

Algeria: The Subterranean Logics of a Non-election (ARI)

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Theme: Algeria has just held what it calls a presidential election. It has done so at intervals since 1995 and these have regularly been a cause for dissatisfaction at home and abroad. But what exactly are these events that so consistently fail to measure up to widespread expectations? This ARI explains that they are not really elections at all and that the expectations entertained in respect of them are entirely misplaced.

Summary: The proceedings that are officially known as presidential elections in Algeria are exercises in legitimation achieved through the mobilisation of allegiance. They are held not to establish the People's choice, but to secure popular assent to a choice that has already been made by the ruling oligarchy and, through this, legitimation of the oligarchy itself. The formally pluralist aspect of these proceedings should not be mistaken to imply that there is a significant competition. The regime's candidate is certain to be the next President and there is no real race at all; the function of the other candidates is to boost aggregate turnout and so maximise the legitimation dividend for the regime, not to dispute the oligarchy's choice of President. This preoccupation with legitimacy also marks the outlook and activity of those parties calling for a boycott and helps to ensure that political debate in Algeria remains fundamentally sterile. The true nature of these proceedings signifies that the substantive democratisation of the Algerian political system has yet to begin and that it is entirely vain for Algeria's Western partners to suppose that they have made any real headway in promoting democracy in the country over the last two decades or that they can realistically aspire to do so in the foreseeable future.

Analysis: The official figures announced by Algeria's Interior Minister, Nouredine Zerhouni, giving Abdelaziz Bouteflika 90.24% of the vote –leaving less than 10% to the five other candidates to share between them– and claiming a turnout of 74.11% in the poll of 9 April, have been almost universally taken as vindicating widely touted assessments that the outcome of Algeria's presidential election was a foregone conclusion. This is a misconception of what has happened.

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Table 1. Official results of presidential poll in Algeria, 9 April 2009

| Candidate | Votes | % of total vote |
|---|------------|-----------------|
| Abdelaziz Bouteflika (non party; backed by PFLN, RND, MSP, etc) | 12,911,705 | 90.24 |
| Louisa Hanoune (<i>Parti des Travailleurs</i>) | 604,258 | 4.22 |
| Moussa Touati (<i>Front National Algérien</i>) | 330,570 | 2.31 |
| Djahid Younsi (<i>El Islah</i>) | 176,674 | 1.37 |
| Ali Fawzi Rebaïne (<i>AHD 54</i>) | 133,129 | 0.93 |
| Mohamed Saïd (<i>Parti pour la Liberté et la Justice</i>) | 132,242 | 0.92 |
| Election data | Number | |
| Electorate | 20,595,683 | |
| Voted | 15,262,695 | |
| Turnout (%) | 74.11 | |

Source: Interior Minister as reported by *El Moudjahid*, 10/IV/2009.

There are countries which hold presidential elections that are sometimes foregone conclusions. The results of the elections in the US in 1964 (Johnson vs. Goldwater), 1972 (Nixon vs. McGovern) and 1984 (Reagan vs. Mondale), like the Chirac vs. Le Pen contest in France in 2002, were all foregone conclusions. But they were genuine elections nonetheless, as were the British general elections in 2001 and 2005 which saw Tony Blair's New Labour so easily and predictably defeat its Conservative rival. The fact that, on all of these occasions, the electors were known to have made up their minds well before polling day did not in itself detract from the significance of the act of voting as the exercise of a genuine power of decision by an enfranchised people. But the Algerian people are not enfranchised and have never had the power to decide who their President is to be.

There is no good reason to call what happened in Algeria on 9 April an election. It was not an election. The activity of the voters, however few or many of these there were, did not decide anything. What was at stake was not who would be Algeria's head of state for the next five years, since that had already been decided. The only result of importance at stake in the poll was the size of the turnout. That was never a foregone conclusion. And, since there was and is no possibility of subjecting the Interior Ministry's statistics to independent verification, we may never know the true outcome.

The decision that Bouteflika would have a third term was taken last October if not earlier. It was implicitly made public by Bouteflika himself when he announced on 29 October that the necessary revision of the Constitution, to abolish the two-term limit that required him to stand down, would proceed, as indeed it did, receiving the approval of the Constitutional Council on 7 November and the assent of the Algerian Parliament five days later. The President's announcement clearly signalled that agreement had been reached within the ruling oligarchy that he should continue in office. Why this should have happened is a secret without really being a mystery. We can safely assume that Bouteflika's demand for a third term was granted for the following inter-connected reasons:

- The reality of power: after two terms, Bouteflika and his supporters had dug themselves into strong positions within the power structure and could not easily be evicted.
- The lack of a strong reason to evict him, given his willingness and ability to accommodate the main vested interests in the regime, especially the army high command, and the lack of popular hostility to him (unlike Chadli Bendjedid at the end of his second term in 1988), even if earlier popular enthusiasm had clearly waned.

- The lack of a plausible alternative candidate for those opposed to a third Bouteflika term to promote and advance behind.
- The desirability of continuing with Bouteflika given his success in identifying the 'national reconciliation' discourse (which still plays well abroad) with himself.

Since the presidency is not the possession of a dynasty, we may say that President Bouteflika has been re-elected, but only on condition that we acknowledge that he was re-elected by the top echelon of the ruling oligarchy and that the precise composition and *modus operandi* of the informal electoral college that really decides such matters remains veiled in *le secret d'état*.

What happened on 9 April was a ritual consecration of the decision that had already been made more than five months earlier. The formality of a nation-wide public vote was required to induce ordinary Algerians to legitimate for external consumption –and thereby dignify– the prior informal decision. As such, it would be more accurate to call the proceedings a plebiscite or even a referendum rather than an election. But we can only employ these terms if we also qualify them at once by recognising that the people summoned to vote in the plebiscite were not actually being asked to decide anything.

Referendums are employed in genuine democracies to take decisions governments are unwilling or parliaments deemed unsuited to take. In such cases, the voters decide directly. The British decision to remain in the Common Market in 1975, the Irish decision to reject the Nice treaty and the French and Irish decisions to reject the EU Constitution are evident cases in point. But the Algerians who voted in the plebiscite on 9 April were not deciding a tricky issue referred to them by their government. It is not the case that the power brokers in Algiers could not agree on the relative merits of Abdelaziz Bouteflika and any one of the five other candidates and were relying on and empowering the people to resolve their dilemma for them. Nor were the voters ratifying their rulers' decision to stick with Bouteflika. The decision was not a merely provisional one that was subject to popular approval. Individual voters might be said to have had the option of withholding their personal approval of the decision by voting for other candidates or not voting at all, but the Algerian people collectively did not have this option. Bouteflika's continued occupancy of the El Mouradia palace did not depend on the outcome of the vote in the least. And so it would be as much a misuse of words to say that the voters were ratifying the deciders' decision as to suggest that they were deciding the matter for themselves. They were doing something else altogether.

In order to grasp precisely what this was, we need to take account of the activity of those formations campaigning for a boycott of the vote and the attitude of the government to their campaign.

'Boycott' vs. 'Adhesion'

The two main parties calling for a boycott were Dr Said Sadi's Rally for Culture and Democracy (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie*, RCD) and Hocine Aït Ahmed's Socialist Forces Front (*Front des Forces Socialistes*, FFS). Both of these have their main base in the Berber-speaking Kabylia region, but also some support in Algiers and the other towns across the country, as well as abroad, where the communities of the Kabyle diaspora are to be found. In Kabylia, the RCD and FFS both campaigned vigorously for the boycott, the FFS holding impressive demonstrations, with several thousand marchers (estimates varied between 3,000 and over 5,000), in Tizi Ouzou and in Bejaia, the region's main towns, on 2 April. But, elsewhere, some of the supporters of

these parties found the boycott campaign a hard sell and had misgivings about it, especially in view of the hostility of the pro-Bouteflika camp and the government.

This hostility rose to a new level of vehemence following the RCD's fateful decision to replace the Algerian national flag flying over its offices in Algiers and elsewhere with a black flag to signify national mourning. This histrionic gesture provoked a wave of denunciations from the Bouteflika camp, notably the Party of the National Liberation Front (*Parti du FLN*, PFLN) and the Democratic National Rally (*Rassemblement National Démocratique*, RND) and the General Union of Algerian Workers (*Union Générale des Travailleurs Algériens*, UGTA: the state labour organisation). It was also condemned by the notionally neutral National Political Commission for the Oversight of the Presidential Election (*Commission Politique Nationale de Surveillance de l'Élection Présidentielle*, CPNSEP). Their fire was concentrated not on the act of raising the black flag but on the prior act of taking down the national flag, an action portrayed as a deliberate insult to the flag and therefore unpatriotic. Elements of the RCD wing of the boycott campaign began to crack under this pressure. In Relizane, in western Algeria, eight local council members belonging to the RCD decided publicly to dissociate themselves from the boycott campaign and announced their dissidence from their party's line in the following terms:

'We certainly fight politically for democracy and the diversity of ideas, but to go so far as to insult the national emblem and raise a black flag, this we strongly reject... Outraged by this position, we have all decided to work for the success of this election, for which we confirm our support'.¹

The English word 'support' is an inadequate translation of the French word *adhésion*. But this word is a key element in the Algerian political lexicon. It does not mean support in the sense of *soutien* or *appui*, that is, support one is free to offer or not, so much as allegiance and loyalty. Like any state, the Algerian state requires the loyalty of its citizenry. Unlike Western democracies, however, it consciously and conspicuously uses elections as occasions to remobilise this loyalty. It requires the citizenry actively to demonstrate its allegiance to the state by participating in the process; voting is conceived far more as a collective, patriotic and civic duty than as an individual's civil right.

In the days of the one-party system (1962-88), when there was only one candidate (Ahmed Ben Bella, Houari Boumediène, Chadli Bendjedid) for the presidency, matters were very clear-cut: the Algerians were required to express their allegiance to the regime by demonstrating in the polling booth that they 'adhered to', that is, accepted and went along with, the deciders' decision. The advent of formal pluralism in 1989 complicated matters, but in reality only modified the system without substantively reforming it, let alone replacing it. Voters are allowed a plurality of 'candidates' to vote for, but the choice is between voting for the man who has already been chosen by the informal electoral college of 'deciders' and voting for the remainder, who are not serious contenders at all (one can scarcely even call them 'also-rans', since they are not at any point in the running; there is not a real race at all).

¹ 'Nous militons, certes, pour la démocratie et la diversité des idées, mais arriver à berner l'emblème national et hisser un étendard noir, c'est ce que nous rejetons avec force... Outrés par cette position, nous sommes tous décidés à œuvrer pour la réussite de cette élection à laquelle nous confirmons notre adhésion'; see 'Les élus du RCD de Relizane se démarquent de leur direction', *El Watan*, 5/IV/2009.

Algerians are well aware of the reality of this procedure; of the candidates who are not real contenders, they regularly remark that 'they are there merely for form's sake'.² In fact, however, the non-contender candidates perform certain functions that are quite substantial and valued by the regime. These functions include:

- *Cosmetic services*: the participation of other candidates enables the regime to maintain the illusion or fiction that political pluralism is a reality in Algeria; while this no longer impresses domestic audiences, it is important for external consumption, enabling the regime to humour its Western partners and facilitating the latter in their dealings with Algiers.
- *The safety-valve*: certain strongly held political views that cannot find an outlet in support for the obligatorily mainstream, above-party, 'candidate of consensus'³ find a safe outlet in support for one or another ideologically distinctive candidate; thus the non-contender candidates always include an Islamist and a Kabyle and, on this occasion (as in 2004), a leftist (who is also a woman).
- *Ancillary or auxiliary mobilisation*: the non-contender candidates, especially those distinguished by ideology, programme or regional identity, are able to appeal to elements of the electorate that the mainstream candidate-elect cannot reach and mobilise constituencies he cannot mobilise; they thereby perform the invaluable service of boosting turn-out, maximising the expression of allegiance and so securing supplementary legitimation (candidates who might *take votes away* from the regime's choice and who might therefore be considered to be real contenders are not allowed to stand).⁴

For these reasons, the government's attitude towards the five non-contender candidates was quite different from its attitude towards the boycotters. Certainly, the five supplementary candidates were at no point treated as Bouteflika's equals; in particular, their allocations of air time on national radio and television were meagre compared with the coverage Bouteflika and his campaign received. But the other candidates were at least accorded *some* air time, their meetings were authorised and they were shown at any rate a minimum of consideration. Thus their activity was explicitly tolerated and allowed, because its usefulness was tacitly appreciated. The boycotters, on the other hand, were actively combated and denounced. The boycott campaign was accorded no air time whatever, public meetings it sought to hold outside Kabylia were banned, a number of campaigners distributing tracts were arrested and the campaign was denounced in the most vehement terms, notably when Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, who is also the leader of the RND, declared that 'those calling for a boycott are traitors, criminals'.⁵

It would be a mistake to dismiss these words as a mere excess of language in the heat of an electoral battle. Mr Ouyahia is a sober figure who calculates what he does and says. His employment of these extreme terms faithfully represented the true outlook of the regime as a whole. This outlook is, in this respect at least, a continuation of the outlook of the wartime FLN which constituted the Algerian state. The wartime FLN did not seek

² 'Ils ne font que de la figuration', a comment I heard repeatedly when observing the presidential elections in 1999 and 2004.

³ As Bouteflika was repeatedly referred to in 1999, although the term applies in every presidential election, the consensus being that of the top echelon of the ruling oligarchy.

⁴ A rule that was applied at the expense of Redha Malek in 1995, Mahfoud Nahnah in 1999 and Dr Ahmed Taleb Ibrahim in 2004.

⁵ 'Ceux qui appellent au boycott sont des traîtres, des criminels'; see Hanafi Taguemout, 'La Kabylie résiste aux manœuvres du Pouvoir: Drapeaux noirs, carton rouge', *Le Soir de Bruxelles*, 8/IV/2009.

popular support in the manner of a political party, it demanded the allegiance of the Algerian people in the manner of a state (and the wartime FLN was a state in embryo from late 1956 onwards). Algerians who resisted or contested the FLN's authority, or gave their allegiance to rival organisations, were denounced as traitors and punished as such.

Given that the sole issue at stake on 9 April was the size of the turnout, that is, the degree to which the Algerian state under its present management is still capable of evoking and securing the loyalty and allegiance of the population, the organisations calling for a boycott were the only real adversaries of the Bouteflika camp. In effect, the regime was saying to the people: you have four options:

- (1) You can express maximum allegiance and loyalty to the state by voting for Bouteflika, the regime's own choice.
- (2) You can express qualified but still substantial allegiance and loyalty to the state by participating in the proceedings without voting for Bouteflika by voting for one of the no-hopers if you really want to.
- (3) You can go through the motions of voting while expressing your private feelings, if you must, by spoiling your ballot paper.
- (4) You can, finally, if you really insist, stay at home and omit to vote at all on condition that you do so discreetly and abstain from giving your abstention –ie, your dereliction of your civic duty– any political significance and setting a bad example to your fellows.

What the regime was not prepared to tolerate was the deliberate and public act of abstention as a politically significant gesture, let alone facilitate the public advocacy of this *qua* boycott, since this challenged and put in question the whole exercise. Those who called for a boycott were thus opponents of a different order; not alternatives to the candidate-elect, but opponents of the remobilisation of allegiance to the state, hence the logic of denouncing them as traitors.

The Mutually Reinforcing Logics of Legitimation and Delegitimation

The procedure in Algeria that is widely misnamed a presidential election is essentially an exercise in legitimation. But as such it is not a simple affair; in fact, it is a very complex affair, if not a convoluted one. The vote legitimates the deciders' choice and dignifies this choice in the eyes of the outside world, and thereby legitimates Abdelaziz Bouteflika's continued occupancy of the presidency and his authority to preside and arbitrate matters at home and wheel and deal with his counterparts abroad. At the same time, by legitimating Bouteflika, the regime's candidate, the action of the voters legitimates (or re-legitimates) the regime itself. Votes cast for the other candidates do not legitimate the regime's candidate directly but they do this indirectly, by legitimating the proceedings from which the regime's candidate emerges wreathed in the victor's laurels. They do this despite the fact that the unsuccessful non-contender candidates routinely complain, after polling day, about the unfairness of it all: the inequitable allocations of airtime, the suspiciously low percentages of the vote officially attributed to them by the Interior Minister, etc. The latter is easily able to shrug off such reproaches, challenging the candidates to submit formal complaints if they have hard evidence of rigging, a challenge that is equally routinely refused.

Thus, the extent to which the complaints of the other candidates tarnish the proceedings and detract from their legitimacy is limited. For all the tone of indignation they adopt, it cannot seriously be supposed that the candidates in question really expected anything better. They knew the score before they agreed to play the game. They did not stand

because they thought for a moment they had a chance of winning or even coming close; they did so as an exercise in self-advertisement, to raise their own or their party's profile, expand or at least defend their constituencies and exercise their troops with a view to performing well in the elections they can hope to get something out of, those for the national, regional and municipal assemblies. The point is that, since there are always potential candidates who did not play, candidates who were debarred from standing or parties which called for abstention, the candidates who played the game need to counter the accusation that they were simply the regime's pawns and look to their own legitimacy. They therefore invariably complain about the way the 'election' was rigged, in order to cover their own flanks. By doing this, they implicitly comfort and reinforce the illusion that the 'election' was *almost* –or could have been– a real election, when this was never a possibility. Thus, they contribute to the general mystification surrounding the proceedings.

Similarly, the parties and personalities ostentatiously decrying and boycotting the proceedings are equally engaged in a convoluted form of legitimacy politics. Dr Sadi was a candidate in 1995 and 2004; Hocine Aït Ahmed was a candidate in 1999. The leaders of the two main parties calling for a boycott on this occasion have joined the dance in the past. They have accordingly needed to legitimate their change of attitude by suggestion that this year's 'election' has been a quite different affair from preceding ones; hence the RCD's histrionic black flag of mourning. In fact, the basic rule of the game has never varied, and it cannot seriously be supposed that Dr Sadi and Mr Aït Ahmed are unaware of this.

Equally importantly, by calling for a boycott, they have unquestionably been focusing on the legitimization function of the proceedings; instead of legitimating the regime and its candidate, their aim was simply to delegitimize them both. No other aim appears to have been in view. Thus the boycotters as much as the participationists have been locked in the obsessive preoccupation with the legitimacy issue (who has a right to rule?) to the exclusion of all other issues (such as what should the policies of our government be?). As one Algerian observer, the political analyst Nacer Djabi, noted, a disappointing feature of the campaign was the absence of serious policy debate.⁶ This owes as much to the boycotters as to the regime, the Bouteflika camp and the other candidates. By calling for a boycott, the RCD and FFS unquestionably aggravated the Bouteflika camp's anxiety about the eventual turnout and ensured that this preoccupation would outweigh other considerations. The obsession with the legitimacy issue itself is a major factor inhibiting open political debate in Algeria. The continued grip of this sterile obsession over the political reflexes of all and sundry should be laid at the door of the so-called 'opposition' parties as well as that of the regime itself. The obsession of the one fuels the obsession of the other in an endless vicious circle.

The bitter irony in this is that the preoccupation with legitimacy has not involved a willingness on either side to address seriously the one key aspect of the legitimacy issue that unquestionably needs to be faced. This is the problem which President Bouteflika himself drew attention to, in a speech to Algeria's war veterans in late 2004, when he suggested that the 'revolutionary legitimacy' on which successive regimes had depended since 1962 was all but exhausted, a suggestion that implicitly posed the question: what alternative source of legitimacy is henceforth available to the regime? It would appear that neither the regime nor the opposition has a convincing answer to this question, that is, an

⁶ 'Algérie: la campagne pour la présidentielle du 9 avril s'achève dans l'indifférence', Associated Press, 6/IV/2009.

answer that is a possibility of practical politics, and the recent campaign was a missed opportunity for broaching a serious debate on this crucial issue. But the reconstruction of the Algerian polity in the medium term unquestionably depends upon a satisfactory answer being found before much longer. Meanwhile, the population's disenchantment with the present political system, given its inability to assure adequate representation of the society, is brought home in the local level riots that occur somewhere almost every fortnight, while the routine renewal of the state of emergency each year underlines the impossibility of a return to political normality on the basis of the *status quo ante*. In the light of these realities, the oligarchy's decision to continue with Bouteflika may be interpreted as above all a decision to buy more time, since the problematical contours of *l'après-Bouteflika* remain to be agreed.

Conclusion: Outside diplomatic circles and their imperatives of politeness, there are only bad reasons for calling this exercise an election. Chief among them is the concern to find fault with it, for failing to measure up to the demanding Western yardsticks of what an election should be or at least look like. The addiction of much of the Western media to a fault-finding discourse on foreign parts disposes them to call the peculiar exercise in which the Algerian state periodically engages an 'election' the better to debunk it, complain about it or at least sneer at it. In this, the media have generally been taking their cue from Western governments equally addicted to meddling, at least verbally if not in more serious ways, in the foreign parts in question. It is therefore of some interest that, on this occasion, the reactions of Western governments have been generally neutral, limited to congratulating President Bouteflika and saying next to nothing about the process by which he has secured a third term. The absence of moralising from the reactions of European governments in particular to what has just been transacted in Algeria suggests that these governments are finally on a learning curve where Algeria is concerned. The European media may eventually follow suit.

This would be a positive development. The most constructive thing that Western observers can do to promote political progress in Algeria is to hold up true mirrors to what goes on there. By doing so they can help to demystify Algerian political realities and facilitate the emergence of new thinking among the Algerians themselves that is the precondition of the kind of substantive reform that will sooner or later prove necessary to the stability of the state itself.

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