The Illusion of a Triumph

The re-election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika on 17 April 2014 for a fourth consecutive term was surprising, above all for the announced voting results. Indeed, the incumbent, who was not able to campaign for health reasons – and who delegated this task to his supporters, all of them connected to the state apparatus –, nevertheless purportedly obtained 81.49% of the votes in the first round (90.24% in 2009), according to the results officially announced by the Constitutional Council. Participation was said to be only 50.70% (74.54% in 2009).

The opposition’s representatives, most of whom chose to boycott the elections, not only denounced election results that were set in advance – as well as systemic fraud – but they were likewise outraged to see Bouteflika moving about in a wheelchair on election day, an additional indication of his inability to manage the nation’s affairs, according to them. In any case, the incumbent provided a medical certificate with his candidate file, in accordance with the law.

Transferred to the Val-de-Grâce Hospital in January 2014 – after a long period in the same institution in the preceding year, fuelling the wildest rumours –, Abdelaziz Bouteflika was hospitalised for several days in the French capital to “complete his medical check-up” on the eve of convening the elections. This unprecedented situation led certain protesters to demand application of Article 88 of the Constitution, regarding presidential incapacity to serve “due to serious and lasting illness.”

This incident illustrates the weakness of the regime’s opponents, since there is no autonomy of powers and the population at large remains deaf, for the time being, to appeals calling for a rupture with the system. This does not mean, however, that the government’s people exercise their hegemony without the least dissent – which has expressed itself primarily through abstention or invalid ballots (1,132,136 out of 11,600,984 voters). Despite its liberality since the uprisings in January 2011, the regime’s underpinnings ultimately remain fragile.

Diffuse Dissent and Political Reshuffling

Certain analysts have magnified the parallels between the invalid President and an outdated regime, though the supporters of the latter have more time and resources than the former. Bouteflika’s state of health – not to mention his old age, his status as veteran in the war of independence or his policy of reconciliation with armed Islamist groups – has conveniently prevented the Algerian population’s grievances from being blamed on him. The slogan “Bouteflika, get out” will not last long.

Against the diffuse, opaque nature of the Algerian system, there is no less diffuse dissent that is above all resistant to any form of institutionalisation. The diverse protests through which the population expresses its rejection of arbitrariness, of the housing shortage, the decreasing quality of life, the fall in purchasing power, etc., are not, strictly speaking, apolitical, but remain distant from the parties weakly entrenched in the country and tactically avoid questioning the legitimacy of the ruling regime.
In the face of this cycle of protests stirring society since the civil war’s intensity dropped in the early 2000s, we are witnessing a reshuffling in the political arena, apart from the two parties of the Administration, which are the National Liberation Front (FLN) – the only party from 1962 to 1989 – and the National Rally for Democracy (RND), the main backers of Bouteflika’s candidacy, together with the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA) – formerly the only trade union – and employers’ associations.

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The Workers’ Party (PT), whose candidate in the presidential elections, Louisa Hanoune, won 1.37% of votes (4.22% in 2009), in contrast to the preceding elections, was careful not to denounce electoral fraud and even spoke of a “victory.” This Trotskyist organisation now refuses to be associated with the opposition in the name of a sovereignist rhetoric that leads it to fuel propaganda based on fear, spreading rumours, for instance, in the spring of 2013 on the possibility of an American landing from a Spanish military base.

**Seeking an Alternative Coalition**

The Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), in contrast, has lately distanced itself from the perimeter of Algerian power. This Islamist party began distancing itself in January 2012, in the wake of the Arab Spring, believing it could ride the wave of sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood in Tunisia and Egypt. The MSP thus left the Presidential Alliance coalition, of which it had been a member since 2004 together with the FLN and the RND, to found the Green Algeria Alliance for the May 2012 legislative elections, with El Islah and Ennahda.

The emergence of Abderrazak Mokri as head of the MSP in May 2013 confirms the Islamist party’s shift to the opposition and allows exchange with other political movements such as the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), an organisation considered secular, liberal and even pro-Western. Above all present in Kabylia, the RCD has long maintained its label of “pro-eradication” for its opposition to dialoguing with the armed Islamists during the civil war, in contrast to the MSP.

The RCD’s repositioning followed the failure of the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD) umbrella group, created in response to the so-called national “cooking oil and sugar” uprisings in January 2011 and calling for Bouteflika’s departure. Leading the dissent, the then-president of the RCD, Saïd Sadi – replaced by Mohsen Belabes in March 2012 – was reproached for drawing media coverage to himself to the detriment of a collective dynamic, which in any case has run up against repression and government counter-measures.

Since the national uprisings, attempts at regrouping opposition movements have been announced, materialising through press releases, demonstrations or the creation of often ephemeral coalitions such as the National Alliance for Change (ANC), founded in February 2011 by the former head of government, Ahmed Benbitour, and other organisations, particularly Islamist ones. The feature these initiatives share is the will to overcome the rifts inherited from the civil war between “eradicators” and “dialoguers.”

“Democratic Crowd Control” or Classic Repression?

The success of the meeting held in Algiers on 21 March 2014 on the initiative of the National Boycott Coordination platform constitutes another illustration of this rapprochement, since speakers include Mohsen Belabes, Ahmed Benbitour and Abderrazak Mokri. This event was tolerated by the authorities because it was held indoors, which was not the case with other protests held in the street, which were quelled by the police, above all in the capital, despite the lifting of the state of emergency in February 2011.
The opposition is thus confined to indoor meetings or certain private newspapers. The mass media, such as radio or television, have been state monopolies since independence and remain propaganda tools for the regime. A breach was made, in any case, by the appearance of private television networks in autumn 2011, such as Echorouk TV, but their reporting of the news in the electoral period was generally assimilated to the themes of the ruling regime, giving the impression of false pluralism.

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The private television station Al Atlas TV was thus suspended in March 2014 for criticising the regime on its programmes. Insofar as the Barakat! Movement, founded in the same period in opposition to Bouteflika’s fourth term, several of its protests have been the object of police intervention. The latter, headed by Major General Abdelghani Hamel, subscribe to the doctrine of “democratic crowd control,” though in practice, they are not very convincing of real change.

In fact, the violent repression of a demonstration in Tizi-Ouzou on 20 April 2014 revealed the limits of the National Security Forces’ “democratic” pretensions. A video uploaded on the internet showing police officers brutalising individuals has scandalised public opinion. The attitude of the security forces has likewise been questioned due to the recurrent confrontations between Ibadis and Sunnis in Ghardaïa. Since December 2013, the resumption of the conflict has caused the destruction of homes and shops as well as the death of numerous citizens.

**The Advantages of Counter-Revolutionary Legitimacy**

Despite the low intensity of the conflict that bloodied the country in the 1990s, Jihadi attacks continue against the People’s National Army (PNA, the Algerian army), in particular in Kabylia, where groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) operate. In January 2013, AQIM dissidents, moreover, took several hundred workers hostage at the In Amenas natural gas facility. The subsequent assault by the PNA resulted in the neutralisation of the majority of AQIM assailants, who executed dozens of hostages in retaliation.

The period that began with the 11 September 2001 attacks has allowed the Algerian regime to reposition itself on the international arena on behalf of the war against terrorism and to assert its status as the key State in the region, thus creating a new advantage after that of non-alignment since independence. The rise of danger in the Sahel as well as the instability in Tunisia and Libya since the fall of Ben Ali and Gaddafi contrast with the capacity of the Algerian government to continue stable, thus reassuring its Western partners.

The recent visit to Algiers of US Secretary of State John Kerry several days before the first round of presidential elections was, in fact, essentially motivated by the struggle against terrorism. Largely dependent on its hydrocarbon resources, Algeria can still afford to figure among the 20 countries spending the most to equip themselves with arms in 2013, with a budget estimated at 10.8 billion dollars, which places it just behind the State of Israel, according to IHS Jane’s.

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In any case, it is first and foremost on the interior front that the Algerian regime’s resources would appear decisive to preserving its legitimacy, tarnished at least since the riots of October 1988, and ensure the loyalty of its clientele (the army, police, civil servants, veterans, guilds or brotherhoods, merchants and entrepreneurs associated with the purchase orders or loans guaranteed by
A Struggle against the Clock

The magnitude of the corruption – Algeria is among the 100 countries most affected by the phenomenon in 2013, according to Transparency International – fosters the maintenance of the status quo despite the scandals revealed by the national and international press. The businessman, Farid Bedjaoui, for instance, is the object of an international arrest warrant put out by the Italian judiciary regarding contracts signed by the oil companies Saipem – subsidiary of the Italian ENI Group – and Sonatrach – a true State within a State in Algeria.

In any case, neither corruption nor repression nor the civil war or natural resources are factors that can explain in and of themselves how this authoritarian regime with totalitarian overtones continues in place. It is above all the absence of a radical alternative that would provide a rupture with the current system and its populist practices and ideas that prevents a sustainable “changeover” – sought by diverse opposition movements or by the unsuccessful candidate and former head of government, Ali Benflis – from taking place.

Whereas the Barakat! Movement – highly publicised due to the presence of journalists among its members – proposes “the establishment of a transition period” with a view to instituting a second Republic, the Platform for an Independent Labour Policy (Collectif pour une politique ouvrière indépendante) convened a rally on 1 May 2014 in Algiers – broken up by the police – in support of social demands and against “neo-liberal policies.” The Algerian situation in the medium term will depend to a large extent on the ability to make sectoral struggles converge.

For its part, shortly after Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s re-election, the government relaunched a process of consultation on revisions of the Constitution. These discussions, which will be led by former head of government Ahmed Ouyahia, will not take into account the results of preceding discussions on political reform initiated in May-June 2011. The latter had the effect of providing those in power the time to better adopt a series of repressive measures.

Bibliography


