its natural gas reserves have become even more important for Europa. Algeria's international partners are even more interested in the stability of the country in light of the increased political instability

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. «Ahmed Betatache: Nous ne voulons pas participer à une pièce de theater», El Watan 4/11/2014.

in the region in the wake of the Arab Spring, which has signified a heavy burden for the economic interests of the industrialized countries.<sup>7</sup> Western arms manufacturers have found a lucrative stake in the region, [especially in Algeria](#). But European and U.S. based consumer goods companies, attracted by the lower wage level and largely higher profits in Third World countries, have come under pressure seeing their profits diminished as a result of interruptions in production caused by the ongoing political unrest in North Africa. With Bouteflika's clan in power, Western countries rest assured that [their economic and security interests in North Africa](#) are protected. Washington and Brussels are largely satisfied with the election results. Although the economic outlook remains dire for many, and widespread social inequalities remain, at this stage Algeria's new protest movement «Barakat» has not yet become a catalyst for political reforms. The military regime in Algiers maintains its position as a bastion for European economic and security interests.

## **THE BOUTEFLIKA SYSTEM – WHO WILL BE THE NEW VICE PRESIDENT?**

Bouteflika's «national reconciliation», initiated at the end of the bloody civil war in the late 90s with its 150000 people killed, was flanked by a massive increase of state revenues from Algeria's oil and gas exports. The country is the second biggest oil and gas exporting country in Africa and due to the high world market price level for crude oil and natural gas, its government controls a vast revenue stream. This income is used for an extensive import of food and consumer goods or disappears in the widespread corruption canals of the state and security apparatus. The government has so far failed in its attempts to create jobs, and Algeria is largely dependent on imported commercial goods. Despite its considerable financial resources, Algeria suffers from a high unemployment rate and housing shortage. The government has so far proven itself incapable of implementing adequate economic and social welfare policies that could appropriately distribute the country's wealth. High subsidies on food and consumer goods are the primary means of alleviating the problems caused by Algeria's ongoing struggle with unemployment and corruption.

It is likely that the ongoing social inequality will lead to political unrest. According to observers, the question is not so much if, but when a new uprising will start. The established opposition parties are discredited and the regime has successfully created a power vacuum. The regime has so far co-opted all political forces by sharing a part of the oil revenues with them. Furthermore, Algiers has used this income to promote a trade-oriented middle class, but the industry remains weak and the unemployment rate high. By granting interest-free loans, the regime has created about 600000 jobs in the past few years. But the result of this strategy is that hundreds of thousands of young entrepreneurs are now indebted to the state.

Algeria is ruled by a so called «deep state». «Algeria's regime is a state class, a cartel acting behind closed doors, whose various rival factions informally agree on power-sharing. Apparently, the most important groups within the apparatus – the military, the intelligence service DRS (Département du renseignement et de la sécurité) and Bouteflika's FLN – could not agree on a successor. Bouteflika was forced to run again», said Ouassa. Bouteflika ran for the presidency in 1999 as the declared «consensus candidate» who was able to balance the rivalries between the different faction within the FLN as well as in the military and intelligence apparatus. Nevertheless, in his third term [power struggles broke out, both within the FLN as well as between Bouteflika's clan and the DRS](#). Despite heavy resistance from inside the FLN, in 2013 Bouteflika appointed Saïdani as the FLN's Secretary General. In a cabinet reshuffle in September 2013, Bouteflika nominated close allies for key posts in the government. Tayeb Belaïz was appointed Minister of Interior and Tayeb Louh as Minister of Justice. Furthermore, Bouteflika's former Foreign Minister Mourad Medelci was appointed as head of the Constitutional Council. With these posts under his control, Bouteflika was well prepared for his re-election. Meanwhile, Saïdani started a public row with the powerful DRS chief Mohamed Mediène, who systematically targeted Bouteflika confidants with corruption scandals in recent years to weaken Bouteflika's position inside the ruling cartel.

These affairs have not changed anything. Algeria's regime may be fragmented, but the factions in power have a basic interest in keeping the effective power structure hidden. Ouassa calls the verbal fight between the DRS and the FLN a «staged play». As long as the profiteers of the «Bouteflika System» control

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<sup>7</sup> Libya threatens to break apart even further, while Egypt is still in the midst of a transitional period. In Mali, Niger and Chad the activities of radical Islamist groups have significantly increased since 2011, especially after the civil war in Mali in 2012.

the income from the oil and gas exports and are able to divide it among themselves, the ruling class has no interest in open rivalry. In the meantime, the regime pumps money in the form of loans and subsidies into the wider society to manage public discontent. However, Bouteflika has lost his power. «The new key post in Algeria will be the vice-president's office, whose holder can directly move on to Bouteflika's chair after his death. The decision about who will take that office is more important than the presidential election itself. With this mechanism, the regime makes sure to, elegantly and without internal trouble, solve the problem of finding a successor for Bouteflika», Ouaisa believes. Favourites for the post are Ahmed Ouyahia and Bouteflika's younger brother Said, who is a well-known figure in Algeria and influential inside the cartel.

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