

Algeria: Cosmetic Change or Actual Reform?

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Spared from the revolutionary waves that enveloped much of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) since early 2011, the Algerian government has gone to great lengths to promote an image of the country as an 'island of stability' in a region experiencing deep social and political change. Meant primarily for international consumption, the latest manifestation of this trend is given by the country's recent parliamentary elections held on May 10, 2012. Hailed by the government as Algeria's "freest ever"¹, the vote was meant to restore a semblance of popular legitimacy to the political process given that the new parliament is expected to enact a series of constitutional reforms promised by the executive in April 2011. Described as a "test of the country's credibility"² by Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the election results confounded many as the country's ruling party garnered a solid majority of seats in Algeria's parliament thus bucking a region-wide trend that saw Islamist parties win elections across North Africa since the advent of the Arab Spring. In light of these events Algeria has emerged as something of an 'exception' across the MENA region, and while the recent elections have been marred by widespread allegations of fraud, the results have effectively consolidated the regime's grip on power thus ensuring its complete monopoly over the country's reform process. Bouteflika's much vaunted promises of reform, unveiled in the wake of the Arab Spring and ostensibly aimed at "strengthening democracy" in the country, have been described by many within Algeria as yet another ploy designed to ensure regime continuity while giving the international community the perception that the government is engaging in a gradual process of political reform. Algeria's opposition parties, many of which have challenged the election results and subsequently boycotted the opening session of parliament, hold that these reforms will at best result in a series of cosmetic changes that cannot hope to challenge the entrenched interests of those political and military elites who have governed Algeria – often from behind the scenes – since 1962.

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Les opinions exprimées dans ce texte n'engagent que leur auteur.

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¹ *Al-Jazeera*, "Algeria prepares for parliamentary elections," 9 May 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/africa/2012/05/201259152952927406.html>.

² *Reuters/Al-Arabiya*, "Algerians skeptical election will bring change; Bouteflika says voting is 'test of credibility'," 9 May 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/05/09/213047.html>.

Over a year since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, the government's promises of political reform have yet to be implemented by Algeria's ruling elites. While stability has thus far prevailed, Algeria's profound imbalances in the social, political and economic realms seriously call into question the future sustainability of the Algerian regime. By analyzing the Algerian government's promises of reform and the country's recent parliamentary elections, the following research address the thesis of a so-called 'Algerian exception' and casts doubt over the regime's genuine intentions for reform.

A Missed Opportunity for Reform?

Starting on July 5th Algeria will begin a year-long celebration commemorating 50 years of independence from France and many had hoped 2012 to be a turning point in the country's recent history; a time to reflect on Algeria's past and future, to learn from recent events in the region and to begin tracing a path towards a resumption of the country's interrupted democratic opening of 1988-1992. However, recent events point to the opposite direction and the government-led process of reform has been conducted in such a top-down manner that leaves little room for a truly broad-based national dialogue for change. Like many of its North African neighbors, Algeria faces a series of challenges such as high levels of youth unemployment, deep social and economic inequalities, a chronic housing shortage and a profound crisis of legitimacy affecting the country's public institutions. While Algeria has been able to draw on its extensive monetary reserves in order to placate many of the population's most urgent socioeconomic demands, such short-term measures can only hope to postpone Algeria's many troubles. Unless these challenges are addressed with a genuine and inclusive process of reform Algeria risks descending into renewed chaos and instability, a scenario reminiscent of the country's 'lost decade' of civil war during the 1990s and which could therefore hold dramatic consequences for Algeria, the Maghreb and the wider Mediterranean region.

Algeria's democratic façade may have survived the initial impetus for change that has spread across the region since early 2011, and while the country's governing elites are well aware that the current status quo cannot be sustainable in the long-run, there appears today to be little genuine effort aimed at addressing Algeria's profound imbalances in the political, economic and social realms. The combination of unsustainable levels of public spending, an economy almost entirely dependent on the export of hydrocarbons, an increasingly young and disenfranchised population and growing levels of public disillusionment with the political process do not bode well for the future. In the words of a prominent Algerian activist and human rights lawyer, Salah-Eddine Sidhoum, "Algeria is not an exception [...] the revolution will come – it's just a question of time"³.

In the wake of the Arab Spring the Algerian government has played a careful balancing act combining aspects of continuity with certain, hesitant, openings towards change.⁴ As popular protests spread from Tunisia to Egypt in January 2011, Algeria experienced four days of widespread violent demonstrations leading many to predict that Algeria would be the next North African country to be swept up by the Arab Spring. However, the January riots were largely devoid of political objectives, rooted as they were localized grievances linked to the rising cost of food, lack of affordable housing and the perceived indifference displayed by the government towards the growing socioeconomic challenges confronting large swaths of the

³ Al-Jazeera, "Algeria: The Revolution that Never Was," *People & Power*, 17 May 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/peopleandpower/2012/05/2012516145457232336.html>.

⁴ Andrea Dessì, "Algeria at the Crossroads; Between Continuity and Change," IAI Working Paper 11/28, September 2011, <http://www.iai.it/pdf/DocIAI/iaiw1128.pdf>.

population.⁵ These initial disturbances were however followed, in February and March, by attempts to form a wide-ranging social movement for change uniting a series of opposition parties, civil society associations, human rights organizations and independent trade unions under an umbrella group called the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (*Coordination Nationale pour le Changement et la Démocratie – CNCD*).

Founded in late January in an attempt to emulate similar protest movements in Tunisia and Egypt, the CNCD group succeeded in hosting a first demonstration in the capital Algiers on February 12th, but the protest was harshly repressed by the authorities who deployed an estimated 30,000 police officers across the city.⁶ As it happened the protest did not attract a large gathering and the group soon succumbed to internal factionalism causing the movement to split into two opposing camps, thus further undermining its national appeal.⁷ Spontaneous outbursts of popular anger directed against symbols associated with the ruling elites have however continued on a regular basis throughout 2011, and according to media reports, between January and late June 2011 the police conducted at least 2,777 riot control operations throughout the country.⁸ As noted by many long-time Algeria specialists, riots, strikes and sit-ins have long been “a regular feature of Algerian political life”⁹ and these may serve as proof that below the aura of stability promoted by the government lays an increasingly frustrated population which has lost confidence in the political process and is instead turning to violent street protests as the only way to extract localized concessions from the government.¹⁰

Popular Mistrust in the Political Process

A major reason for this widespread popular disillusionment with politics is given by the almost complete dominance of the executive over the legislative branch of government and the fact that parliament serves as little more than a “rubber stamp”¹¹ for decisions taken by the presidency and/or the unelected heads of the military and intelligence services.¹² The weakness and inefficiency of parliament is further reinforced by the fact that three parties – the National Liberation Front (*Front de Libération Nationale – FLN*), Algeria’s founding party and single-party ruler from 1962 until 1989; a similar regime-allied secular party, the National Democratic Rally (*Rassemblement National Démocratique – RND*); and the mildly Islamist Movement of Society for Peace (*Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix – MSP*) – have dominated Algeria’s parliament since 1997. In 2004 the three parties formalized their alliance creating the so-called ‘presidential coalition’, which has since supported president Bouteflika’s re-election campaigns (2004, 2009) while together winning majorities in the country’s parliamentary polls (1997, 2002, 2007). This has ensured that the already limited legislative powers of parliament have been monopolized by regime supporting parties which in turn means that the regime does not need to engage in dialogue with Algeria’s opposition parties, many of which have traditionally preferred to boycott elections altogether. It should

⁵ John P. Entelis, “Algeria: Democracy Denied, and Revived?,” *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol.16, No.4, December 2011:653—678,pp.674-5.

⁶ BBC, “Pro-Democracy rally begins in Algeria, defying ban,” 12 February, 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-12438015>.

⁷ Yahia H. Zubir and Ahmed Aghrout, “Algeria’s Path to Reform: Authentic Change?,” *Middle East Policy*, Vol.XIX, No.2, Summer 2012:66—83, p. 69.

⁸ Mouna Sadek, “Algeria Responds to Social Protests,” *Magharebia*, 24 June 2011 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/06/24/feature-02.

⁹ Entelis, “Algeria: Democracy Denied, and Revived?,” *op. cit.*, p. 674.

¹⁰ Roberts, “Algeria’s national ‘protesta’,” *op. cit.*; Azzedine Layachi, “Algeria’s Rebellion by Installments,” *Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP)*, 12 March 2011 <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero031211>.

¹¹ Layachi, “Algeria’s Rebellion by Installments,” *op. cit.*

¹² Hugh Roberts, “The Bouteflika Presidency and the Problems of Political Reform,” *FRIDE Conference Transcript*, February 2005 <http://www.fride.org/event/78/bouteflika's-presidency-and-the-problem-of-political-reform-in-algeria>.

therefore come as no surprise that a recent poll has demonstrated how 75 percent of Algerians have “no trust”¹³ in parliament and that turnout in Algeria’s parliamentary elections has traditionally been extremely low, touching 35 percent in 2007 (the lowest in Algeria’s history) and 43 percent in 2012.¹⁴

If seen in this light, the recent parliamentary elections, described as a first step towards the enactment of Algeria’s post-Arab Spring reforms, can already be described as something of a publicity stunt given that the powers of parliament are effectively subservient to those of the presidency.¹⁵ Moreover, the 2012 results gave a crushing majority to the FLN and the RND, the two most regime aligned parties present in the country. While Algeria has been holding elections at regular intervals since 1995, most analysts agree that none are truly reflective of popular will, given that the regime stands widely accused of fraud in every election since the country’s first multiparty vote was overturned by a military coup in 1992.¹⁶

Many had hoped that Algeria’s May elections would have led to a parliament more reflective of Algeria’s varied political currents, especially given that it will be called upon to approve Bouteflika’s much awaited constitutional reforms.¹⁷ However, as things stand today, with the elections resurrecting the FLN’s age-old monopoly on power, such expectations appear to have been misplaced. Widespread allegations of fraud, combined with a low turnout and high rate of abstention, appear to have poisoned the reform process thus further undermining public confidence in the regime’s promises of reform.¹⁸

Algeria’s (yet unmet) promise of reform

Faced with the profound changes taking place across the region, and knowing that Algeria shares many of those same socioeconomic and political grievances that contributed to the outbreak of mass protests in neighboring states, the government reacted by quickly implementing a series of short-term economic incentives aimed at appeasing some of the populations most pressing demands. Responding to the global increases in food prices registered in January 2011, the government slashed taxes on cooking oil and sugar by 41 percent while approving a 34 percent salary increase for civil servants and reinstating government subsidies on flour, milk and other basic foodstuffs.¹⁹ Throughout 2011 the government also implemented a series of reforms meant to grant easier access to credit for young entrepreneurs and the most vulnerable sections of the population.²⁰

While largely successful in allowing the country to avoid the type of sustained popular protests witnessed by other states in the region, the combined effects of these economic incentives led to a 25 percent rise in public spending (64 to €80 billion) which in turn has resulted in a 34 percent budget deficit in 2011.²¹ Recent reports indicate that the government will continue increasing public spending throughout 2012, allotting 17 percent of the budget

¹³ Zoubir and Aghrout, “Algeria’s Path to Reform,” *op. cit.*, p. 67.

¹⁴ In both cases government figures have been hotly disputed by members of the opposition. See below for a more in depth analysis of Algeria’s 2012 parliamentary elections.

¹⁵ Paul Schemm, “Algeria elections look good abroad, bad at home,” AP/Guardian, 17 May 2012 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/feedarticle/10247103>.

¹⁶ James D. Le Sueur, *Between Terror and Democracy; Algeria since 1989*, London and New York, Zed Books, 2010.

¹⁷ Karina Piser, “A second chance for Algeria’s Islamists,” Foreign Policy Middle East Channel, 18 April 2012 http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/04/18/a_second_chance_for_algerias_islamists.

¹⁸ Jeremy Keenan, “Algeria’s election was a fraud,” Al-Jazeera Op-ed, 15 May 2012 <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2012/05/201251482813133513.html>.

¹⁹ Zoubir and Aghrout, “Algeria’s Path to Reform,” *op. cit.*, p. 68.

²⁰ BBC, “Is Algeria immune from the Arab Spring?,” 27 July 2011 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14167481>.

²¹ Dessì, “Algeria at the crossroads” *op. cit.*, p. 8.

to its policy of “buying social peace”²² and thus causing an expected 24 percent deficit for 2012. These increases in public spending, combined with a \$286 billion five-year development plan (2010-2014) aimed at creating more jobs and housing, have strained Algeria’s economy. Thanks to its richness in national resources Algeria’s finances are in a much better state compared to many of its Arab neighbors, however, in 2011 Algeria registered the second largest budget deficit among oil producing countries in the MENA region, a reality which has not been missed by the government or international observers.²³ Given that over 97 percent of Algeria’s exports, one-third of GDP and more than two-thirds of government revenue come from Algeria’s hydrocarbon sector, the IMF has repeatedly warned that diversifying the economy remains Algeria’s primary challenge for the future. Moreover, the IMF has also warned that the country’s “current expenditure growth”²⁴ has seriously weakened Algeria’s financial outlook, while also reminding Algeria that its fiscal position remains “highly vulnerable to a major slump in the price of oil”²⁵.

The government is well aware of Algeria’s exposure to market changes and it is for this reason that Algeria has begun to display a more conservative posture within OPEC, recently coming out against Saudi Arabia’s intention to increase oil output fearing that this would lead to a drop in the price of oil.²⁶ According to the IMF, Algeria needs oil prices to stabilize at slightly over \$100 dollars a barrel in order to balance its budget in the short-to-medium term, a reality which underscores Algeria’s continued exposure to market forces largely beyond the government’s control.²⁷

Unlike its neighbors in North Africa, however, Algeria enjoys high levels of foreign currency reserves which have been vital for the government to quickly respond to the growing signs of popular discontent registered in early 2011. Accumulated through its exports in the oil and natural gas sectors, Algeria’s currency reserves have been used to approve generous handouts for the most disadvantaged members of society, granting low-interest loans of up to \$300,000 which have no doubt helped to keep a lid on popular discontent.²⁸ Algeria’s reserves amounted to over \$200 billion in mid-2012, sufficient to cover more than three years of Algeria’s imports, an aspect which will no doubt secure some breathing space for the government.²⁹ The sheer amount of Algeria’s foreign reserves has even prompted a request by the IMF for Algeria to help replenish the organization’s resources needed to grant loans to emerging economies affected by the global financial downturn.³⁰ While Algeria has yet to respond to the request, the fact that large segments of the population suffer from severe social and economic inequalities would make a government decision to loan money to the IMF both highly unpopular and potentially dangerous for Algeria’s social peace. Even the country’s own finance minister has in the past admitted that Algeria’s current

²² Zoubir and Aghrout, “Algeria’s Path to Reform,” *op. cit.*, p. 70.

²³ Javier Blas, “Algeria is OPEC’s new uber hawk,” *The Financial Times*, 14 June 2012 <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/bfd38c02-b559-11e1-ab92-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1x1xdN5m>.

²⁴ IMF, “Algeria: 2011 Article IV Consultation – Staff Report; Public Information Notice,” IMF Country Report No.12/20, January 2012 <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2012/cr1220.pdf>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.8.

²⁶ Blas, “Algeria is OPEC’s new uber hawk,” *op. cit.*

²⁷ IMF, “Executive Board Concludes 2011 Article IV Consultations with Algeria,” IMF Country Report 12/5, 27 January 2012 <http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pn/2012/pn1205.htm>.

²⁸ Adam Nossiter, “Algerians Belittle Elections, but Not Enough to Protest,” *The New York Times*, 19 May 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/05/19/world/africa/in-algeria-belittling-elections-but-no-arab-spring.html?pagewanted=all>.

²⁹ Lahcen Achy, “Algeria’s Financial Surplus and Socioeconomic Struggles,” Carnegie Endowment, 15 May 2012 <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/15/algeria-s-financial-surplus-and-socioeconomic-struggles/b0oj>.

³⁰ Mouna Sadek, “IMF seeks help from Algeria,” *Magharebia*, 4 May 2012 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2012/05/04/feature-01.

expenditures will only be sustainable until 2014-2015³¹, a time frame which will undoubtedly shrink further in the event of a sudden decline in the price of oil.

On a more positive note, authorities in Algeria can breathe a partial sigh of relief given that this year's grain harvest has exceeded expectations, allowing the government to halt durum wheat and barley imports from April 2012 onwards.³² Given that the agricultural sector contributes only 8 percent of the country's GDP³³, Algeria has traditionally had to rely heavily on the import of basic foodstuffs, something which in turn has further drained Algeria's finances. Throughout 2011, for example, Algeria was forced to import 7.42 million tonnes of grain, the highest rate since the country achieved independence from France in 1962.³⁴ Such savings are important for Algeria, especially given the need to diversify the economy away from the hydrocarbons sector in order to promote job creation and sustainable growth. One government sponsored project which aims to address Algeria's economic imbalances is that of boosting the country's tourism industry which only contributed \$400 million to the economy in 2011 against an estimated \$70 billion coming from the oil and gas sectors.³⁵ The government has in fact announced an ambitious \$5 billion public-private tourism development plan aimed at attracting some 3.5 million tourists by 2015, up from under 2 million in 2011.³⁶

Algeria's Promises of Political Reform

Coupled with Algeria's extensive economic concessions approved in the wake of the Arab Spring, the government has also unveiled a series of political reforms aimed at restoring public confidence in the political process. These began in early February 2011 when, in an attempt to preempt the CNDC's first protest gathering scheduled for 12 February in Algiers, the government announced the suspension of the country's emergency laws, in place since an army coup interrupted Algeria's process of democratic reform back in 1992. The announcement was however followed by the approval of a series of antiterror laws that effectively "put all the security and police services under the army's authority"³⁷ thereby stripping the government of its oversight in many, if not all, security-related issues. Moreover, many restrictions on civil liberties continued even after the lifting of the emergency laws, an example being a 2001 law forbidding public gatherings in the capital (Law 91-19) and a 1991 decree requiring prior government approval for any public gathering across the country.³⁸

It was not until mid-April 2011, four months since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, that Algeria's president made his first televised speech to the nation in which he formally promised a series of constitutional reforms aimed at "strengthening democracy" in the country.³⁹ Among the promised reforms, which included new legislation governing the creation of political parties, freer media laws and increased powers for the parliament and

³¹ Fidat Mansour, "Algeria's Finances Strained by Strife," *Magharebia*, 7 July 2012 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/07/07/feature-02.

³² Reuters Africa, "Update 1- Algeria sees 2012 grain harvest exceeding 5.8 mln t," 14 June 2012 <http://af.reuters.com/article/algeriaNews/idAFL5E8HE60J20120614>.

³³ Achy, "Algeria's Financial Surplus and Socioeconomic Struggles," *op. cit.*

³⁴ Reuters Africa, "Algeria halts durum, barley imports until year-end," 18 June 2012 <http://af.reuters.com/article/algeriaNews/idAFL5E8HIFU720120618>.

³⁵ Tarek Amara, "Algeria to develop tourism to diversify economy – minister," Reuters, 17 April 2012 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/17/uk-algeria-tourism-idUSLNE83G01D20120417>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Amel Boubekeur, "Countries at the Crossroads 2011: Algeria," Freedom House, 2011, p. 7 http://www.freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/inline_images/AlgeriaFINAL.pdf.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, "Country Summary: Algeria," January 2012, p. 1, http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/algeria_2012.pdf.

³⁹ Nazim Fethi, "Bouteflika pledges reforms," *Magharebia*, 18 April 2011 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/04/18/feature-01.

the prime minister, Bouteflika pledged to overturn a highly controversial constitutional overhaul he implemented in 2008 and which had effectively crushed both domestic and international confidence in Bouteflika as a 'reformer president' for Algeria.⁴⁰ The constitutional changes approved in 2008 scrapped the two-term limit on the presidency, allowing for Bouteflika's re-election to a third-term in 2009, and significantly increased the powers of the executive to the detriment of parliament. It is significant that just two months before the scheduled parliamentary vote needed to legalize the 2008 constitutional reforms members of parliament received a 300 percent pay rise pushed for by the executive⁴¹, a fact that in itself reflects what is a common practice among Algeria's ruling elites; that of drawing on the country's hydrocarbon wealth to simply coopt politicians into supporting government policies.

According to the government announced reforms, a two-term limit on the presidency is now due to be reinstated in view of the country's next presidential elections scheduled for 2014, while the prime minister is expected to be appointed by parliament and not by the executive, as was the case before 2008.⁴² Following the April 2011 reform announcement the government launched a month-long consultation process in which opposition parties, civil society groups and recognized trade unions were invited to voice their respective reform priorities. The consultation process, run by a three man committee appointed by and closely allied to the presidency, was however boycotted by many opposition groups thus immediately casting a shadow over the entire process. The Socialist Forces Front party (*Front des Forces Socialistes – FFS*), one of Algeria's most respected opposition parties, labeled the entire process a "political circus"⁴³, while the Rally for Culture and Democracy (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie – RCD*) termed it a regime-directed "monologue against change"⁴⁴.

Algeria's 2012 Parliamentary Elections – Change without Reform

In the run-up to the May 2012 elections many international observers had highlighted what appeared to be a more concerted government effort aimed at producing concrete changes in the social and political realms. In September 2011 the authorities presented legislation which aims to put an end to the state's monopoly over TV and radio stations, while promising to establish an independent body charged with supervising the granting of press licenses and the administration of fines for libel.⁴⁵ While it is yet unclear how far reaching these reforms will actually be, as of 2012, Algeria is for the first time witnessing the emergence of private TV networks. These have however been forced to broadcast into Algeria from outside the country given that the expected legislation has yet to be approved by parliament.⁴⁶ While undoubtedly a positive step in the right direction, many local and international organizations have voiced skepticism towards the true nature of these reforms, citing the continued intimidation of journalists and the use of economic coercion against private news outlets as

⁴⁰ Ahmed Aghrout and Yahia Zoubir, "Introducing Algeria's President-for-life," MERIP, 1 April 2009 <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero040109>; Dessì, "Algeria at the crossroads", *op. cit.*, p.11-2.

⁴¹ Boubekeur, "Countries at the Crossroads 2011: Algeria," *op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁴² Fidat Mansour, "Algerians puzzled by term limit reversal," Magharebia, 7 June 2011 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/06/07/feature-02.

⁴³ Mouna Sadek, "Algeria begins reform process," Magharebia, 26 May 2011 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/05/26/feature-01.

⁴⁴ Zoubir and Aghrout, "Algeria's Path to Reform," *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁴⁵ Dessì, "Algeria at the crossroads," *op. cit.*, p. 15-6.

⁴⁶ Mouna Sadek, "Private TV networks emerge in Algeria," 7 June 2012 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2012/06/07/feature-03.

practical means used by the government to continue censoring the press.⁴⁷

A further and perhaps more significant example of change is given by the approval of 21 new political parties ahead of the country's parliamentary elections (a total of 44 parties competed in the election).⁴⁸ Hailed by the government as proof of its genuine intentions for reform, many have cast doubt over the true motivations for this decision citing Algeria's decade-old tactic of divide and rule and the government's need to attract a sizable turnout in order to give legitimacy to the election results. One of the major reasons for Algeria's failure to embark on a genuine and inclusive process of reform is that of the weakness and factionalism present among Algeria's opposition parties and civil society organizations. While the sheer number of active political parties and civil society associations in Algeria has long been highlighted as a major difference separating the country from its Arab neighbors (according to government statistics there are over 92,000 registered civil society associations in the country⁴⁹), a closer analysis of their activities will expose a government-led policy aimed at creating rivalries among the various opposition camps by simply creating new parties or associations (many sharing the same names as their rivals) whose sole aim is that of overshadowing the activities of the original.⁵⁰ Through the combined use of patronage, favoritism, cooptation and repression the Algerian regime has repeatedly fueled divisions among Algeria's opposition thus ensuring its complete monopoly over the political decision-making process and preventing the emergence of a united front against the regime.

Since 1999 only a single political party has been legalized by the government and in this respect the approval of 21 new parties in 2012 is undoubtedly significant, but the sheer number of approvals, combined with the fact that very little is known about the parties themselves, raises questions as to whether the approval is motivated by a desire to increase popular turnout at the polls by simply increasing the voters choice of candidates.⁵¹ This thesis is also supported by president Bouteflika's unprecedented series of public appeals calling on Algerians to "go to the polls"⁵² and by the fact that in early February 2012 the government increased the number of seats in parliament from 389 to 462, thus allowing for more candidates to compete in the elections.

A further motivation could be that of weakening Algeria's more established parties (such as the FFS, the Workers Party or Algeria's various Islamist parties)⁵³ by widening the scope of candidates and thus diluting the amount of votes any one party can hope to secure. This is especially significant in view of the fact that many had predicted the 2012 elections to hand a sizable amount of seats to Algeria's Islamist parties, three of which united to form an alliance (the 'Green Algeria Alliance') to compete in the 2012 elections. Composed by the MSP party, which withdrew from the FLN-RND presidential coalition shortly before the election, the El Islah party and Ennahda, the Green Alliance secured only 49 seats in the new parliament, three less than what the MSP party alone had won in 2007. Algeria's Islamists

⁴⁷ See for instance: Reporters without Boundaries, "Two Journalists Assaulted as Police Violence becomes a Habit," 21 March 2012 <http://en.rsf.org/algeria-two-journalists-assaulted-as-21-03-2012,42174.html>; Boubekeur, "Countries at the Crossroads 2011: Algeria," Freedom House, *op. cit.*, p. 5-6.

⁴⁸ Zoubir and Aghrout, "Algeria's Path to Reform," *op. cit.*, p. 74.

⁴⁹ République Algérienne, "Typologie des associations locales agréées," Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Collectivités Locales, 31 December 2011 <http://www.interieur.gov.dz/Dynamics/frmlItem.aspx?html=2&s=29>

⁵⁰ See for instance; Frédéric Volpi, "Algeria's Pseudo-democratic Politics: Lessons for Democratization in the Middle East," *Democratization*, Vol.13, No.3, June 2006:442-455; Francesco Cavatorta, "Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World: The Dynamics of Activism," New York and London, Routledge, 2011 (Chapter 3 'Algeria').

⁵¹ Zoubir and Aghrout, "Algeria's Path to Reform," *op. cit.*, p. 74-5.

⁵² APS, "President Bouteflika reiterates call for high turnout to begin new stage of reforms," 8 May 2012 <http://80.246.2.217/President-Bouteflika-reiterates,46788.html>.

⁵³ In March 2012 the FFS party surprised many by announcing that it was going to end a 15-year boycott of elections by agreeing to field candidates in the May 10 elections.

where therefore squarely defeated by the FLN (208 seats) and the RND (68 seats), which together now control about 60 percent of parliament.⁵⁴ A primary reason that can help explain the low amount of votes secured by the Green Alliance is the fact that the MSP party does not enjoy much popular credibility as an opposition party given that it has been a long-time member of the 'presidential coalition'. Moreover, even following its withdrawal from the FLN-RND alliance before the May elections the MSP party refrained from pulling out its four ministers from the government.⁵⁵

Last but not least, another novelty linked to Algeria's recent parliamentary elections was the government's introduction of a gender quota system which has resulted in Algeria now holding the largest number of women parliamentarians throughout the Arab world. Equal to 31.6 percent of the total, 146 out of 7,700 female candidates have been elected to Algeria's parliament, up from the 31 (or 7.7 percent) in the previous assembly.⁵⁶ Unsurprisingly much of the international media has highlighted this development as a further aspect of the so-called 'Algeria exception' that has set Algeria aside from other Arab countries affected by the Arab Spring. However, as recently noted by Yahia Zoubir and Ahmet Aghrout, a closer look at the way in which the quota system was actually implemented will demonstrate how Algeria's ruling parties, the FLN and RND, have in reality limited the actual scope of this reform by pressing for an amendment to the bill that makes the number of elected female deputies "directly proportional to the number of seats in each constituency" rather than a standard "electoral-list quota" that would have secured a more wide-ranging representation of women in politics.⁵⁷ Moreover, it is also important to consider that Algeria's family code, partially amended in 2005, is still far behind that of Tunisia or Morocco when it comes to women's rights.

Algeria's Post-Election Stalemate

Over a month has passed since Algeria's May elections, and no decision has yet been taken as to the composition of the new government. The FLN and RND, which together hold a solid majority in the new parliament, appear to be working to create a government inclusive of all parties in parliament, but this plan has encountered resistance from Algeria's opposition, many of which refuse to be associated with Algeria's ruling parties. The MSP and its partners in the 'Green Alliance' have decided to boycott the new government while refusing to acknowledge the 2012 election results.⁵⁸ A similar reaction was given by the FSS party and the Worker Party (PT), which together gained 51 seats in parliament, and have since refused to take part in the new government.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Algeria's incumbent Prime Minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, leader of the RND party and among the possible presidential candidates in 2014, has not been replaced following the elections as is usually the case in Algeria and appears to be set to retain his post indefinitely, something which in turn has been met with increased criticism by Algeria's opposition which had wanted an independent

⁵⁴ Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "The May 2012 Legislative Elections in Algeria," 10 June 2012 <http://english.dohainstitute.org/Home/Details/5ea4b31b-155d-4a9f-8f4d-a5b428135cd5/26064712-84a2-486c-b74c-efcabe3d6bce>.

⁵⁵ Zoubir and Aghrout, "Algeria's Path to Reform," *op. cit.*, p. 78.

⁵⁶ David Ottaway, "Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections," Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, May 2012, p. 3, <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/Algeria's%20Islamists%20Crushed%20in%20First%20Arab%20Spring%20Elections.pdf>; Hamid Ould Ahmed, "Arab world gets new trailblazer for women in politics," Reuters, 13 June 2012 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/06/13/us-algeria-parliament-women-idUSBRE85C0UH20120613>.

⁵⁷ Zoubir and Aghrout, "Algeria's Path to Reform," *op. cit.*, p. 73.

⁵⁸ Fidat Mansour, "Algerian Islamists boycott new government," Magharebia, 22 May 2012 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2012/05/22/feature-03.

⁵⁹ Nazim Fethi, "Algerians await a new government," Magharebia, 20 June 2012 http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2012/06/20/feature-03.

to be appointed as prime minister even before the May elections.⁶⁰

Among the most contentious issues related to Algeria's recent elections is the official turnout figures released by the government which put popular participation at 43 percent. While still low, such a figure, which is higher than the 35 percent registered in the last legislative elections of 2007, has allowed the government to declare the elections a success. The turnout has been hotly contested by numerous camps and many believe the actual figure to be anywhere between 25 and 35 percent. Moreover, even if one considers the official figures to be correct, an estimated 1.7 million Algerians voted with black ballots, thus meaning that only 35 percent of eligible voters actually expressed a preference at the polls.⁶¹ A close examination of the voter tallies will also show that out of 7.63 million votes cast in the election (in an electorate of 21.65 million) only 1.31 million actually voted for the FLN, a number which is roughly equivalent to 6 percent of Algeria's electorate.⁶² With 208 seats in the new parliament, the FLN has however emerged as Algeria's largest party securing over 45 percent of seats in parliament, something which in turn can help explain the opposition's pessimism towards the awaited constitutional reforms. Even Algeria's election monitoring commission, made up of 44 representatives from the country's political parties, has refused to endorse the election results charging that these were "not credible" and that the entire process was "marred by numerous breaches" in electoral conduct.⁶³

Notwithstanding these numerous allegations of fraud, the estimated 500 foreign observers invited to oversee Algeria's May elections have not highlighted significant irregularities. The Algerian government surprised many by inviting international observers from the EU, UN, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and international NGOs to oversee the elections, something which it had refused to do in the past. While the US highlighted the "high number of women elected" as a welcomed "step in Algeria's progress toward democratic reform" the EU took a rather more guarded stance stating that this first step "will need to be backed, after a constitutional review, by a deepening of democracy" in the country.⁶⁴

As the largest country in Africa, Algeria is the continent's fourth largest crude oil producer and Europe's third largest gas supplier. This has made Algeria an increasingly important partner for Europe, especially given that oil supplies from Libya, Syria and Iran have suffered heavily from international sanctions and instability throughout 2011. Given Europe's need to diversify its energy supplies, Algeria has emerged as a major partner for many European countries and Algeria today supplies 13 percent of Europe's gas demands (second only to Russia). Moreover, Algeria is also a strong western partner in the fight against terrorism in North Africa and the Sahel region, a further aspect which has ensured a close relationship between Algeria the United States and Europe. All these factors can help explain the west's reluctance to criticize the Algerian regime or to push for more far reaching political reforms, especially given that the Algerian military has promoted itself as the guardian of stability in a country which throughout the 1990s had become synonymous with terrorism and instability.

Since 2005, Algeria and the EU have been holding regular consultations within the EU Association framework which aims at establishing a free trade area by 2017 and most

⁶⁰ Lamine Chikhi, "Algeria's political parties demand new PM to oversee election; opposition fears fraud," Al-Arabiya/Reuters, 4 January 2012, <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/01/04/186401.html>.

⁶¹ Lahcen Achy, "Algeria Avoids the Arab Spring?" Carnegie Endowment, 31 May 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/31/algeria-avoids-arab-spring/b0xu>.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ AP/Ahram Online, "Algeria's elections not credible: monitoring commission," 2 June 2012, <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/0/43534/World/0/Algerias-elections-not-credible-monitoring-commiss.aspx>.

⁶⁴ Jean-Marc Mojon, "US hails Algerian election despite suspicions," AFP, 12 May 2012, http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gQ_Ydb5r5ZnWTxaEZ0iziOcSNUPw?docId=CNG.0e439942cb7ce2ac4375d50554d1b919.101.

recently the EU has pledged \$234 million in aid to Algeria between 2011 and 2013.⁶⁵ However, as noted by numerous reports published by the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN), the EU has so far failed to press Algeria to implement the EU guidelines on human rights contained in the Association Agreement.⁶⁶ The EU has instead concentrated on security, energy and migration issues, something which has led many to question whether Europe has learnt from its past mistakes after the 2011 outbreak of popular protests exposed the EU's failures in pressing for political reform and human rights throughout the Arab world. As one analyst has recently put it; "Algeria should be a lesson against old habits", however, as recent events seem to have again confirmed, "old habits die hard".⁶⁷

Algeria's Spring – Ready and waiting?

In light of Algeria's apparent immunity to the Arab Spring, numerous journalists have highlighted what has been described as an 'Algerian exception' compared to its neighbors in the MENA region. Throughout 2011, analysts underlined a series of specific socioeconomic, political and historical factors that can help explain why Algeria was spared the kind of sustained mass protests experienced by other states in the region. These can be summarized as a combination of Algeria's economic wealth, which has allowed the government to keep a lid on popular discontent; the country's partial political freedoms (unlike other countries in the region Bouteflika has been in power since 1999 and actually enjoys some remnants of popular support given his success in restoring stability to Algeria); and the fact that memories of the country's civil war that followed Algeria's botched attempts at democratic reform in 1988-1992 and cost the lives of an estimated 200,000 people are still fresh in the minds of many Algerians who are thus wary of taking to the streets in large numbers to call for democratic reform.⁶⁸

The Algerian regime itself has also bought into this rhetoric of 'exceptionalism' by repeatedly emphasizing Algeria's differences compared to its neighbors and dismissing claims that Algeria might soon experience its own spring of revolt.⁶⁹ In this respect it is interesting to note that the official, government-endorsed, slogan for the recent parliamentary elections was "Algeria is our spring"⁷⁰, a statement meant to underscore both Algeria's traditionally strong nationalistic sentiments and its perceived 'exceptionalism' compared to the rest of the region. "We don't need lessons from outside"⁷¹ declared Algerian Prime Minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, in a speech delivered at a mass rally held in Algiers a day before the May elections. In the same speech he also described the Arab Spring as a "plague" and the revolutions that followed it the "work of Zionism and NATO", while adding that "our spring is Algerian, our revolution of 1 November 1954". Such rhetoric demonstrates both the government's unease with the current changes taking place across the region and the extent in which elites in Algeria appear to be detached from the daily realities affecting their countrymen. By referring to Algeria's war of independence from France as "Algeria's spring" Ouyahia was attempting to evoke Algeria's nationalistic sentiments in the hope of restoring the long-lost revolutionary legitimacy Algeria's institutions had enjoyed following the FLN's

⁶⁵ Human Rights Watch, "Country Summary: Algeria," *op. cit.*, p.4.

⁶⁶ EMHRN, "One Year After the New ENP Approach: Time for Europe to Show Credibility," 21 June 2012, <http://www.euromedrights.org/en/news-en/emhrn-releases/statements-2012/11978.html>.

⁶⁷ Barah Mikail, "Old Habits Die Hard: U.S. and EU Policy in Algeria," Carnegie Endowment (Sada), 17 May 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2012/05/17/old-habits-die-hard-us-and-eu-policy-in-algeria/athk>.

⁶⁸ Dessì, "Algeria at the crossroads," *op. cit.*

⁶⁹ Lamine Chikhi, "Interview – Tunisia virus won't reach Algeria: presidential ally," *Reuters Africa*, 30 January 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/tunisiaNews/idAFLDE70T08C20110130?sp=true>.

⁷⁰ BBC, "Q&A: Algerian parliamentary elections," 8 May 2012 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-17955857>.

⁷¹ Brian Whitaker, "Algerian prime minister calls Arab Spring a 'plague'," *The Guardian*, 9 May 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/may/09/algerian-prime-minister-arab-spring>.

military victory against its colonial master and major NATO country, France. While Algeria's independence war and subsequent activism within the Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War are indeed important pillars of legitimacy which have traditionally supported the Algerian state, such parallels will not resonate among Algeria's increasingly young population; many of which have little recollection of Algeria's war of independence. A more fitting parallel, one which could have received a more welcoming reaction from the population at large, would have been to link the current Arab Spring to Algeria's 1988 popular uprising which set the stage for the country's first multiparty elections and ended thirty years of single-party rule by the FLN.

Given that many of those underlining grievances that led to the outbreak of Algeria's popular uprising in 1988 have not yet been resolved by the government, Algeria's apparent stability must be taken with a grain of salt. Official unemployment figures have been declining significantly since 2001 and rest today at just over 10 percent, however, this number jumps to 21 percent among the youth. Unofficial figures for youth unemployment put the rate at over 30 percent and this is especially worrisome given that 70 percent of Algeria's population is under the age of 30 (40 percent is under 15).⁷² Corruption in the country is also pervasive as highlighted by successive Transparency International reports, the latest of which gives Algeria a score of 2.9 out of 10⁷³, while a severe housing crisis has been steadily worsening despite significant government investment in new housing projects.⁷⁴ Popular disillusionment with politics, reflected by the steady decline in voter turnout and explained by the consistent allegations of fraud that have marred each and every one of Algeria's elections since 1992, signifies that growing numbers of people have lost faith in traditional means of popular contestation and are growing increasingly prone to the use of violence to attract the government's attention to their localized needs. The government may have been able to placate many of these popular demands thanks to its easy access to funds, but, as noted above, such measures are only valid in the short-term and given Algeria's continued reliance on hydrocarbon exports to fuel the economy a sudden decline in the price of oil could result in a severe economic crisis with unpredictable consequences for social peace. In this respect it is significant to point out that one of the major reasons that led to the outbreak of Algeria's popular revolution of 1988 was the impressive decline in oil prices that followed the oil shock of 1986, when the price of oil declined by over 50 percent almost overnight.⁷⁵ While oil prices stand today at about \$97 per barrel, a sudden decline would result in the government no longer being able to draw on those resources needed to appease the populations growing socioeconomic demands.

The governments promised constitutional reforms, which have yet to be implemented over a year since the outbreak of the Arab Spring, were meant to respond to this growing crisis of legitimacy affecting the country's public institutions, but as has been the case in the past, such reforms appear aimed more at the international community than at addressing Algeria's domestic realities. It is unlikely that the power and influence of Algeria's intelligence services, which have long been credited with running the country from behind the scenes and are sometimes described as Algeria's "black cabinet"⁷⁶, will be affected by the announced reforms. Moreover, Algeria's 1963 constitution has been revised and amended countless times with each of Algeria's seven presidents having their "own" constitution, thus

⁷² Entelis, "Algeria: Democracy Denied, and Revived?," *op. cit.*, p. 662-663.

⁷³ Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index 2011 <http://www.transparency.org/country#DZA>.

⁷⁴ Lahcen Achy, "Algerian Housing Policy: the roots of failure," Carnegie Endowment, 24 January 2012, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/01/24/algerian-housing-policy-roots-of-failure/9h9q>.

⁷⁵ Sueur, *Between Terror and Democracy*, *op. cit.*, p.26-7.

⁷⁶ Al-Jazeera, "Algeria: The Revolution that Never Was," *op. cit.*

further undermining public trust in regime-directed promises of reform.⁷⁷

All of these aspects point to an increasingly uneasy relationship between Algeria's governing elites and the population at large. As was recently noted by John P. Entelis "the gap between state and society in Algeria remains as wide as ever"⁷⁸ and unless the government responds to these growing signs of popular disillusionment, one cannot discount the possibility of the country experiencing a delayed reaction to the revolutionary waves that have enveloped much of the region since 2011. In the current phase of political uncertainty, with no new government named, the regime is putting much emphasis on the country's festivities commemorating 50 years of independence from France. In the meantime, numerous reports are circulating regarding increased infighting both within and among Algeria's regime allied parties. Even before the recent election, numerous members of the FLN party staged a protest calling on the party's Secretary-General Abdelaziz Belkhadem, a close ally of Bouteflika, to step down.⁷⁹ Many consider this a preamble of what is expected to be a tough competition over who will succeed Bouteflika as president in 2014. Bouteflika's health has been steadily deteriorating and given his strained relations with the heads of the military intelligence services, and in particular with General Mohamed Mediène Toufik, head of Algeria's infamous *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (DRS) since 1990, it is possible that the army is preparing the field for a candidate which will more closely support their interests in the country, thus reversing Bouteflika's limited success in demilitarizing Algeria's political system.⁸⁰

From afar it is always hard to decipher the internal mechanisms governing the relations between Algeria's various elites. In power since 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika still no doubt enjoys some degree of popular support given his success in stabilizing the country, restoring Algeria's international image and presiding over a period of renewed economic growth. However, this support has been declining fast and Algeria still suffers from many of those same features of unsustainability – high unemployment, widespread corruption, socioeconomic inequalities and a growing crisis of legitimacy affecting the country's public institutions – which in many respects resemble the underlining causes for the country's 1988 popular revolution. The government's failure to restore popular trust in the political process, as evidenced by its monopoly over the country's reform process and the widespread allegations of fraud that have marred Algeria's recent elections, is undermining the regime's promises of change. A close examination of Algeria's recent history will expose a reality in which the regime has been relying almost exclusively on its hydrocarbon revenues to sustain the country's current image of stability. Such a scenario leaves Algeria exposed to market forces largely beyond the government's control and cannot therefore represent a sustainable path for the future.

While many are pointing to the country's 2014 presidential elections as yet another crossroads for Algeria, the real question that must be asked is whether and to what extent will Algeria be able to wait that long for a genuine, inclusive and long-overdue process reform. Transparency and inclusiveness are two indispensable ingredients necessary to begin restoring public trust in the political process, but neither have been present in the government's promises of political reform unveiled in the wake of the Arab Spring. If past

⁷⁷ Algeria's president's Boudiaf and Kafi, which ruled respectively for six and 18 months, were the only presidents to have not changed the country's constitution. See; Francesco Tamburini, "Algeria: Il Lungo Cammino Verso la Consacrazione del 'Regime Ibrido', in *Africa*, Vol LXV, No.1-4: 82-103, p. 97.

⁷⁸ Entelis, "Algeria: Democracy Denied, and Revived?," *op. cit.*, p.662.

⁷⁹ Lamine Chikhi, "Algeria ruling party mutiny reflects race for power," Reuters, 23 April 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/04/23/us-algeria-vote-fln-idUSBRE83M0M120120423>.

⁸⁰ See; Entelis, "Algeria: Democracy Denied, and Revived?," *op. cit.* pp.265-275; Hugh Roberts, "Demilitarizing Algeria," "Carnegie Papers", No. 86, May 2007, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cp_86_final1.pdf.

events are any indication for what lays ahead in the future, the government's much vaunted promises of reform will not be successful in addressing Algeria's profound imbalances in the social, political and economic realms. A shadow of doubt must therefore be cast over the thesis of a so-called 'Algeria exception' when compared to its neighbors in the MENA region. If left unaddressed, the country's underlining features of unsustainability are set to continue haunting state-society relations in the country for some time to come.