

Political Opposition in Algeria: A frustrated hope.

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ملخص:

لم يتم تحليل مواقف أحزاب المعارضة في الانتخابات الوطنية الجزائرية قبل وأثناء رئاسة بوتفليقة بشكل كاف ضمن دراسات التحول الديمقراطي في الجزائر. تعالج الورقة هذه المسألة بالتركيز على قضيتين مترابطين. أولاً، قبل رئاسة بوتفليقة، لم تقدم المعارضة السياسية سوى إضافة محدودة سواء فيما يتعلق بإعادة التنظيم المنهجي للأحزاب السياسية أو تقديم برامج سياسية ذات مصداقية، والتي من شأنها إعداد أحزاب وشخصيات المعارضة لتشكيل حكومة ديمقراطية. ثانياً، بغض النظر عن طبيعة ونوعية مشاركة الأحزاب السياسية ومنافستها في الانتخابات البرلمانية والرئاسية خلال رئاسة بوتفليقة، فقد ظلت الأحزاب السياسية المعارضة غير فعالة في تقديم برامج سياسية بديلة للرئيس وحزبه، بل أنها عانت من الانقسام على نفسها. ومن خلال المقارنة بين الفترتين تحاول هذه الورقة تحليل كيف أن المعارضة السياسية في الجزائر فشلت في القيام بدورها كثقل سياسي موازن للرئيس بوتفليقة وقبله للجيش. وبالنتيجة، فإن أداء أحزاب المعارضة الجزائرية يشير إلى كون النظام المتعدد الأحزاب الذي ظهر في أواخر الثمانينات ما زال ضعيفاً، مما يجعل التقدم الديمقراطي بطيئاً إلى حد كبير. لمن من المهم أن نفهم سبب ضعف الأحزاب السياسية وربما يساعدنا في ذلك مقارنة سريعة مع الوضع في الدول العربية الأخرى.

كلمات مفتاحية: الجزائر، الأحزاب السياسية، المعارضة، الديمقراطية، الربيع العربي.

ABSTRACT:

The position of opposition parties in Algeria's national elections before and during Bouteflika's presidency is hardly examined in studies of democratization in Algeria. The paper considers this problem by focusing on two interrelated issues. Firstly, before Bouteflika's presidency, political opposition had produced only a limited increase in systematic re-organization of political parties and credible political programmes that prepare opposition parties and figures for democratic government. Secondly, regardless of the nature and quality of participation by political parties and their competition in parliamentary and presidential elections during the presidency of Bouteflika, opposition political parties have continued to be ineffective in presenting alternative political programmes to the president and his party, and they suffer from fragmentation. The paper assesses through comparison between the two periods how political opposition in Algeria has failed to carry out its role as a political counterweight to Bouteflika and before him to the military. The key conclusion is that the performance of Algeria's opposition parties indicates that the multiparty system that emerged in the late 1980s is still weak, which makes democratic progress largely slow.

Keywords: Algeria, political parties, opposition, democratization, 'Arab Spring'.

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INTRODUCTION

Political parties are vital to the life of a political system. They provide the focus not only of loyalty for their members but also of identification. It is through parties that political choices and interests are aggregated and represented. Most importantly, political parties are the agencies for recruitment; from these parties the leadership of a country is recruited and renewed. Governments are formed by political parties and so is the opposition. In the countries of the Arab Middle East (AME), the regimes were changed through violent means such as Libya, Yemen, and Egypt or survived through a series of incremental reforms that would allow the opposition, to varying degrees, a bigger say in the running of the affairs of the country such as Morocco and Algeria.

It should be pointed out that Algeria experienced its 'democratization' more than two decades before the launch of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in December 2010. Indeed in 1989, almost three decades after Algeria achieved its independence from France in 1962, the country, at least on the surface, broke away from its authoritarian past and began experimenting with a multiparty system. Following the opening up of the political space for previously excluded groups, the political landscape of the country changed almost beyond recognition. A new constitution, which paved the way for the legalization of political parties, was adopted, associations of civil society emerged, independently owned newspapers mushroomed, multiparty elections were held, and the state-run TV station began discussing issues that were taboo hitherto. Indeed, these developments led some close observers of Algerian affairs to argue that, 'Algeria to date is the only Arab or Muslim country that has significantly democratized its political system and the only country within an oil-based economy that has abandoned its authoritarianism.'¹

In Algeria's electoral process which began in June 1990 and has continued since, the mushrooming of political parties –the number of parties that contested the first round of the first round of the legislative elections of December 1991 reached 57 -, contributed to the emergence of a multiparty parliament since 1997. That these parties could put forward candidates for elections, run political campaigns, gain seats in parliament are indeed positive steps towards, at least on the surface, eroding one-party rule. However, the main arguments of this paper are that the increase in the number of political parties did not translate into a strong presence on the political scene. The regime in Algiers has been playing up to an international audience to give the semblance of a democracy. In terms of performance, political opposition in Algeria has, on the whole, been fragmented and ineffective in challenging the status quo and in providing a genuine alternative to the system in place. The autonomy of several parties from the centre remains highly questionable. The regime has resorted to different means, including intimidation, administrative hurdles and bribes, in order to ensure that parties

adopt the official line. Hence their ability to propose genuine policies and to act as a watchdog over government policy and weaken executive power is compromised.

In this paper, we are going to look at the role of political opposition in Algeria. This opposition can be divided into two main periods. The first begins in 1962, when Algerian formally achieved its independence from France and ends in 1989. This date marks the adoption of the February Constitution which paved the way to the multiparty system adopted since then. The second period, which began with the adoption of this Constitution runs until today. Whilst the first period was characterized by an authoritarian system, which formally outlawed any opposition, the second period is, on paper, much more dynamic and can itself be divided into two main periods with the 1999 as the cut-off point. The date marks the ascension to power of current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Hence, this chapter will be divided into three main sections. After a preliminary but necessary discussion of Algeria's political landscape from independence in 1962 to the late 1980s, the second section looks at the political reforms and the emergence of parties with special emphasis on the opposition. The performance of the different actors (parties and the regime) during this period is examined. In the third section, the role of opposition in Algeria since president Bouteflika came to power in 1999 is examined. Particular attention will be paid to the impact of the 'Arab Spring' on developments in Algeria. The chapter concludes with a general assessment of the performance of opposition in Algeria and makes recommendations to make the role of political opposition more effective.

THE MAKING OF AN AUTHORITARIAN REGIME

During French occupation, Algeria had a multiparty system. These parties contested elections and indeed sent deputies to the French National Assembly. In the 1950s, however, a number of militants came to the realization that armed struggle was the only option left if they were serious about independence. Hence, the National Liberation Front (FLN) was created to lead the armed struggle and people were invited to join, as individuals, not as members of a particular group. Members of the main political currents at the time, -communists, liberals and Islamists- joined the newly created front. The understanding was that once independence was achieved, individuals would be free to revert to their ideological groupings.²

Once independence was achieved, the political scene in Algeria was dominated by two main camps. The first camp believed that the FLN had accomplished the mission it was created for, gaining independence, and the time had come to revert to the pre-war period with the creation of political parties and autonomous associations. Leading figures of the Algerian War such as Mohammed Boudiaf and Hocine Ait Ahmed created their own parties, the Socialist Revolutionary Party (PRS) and the Social Forces Front (FFS) respectively. The other camp believed that since the FLN achieved what other political groupings failed to

do; it was an organization that could neither be equaled nor rivaled. The will of second camp prevailed and, at least until the mid-1980s, the Algerian authorities exhibited animosity towards any forms of independent associations regardless of its character.

Given that the war of independence was perceived as a war against imperialism and that former communist countries of Central and Eastern Europe not only sympathized with but also provided support for the Algerian cause, it came as no surprise that those who assumed power soon after independence opted for a socialist system of government where the public sector was to play a pivotal role. All political systems, White argued, regardless of the type of government, dictatorship or democracy, need a basis for legitimation.³ The FLN regime's legitimacy in Algeria rested on two main pillars. The first, as stated above, was the historical grounds—the role the FLN played during for independence (1954-1962). The second was the regime's ability to provide for most people's social and economic needs. Given its healthy hydrocarbon revenues, the Algerian regime was able to invest in ambitious social programmes such as free education, free health care and cheap housing. Given the type of economic system employed where profit was not the priority, at least until the mid-1980s, unemployment was hardly an issue. In order to strengthen their grip on the political scene, the authorities in Algiers adopted, in August 1963, decree 63-297, which prohibited the existence of any political party, establishing a *de facto*, one party-rule. Consequently, Boudiaf's PRS and Ait Ahmed's FFS were outlawed. Both of these leaders tried separate unsuccessful rebellions against the regime. Boudiaf fled to Morocco and Ait Ahmed was arrested and sentenced to death in 1964.⁴ Furthermore, given the FLN's relentless drive to absorb independent organizations, the regime's intervention in trade unions as well as student organizations was common practice. Indeed, the powerful trade union, General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA), was absorbed by the Party in 1963.

The adoption of socialism as the country's ideology was perceived as a betrayal by a segment of the Algerian society: the Islamists. In January 1964 the *Al Qiyam* (values) association, which included several members of the pre-war Association of Algerian Muslims *Ulama*, came into existence. The association, for which the great Algerian thinker Malek Benabi (1905-73) provided the intellectual leadership, was independent of the state. It focused on the religious/cultural sphere and called for, among other things, the reduction of what it perceived to be the continuous influence of French culture in Algeria. It urged the authorities to respect the provisions of the Algerian Constitution that stressed Arabic as the country's official language and Islam as its official religion. Hence, the promotion of the use of Arabic and Islamic values in society were legitimate demands. Hachemi Tidjani, the association president, clearly identified with Hassan Al Banna, founder of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt in 1928 and Sayed Qutb, who ascribed to the view that contemporary Muslim societies living in total ignorance of Islam

(*jahiliyya*).⁵ The regime's policies and the association's views on them put the two at loggerheads. The constant pressure the association was placing on the regime led then President Ben Bella (1962-65) to dismiss Tidjani from his post at Algiers University and the strict monitoring of the association began in earnest. According to Roberts, the creation of this association led, in the mid-1960s, to a loss of control by the regime over a significant aspect of Algerian life – 'the religious sphere' – when president Ben Bella found himself unable to enlist the support of any respectable Muslim figure to attack *Al Qiyam* from a religious perspective'.⁶

Ben Bella's regime, which laid the foundations for the establishment of an authoritarian regime⁷, came to an abrupt halt in a *coup d'état* on June 19, 1965. Colonel Houari Boumedienne, then minister of defense, toppled Ben Bella and continued where the former left off. He went on to consolidate the authoritarian regime. He suspended the constitution and the FLN was relegated to ceremonial role. The running of the country was trusted to the Revolutionary Council, composed of those were involved in the coup, under his chairmanship. Given the perceived illegitimacy of the means by which he came to power and vocal opposition to his move, he relentlessly continued the drive to rid the political scene from any political opposition and strengthen his grip on power. He relied heavily on the military and the secret police to silence any opposition.⁸ Even though the party was relegated to a ceremonial role (it did not hold any congresses during his 13 years' reign). Boumedienne argued that "the plurality of parties under disguised forms should be fought and destroyed because it is a danger which threatens the party and would make [the FLN] a dead body without a soul."⁹ In order to legitimize itself in the eyes of the Algerian people and strengthen Boumedienne's grip on power, his regime presented itself as Islamic and started to take steps to silence *Al Qiyam* which had become very critical of the regime. Hence, in September 1966, a prefectural decree banned the organisation from Algiers, and in 1969, a ministerial decree banned the activities of this organisation throughout the country.¹⁰ In the same year, the government banned the student union, *l'Union Nationale des Etudiants Algériens* (UNEA) because the former had insisted on keeping its autonomy. In order to ensure total control over the political activity in the country, the regime created its own mass organisations under the umbrella of the FLN. Hence, youth, women's and peasants organisations were created. Nonetheless, despite the banning of political parties, the *Partid'Avant Garde Socialiste*, (PAGS) the former communist party, was allowed a certain degree a freedom of activity because it served some of the regime's immediate interests.

Whilst strengthening his grip on power, Boumedienne had embarked on a process of institution building. Local and regional assemblies were elected in 1967 and 1969 respectively. A constitution was adopted in 1976 and Boumedienne ran for presidential election unopposed in the same year. In 1977, parliament was elected. In elections to the different assemblies, local, regional and national, Algerians had a choice of candidates, but not of parties. All candidates were

formally associated with the FLN. It should also be stressed that Boumedienne became disillusioned with the direction the country was taking and had plans to reform the system. He was going to, among other things, revive the role of the party and encourage political pluralism from within the FLN. The party's forthcoming congress was to discuss these potential changes.¹¹ Unfortunately, he did not have the time to put his ideas into practice. He died in December 1978 before the FLN's congress was held.

Colonel Chadli Bendjedid assumed power after Boumedienne's untimely death. Bendjedid started a process of 'de-Boumediennisation' with economic liberalization at the front of his reforms. Bendjedid's open economy¹² began with encouraging privatization, more autonomy to public sectors, and private investment in industry and manufacturing. The period had also seen the rise of more vocal opposition to the regime. The *Mouvement Cultural Berber* (MCB) staged demonstrations against the regime in the region of *Kabilya* in April 1980, commonly known as the 'Berber Spring', to demand recognition of their cultural rights. Security forces were deployed to bring this peaceful demonstration under control and members of the movement were jailed. The Islamist opposition came to the surface and staged mass protests throughout the 1980s. The period also saw the emergence of an Islamist armed opposition under the leadership of Mustafa Bouyali, who was killed in January 1987. The creation of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights, under the leadership of the charismatic Ali Yahia Abdennour, added more pressure on the regime. The fall in oil prices in the mid 1980s, which accounts for almost 98 per cent of Algeria's revenues, meant that the regime was no longer in a position to meet the economic and social needs of its people. The IMF and World Bank-sponsored austerity measures, such as the lowering of subsidies for basic consumer goods, served as the catalyst for the riots and social unrest in October 1988, which paved the way for political reforms and the potential launching of a "second republic".

It must be stressed that the social unrest of October 1988 was not, as it is popularly believed, a spontaneous reaction and a 'revolution' against the regime. Brahim, Algeria former Prime Minister (1984-88), argued that the unrest should be understood as part of the factional struggle within the regime. Divisions within the top leadership of the FLN were common knowledge. On the one hand, there was a reformist wing, associated with the then president Bendjedid (1979-1992), that wanted to liberalize the economy and open up the political space. On the other hand, there was a conservative wing, associated with the former head of the party, Messaadia, who was, at best, reluctant about the direction the country was embarking upon. It was Bendjedid's wing that orchestrated the riots to force the liberalization programme. The events were used to justify the firing of those opposed Bendjedid and his circle's policies.¹³ Following the October riots, Bendjedid, promised Algerians "reforms in all fields". The scope of the reforms was left open and, at least on the surface, very few expected not only the speed but

also extent to which the liberalization process would go. Indeed, during the Sixth Congress of the FLN, held in November 1988, then president Bendjedid showed his animosity towards a multiparty system. He echoed the words of his predecessor Boumediene when he told delegates that 'a multiparty system represented a threat to national unity and independence'.¹⁴ Hence, it came as no surprise that the FLN's Congress concluded by banning the formation of political parties.¹⁵ What is perplexing, however, is that less than three months after the conclusion of the FLN's congress, a constitution was adopted in February 1989, which paved the way for the introduction of a multiparty system.

FROM AUTHORITARIANISM TO 'MULTIPARTY' RULE:

After the October 1988 events, the reformist wing that emerged in the early 1980s, resurfaced and led the liberalization process. Towards the end the first half of 1989, Algeria saw a number of political development that were hitherto unthinkable even in the last month of 1988. A number of wide-ranging new laws and constitutional reforms that, at least in theory, paved the way for a more open government through competitive politics were introduced. The most significant of these reforms was, undoubtedly, the February 23, 1989 Constitution. It provided the basis for a market economy and a multiparty system. References to socialism, the system's ideology that was enshrined in the 1976 Constitution, were dropped, and state-society relations were redefined. Of particular interest, the traditional alliance that existed between the state and the FLN was broken up. The Constitution, in article 42, provided for the formation of "associations of political nature", which formally ended the almost three decades of the FLN's monopoly of the Algerian political scene. This provision was followed by a law, on July 5, 1989, that provided the modalities for the creation of parties. The conditions for the creation of parties were very relaxed, a minimum of fifteen members was required, resulted in the legalisation of more than sixty parties. Some of these parties did not have widespread presence throughout the country and were personality-based to further the political ambitions of those who created them. Nonetheless, despite the provision of the Constitution that no political party could be based on religion, with the legalization of the Islamic Salvation front (FIS), the authorities allowed their laws to be flouted.¹⁶

In the aftermath of these reforms, Algeria exhibited the signs of a multiparty polity. Political parties were legalised, independently newspapers were published associations of civil society were established, multiparty elections were held. The first test of these reforms came in June 1990 when the first plural municipal and departmental elections were held. The FIS won more than fifty per cent of the assemblies' of each assembly. At that time, both Abdellah Djaballah and the late Mahfoud Nahnah, two respected figures of the Algerian Islamist movement, did not create their respective parties and called upon their followers

to vote for the FIS. Regardless of the explanations that this overwhelming success was simply a protest vote, the result of the elections confirmed the FIS as the only credible opposition that can oust the regime. With the legislative elections fast approaching, the authorities in Algiers were following the developments very carefully.

Aware of this potential threat, the authorities moved on to legalize more political Islamic parties. According to some close observers of Algerian affairs, the Algerian *Securité Militaire* (secret service) was behind the creation of HAMAS, later Movement for Peace and Society (MSP), whose aim was to split the FIS's support.¹⁷ The authorities also moved on to redraw the electoral boundaries and change the electoral system in an attempt to ensure that the FIS would be defeated.¹⁸

Despite this, the FIS overwhelmingly won the first round of the legislative elections of December 1991 and was on course to win an overwhelming majority in the 430 seats National Assembly.¹⁹ Faced with a potential Islamist government, the military intervened to nullify the results of the election, pressured president Bendjedid to resign, banned the FIS and declared a state of emergency. The cancellation of the electoral process was very divisive. There were those who, such as the FLN and the FFS, despite its secular tendencies, not only refused to condone the action but also called for the election process to continue. Other parties that call themselves democratic, such as the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), called for the nullification of the results as soon as they were officially announced and supported the military's intervention when it occurred. It is at that particular moment that the authorities in Algiers started to look for allies within civil society and used whatever means at their disposal to ensure that no strong and organised opposition emerged. Following president Bendjedid's forced resignation and in an attempt to enlist the FFS's support, its leader Hocine Ait Ahmed, was considered as a potential president, something he rejected.²⁰

Whilst a number of parties, such as the RCD and *Ettahadi* and the Islamist party Hamas to name just a few, had sided with the authorities and some were present in the National Consultative Council (CCN) – an appointed parliament-the former ruling party, the FLN, was firmly in the opposition. Despite being completely humiliated in the first round of the legislative elections gaining only 16 of the 232 seats,²¹ not only accepted the results but also resisted the overtures of the system. Under the leadership of its charismatic leader, the late Abdelhamid Mehri, the party became a source of embarrassment to the authorities in Algiers and the regime seemed to have lost a large share of its support. In his relentless drive to find a peaceful and inclusive solution to the Algerian crisis, Mehri was instrumental in organizing a meeting at the Saint Egidio Catholic Community in Rome, Italy, in December 1994 and January 1995. All political parties as well as the Algerian government were invited. As expected, the Algerian government declined to attend and so did the parties that took the government's position on the crisis. On the other hand, a number of parties as the FIS, the Trotskyist Workers' Party attended.

The Islamist parties Hamas of Nahnah and Djaballah's Ennahda were also in attendance. Hamas, however, failed to attend the second five days meeting in January 1995 which concluded with the "Platform for a Political and Peaceful Solution of the Algerian Crisis."²² Hamas took the government's position and condemned the meeting as interference in the country's internal affairs, further fueling the allegations that the party was a creation of the Algerian security services. The regime was following the developments in Rome very carefully. Mehri was able to bring together several political parties, from diverse ideological backgrounds to agree on a road map. The authorities in Algiers, aware that decisive action can only be organized through strong and collective action by associations of civil society, political parties were subjected to manipulation and/or infiltration.

It is also of particular importance to note that when General Zeroual, head of state since January 1994, called for presidential elections in November 1995, the FLN did not present a candidate. The Party believed that presenting a candidate would simply give credibility to an illegitimate process. On the other hand, Said Saadi and Mahfoud Nahnah, leader of the RCD and Hamas respectively, were candidates in a race they had no chance of winning.²³

By then the FLN in general and Mehri in particular became a thorn in the regime's side and the latter orchestrated a campaign in which every possible means was used to oust Mehri from the FLN's leadership. In January 1996, at a session of the Party's Central Committee, members were pressured, under direct instructions from the security services, to ensure that Mehri lose the leadership of the party. A mix of intimidation and financial rewards was used to ensure that the objective was attained. Members of the Central Committee were spoken to individually to ensure that they understood what was expected of them. They were promised a pension of a *haut cadre d'état*, (high ranking civil servant, politicians or officer in the security forces) regardless of whether the member qualified for that pension, if they voted to oust Mehri. Those who were not willing to play the game, were threatened.²⁴ The objective was achieved and Mehri was replaced by Boualem Benhamouda, one of the longest serving ministers in Algeria. Under the new leadership, the FLN, simply became a party of the state playing into the hands of the regime.

Zeroual, as expected won the presidential race in the first round and seemed to have 'the popular mandate' to carry on with his project of political reforms. The cornerstone of his project was the adoption of a new constitution in November 1996. Two contradictory provisions of this Constitution are worth mentioning. The first is that it limited the mandate of the president to two five-year terms. This provision in theory strengthens democracy and gives hope to the opposition that rotation of power based on the free will of the Algerian people is guaranteed and that presidency for life will be a distant memory. The second, according to the provision of Article 98, is the creation of a two-chambered parliament: the lower house, the National Assembly, whose members are directly

for five years, and an upper chamber, the Council of the Nation, two-thirds of whose members are indirectly elected from representatives of the local and regional assemblies, while the remaining one-third is directly appointed by the president. However, what is paradoxical in this process of institutionalization is that, while the declared intent was the establishment of a democratic system, the authorities create non-democratic enclaves. For instance, as many critics may argue, given the president's free hand in naming one-third of the membership of the Council for the Nation, it is difficult to justify not only the legitimacy of that institution, but its representative character also. This claim certainly holds true if the appointees come from the President's entourage. The Council's task is to extend the legislative process, for, according to Article 120 of the Constitution, bills are successively debated by the National Assembly and the Council for the Nation. The Council debates the texts already adopted by the National Assembly; they become laws once they are ratified by three-quarters of the membership of the Council. Hence, whilst on the surface the reforms resulted in a multiparty parliament where the opposition could potentially play a significant role in the running of the country's affairs, in practice, these reforms served only to strengthen the executive's position and reduce the legislative branch and the opposition with it to nothing more than a dependent variable. Furthermore, not happy with bringing back the FLN to the fold, the regime created another party, the National Democratic Party (RCD), in February 1997. Four months later, when legislative elections were held in June, this party won an outright majority, with the FLN and the MSP taking the second and third positions respectively.²⁵ This move confirmed, if there was ever any doubt, that (even opposition) political parties are just instruments in the hands of the regime and elections are simply a *rendezvous* for the system to reward its clients.

In September 1998, less than three years into his first five year mandate, president Zeroual stunned the nation when he announced that he would not finish his term and instead called for an early presidential election. He argued that this move would show that democratic practices were starting to take roots in Algeria's politics and would ensure the smooth rotation of power. In reality, however, Zeroual's decision was a result of his frustration and disagreements with the military about the directions that the country was taking.²⁶ Hence, anticipated presidential elections were held in April 1999.

BOUTEFLIKA AND OPPOSITION: ONE STEP FORWARD, TWO STEPS BACKWARDS

Bouteflika came to power in April 1999 under dubious circumstances. What began as an exciting race for the presidency in which some of the most senior figures of Algeria's politics, such as Mouloud Hamrouche, Ahmed TalebIbrahimi and Hocine Ait Ahmed, took part, ended up as a one-man race after Bouteflika was left as the only candidate on polling day. Citing large scale fraud, the six candidates withdrew

from the race on the eve of the election.²⁷ The ascension of Bouteflika marked the gradual return to the old practices of the authoritarian regime albeit under the guise of pluralism.

When the military approached Bouteflika to take over the presidency, he asked for the support of the three largest parties in parliament, the RCD, FLN, and MSP, before he finally agreed to run. The election would only serve to confirm decisions taken elsewhere and give semblance of competition. It is interesting to note that the late Mahfoud Nahnah, leader of the MSP, who was a candidate in the 1995 presidential election, was disqualified from the presidential race in 1999, allegedly because he did not meet one of the necessary conditions: participation in the Algerian War if a candidate was born before July 1, 1942. The conditions that candidates have to meet in order to be eligible to run, it should be stressed, did not change during from 1995 to 1999. This practice raises eyebrows about the role of the elections and the nature of opposition in Algeria. Instead of protesting the decision and raising public awareness of these unlawful practices, the MSP, simply joined the other two largest parties, the RND and the FLN, in pledging their support for the 'brother *Moudjahid* (someone who participated in the war of independence from France 1954-1962) Bouteflika'. The RCD joined the bandwagon and was a partner in the coalition government that Bouteflika installed after he came to power. Whilst the first three parties later formed 'the presidential coalition', offering unqualified support for Bouteflika, the RCD, on the other hand, left the coalition government in 2001.

With Bouteflika in power, parties were reduced to nothing more than instruments of support for the president's program. There seemed to be competition between the different parties on who supported the president's program more than the rest. In this way, the political programs of individual parties, if ever they had any, were pushed to the background and parties were falling over each other to identify with the president and his program. Thus, during his first term in office (1999-2004), the president consolidated his power base, through rewarding his clients and ensuring that obstacles are put in place so that his opponents would not be prevented from exercising their constitutional right of freedom of assembly. The ministry of interior, an arm in the hands of the president, did not process the applications for the legalization of a number of parties, but most importantly was very rigorous in applying the law against parties that were deemed to be not favorable to the president. The most uncontested examples of this practice are The *Wafa* movement of former Foreign Minister Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi and the Democratic Front (FD) of former Prime Minister Sid Ahmed Ghazali, which have been waiting for recognition for more than a decade and a half. They were also prevented from holding any meetings or rallies. Conversely, the Union for Democracy and the Republic (UDR) led by Amara Benyouness, despite not being officially recognized, received preferential treatment given its support for president Bouteflika. Benyouness stated that "despite not being legally

recognized, the administration was very lenient towards us. We got all the venues we requested and we were able to animate several meetings, starting with president Bouteflika's campaign for a second mandate until the Charter for Peace and Reconciliation. We are optimistic about the final results regarding the legalization of the party and its political role."²⁸ Furthermore, the president's relentless efforts to strengthen his grip on the political space in Algeria were clearly visible in 2001. It was at an extraordinary Congress of the FLN in September 2001, allegedly with the support of Bouteflika, that Benflis was elected Secretary General of the Party. Benflis ran Bouteflika's presidential campaign of 1999 and was appointed Prime Minister in 2000. Bouteflika calculated that with Benflis, his friend and political ally at the helm of the FLN, the party's support for a second term in office would be guaranteed. The legislative elections of May 2002, another *rendezvous* for patron-clients relations, brought the FLN back to the forefront of Algeria's politics and confirmed it as the majority party in the National Assembly, winning 199 seats of the possible 389 seats.²⁹ Benflis was anonymously confirmed as the Party's General Secretary of the FLN, in accordance with the Party's statute at the Party's Eighth Congress in 2003. Delegates, several of whom were handpicked by Benflis himself to strengthen his grip on the Party,³⁰ gave him wide ranging powers. At the closure of the Congress, Benflis gave a speech in which he reiterated his determination to make the Party free from any tutelage and that major decisions rested with the Party's structure. This speech raised a few alarm bells in the president's circles and indicated that Benflis harbored political ambitions of his own. In other words, the speech suggested that Benflis wanted to bring back the Party to Mehri's days, when it had its own autonomy and political program and not simply a puppet in the hands of the power holders. It also meant that Bouteflika could no longer count on the FLN's support for his quest for a second term in office and brought to the surface Benflis's ambitions to become president. This put the two men at loggerheads and Bouteflika was faced with a situation he did not expect. With several voices, including serving and retired high ranking officers, such as former minister of Defence Khaled Nezzar and then Chief of Staff Mohammed Lamari, questioning his record in office,³¹ losing the support of the largest party in the country would, at least in theory, jeopardize his chances of securing a second mandate. Hence, the president fired Benflis from his post as prime minister on May 5 and this firing marked the open battle between their respective supporters. Supporters of the President resorted to violence throughout the summer of 2003 and the Algerian press regularly reported attacks on Party offices in the four corners of the country.³² They charged that the Party had departed from its original path and there was a need to redress this situation. In a scenario almost similar to what happened to Mehri seven years earlier, a movement composed of ministers loyal to Bouteflika, under the leadership of Abdelaziz Belkhadem, was created on September 14. It started to take steps to topple the Party's Secretary General. In order to give itself some credibility in the eyes of the Algerian public in general and the Party's membership in particular, it

was named 'the correctional movement'; to portray an image of itself as a "do-gooder".

Benflis and his supporters, on the other hand, interpreted this move as an attempt by the President and his entourage to hijack the Party and make it just another tool in his quest for a second mandate. Consequently, far from achieving its objectives, "the correctional movement" served only to re-enforce Benflis and his supporters resolve to carry on with their plans. Thus, at the end of September and according to the Party's statute, Benflis called for an extraordinary meeting of the FLN to officially announce his candidacy to challenge Bouteflika for the presidency. Alarmed with the turn of events, "the correctional movement" resorted to the courts and initially succeeded in preventing the Congress from taking place. Benflis had the final word. Before the courts decided to invalidate the Eighth Congress of the FLN –that confirmed Benflis as leader- and to freeze the Party's assets in December 2003, Benflis managed to hold an extraordinary meeting of his Party on October 3 and officially announced that he would stand for the presidential election. The following day, six ministers that were still loyal to Benflis and members of Bouteflika's coalition government, were withdrawn. With the FLN split between their respective supporters, Benflis was eventually removed from the leadership of the Party and ran against Bouteflika for the presidential race in 2004. The administration's constant meddling in the affairs of political parties, including through the courts, did not stop with the removal of Benflis from the FLN, but also extended to the disqualification of potential candidates who might pose a threat, however, remote to the President's chances of winning. Hence, Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, one of the grandees of Algeria's politics and potential candidate was disqualified on the basis that he could not secure the required 75,000 signatures. On the other hand, it was the same administration that helped both Louisa Hannoune and Ali Fawzi Rebaine to gather the required number of signatures and stand for election to give the contest more credibility.

These patron-client relations can also be seen before the presidential elections of 2004. It is of particular interest to note that several parties and organizations pledged their support for Bouteflika, even before he officially announced, in February 2004, that he would run for a second term in office. These parties represent the main currents of Algeria's politics –namely the nationalists, democrats, Islamists and Berberists.³³ 'The correctional movement' within the FLN represents the so-called nationalist element in the coalition. Former Abdelaziz Belkhadem led this movement. The National Democratic Rally, under the leadership of former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia represents the 'democratic' wing of this coalition. The party remained faithful to the role it played in the 'presidential election of 1999'. The third is the Islamist current and is represented by the MSP. Finally, the UDR, whilst not formally recognized, represents the Berberist current. The Party was charged, among other things, with preparing the President's visits to the two main administrative departments of *Kabilya*: Bejaia and

Tizi Ouzou. Not only did Bouteflika win his second term in office in 2004, but he went on in November 2008 to amend an article in the Constitution that had limited the presidency to two five years term, creating *a de facto* presidency for life.

When the 'Arab Spring' was launched in Tunisia in December 2010, Algeria, given its history of protests, was one of the contenders to catch the wing of change. In January 2011, the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (NCCD), an umbrella for a number of parties and associations of civil society, was created. It called for the lifting of the state of emergency, the introduction of genuine reforms, the release of political prisoners and social justice.³⁴ It planned to hold marches every Saturday starting on February 12. By all accounts, the inaugural march was a failure and the following Saturday, February 19, was attended by fewer people. A combination of the deployment of security personnel, financial incentives, warning narratives that Algeria might go back to the 1990s and the introduction of incremental reforms ensured the Coordination faded away. Indeed, Bouteflika lifted the state of emergency on February 24, and in a televised speech to the nation on April 15, a visibly ill president promised a series of reforms. The reforms resulted in the legalisation of more than twenty parties and introducing a quota for females in the elected assemblies. Unlike the post Arab Spring elections where the Islamists have made significant gains, the Algerian Islamists did not. Sensing that the moment was favorable to the Islamists, the MSP distanced itself from the presidential coalition and together with Ennahda and Al Islah, two Islamist parties, formed Green Algeria Alliance (GGA) and entered the legislative elections of May 2012. The alliance was completely humiliated coming third after the FLN and the RND. It should also be pointed out that two days before polling, a visibly ill Bouteflika, in his last speech to the nation, referred to his generation as *tab edjnanou* (past its sale by date) and alluded to the fact that he would not be running for office. In April 2013, he was taken ill and spent over three months in a French hospital. The general feeling in Algeria was that the president's days in office were numbered. He would at best see the last year of his third mandate and would not stand for election. Several opposition groups called for the activation of article 88 of the Algerian Constitution to declare the president unfit for office, to no avail. Nonetheless, the general feeling in Algeria was that the president's days in office were numbered. He would at best see the last year of his third mandate and would not stand for a fourth term. These hopes were dashed when Bouteflika reshuffled his cabinet. The Ministry of Interior, of Justice and the chairmanship of the Constitutional Council, key institutions in elections, went to his cronies. With these appointments completed, he decided to run for the presidential election of April 2014 and success was just a formality.

This decision to run for office led to the birth of a pro-democracy movement, called *Barakat* (enough). Its objectives and tactics were similar to many of the protest movements during the Arab Spring. It used social media, especially Facebook, and organized several demonstrations both in Algeria and abroad. Its

goal is "to establish democracy in Algeria."³⁵ However its success has been limited. Furthermore the election of Bouteflika to a fourth term in office, led to the creation of an opposition bloc; *la coordination pour les libertes et la transition démocratique* (CLTD) (the Coordination for Liberties and Democratic Transition). It is composed of a number of political parties such as the RCD, Ennahda, the MSP, the FFS, and a number of public figures, such as former prime ministers Benbitour, Benflis, Hamrouche and Sifi. The Coordination main demand is the radical transition to a more transparent democratic government. Both *Barakat* and the Coordination share the same goal: the establishment of democracy. The establishment of democracy, however noble as an objective, represents their main weakness. They appeal to the middle classes and neither speaks for the working classes or the marginalized poor, the support of which is vital in order to pose a serious challenge to the authorities and push candid political reforms. Demonstrations have since the turn of the century been a common feature of Algerians' daily life. As a matter of fact, in 2011 alone the police recorded 10,910 cases of public disorder.³⁶ Yet very few of these marches had the establishment of democracy as its main slogan. Low wages, shortage of housing, unemployment, improvement of working conditions and an end to corruption have been at the forefront of these demands. The Coordination is also tarnished in the eyes of the population by the fact that most of the groupings and individuals members of this bloc had prior close involvement with the regime. The MSP for instance, was, until 2012, a member of government alongside the FLN and the RND. Benflis, run the 1999 presidential campaign of president Bouteflika and was his prime minister for three years (2000-2003). The Coordination is even divided along the strategies to be adopted and most importantly on the leadership. The never-ending drive to be the *Zaim* (leader) has been one of the most significant weaknesses of Algerian parties. These factors further indicate that the leadership of the parties in Algeria hardly changes through democratic means.³⁷ The authorities have been able to play on the internal divisions within parties as well as on the perception of the *Zaim* within these parties to further infiltrate, manipulate and weaken them. In several instances, the would be *Zaims* of these parties are willing participants in this process of manipulation

CONCLUSION:

In comparison to 'Arab Spring' countries, Algeria has had a longer experience with multi-party politics. The break-away from authoritarian rule occurred more than two decades before the launch of the 'Arab Spring' in Tunisia. The fact that there have been several parties putting forward candidates for elections, running political campaigns which resulted in multiparty parliaments is a positive step. However, despite this, the opposition has been unable to put forward alternatives to the status quo. On the whole, political parties' presence, activity and visibility is limited to election times.

Over the years, the Algerian authorities have mastered the arts of change that preserves the status quo. The state of Algeria's reforms can be best described as inertia. On the surface, a number of laws are adopted and there has been visible change, but in reality *plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose*. Political parties on the whole are too weak and fragmented and easy to manipulate. The FLN, has had a period of opposition in first half of the 1980s, but the authorities in Algiers were successful in bringing it back to line. The majority of parties support the regime and access the resources and the privileges that come with it. In this sense it is difficult to speak of opposition, but it is better to speak to an "opportusition".³⁸ Unfortunately, for the time being, the Algerian authorities have been successful in keeping the status quo while giving the semblance of democracy. In this sense, opposition has been, and will for the foreseeable future remain, impotent.

End Nots:

¹ B. Dillman, <<Transition to Democracy in Algeria>>, in *State and Society in Algeria*, J.P. Entelis and P. C. Naylor (eds), Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1992, p. 31.

² First author's interview with Professor AbdelhamidBrahim, Algeria's former Prime Minister (1984-88) London, 2 December 1998.

³ S. White, <<Economic performance and communist legitimacy>>, *World Politics*, 38, 3, 1986, p. 462-82.

⁴ In 1966, HocineAit Ahmed escaped from his prison and went into exile in Switzerland.

⁵ M. Willis, *The Islamic Challenge in Algeria: a political history*. Reading: Ithaca, 1996 p.64.

⁶ H. Roberts, <<Radical Islamism and the Dilemma of Algerian Nationalism: the Embattled Arians of Algiers>>, *Third World Quarterly*, 10, 2, 1988, p. 564.

⁷ It should be pointed out that a Constituent Assembly was elected in September 1962, with a one-year mandate to draw a constitution. All candidates were drawn from the FLN. In September 1963, a constitution was approved in a referendum and the mandate of the Assembly, according to Article 77, was extended by one year. In early October 1963, however, president Ben Bella froze the activities of the Assembly and assumed full power.

⁸ Two former leaders of the Algerian war of independence, Mohammed Khider and Krim Belkacem, fierce opponents of the Boumedienne's regime, were assassinated in Madrid (1967) and Frankfurt (1970) respectively, allegedly on the orders of Boumedienne.

⁹ H. Zoubir and Y. Bouandel, <<The Question of Human Rights in Algeria: An Analytical Approach>>, *The Journal of Algerian Studies*, 3, 1998 p. 2.

¹⁰ Michael Willis, *The Islamic Challenge in ...* p. 46.

¹¹ First author's interview with Professor Abdelhamid Brahim (1988), Op. Cit.

¹² For more details see, J. Entelis, <<Introduction: State and Society in Transition>>, in *State and Society in Algeria*, J.P. Entelis and P. C. Naylor (eds), Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1992, 17-20.

¹³ First author's interview with Professor Abdelhamid Brahim (1988) Op. Cit.

¹⁴ For more details see, *El Moudjahid* (Algiers) 28. November, 1988

¹⁵ L. Sadiki and A. Boubakri, <<Political Organization in the Middle East and North Africa>>, *Taiwan Journal of Democracy*, 101, 2014, p. 92.

¹⁶ J. J. Lavenue, <<Le FIS et la Constitution Algérienne>>, *Praxis Juridique et Religion*, 10, 1993, p. 130-131.

¹⁷ For further details, see M. Tahj, <<Algeria's Democratisation Process: A Frustrated Hope>>, *Third World Quarterly*, 16, 2, 1994, p. 209-24.

¹⁸ Y. Bouandel, <<Reforming the Algerian Electoral System>>, *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 43, 3, 2005, p. 393-415.

¹⁹ Y. Bouandel, <<Algerian National Popular Assembly Election of December 1991>>, *Representation*, 32, 117, Winter/Spring 1993/4, p. 10-14.

²⁰ The first author is grateful to Professor Belkacem Iratni, Dean of the Faculty of Political Sciences and International Relations, Algiers University 3, Algeria, for bringing this point to my attention.

²¹ It should be pointed out that this electoral system, far from translating the votes that parties received into seats, actually magnified the FIS's popularity. With a relatively low turnout, registered at 59%, it took on average 17,342 votes to elect a FIS candidate, 20,426 to elect an FFS candidate, and a staggering 100,809 votes to elect an FLN candidate. For more details see Y. Bouandel, <<Reforming the Algerian...>>.

²² This Platform called for, among other things, the rejection of violence as a means to achieve power, the consecration of the multi-party system and most importantly perhaps the non-interference of the army in political affairs.

²³ When Zeroual announced the holding of presidential election in November 1995, he asked Rabah Bitat, a historic figure of the Algerian war, former president of the National Assembly, and president of Algeria for 45 days following Boumedienne's death in December 1978, to run for office. Bitat declined stating that he would not enter a race the results of which were known in advance. When the first 'plural elections' were held, Zeroual, as was widely expected won in the first round.

²⁴ The first author is grateful to both Professor Brahimi, former Prime Minister for Algeria (1984-88) and Dr Mokhtar Mezrag, Professor of Political Science and International Relations at Algiers University 3, and former aide to Mr Mehri for sharing these points with me during interviews in London on December 2, 1998 and August 27 2015 in Algiers respectively. A similar, albeit brief, account can be found in *El Khabar* (Algiers) September 4, 2015.

²⁵ Y. Bouandel and Y. Zoubir, <<The legislative election of June 1997 and the future of the democratic transition in Algeria>>, *Representation*, 35, Nos, 2 & 3, Spring/Autumn, 1998, p. 168-74.

²⁶ First author's interview with Professor Abdelhamid Brahim, (1998) Op. Cit.

²⁷ Y. Bouandel, <<The Presidential Elections in Algeria, April 1999, *Electoral Studies*>>, 20, 1, 2001, p. 157-63.

²⁸ N. Djabi, *El Wazir El Jazaeri: Oussoulwa Massarates* (The Algerian Minister: Roots and Directions) Algiers, Chihab publications, 2011, p. 260.

²⁹ Y. Bouandel, <<Algeria: A Controversial Election," *Mediterranean Politics*>>, 7,2, 2002, p. 96-104.

³⁰ During interviews conducted by the first author in the Eastern province of Jijel in May 2002, a school headmaster said: ' I have been a militant of the FLN since 1969. Even in those of the single party-rule, we always held a general assembly to elect delegates to the Party's congresses in Algiers. When Benflis became Secretary-General of the FLN, he fired the party's chairmen at the local and regional level and replaced them with appointed ones. It is these appointees that went to the Eight Congress and gave him all the powers.

³¹ K. Nezzar, *Bouteflika: l'homme et son bilan* (Bouteflika: the man and his record), Algiers: Apic, 2003. See also M. Benchicou, *Bouteflika: Une imposture Algerienne* (Bouteflika and Algerian sham), Algiers: editions Le Matin, 2004.

³² *Echourouk El Yawmi*, (Algiers) 31 December 2003.

³³ It should be pointed that the division of parties into these categories, whilst widely used is not necessarily precise. It raises more questions than answers. For example, is a democrat not a nationalist? Is an Islamist not a nationalist? Is a Berberist not a democrat? Etc...

³⁴ A. Layachi, <<Algeria's Rebellion by Installments>>, (MERIP) *Middle East Research and Information Project*, 12 March, 2011.

³⁵ First author's interview with a member of Barakat, Algiers, June 7, 2014.

³⁶ Socialist Word <<Algeria. Legislative elections give near-majority to the FLN>>, May 20, 2014 accessed 16 May 2015 <http://www.socialistworld.net/doc/5764>.

³⁷ Since the establishment of a multi-party system in the late 1980s, the leadership of these parties had, on the whole, remained the same and changes occurred through natural causes, (death) such as the MSP, of the late MahfoudNahnah, or through internal coups, usually with the support of the intelligence services. Abdellah Djaballah, was twice ousted from the leadership of the two parties he created, *Ennahda* and *Il Islah*. Louisa Hannoune, has been leader of the Workers' Party (PT) since it was legalised over two decades ago.

³⁸ This concept "opportusition" is composed of the two concepts; opposition and opportunity. Political opposition is weak and takes advantage of the opportunity presented to them to support the regime and access state resources.

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