

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Freedom in the World - Algeria (2008)

Capital:
Algiers

Population:
34,100,000

Political Rights Score: 6
Civil Liberties Score: 5
Status: Not Free

Overview

Algeria suffered an upsurge in violence in 2007, including suicide bombings that targeted government and foreign interests. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was ill for much of the year, prompting rumors that he would be sidelined, but by year's end he had reasserted leadership. His recovery also revived expectations that he would push for a constitutional amendment allowing a third presidential term. The ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) lost ground in parliamentary elections in May, though it retained a majority with the help of allied parties.

Unlike many other French colonies, Algeria was considered an integral part of France, leading to an especially bloody war of independence that stretched from 1954 to 1962. In 1965, the military overthrew the country's first president, Ahmed Ben Bella, and installed Houari Boumedienne in his place. The military dominated Algerian politics for the next four decades, backing the National Liberation Front (FLN) to the exclusion of all other parties for most of that time.

Economic upheaval, spurred in large part by the 1986 oil market collapse, culminated in violent riots in 1988. Once peace was restored that year, President Chadli Benjedid permitted the establishment of legal opposition parties. Islamist groups quickly gained popularity in the face of the government's failures, and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) became the main opposition faction. By late 1991 and early 1992, it was apparent that the FIS was poised to win the scheduled parliamentary elections, prompting the army to intervene. It canceled the elections, forced Benjedid from office, and summarily imprisoned FIS leaders under a declared state of emergency.

Over the next decade, various Islamist groups engaged in a bloody civil conflict against the Algerian military and one another. All sides targeted civilians and perpetrated large-scale human rights abuses, causing well over 150,000 deaths and the disappearance of at least 6,000 people. Journalists and intellectuals were targeted as well; the conflict remains one of the deadliest for journalists in history.

In 1999, as the fighting continued, the military-backed candidate—former foreign minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika—handily won a presidential election after his opponents withdrew to protest fraud allegations. Bouteflika's first attempt at resolving the civil war was the promulgation of a civil harmony law, which granted partial amnesty to combatants who renounced violence. A few thousand militants surrendered, but the more uncompromising groups—the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which later renamed itself Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb—continued to kill government personnel and civilians. Attacks slowly subsided over the next several years,

although there were occasional outbursts of violence and the government continued to commit human rights abuses.

The FLN secured 199 of 389 seats in the 2002 elections for the lower house of Parliament. The army-backed National Democratic Rally (RND), which previously held 155 seats, captured only 48. Islah, an Islamist "reform" party, won 43 seats, and the Movement for a Peaceful Society (MSP) took 38. The remaining seats went to leftist and Islamist parties or independents. Elections to the upper house in 2003 left the FLN with 22 seats; the RND, 17; the MSP, 4; and Islah, 2; one seat went to an independent candidate.

In April 2004, Bouteflika ran for reelection and won handily with 85 percent of the vote. The poll was not a model of free and fair elections, but the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and other international monitors declared it to have been free of serious problems. The army was officially neutral, and Bouteflika began to distance himself from the military.

The president again made national reconciliation one of his priorities, and in September 2005, Algerians overwhelmingly approved a referendum on the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. The document was loosely worded to give the government room to maneuver, but it essentially offered a general amnesty to most militants and government agents for crimes committed during the civil war. The charter also called for victims to receive compensation. Although it received 97 percent support in the referendum, victims' groups have criticized the charter for not addressing the issue of the disappeared, and international human rights groups have denounced it for not allowing perpetrators to be brought to justice. Critics also maintain that the criteria for determining which militants may benefit from the amnesty are far too vague and subject to political considerations. While many FIS leaders have been released from prison, they have not been integrated into the political structure in any meaningful way.

Algeria held elections for Parliament's lower house in May 2007, drawing a turnout of just 35 percent, the lowest in Algerian history. Many opposition groups, both Islamist and leftist, asked their supporters not to participate because they said the results would be rigged. Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb also called for a boycott, but the group's support is minimal. The FLN lost 63 seats in the voting, though it remained the largest party with 136. The RND took 61 seats, the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) won 19, and the MSP captured 52, while Islah lost nearly all of its parliamentary presence, holding on to just 3 seats.

Also in 2007, Algeria was racked by attacks attributed to Islamist militants. Many of the attacks took the form of suicide bombings, a new phenomenon in Algeria. The government has had difficulty tackling the problem, and the security situation appeared likely to grow worse.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Algeria is not an electoral democracy. However, parliamentary elections are more democratic than in many other Arab states. The government and public has grappled with the question of who will succeed President Abdelaziz Bouteflika after the end of his second and final five-year term in 2009. He was ill for much of 2007, but his health improved toward the end of the year, and he began conducting his presidential duties on a normal schedule, reviving the possibility that he would seek to amend the constitution to allow a third term. While the military does not

have the prominent role in politics it once did, powerful military personalities still have undue influence over state policy.

The People's National Assembly (APN), the lower house of the bicameral Parliament, has 389 members serving five-year terms. The upper house, the National Council (CN), has 144 members serving six-year terms. Members of the APN are elected by direct universal suffrage. In the CN, 96 members are chosen through indirect elections by local assemblies, and the president appoints the remaining 48.

The Ministry of the Interior must approve political parties before they can operate legally. While there are dozens of active political parties, movements that are deemed too radically Islamist are outlawed, and many of the Islamist groups that were banned in the 1990s remain illegal. The Front of Socialist Forces, *Islah*, and the Democratic and Social Movement were among the parties that called on their supporters to boycott the 2007 parliamentary elections. Parties close to the FLN hold a majority in Parliament and can pass most legislation they deem important.

High levels of corruption still plague Algeria's business and public sectors. In its 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International ranked Algeria 99 out of 180 countries surveyed.

Ever since Algeria established private newspapers, its journalists have aggressively covered the news. During the civil war, dozens were murdered, harassed, and threatened. The situation for journalists is much safer today, but the government uses harsh press laws and other statutes to punish reporters and editors who cross the regime too often. Television and radio are controlled by the state, while the internet, a much less popular news source, is largely unrestricted.

According to international press freedom groups like the New York-based Committee to Protect Journalists, legal harassment of journalists continued in 2007, though at a reduced rate. In April, an appeals court suspended the sentences and reduced the fines that a lower court had imposed on Ali Fodil, editor of the Arabic-language daily *Ech-Chourouk*, and Naila Berrahal, a reporter at the paper. The case stemmed from an article published in 2006 suggesting that Libyan leader Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi was involved in negotiations with Touareg leaders to establish a state in the Sahel region of Algeria. In other cases during 2007, Talal Dhif of the daily *Al-Fajr* received a six-month prison sentence for defamation, and two journalists working for the daily *Al-Watan* received prison sentences and fines. Journalists rarely serve out prison sentences in defamation cases, but the financial burden and work stoppages they entail do negatively affect press freedom.

Algeria's population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, but the small non-Muslim communities are able to practice their faiths without systematic harassment. Given Algeria's civil conflict, security services monitor mosques for Islamist activity. Academic freedom is largely respected.

The government acted to restrict freedom of assembly and association in 2007 as the country suffered its first suicide bombings, which resulted in over 100 civilian deaths. However, Algerian police can disperse peaceful demonstrations even in an ordinary security environment. Government permits are required to establish nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and the government is wary of any organization with Islamist leanings. Workers can establish independent trade

unions. The main union, the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA), has been criticized for being too close to the government and failing to tackle labor issues aggressively. In October 2007, several independent trade unions led by the National Council for Teachers in Higher Education (CNES) announced a strike against a new government-proposed wage structure.

The judiciary is not independent and is susceptible to government pressure. The human rights situation remains poor, though it is much better than during the civil war. International human rights activists have accused Algerian police and security forces of practicing torture. In 2007, prominent human rights lawyers and government opponents Amine Sidhoum and Hassiba Boumerdassi faced charges of handing documents to prisoners without authorization. The charges have been described by Human Rights Watch as politically motivated. Under the February 2006 implementation of the Charter for Peace and Reconciliation, members of the armed forces and progovernment paramilitary groups have been granted amnesty; virtually all cases of forced disappearance dating to the civil war remain unresolved. Harsh treatment and overcrowding have been reported at Algerian prisons.

Algeria's ethnic composition is a mixture of Arabs and Berbers. Those who identify themselves as Arabs have traditionally formed the country's elite. In the last few years, following outbreaks of antigovernment violence in the Berber community, officials have made more of an effort to recognize Berber cultural demands. Tamazight, the Berber language, is now a national language.

Political opponents of the state and those suspected of having ties to terrorists may be monitored or restricted in their movements, but Algerians are generally able to move freely throughout the country and abroad. Men of military draft age are not allowed to go abroad without government consent. The state of emergency, still in effect, gives the government discretion to restrict where certain people live and work.

Algerian women continue to face discrimination at both the legal and societal levels. According to the family code, which is based on Islamic law, women do not enjoy equal rights in marriage and divorce. There remains considerable room for improvement, particularly in the area of inheritance, where women receive less than men.