

# Algeria: Elections, Social Problems and Freedom of the Press

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The year 2004 in Algeria was dominated by the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, with a very large majority of votes. Elected for the first time in 1999, the Algerian president began a second mandate at the head of the Algerian Republic in April 2004.

So, in 2004 began the year of Bouteflika's supremacy and of the liquidation of the other centres of power, with the departure into retirement of General Lamari and the bringing into line of the FLN, which had been opposed to Abdelaziz Bouteflika's policies. The Algerian army, until now at the forefront of the political scene, is now evolving towards greater "professionalisation." This mutation began when the Islamist resistance, in particular that of the GIA, collapsed after years of a particularly bloody civil war (the official figure is more than 100,000 deaths). The "repentant" Islamist militants are awaiting an amnesty promised by the newly elected president, an amnesty that is provoking a big debate within society and the political class. 2004 also saw a similar weakening of the "Aârouchs" ("tribal") movement in Kabylia against the central power and record financial income for Algeria because of oil price increases on the international market. It was also the fiftieth anniversary of the beginning of the war of independence against France, which began on the 1st November 1954. It is a fiftieth anniversary which in fact marks the decline of a political generation which has relied on "historical legitimacy" to maintain or to hang on to power.

## **The aftermath of an electoral victory: employment and housing.**

After a very hard electoral campaign with many personal attacks, Abdelaziz Bouteflika was elected president of the Algerian Republic on 9th April 2004, after having had as principal rival the FLN candidate Ali Benflis. The size of his victory was surprising, since he picked up 83.49% of the votes, although the outcome of the poll had seemed uncertain. His main opponent, Ali Benflis, obtained barely 7% of the votes. In fact, Abdelaziz Bouteflika won a degree of popularity campaigning for the return of "peace and stability in Algeria" in a country tired of ten years of civil war. But the size of the victory, which took on the appearance of a plebiscite, has thrown doubts on the validity of the election. Opponents belonging to the Berber movement, militant feminists, journalists and some trade unionists have marred the president's victory with their complaints of irregularities.

The Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was thus beginning his second mandate at the head of the country, has declared that he wants to deal with day-to-day problems and the many social issues, in order not to disappoint his fellow countrymen. He is benefiting from a considerable financial reserve of 33 billion dollars, giving him room for manoeuvre in solving the nagging problem of unemployment and the housing crisis, two social ills that have been undermining Algerian society for years. In fact, even though in the last two years there has been a slight fall in unemployment, which has moved officially from 30% to 25% of the active population, it remains a fact that 2.3 million Algerians are without jobs. Alongside this, half of the 32

million Algerians live below the poverty line.

Unemployment particularly touches those aged under 30. According to economists, half of this group is jobless. These are the masses of unemployed people who could form a seedbed for armed groups of Islamist militants (which have, however, been losing impetus for several years). These unemployed people are often the origin of the riots which, over the last few years, have become one of the means of expression for making all kinds of protests in Algeria. Often, groups of demonstrators set up barricades in the street or attack public buildings to express their discontent because they have not been able to find housing or because of the constant water and power cuts.

The most serious problem is, in fact, housing and the authorities seem incapable of solving it, particularly because of a galloping population increase, which has seen Algeria move from 10 million inhabitants in 1962 to 32 million in 2004. The Algerian press is overrun with letters from readers reproaching the authorities for launching schemes which are suddenly abandoned and for spending many years building several hundred apartments to eventually let them according to criteria which arouse the anger of the people. The head of the government, Ahmed Ouyahia, declared on 20 March 2004 at an Algiers housing trade fair "that Algeria would turn round the housing crisis by 2010." He said Algeria had built 700,000 homes during the last five years and 300,000 were in the process of being built. This number is a long way short of being sufficient in view of the demand and the deficit of a million homes which the country has been suffering for decades. Currently, according to official

statistics, the average home – and they are usually small – is occupied by 6.1 people. In this area, the State has to bear the pressure alone because private sites are beyond the means of the vast majority of Algerians, who do not receive any kind of housing benefit along the lines of that given in Europe.

### **Economic and financial issues**

The economic reforms imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to bring Algeria rapidly out of the rut of a socialist economy have progressed slowly under the first five years of Mr Abdelaziz Bouteflika, despite the injection of the considerable financial benefits the country has enjoyed thanks to oil income. The privatisations imposed in 1994 by the IMF structural adjustment programme in fact slowed down under Mr Bouteflika's first five years in office, although, according to Algerian and foreign experts, between 1997 and 2000 almost 1,000 companies were privatised. The IMF emphasised at the beginning of the year that "the improvement in living standards for Algerians remains slow."

The Algeria which turned its back on State socialism based on the Soviet model in 1994 to opt for the market economy, did, however, record an increase in gross national product (GNP) in 2003 of 6.8%, the strongest increase in 15 years. According to economists, this growth has basically been driven by the hydrocarbons sector, which provided 96% of the country's foreign currency income, despite the launch in 2001 of a 252 billion dinar (7 billion dollar) three-year relaunch plan. The application of this plan, intended to ameliorate the social damage caused by the closures of State industries which had led to the sacking of hundreds of thousands of workers, was halted by the lack of sizeable industrial development and the failure of the banking sector to adapt to the market economy. In addition, specialists have noticed that a nitpicking bureaucracy, also criticised by Abdelaziz Bouteflika

and his Economy and Finance minister Mr Benachenhou, has discouraged foreign investors from establishing themselves in Algeria. Only foreign oil groups have developed partnerships with the powerful public company Sonatrach, which is in charge of hydrocarbons in Algeria.

### **Press freedom in question**

On 6th December 2003, the editor of the daily paper *Le Matin*, Mohamed Benchicou, was called to the Security Department's "service for personal attacks" at the Algiers provincial headquarters. During the campaign for the election of the President of the Republic, the harassment of journalists increased and in January 2004, the editor of the publication *Soir d'Algérie*, Fouad Boughanem, and two journalists were called in by the police; Ali Dilem, cartoonist in *Liberté* and Farid Alilat, editor of the publication, were also called in by the criminal police for a cartoon published on 27th September 2003 under the title "Bouteflika will not get a second mandate." Mohamed Benchicou, after the publication of his work, *Bouteflika, an Algerian impostor*, and Ali Dilem were accused of insulting the President of the Republic and were questioned by the police. They were brought to the police station and brought before an Algiers court in front of a prosecutor and instructing magistrate. In February 2004, the former cartoonist of the daily paper *El Youm*, was sentenced to a 1-year suspended sentence for a cartoon about the methods of recruiting women for Algerian television.

On 9th June, the journalist and human rights activist Hafnaoui Ben Ameer Ghouh was sentenced by a court in Djelfa to two months imprisonment and a fine of 10,000 dinars on three charges of libel filed against him by the "wali" (prefect) of Djelfa and its health and population director (DSP) concerning an interview he gave on 17 May in the newspaper *Le Soir d'Algérie*.

On 14th June 2004, Mr Mohamed

Benchicou, editor of the newspaper *Le Matin* was sentenced to two years, imprisonment with a committal order and a fine of 3 billion cents by the El Harrach Court for an offence against exchange regulations. On 25th June 2004, the daily paper was suspended for "non-payment of printing bills." It disappeared definitively from Algerian newsstands. The newspaper *Le Matin* had a circulation of 100,000 copies.

### **The year of reconciliation and amnesty?**

At the end of 2004 and at the time when Algeria was celebrating the 50th anniversary of the outbreak of the war of independence against France, a debate began on the "amnesty" promised by A. Bouteflika.

For many politicians and journalists, the amnesty must not be achieved at the cost of amnesia wiping out the dreadful years Algeria has lived through. Since 2nd January 2005, the debate has been growing in importance in the Algerian Press. For the Arabic newspaper, *Ech-Chourouk El-Youmi*, "2005... will this be the year of the end of resentment and the year when reconciliation becomes reality?" For *Le Jeune Indépendant* if the leadership of the GSPC (Salafist Preaching and Combat Group) has now been decimated and the GIA almost annihilated, why continue to ask for a general amnesty? From then on, voices have been raised: "but who is going to be granted an amnesty?" For the government, clarifying the actual meaning of the amnesty to people involves a considerable risk. And *L'Expression* notes that "peace is not enough." This year will be more stable, more prosperous than the one that has just finished. But there is an urgent need for it to be the beginning of the establishment of real social justice. This is the price for bringing Algeria out of a cycle of "public violence" after completely getting rid of "terrorist violence."