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Freedom in the World 2012 - Algeria

2012 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 5.5
Civil Liberties: 5
Political Rights: 6

Overview

Fearing a popular uprising similar to the Arab Spring movements sweeping the region, the Algerian government made a number of political and economic concessions in early 2011 to calm discontent. While the government also promised reforms to the constitution, the electoral law, and laws governing the media, real progress was slow to materialize, due in part to concerns about increasing extremist violence.

Algeria secured independence from France after a guerrilla war that lasted from 1954 to 1962. The military overthrew the country's first president in 1965 and dominated Algerian politics for the next four decades, backing the National Liberation Front (FLN) for most of that time. President Chadli Benjedid permitted the establishment of legal opposition parties in 1989, and an Islamist movement quickly gained popularity in the face of the government's failures; the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) became the main opposition faction. With the FIS poised to win parliamentary elections in 1992, the army canceled the elections, forced Benjedid from office, and imprisoned thousands of FIS supporters under a declared state of emergency.

Over the next decade, the military government and various Islamist groups engaged in a bloody civil conflict. All sides targeted civilians and perpetrated large-scale human rights abuses, causing an estimated 200,000 deaths and the disappearance of at least 7,000 people.

A military-backed candidate, former foreign minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika, easily won the 1999 presidential election after his opponents withdrew to protest alleged fraud. Bouteflika's first attempt at resolving the civil war was the Civil Concord Law, which granted partial amnesty to combatants who renounced violence. A few thousand militants surrendered, but the more uncompromising groups – including what later became Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – continued to kill government personnel and civilians. The next several years saw occasional outbursts of violence, and the government continued to commit human rights abuses.

The ruling FLN gained ground against the military-backed National Democratic Rally (RND) in the 2002 and 2003 elections to the lower and upper houses of Parliament, respectively, while Bouteflika, who began to distance himself from the military, won a second term in 2004. In 2005, a referendum approved the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, which offered amnesty to most militants and government agents for crimes committed during the civil war. However, human rights organizations criticized the charter for not addressing the issue of the disappeared and for allowing perpetrators to escape justice.

In May 2007 lower house elections, the FLN lost 63 seats, though it remained the largest party, with 136. The RND came in second, with 61 seats, followed by the Islamist-oriented Movement of the Society of Peace (MSP), with 52, and independent candidates, who claimed 33. The FLN and RND also placed first and second, respectively, in indirect elections for the upper house in December 2009.

Bouteflika won a third term in an April 2009 election, taking about 90 percent of the vote amid widespread accusations of fraud. After the election, reports that the ailing Bouteflika would be succeeded by his younger brother met with opposition from the intelligence services, particularly General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène, the powerful head of the Department of Intelligence and Security. In January 2010, Mediène launched a corruption investigation into the state-owned oil and gas company Sonatrach, which was responsible for 98 percent of Algeria's foreign exchange and 40 percent of its gross domestic product. Bouteflika allies at Sonatrach were indicted for corruption and later jailed; the president also lost two key supporters in a May cabinet shuffle. Some observers interpreted the February 2010 murder of the head of Algeria's national police, Ali Tounsi, as part of the ongoing power struggle.

In early 2011, the Algerian government remained firmly in control as political change gripped its Arab neighbors. Protests over high unemployment, rising prices, and the lack of political freedoms failed to attract crowds beyond a few thousand, and were violently subdued by the police. The government quickly introduced new subsidies and wage increases to head off a more widespread uprising. It also lifted the country's long-standing emergency law in February and promised reforms to the constitution and political party laws before parliamentary polls in May 2012. Meanwhile, AQIM attacks increased starting in April, heightening concerns over security. Some analysts said that a desire for stability among a population weary of conflict after years of civil war – along with the government's ability to draw on its oil wealth to appease economic grievances – made an uprising similar to those in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya less likely in Algeria.

In August, Algeria took in several members of deposed Libyan leader Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi's family who had fled the conflict in their home country.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Algeria is not an electoral democracy. The military and intelligence services still play an important role in politics despite their ongoing rivalries with the political establishment. The People's National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament, has 389 members directly elected for five-year terms. The upper house, the National Council, has 144 members serving six-year terms; 96 members are chosen by local assemblies, and the president appoints the remaining 48. The president is directly elected for five-year terms, and constitutional amendments passed in 2008 abolished the two-term limit, allowing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to run for a third term in 2009. The amendments also increased the president's powers relative to the premiership and other entities, drawing criticism from segments of the press and opposition parties.

The Ministry of the Interior must approve political parties before they can operate legally. A coalition of the FLN, RND, and MSP forms the current government. 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. As the next round of parliamentary elections approaches, debates have reopened over whether exiled Islamists, such as former FIS leader Anwar Haddam, should be allowed to return to Algeria. In September 2011, Haddam announced plans to return to the country, though he officially remained an outlaw.

High levels of corruption plague Algeria's business and public sectors, especially the energy sector. Sonatrach has come under particularly heavy fire in recent years; after being dismissed and arrested for corruption in 2010, its former chief executive officer, Mohamed Meziane, was sentenced to two years in prison in May 2011. Algeria was ranked 112 out of 183 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2011 Corruption Perceptions Index.

There is an array of restrictions on press freedom, but the situation has improved since the peak of the civil war in the mid-1990s. Privately owned newspapers have been published for nearly two decades, and journalists have been aggressive in their coverage of government affairs. However, most newspapers rely on the central government for printing, giving the state a high degree of influence over them. Also, the state-owned advertising agency favors progovernment newspapers, encouraging self-censorship. Arabic- and French-language satellite channels are popular, though the government maintains tight control over national news broadcasts. Both government officials and private entities use criminal defamation laws to pressure independent newspapers. Harassment of journalists continued in 2011, especially during the protests. In September 2011, Bouteflika announced proposed reforms that would lift state regulation of television and radio, and end the practice of imprisoning individual journalists convicted of libel. A new press law adopted in December 2011 was criticized by journalists and human rights activists for containing vague language that reinforces the government's ability to block reporting on certain sensitive topics, including those deemed to undermine the country's security or economic interests.

A July 2009 cybercrime law gives authorities the right to block websites "contrary to the public order or decency." In late 2009, the information minister announced a centralized system for monitoring internet traffic. In February 2011, amid protests against the regime, activists in Algiers and the northwestern city of Annaba accused the government of shutting down the internet and disrupting social networking activities.

Algeria's population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, and small non-Muslim communities do not face systematic harassment. However, non-Muslims may gather to worship only at state-approved locations, proselytizing by non-Muslims is illegal, and the government in 2008 began enforcing an ordinance that tightened restrictions on minority faiths. In May 2011, an Oran court sentenced a Christian convert to five years in prison for offending the prophet Muhammad. Also that month, the governor of Bejaia province ordered all churches in the province to be shut down, part of an ongoing legal dispute over possession of a church building in the region. Security services monitor mosques for radical Islamist activity, but Muslims are also sometimes harassed for a perceived lack of piety. Academic freedom is largely respected, though debate is somewhat circumscribed.

The police disperse peaceful assemblies, and the government generally discourages demonstrations featuring clear or implicit criticism of the authorities. As protests deposed other leaders in the region in 2011, the government forcibly disrupted public gatherings and protests, even after repealing the emergency law in February. Several people died and hundreds more were injured in clashes between the police and demonstrators.

Permits are required to establish nongovernmental organizations, and those with Islamist leanings are regarded with suspicion by the government. Workers can establish independent trade unions, but the main labor federation, the General Union of Algerian Workers, has been criticized for being too close to the government and failing to advocate aggressively for workers' interests.

The judiciary is susceptible to government pressure. International human rights activists have accused the security forces of practicing torture. In January 2011, Algerian national Saeed Farhi bin Mohammed was sent home from the U.S. military detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Mohammed had fought the transfer, saying he feared being targeted by the regime upon his return. This was the second such transfer to Algeria in less than a year. Prison conditions in Algeria generally do not meet international standards due to overcrowding and poor nutrition and hygiene.

Algeria's ethnic composition is a mixture of Arabs and Berbers, with Arabs traditionally forming the country's elite. In recent 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. However, Berbers were not beyond the reach of government repression during protests in early 2011.

While most citizens are free to move throughout the country and travel abroad, the authorities closely monitor and limit the movement of suspected terrorists. Access to visas for non-Algerians is carefully controlled. Men of military draft age are not allowed to leave the country without government consent.

Women continue to face discrimination at both the legal and societal levels. Under the family code, which is based on Islamic law, women do not enjoy equal rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. They are poorly represented in Parliament, holding only 5.2 percent of the upper house and 7.7 percent of the lower house. A law requiring that female candidates comprise one-third of any candidate list for legislative elections was adopted in November 2011. However, Algeria is one of the few countries in the region to allow women to transfer their nationality to their children, regardless of the father's nationality. A law adopted in January 2009 criminalized all forms of trafficking in persons, but the government has made little effort to enforce it, according to the U.S. State Department's 2011 Trafficking in Persons Report.

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