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Reconfiguring the Algerian Regime: On the Stability and Robustness of Authoritarianism in Algeria

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Abstract: The authoritarian Algerian regime faced a democratization attempt and a civil war in the 1990s, but since that time the regime has been characterized by its robustness and stability. Even during the Arab uprisings, the Algerian regime found ways to absorb the protests and survive. How did Algeria become such a stable and robust authoritarian regime after the instable 1990s? The regime introduced new mechanisms such as political liberalization and a multiparty system in the 1990s in an attempt to control the challenge of opposition and respond to it when needed. When faced with such a challenge, the regime uses political liberalization as a strategy and initiates reforms that do not change the political system, yet appease the public. Likewise, the regime uses the multiparty system to its benefit. While providing a relatively free yet limited public space to the opposition and canalizing their activities into the institutional sphere, the regime does not allow free and fair elections, controls the party system, and does not allow opposition to go beyond defined limits. Thanks to these new measures, the Algerian regime changed its form in the 1990s and became a stable and robust authoritarian regime with a strong grip on the political sphere.

More than two decades before the region was shaken by protests and regime change, Algeria had its own experience with major political transformations. After a failed democratization attempt, a coup and an almost decade-long civil war in the 1990s, the Algerian regime reconsolidated and has emerged today as one of the most robust authoritarian regimes in the region. While the Arab uprisings led to the fall of dictators in neighboring countries, the Algerian regime managed to survive and is not expected to yield to future challenges in the medium term. What makes the Algerian regime so resilient today? How has the regime that experienced a breakdown and opened the path to democratization two decades ago rebuilt itself so robustly? What are the main tools that the Algerian regime introduced to sustain its survival? What are the roles and prospects for the opposition as possible challengers to the existing regime? This expert brief answers these questions by looking at the reconfiguration of the Algerian authoritarian regime in the 1990s.

The Historical Development of the Algerian Regime

Following its independence from France in 1962, the Algerian state was founded around the Front de Libération Nationale (National Liberation Front - FLN) government, beginning almost thirty years of single-party rule under the influence of the military as the guardians of the republic. Due to a combination of internal regime rifts, political and economic crises and widespread protests in October 1988, the government initiated a series of political reform initiatives. These reforms were more than expected at the time and brought about a process of democratization.

The constitutional change in 1989 legalized opposition parties, civil society organizations and private newspapers for the first time since the 1960s. For about two years,

Algeria enjoyed a fairly open political field with dozens of political parties competing in elections. However, following the landslide victories of the Islamist Front Islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front - FIS) in the municipal elections of 1990 and legislative elections of 1991, the army carried out a coup d'état in early January 1992, forcing the president to resign, canceling the elections, and banning the FIS. This coup d'état put an end to the democratization of Algeria, began an authoritarian reversion, and led to a long civil war between the army and various Islamic forces.

While the Arab uprisings led to the fall of dictators in neighboring countries, the Algerian regime managed to survive and is not expected to yield to future challenges in the medium term.

During the infamous Black Decade of the 1990s, an estimated 150,000 to 200,000 people were killed, while about 20,000 disappeared and many more were displaced. The civil war ended in 1999 with a Civil Concord which gave amnesty to most fighters, followed by the election of the architect of the concord, Abdelaziz Bouteflika.[1] Bouteflika was then seen as a savior who brought stability to the country. However, after his first two terms, Bouteflika's popularity kept decreasing. Thanks to a constitutional amendment lifting presidential term limits being enacted in 2008, Bouteflika is currently serving his fourth term in office.

During the tumultuous 1990s, from the failed democratization attempt to Bouteflika's presidency, the Algerian authoritarian regime refounded itself. Rather than one-party rule with direct military presence, no formal opposition and no freedoms of expression or association, the new regime reconfigured itself around seemingly civilian politics with the backing of reconsolidated army and intelligence structures and a multiparty system with increasing opportunities and freedoms. However, this new more civilian-looking regime under Bouteflika not democratic either, it is just a different form of authoritarian regime. Unlike the pre-1990 regime, the president and prime ministers do not come from military backgrounds, which consolidates the government's civilian image. Furthermore, the army does not directly involve itself in day-to-day politics. However, political freedoms are still limited, the elections are not free and fair, and the army is still seen as the main decision-maker in politics, as many experts believe that the army's candidate will become the next president after Bouteflika. Thanks to this reconfiguration and the new mechanisms of survival introduced during the 1990s., despite Bouteflika's deteriorating health and the possible end of his mandate, a continuous internal power struggle between different factions of the regime,[2] an economic crisis, and changing domestic and international power dynamics, the Algerian regime still remains strong.

The Algerian Regime's Survival Toolkit

Authoritarian regimes such as Algeria use a set of different tools for survival in the face of challenges from the elites (both within-regime and opposition) and the people. As the challenges vary from case to case, the tools that regimes use vary as well. Sometimes using a few tools is enough for survival, but having a variety of tools in the inventory provides enhanced protection from different challenges. Unlike some other authoritarian regimes, Algeria has a wide variety of tools in its inventory today. Before the 1990s, Algerian regime was under one-party rule without much flexibility. To respond to challenges, the regime used oil rents, the legitimacy that came from the war of liberation, and its strong coercive apparatus. During the reconfiguration of the 1990s, the Algerian

regime introduced political liberalization reforms and a multiparty system as a strategy to provide flexibility against these challenges.

For the current Algerian regime, liberalizing reforms are a perfect strategy for survival. Even though earlier scholarly literature argued that political liberalization is a first step towards democratization, Algeria, along with many other cases in the region, have proved that liberalization can be a strategy for authoritarian survival. The previous regime did not use reforms as a strategy for most of its time in power. The first significant reform initiative, through the constitutional change of 1989, then led to an unexpected level of political transformation.

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Since then, the regime has utilized reforms to meet some opposition demands without undermining the existing political system. Over the past two decades, there have been occasional constitutional amendments and even some complete constitutional changes. The most significant of all were the reforms that followed the protests of 2011. In response to the protest movements, President Bouteflika promised a wide range of reforms including political liberalization, transparency and the institutionalization of the rule of law rather than fully repressing the masses. This promise later led to a wide constitutional amendment in early 2016 which, in reality, fell short of bringing about the promised changes. Even though these reforms remained short of bringing about a more open political system, the strategy of using political reforms was enough for the regime to respond to popular demands within certain limits and deflect a potential challenge.[3]

The introduction of a multiparty system, on the other hand, provided the regime with a wide range of opportunities for flexibility. The constitutional change of 1989 allowed opposition parties, which eventually led to proliferation of parties in a very short period. Even though the democratization attempt of the early 1990s failed, the regime preferred to keep opposition parties, institutionalize elections, and provide certain freedoms to the opposition rather than return to the pre-1989 order. Today, Algeria has a vibrant political party system with a variety of ideological orientations represented in the political arena. The current parliament hosts a variety of centrist, nationalist, Islamist, Berberist and leftist parties. The parties run in elections, form electoral alliances, and some even take positions in government. They also enjoy a higher level of freedom of expression in comparison to other authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. Unlike many other authoritarian settings, it is easy to openly criticize the president or the army to the extent that the opposition regularly unleash their anger at the regime.

If there is such a vibrant political party system and relatively high level of freedom of expression, why doesn't this make a real impact and lead to possible regime change? The Algerian regime successfully transitioned to a multiparty authoritarian regime from a single-party one in the 1990s by delineating the limits of the party system, undermining the strength of the opposition and co-opting some to the regime. There are five important features of this successful transition to multiparty authoritarianism that facilitate the regime's survival:

First, the political party system in Algeria is strong and general ideological lines are well represented but the parties are very scattered. Political parties in Algeria can be categorized into regime parties, Islamist parties, and leftist parties (both Kabyle and non-Kabyle left)[4]. When the multiparty system began in Algeria, three Islamist parties were founded and one of them, the FIS, was banned after the coup d'état of 1992. The Islamist movements represented by the other two parties, the Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix (Movement of Society for Peace – MSP or Hamas) and the Mouvement de la Renaissance Islamique (Islamic Renaissance Movement – MRI or Ennahda), are still alive today.[5] However, each of these movements are divided into smaller parties, making a total of six Islamist parties on the political scene today.[6] There are mainly two Kabyle parties representing the Kabyle minority, Front des Forces Focialistes (Socialist Forces Front - FFS) and Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie (Rally for Culture and Democracy - RCD). Even though they represent a similar electorate, the two parties have differences in terms of some of their ideological and policy positions. In the non-Islamist / non-Kabyle sphere, there are multiple small parties that occasionally take bigger roles in politics, yet mostly revolve around the personality of their leaders. Even though the party system is well-established, parties do not have strong organizations and the opposition parties' impact is limited in such a scattered party scene. Since the beginning of the multiparty system, the regime has successfully utilized these rifts within each party line to drive them to further compartmentalization which eventually makes them less of a challenge.

Second, in the mid-1990s, the factions in favor of a status quo within the regime initiated the foundation of a second pro-regime party, the Rassemblement National Démocratique (National Rally for Democracy - RND). The emergence of the RND as the secondary regime party provides a great level of flexibility to the Algerian regime. Under the current semi-presidential system, the direct target of the anger of the political opposition and the masses anger is not the presidency or the army; it is the government. If there is increasing tension from the opposition or the masses, the regime has the ability to initiate a turnover between the two regime parties, namely the FLN and RND, without directly affecting the regime. Since the mid-1990s, the head of government has occasionally switched between these two regime parties.

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Third, even though parties are free to operate within the political system and participate in the elections, there are certain limits on party activities. Founding a party built upon the banned FIS's legacy is not allowed and the leaders of the FIS are banned from politics. Therefore, any political party activity along the lines of or including members of the FIS is not allowed. Likewise, because of the long civil war in which most warring factions were radical jihadists, there is a strong aversion to violence as a political means. Even though these warring factions were not direct continuations of the FIS, since some FIS leaders did not condemn their armed action during the civil war, there is an effort made by the regime to continuously couple the FIS with the warring factions in the civil war. For this reason, the Islamist parties in particular

continuously seek to detach themselves from the FIS's legacy and discourse as well as violence. On the one hand, this has had a very positive impact, as the current Islamist parties acquired a much more moderate position. The current Islamist parties avoid using the strong invective against the regime which the FIS used to use in the early 1990s. On the other hand, the constant effort to detach themselves from the FIS's legacy and its strong criticism to the regime leaves the Islamist opposition to the regime very superficial and weak. Alongside this, the fact that some Islamists have participated in governments over the last two decades has raised criticisms about their co-optation by the regime.

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Fourth, even though the Algerian regime allows elections and holds them regularly, fraud is a reality in the Algerian political system.[7] The Electoral Integrity Project ranked Algeria 103rd among 127 countries in 2014, the year the last presidential elections took place.[8] In the wake of the legislative elections of May 2017, most opposition parties have low expectations of the possibility of the elections to bring about significant changes. Moreover, having elections is very helpful for authoritarian regimes such as Algeria, since they help to control, monitor, manage and appease the opposition.[9]

Finally, the freedom of expression that the Algerian regime allows has its own limits. It is possible for the parties, civil society organizations, or ordinary citizens to criticize the regime and the government. However, if there is a risk of a protest movement or an openly anti-regime movment, the regime does its best to prevent it. In other words, the freedom to criticize the regime is given up to the point where words become action. This was seen in 2012 when the regime passed a new restrictive law on associations[10] in response to protest movements that started in Algeria following those in Tunisia and Egypt.

Opposition Efforts to Challenge the Regime

On top of these existing limitations, the opposition has not fared well in its attempts to challenge the regime and changing the political situation. Most parties have accepted the current political climate without posing a serious threat to the regime, which has eventually led to apathy toward political parties among voters. There has only been one positive initiative aimed at challenging the regime from political parties over the last couple of years; this was known as the Mazafran Initiative after the name of the hotel in which the meetings took place.

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From 2011 onwards, certain political parties sought to benefit from the changing political climate in Algeria and reinforced their oppositional activities. Several parties held

talks at that time which led to the founding of the National Coordination for Liberties and Democratic Transition (CNLTD) and the Commission of Consultation and Monitoring of the Opposition (ICSO) with the participation of Islamist and leftist parties, as well as some significant independent opposition figures. Even though this initiative created some hope and the parties later met for a second Mazafran Conference, it proved to be an inefficient initiative due to disagreements among the parties and a lack of solutions to the regime question in Algeria. According to several politicians and pundits involved in the initiative, the parties have sought to pursue their own political interests rather than a common initiative for real regime change and have deadlocked the process in the meeting rooms of fancy hotels without establishing new links with the already disengaged electorate. The regime did not even try too hard to undermine this initiative, as it did not pose a serious challenge. Even though the initiative still continues today, some leading figures have already left the platform.[11] In particular, the May 2017 legislative elections have made existing problems within the initiative even more apparent. While some of the parties decided to run in the elections, others boycotted them, and strong words were exchanged between the leaders of the initiative. Disagreements on even these strategic issues have once again proved that the opposition has a long way to go to pose a significant threat to the regime.

Yet, this unsuccessful initiative may prove to be helpful in the future. Even though the initiative failed due to false premises, disagreements, and a lack of willingness, this may teach some lessons to the Algerian opposition. If one day, a new opposition coalition is founded, learning from the mistakes of Mazafran initiative and based on sound basic principles and trust, the Algerian opposition may prepare itself for possible future structural and institutional changes in the country.

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Conclusion

The Algerian regime is more robust today than it was two decades ago thanks to the introduction of new mechanisms within the system. The regime reinforced its survival toolset with new tools such as liberalizing reforms and the flexibility of operating within a multiparty system. Inside this system, even though parties and civil society groups have more opportunity to challenge it, the regime delineates the limits of the system very well and keep the opposition weak at all times. Even though there are occasional efforts to counter the regime, the opposition is part of the existing system and does not pose a serious challenge to it. Therefore, despite declining oil prices, economic constraints, existing rifts within the regime and the worsening health of President Bouteflika, the Algerian regime is not on the brink of a breakdown.

If anything weakens the regime, it will probably be the regime itself in the form of different factions having different positions on the future directions of Algeria. However, unlike in the past, factions in the Algerian regime are not divided by ideological differences; it is a division based on who obtains more power and resources. In this regard, the discussion is more about who will rule than where the country is going. Given that Bouteflika has not designated a successor,

there may be a succession struggle after he leaves office. Nevertheless, Algerian regime has strong institutions and is not reliant on individuals. It would not be surprising to see all factions of the regime rallying behind the new president after a successor is chosen, leaving the regime robust.

Endnotes:

1- Even though there are ongoing questions about the Civil Concord, which gave a blanket amnesty to fighters, it was widely welcomed for ending a long and destructive civil war. For more see: William B. Quandt, "Algeria's Uneasy Peace," Journal of Democracy 13, no. 4 (October 1, 2002): 15–23.

2- According to experts, there are several factions within the Algerian regime which are all competing for power. The most salient ones are the faction around the former head of the intelligence service (DRS), General Toufik, and another around President Bouteflika and army chief of staff General Gaid Salah. For more, see: "Algerian leader replaces powerful intelligence chief", Middle East Eye, September 13, 2015, http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algerian-leader-replaces-powerful-intelligence-chief-2938628

3- For more on how Bouteflika regime used the promise of reforms in order to appease the masses during the Arab uprisings, see: Frédéric Volpi, "Algeria versus the Arab Spring," Journal of Democracy 24, no. 3 (2013): 104–15. Also for the changes that 2016 constitutional amendment did and did not achieve, see: John P. Entelis, "What does an amended constitution really change about Algeria?," The Washington Post, Monkey Cage, January 19, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/01/19/what-does-an-amended-constitution-really-change-about-algeria/

4- Kabyle parties refer to parties that represent the Berberist ideology and demands of the minority Kabyle region in Algeria. Even though these parties may seek to expand their influence, they are still known by their Kabyle identity.

5- Other than sharing the broad Brotherhood ideology, these two parties do not have direct ties to Hamas of Palestine or Ennahda of Tunisia. Algerian Hamas is the representative and the member of the International Organization of the Muslim Brotherhood. Ennahda, on the other hand, while sharing a similar ideology, is seen as a local/Algerian party with no organizational link to the International Muslim Brotherhood.

6- At the time of writing this piece, there are multiple unity talks among Islamist parties which may lead to three rather than six parties: "Algérie : Les Partis Islamistes à La Recherche de L'unité En Vue Des Législatives," France 24, January 15, 2017, http://www.france24.com/fr/20170115-algerie-partis-islamistes-recherche-unite-elections-legislatives.

7- Jeremy Keenan, "Algeria's Election Was a Fraud," May 15, 2012, http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/05/201251482813133513.html.

8- Pippa Norris, Ferran Martinez i Coma, and Max Grömping, "Electoral Integrity Project: The Year in Elections, 2014" (Sydney: University of Sydney, February 2015), https://sites.google.com/site/electoralintegrityproject4/projects/expert-survey-2/the-year-in-elections-2015.

9- For more on the functions of elections for authoritarian regimes, see: Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Okar, "Elections Under Authoritarianism," Annual Review of Political Science 12, no. 1 (2009): 403–22.

10- Human Rights Watch, "Algeria: Bureaucratic Ploys Used to Stifle Associations," March 30, 2014, https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/03/30/algeria-bureaucratic-ploys-used-stifle-associations.

11- Abed Charef, "En Algérie, L'opposition Se Plie à L'agenda électoral Du Pouvoir," Maghreb Emergent, January 15, 2017, http://www.maghrebemergent.com/politiques-publiques/algerie/68161-en-algerie-l-opposition-se-plie-a-l-agenda-electoral-du-pouvoir.html.

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The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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