

ANALYSIS OF THE ALGERIAN LEGISLATIVE ELECTIONS BETWEEN CONTINUITIES AND CHANGES

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Abstract

By declaring the dissolution of the National People's Assembly in February 2021, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune hoped to open a new political cycle for Algeria after years of massive protests. The snap legislative elections held on June 12 took place in a tense climate of generalized repression amid a political and economic crisis, while most of the opposition boycotted the ballot. The low turnout and lack of a political majority in the National Parliament seemed to designate the boycotters as the election's true winners. However, the results have frozen the confrontation between a regime incapable of renewing itself and a protest movement extremely impaired by internal conflicts and paralyzed by harsh repression. The opposition's rejection of the regime's offer to open political opportunities has paradoxically resulted in a lack of any political alternative to the The National Liberation Front (FLN) and greater discretion in the hands of the President of the Republic. Instead of bringing a rupture, the last ballot represented a continuity with the Bouteflika regime's characteristics of electoral formalism and lack of accountability.

On Friday, February 22, 2021, Algeria was once more flooded with crowds eager to revive the revolutionary process known as the 'Algerian Spring,' or *Hirak*, that started two years ago. After a one-year hiatus due to the Covid-19 pandemic, protesters again filled the streets in Algiers, Constantine, Oran, Jijel, Tlemcen, Tizi-Ouzou, Béjaia, Bouira, Kherrata and Sétif.

Rekindled by a deepening socio-economic crisis, protests first resurfaced at the end of 2020 after the return of General Khaled Nezzar, the former defense minister who flew to Spain in July 2019 escaping justice. As revealed by the media, the General returned to Algeria after obtaining guarantees for a retrial and cancellation of the international arrest warrant issued against him.¹ Nezzar is not the only member of the old guard to be granted an informal pardon under the table. The former intelligence chief Lieutenant General Mohamed Median, better known as General Tawfiq, and General Bashir Tartag also returned home thanks to similar arrangements. As a full restoration of the *Ancien Régime* seems to proceed onwards, *Hirak* has surged in response.

The reactivation of the *Hirak* movement led the regime to reconsider its legitimization strategies. Following mass protests, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune signed a pardon for approximately 30 detainees from the protestors along with more than two dozen others who were waiting to go on trial. Moreover, the ailing leader dissolved the lower house of parliament and called for snap legislative elections that were held on June 12, 2021. The latter were presented by national authorities as a symbolic turn, as they were the first legislative elections since the *Hirak* popular uprising against the Bouteflika's fifth mandate.

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In the meantime, the government is also trying to exploit the emerging divisions within *Hirak* between local and foreign activists, mainly based in Paris, London and Montreal. The diaspora engaged in *Hirak* is a heterogeneous group who represent a wide array of political positions, originally united by the common goal of overthrowing the regime. The diaspora played an important role in boycotting the last legislative elections through digital mobilization, when offline and online protests in Algeria were harshly repressed. However, with the resurgence of mobilization on the streets, political clashes erupted between the secular forces and the leaders of the *Rachad Movement*, which was founded by several former militants of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in exile in 2007.

Committed to finding a balance between a strategy of appeasement and the need to contain the rise of radical challengers, the government has actually found unexpected allies among opposition forces, exploiting the fractures emerging within the *Hirak*.² The regime's decision to release protesters in Algeria while punishing activists abroad was a 'successful' effort to gain legitimacy against the backdrop of a major threat: the resurgence of radical groups. In this scenario, opposition parties, such as *Jil Jadid* (New Generation) started negotiating with the government on possible reforms and the release of more activists, and even decided to participate in the last legislative elections.³ The president of *Jil Jadid*, Soufian Jilali, stated that "If the whole opposition remains in a radical and rebuffing position, the authorities will act in such a way as to restore the power".⁴

Recently, the regime also proved capable of attracting several progressive forces through the launch of the civil society initiative "Massar Jadid".⁵ According to several sources, the "Hirakists" who participated in the initiative have adopted a strategy that "change can come from within." Convinced that the *Hirak* has weakened or has been derailed, they feel the time has come to seek a dialogue with the government and wrest from power whatever can be wrested. While several opponents are wary of embarking on a roadmap drawn up by the regime, the latter is proving an undeniable ability to hold on despite the resurgence of massive protests, finding new allies in the opposition's ranks. Notwithstanding these efforts, the last legislative elections obtained one of the lowest turnouts in the country's history.

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Low turnout amid the boycott

According to the president, holding parliamentary elections would give young people the chance to get involved in political life for a 'new Algeria.' Yet, while some political parties have been demanding the dissolution of the parliament, the call for early elections was not met with enthusiasm by the Algerian people, leading to one of the highest rates of abstention in the history of Algerian elections. As confirmed by Algerian academics: "the electoral campaign led by political parties and independent lists failed to mobilize citizens. We saw almost empty rooms with a carnival-like atmosphere." By referring to the contents of electoral programmes, he also remarked that they contained, "Nothing, except generalities and dreams to sell to the Algerians".⁶

Only 23% of voters turned out to renew the 407 deputies sitting in the National People's Congress, according to the official figures given by the National Independent Election Authority (ANIE). The representation of women has greatly diminished since only 34 women were elected, while in the old assembly, they were 112 women elected. Unsurprisingly, the boycott of the Kabylia region, home to the Kabyle Berber or Amazigh ethnic minority, was one of the highlights of these elections. The deep mistrust of citizens in this region was reinforced this year by the fight declared by the authorities against the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylia (MAK).⁷ Indeed, the Kabylia region recorded the highest abstention rates (less than 1%) despite being one of the most populous regions.

The June 2021 elections were the third boycott of elections by the *Hirak* movement after the presidential election of December 2019, where only 40% of the population voted, and the constitutional referendum in November 2020, with only 23.7% voter participation. Indeed, the general protest movement led by the *Hirak* calls into question the very usefulness of these elections and shows that the major stakes cannot be reduced to the act of voting. Moreover, the ambiguous behavior of some political parties heightened citizens' mistrust, dissuading Algerians from voting.

Thus, abstention has become a political act by which one rejects the authorities' project. "The rate is extremely low. It is a figure which shows to what extent this election, like those which preceded it, does not constitute the solution to the crisis," declared to AFP Louisa Dris

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Aït Hamadouche, professor of political science at the University of Algiers. Tebboune tried to minimize the significance of this massive abstention. “For me, the turnout doesn’t matter,” he warned. “What matters to me is that those whom the people vote for have sufficient legitimacy”. In addition to being elected by only 4.6 million voters (out of more than 24 million voters), the Assembly has received very little renewal. The historic National Liberation Front (FLN), although declining, remains the largest force in parliament.

Winners and losers

The elections of June 12, 2021, brought the FLN and the National Democratic Rally (RND) back into the political arena despite being heavily criticized for their support to President Bouteflika and his proposed fifth term. Even though these political groups kept the majority of votes, they lost many seats compared to the last elections (FLN: 98 seats in 2021 compared to 159 seats in 2017; RND: 100 seats in 2017 against 58 in 2021).

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|-------------------------------|----|
| FLN | 98 |
| Independent | 84 |
| MSP | 65 |
| RND | 58 |
| El Moustakbal Front | 48 |
| Movement El Binaa | 39 |
| People’s Voice Party | 3 |
| Freedom and Justice Party | 2 |
| Justice and Development Front | 2 |
| El Fadjir El Djadid | 2 |
| Good Governance Front | 2 |
| New Algeria Front | 1 |
| El Karama | 1 |
| Jil Jadid | 1 |
| Algerian National Front | 1 |

Table 1. Results of legislative elections of June 12, 2021⁸

The FLN victory was, however, a surprise because it was considered moribund due to its compromise with the deposed President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, even if the party benefits from an old and extensive establishment. The nationalist current remains in fact very anchored in the rural world and among older generations. However, according to some Algerian analysts, such as the sociologist Nacer Djabi, the elections results showed that the FLN did not win, yet simply set in motion its electoral machine, which still works. Others, such as Brahim Oumansour, associate researcher at the Institute for International and Strategic Relations (IRIS), said: “the low turnout mechanically favored the FLN, who remains the party of the administration, capable of mobilizing its base on demand”.

Despite the FLN’s fragile victory, the June elections represented some interesting novelty, with a strong presence of independent lists since the fall of Bouteflika’s regime. As a matter of fact, the ANIE validated 1,253 lists of independents. For the 2017 legislative elections, the same body retained less than 800 independent lists. Indeed, the independents were the elections’ big surprise by obtaining second place with 84 seats. The unprecedented number of independent lists vying for the legislative elections has reshuffled the National Assembly, traditionally dominated by political parties allied with the presidency. It is important to note, however, that 26 parties failed to meet the conditions for participation in the elections. This gave the impression that independent lists are only party projects to form a parliamentary belt that would support Tebboune and the future government. Moreover, it should be noted that several FLN and RND activists applied as independents.⁹

However, the presence of new actors in the legislative elections was not fully unexpected, insofar as the Algerian government bet on civil society in order to transform the political landscape through the emergence of new political entrepreneurs against a backdrop of the traditional parties. The independent candidates eventually managed to overtake the RND, which had never obtained less than second place during its quarter of a century history.

Part of the opposition, known as the “legalist opposition,” decided to participate in the elections. The Islamist forces were represented by two main formations, the MSP (Movement for the Society of Peace, with 69 seats) and the *Binaa Movement* (with 35 seats). Notably, the MSP’s acceptance of the election roadmap has divided its voters, especially the youngest, for whom the party is now discredited.¹⁰ As stated by Djabi: “The Islamists are an old scarecrow of democratic intellectuals, especially the French-speaking press”.¹¹ The MSP certainly has a base in the middle class, but it does not at all have the popular base that the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) had in the 1990s. As a matter of fact, the two movements are very different from a sociological and political perspective. The *Rachad Movement*, which radically boycotted the elections, blamed the Islamist groups for allying with the regime. Likewise, other opposition parties have also been discredited by their participation in legislative elections, such as the *Jil Jadid* party.

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The impact of legislative elections and future scenarios

After the forced resignation of President Bouteflika, Algeria could not find a way out of its political crisis, which became only more aggravated. Not only did the uprising not stop, but its demands became more radical. When President Tebboune put anticipated elections and a government reshuffle on the table, it was apparently too little, too late. Thus, the last legislative elections did not instigate meaningful change. The results reveal a political stagnation, mirroring the low electoral turnout of the late Bouteflika regime. The lack of political representativeness, coupled with the worsening economic situation – as the price of oil has fallen sharply and the trade balance is in deficit – are likely to generate new forms of instability. Popular discontent not channeled by other political offers paradoxically creates a void allowing the President to appoint a government as close as possible to the regime's political agenda.

Experiences of democratic transitions around the world show that negotiations between those in power and protest movements require mediators, usually opposition parties or civil society actors. The most recent example was given by Tunisia, where the Quartet played a key role in the transition, through the establishment of the constituent process. In Algeria, the absence of a mediator supported by the people's will puts political power, and in particular the army command, in a position of strength, allowing it to rule out any possibility of negotiations. However, this position is less comfortable than it seems at first glance. By rejecting the proposals coming from the protest movement on the grounds that they do not come from "legitimate stakeholders," those in power clash with the popular symmetric refusal of any presidential election led by the "gang" (*el-'issaba*), as they call the political establishment.

Instead of bringing a rupture, the last ballot seem to represent a continuity with the previous regime, characterized by the regime's electoral formalism and lack of accountability. With the fragmented electoral results, a coalition of at least 3 parliamentary blocs is needed to form a majority in Parliament, to reach 204 seats out of a total of 407.

Overall, the lack of a parliamentary majority and the low turnout seems to designate the boycotters as the true winners of last elections. However, in a context characterized by the lack of a solid political alternative, the radical rejection of the regime's opening of political opportunities might paradoxically give greater leeway to the President of the Republic.

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On June 26, President Tebboune initiated consultations with leaders of the political parties and representatives of the independent winners for the formation of a new government. All the winning parties and the independent blocs, except the MSP, have announced their support for the formation of a majority presidential government, to favor the option of appointing a Prime Minister close to the leanings of the Algerian president.¹² Talking about the MSP refusal to engage in a coalition with the FLN, the chief Abderrazak Makri posited at a press conference: “unfortunately, what has been proposed to us did not reflect the political and economic measures as we had promised our electors”.¹³

Against this background, and in the light of the regime's ability to hold on despite a generalized popular distrust, the main role of breaking with the old dynamics of the past would belong to the opposition. The Hirak movement, which has been strongly weakened by the worsening of the public health situation and by the continuous repression, should at least for its part overcome its internal divisions in order to act as a real counter-power during this delicate political phase.

Endnotes

- 1- <https://thearabweekly.com/return-general-nezzar-algeria-hints-deal-authorities>
- 2- <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1124297/politique/algerie-tebboune-dissout-lassemblee-et-promet-de-liberer-des-detenus-dopinion/>
- 3- <https://en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-algerian-opposition-leader-soufiane-djilali-political-crisis-in-algeria---is?nopaging=1>; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algeria-release-two-leaders-hirak-movement-says-opposition>
- 4- <https://www.franceinter.fr/emissions/le-zoom-de-la-redaction/le-zoom-de-la-redaction-du-mercredi-16-juin-2021>
- 5- <https://twala.info/fr/societe/massar-jadid-autour-du-feu-du-pouvoir-au-risque-de-se-bruler-les-doigts/>
- 6- https://www.liberte-algerie.com/actualite/lenjeu-majeur-ne-peut-etre-reduit-a-lacte-de-vote-360333?fbclid=IwAR1-sw_E_L4ScwXEEL3Go11vvr3GQXrXyuQB-J4lhCXKvzsrjTeaDZtgnE
- 7- Since April 2021, the Algerian authorities have increasingly resorted to accusations of “terrorism” or “conspiracy against the state” to prosecute human rights defenders and Hirak activists. They called two organizations that express dissenting views as “terrorist” organizations: the opposition movement Rachad and the Movement for Self-Determination of Kabylia (MAK). See : <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/latest/news/2021/06/algeria-scores-detained-in-escalation-of-crackdown-against-activists/>
- 8- <https://www.aps.dz/algerie/124026-legislatives-du-12-juin-le-conseil-constitutionnel-proclame-les-resultats-definitifs>
- 9- Several parties could not be represented in this election due to the obligation to collect a necessary number of signatures. Indeed, the electoral law requires parties to be supported by at least 25,000 individual signatures of voters registered on the electoral rolls. These signatures must be collected through at least twenty-three *wilayas* (governorates). The number of signatures required for each *wilaya* cannot be less than 300 signatures. See: <http://www.droit-afrique.com/uploads/Algerie-Code-2021-electoral.pdf>
- 10- https://www.liberation.fr/international/afrique/elections-en-algerie-le-fln-na-pas-gagne-il-a-simplement-mis-en-route-sa-machine-electorale-20210616_RC5CX2JSOVDDLHBNB7ZVGPK3ZU/
- 11- Ibid.
- 12- According to the new Constitution of November 1, 2020, the President of the Republic has the free choice in appointing the prime minister.
- 13- <https://fr.africanews.com/2021/07/01/algerie-le-msp-ne-fera-pas-partie-du-prochain-gouvernement/>

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