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Freedom in the World 2011 - Algeria

Capital: Algiers**Population:** 35,370,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika reshuffled his cabinet in May 2010 as his poor health fueled rumors about the possible succession of his brother and the government struggled with corruption allegations against the state-owned oil company. Also during the year, the government continued to tamper with internet access, explicitly blocking a political website for the first time in January.

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) to the exclusion of all other parties 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 summarily imprisoned thousands of FIS supporters under a declared state of emergency that remains in effect to date.

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 well over 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 promulgation of a Civil Concord Law, which granted partial amnesty to combatants who renounced violence. A few thousand militants surrendered, but the more uncompromising groups – including one which later renamed itself 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 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, referendum voters approved the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, which offered amnesty to most militants and government agents for crimes committed during the civil war. It also called for victim compensation, but victims' groups and human rights organizations criticized the charter for not addressing the issue of the disappeared and allowing perpetrators to escape justice.

Many opposition groups called for a boycott of the 2007 lower house elections, arguing that the results would be rigged, and turnout was a record-low 35 percent. The FLN lost 63 seats, though it remained the largest party with 136, followed by the RND with 61, the Movement for a Peaceful Society (MSP) with 52, the Workers' Party with 26, and the Rally for Culture and Democracy with 19. More than a dozen smaller parties also won seats, as did 33 independents. The FLN and RND similarly led indirect elections for the upper house in December 2009.

Bouteflika won a third term in an April 2009 presidential election, taking about 90 percent of the vote amid accusations of fraud from the other five candidates. An informal Associated Press poll found that turnout was about half the official figure of 74 percent. In the aftermath of the election, reports that the ailing Bouteflika would be succeeded by his younger brother were met with opposition from the intelligence services, particularly General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène, the powerful head of the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS). 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. A cabinet reshuffle in May 2010 resulted in the loss of two of Bouteflika's key supporters, while other allies at Sonatrach were indicted for corruption and jailed. The February murder of the head of Algeria's national police, Ali Tounsi, by a disgruntled subordinate was also interpreted by some observers as part of the ongoing power struggle.

Algeria and its neighbors to the south formed regional coordinating bodies in 2010 to help guard against terrorist attacks. Meanwhile, AQIM continued its efforts to attack government and business interests as well as kidnap European contractors and tourists in the region.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Algeria is not an electoral democracy. However, parliamentary elections are more democratic than those in many other states in the region. The military and intelligence services still play an important role in politics despite fluctuations in their prominence in recent years.

The People's National Assembly (APN), the lower house of the bicameral Parliament, has 389 members directly elected for five-year terms. The upper house, the National Council (CN), 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 allowed 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. 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. A coalition of the FLN, RND, and MSP forms the current government. The MSP is Islamist in its orientation.

High levels of corruption still plague Algeria's business and public sectors. The energy sector is viewed as especially graft prone. The Sonatrach scandal in the early part of 2010 continued to reverberate throughout the year. In May, Nourredine Cherouati became CEO of the company, with the publicly stated goal of cleaning up the firm; he replaced Mohamed Meziane, who had been arrested with his two sons and several associates. Algeria was ranked 105 out of 178 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2010 Corruption Perceptions Index. In September 2010, Amnesty International reported that the head of the nongovernmental Algerian Association to Combat Corruption, Djilali Hadjadj, was arrested in connection with a May conviction for forgery. The verdict was apparently handed down without his presence or knowledge.

There are 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, though readership is limited by an illiteracy rate of about 30 percent. Arabic and French-language satellite channels are popular, but the government keeps tight control over national news broadcasts. In July 2009, the government passed a cyber crime law giving 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. The purported aim was to inhibit hacking, online piracy, and access to pornography. In January 2010, the Islamist political website Rachad was blocked, the first time the law was enforced. In March 2010, the online radio station Kalima-Algérie was also blocked.

International press freedom groups continued to document numerous cases of harassment of critical journalists, and foreign journalists often face obstacles while covering the news. In September 2010, the International Federation of Journalists condemned the arrest of two Moroccan reporters who were covering a visit to Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf by a Polisario Front dissenter. Both government officials and private entities use criminal defamation laws to pressure independent newspapers.

Algeria's population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, and the small non-Muslim communities are able to practice their faiths without systematic harassment. However, non-Muslims may only gather to worship 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. Security services monitor mosques for radical Islamist activity, but Muslims are also sometimes harassed for a perceived lack of piety. In October 2010, Amnesty International condemned the arrest of two men in Tizi Ouzou for not observing Ramadan. 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 terrorist attacks continued in 2010, the government remained wary of large public gatherings and restricted freedom of assembly. However, public celebrations of the Algerian national soccer team's performance in the World Cup were allowed during the summer.

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 advance workers' interests aggressively.

The judiciary is susceptible to government pressure. International human rights activists have accused the security forces of practicing torture. In June 2010, Abdul Aziz Naji was sent home from the U.S. military detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. Naji had fought the repatriation, saying he feared for his life if he returned. 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. 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.

While most citizens are free to move throughout the country and abroad with little government interference, the authorities closely monitor and limit the movement of suspected terrorists. Access to visas for non-Algerians is carefully controlled. The long-standing state of emergency permits the government to restrict where certain people live and work. 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 7.2 percent of the lower house. In 2009, presidential candidate Louisa Hanoun came in a distant second place with about 4 percent of the vote. 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.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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