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Freedom in the World 2014 - Algeria

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2014 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 5.5

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 5

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 6

OVERVIEW

Two years after Algeria lifted its 19-year state of emergency and promised constitutional and electoral reforms, protests against stagnant economic and political conditions continued. Laws relating to political and civil liberties were criticized for failing to protect basic rights, and harassment of the political opposition and civil society was ongoing.

A January 2013 attack by Islamist militants at a gas plant at In Amenas, a southeastern town near the Tunisian border, killed 40 oil workers, including 39 foreigners. Unprecedented in its scale in Algeria, the attacks raised concerns about regional security in the wake of the overthrow of longtime Libyan ruler Mu'ammar al-Qadhafi in 2011, which led to the widespread dispersion of Qadhafi-era weapons.

Algeria expects to hold presidential elections in 2014, prompting speculation about whether ailing president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, 76, will run and the circumstances likely to surround his succession.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 12 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 4 / 12

Algeria's upper house of Parliament, 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 size of the People's National Assembly, the lower house of Parliament, was increased from 389 to 462 members directly elected for five-year terms in advance of the May 2012 elections. The president is directly elected for five-year terms, and constitutional amendments passed in 2008 abolished the two-term limit, allowing Bouteflika to run for a third term in 2009. The amendments also increased the president's powers relative to the premiership and other entities.

Bouteflika, who took office in 1999, won a third term in April 2009, taking about 90 percent of the vote amid widespread accusations of fraud.

In parliamentary elections held in May 2012, the National Liberation Front (FLN) won 221 seats, the military backed National Democratic Rally (RND), 70, and the Green Algeria Alliance – comprised of multiple Islamist parties – 47. The government estimated participation in the elections at approximately 42 percent. Foreign observers from the European Union, United Nations, Arab League, and other institutions declared the elections largely free and fair.

Opposition candidates and some human rights groups, however, asserted that the results were manipulated by the Ministry of the Interior, and that participation rates were much lower than the government stated. Fifteen parties that won a combined 29 seats announced that they would boycott the new Parliament. The election commission set up by the Algerian government itself condemned the elections as "not credible," although FLN and RND members on the commission refused to sign the final report. In September 2012, Bouteflika appointed former water resources minister Abdelmalek Sellal the new prime minister. Sellal presented a reform plan to the Parliament in October that stressed the need to continue with political reforms, enhance security, boost the economy, and fight corruption.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 4 / 16

The Ministry of the Interior must approve political parties before they can operate legally. The 2012 elections were also supervised by a judicial body, the National Election Observation Commission. A January 2012 law liberalized the party registration process, and 23 new political parties were allowed to register for the first time since 1999. The FLN, RND, Green Algeria Alliance (comprised of the Movement for the Society of Peace [MSP], Ennahda, and Islah parties), the Front of Socialist Forces, the Workers Party, and a number of smaller parties sit in the current Parliament.

The military and intelligence services play an important role in politics despite their ongoing rivalries. In recent years, a power struggle developed between the ailing Bouteflika, who reportedly suffered a stroke in April 2013, and General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène, the powerful head of the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), over rumors that Bouteflika's younger brother would succeed him. Shake-ups in the cabinet and the DRS in September and October 2013, respectively, suggested Bouteflika's desire to assert more control over the government and limit the power of the DRS.

Although parties cannot form explicitly along ethnic or religious lines, minorities, particularly the country's indigenous Amazigh groups, are able to participate actively in the political process.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

High levels of corruption plague Algeria's business and public sectors, especially the energy sector. In 2012, Algerian courts sentenced Mohamed Boukhari, the former executive officer of state-owned Algeria Telecom, to 18 years in prison for accepting bribes from two Chinese firms over a period of three years. Despite the existence of anticorruption laws, low levels of judicial independence, bloated bureaucracies, and a lack of government transparency contributed to problems of corruption. Algeria was ranked 94 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 23 / 60 (-1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 6 / 16 (-1)

There is an array of restrictions on press freedom, but the situation has improved since the peak of Algeria's 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, and the state-owned advertising agency favors progovernment newspapers, encouraging self-censorship. 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. In 2013, there was widespread secrecy surrounding the health of Bouteflika, as well as a near-complete media blackout surrounding the In Amenas terrorist attack. Both government officials and private entities use criminal defamation laws to pressure independent newspapers. In September, blogger Abdelghani Aloui was arrested for posting allegedly defamatory cartoons of Bouteflika on his Facebook page and charged with "glorification of terrorism" and "insulting state institutions"; he remained imprisoned at year's end.

A July 2009 cybercrime law gives authorities the right to block websites "contrary to the public order or decency," and a centralized system monitors internet traffic. In February 2011, amid protests against the government, 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; small non-Muslim communities do not face 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 2013, some Christians faced harassment at their places of worship. 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 climate produced by the Arab Spring has led to increased fears of government surveillance among citizens and a reluctance to express opinions on sensitive subjects such as slow or absent political reforms and high levels of political corruption, especially through social media.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 5 / 12

Despite the lifting of the state of emergency in 2011, the government has nevertheless continued to forcibly disrupt and discourage public gatherings and protests. International human rights groups criticized the suppression of demonstrations in advance of the May 2012 elections. In 2013, activists protesting government policies also faced arrest, often on vague charges, and others were apprehended when they protested the detention of their colleagues. In February, three activists – Taher Bela'bas, Khaled Dawi, and Ali Ghabshi – were fined and handed jail terms ranging from one to two months for participating in a January protest against rising unemployment in the eastern province of Ouargla. In April, the leader of the banned Islamist Salvation Front, Ali Belhadj, was detained during a protest in Tizi Ouzou.

A January 2012 law on associations was criticized for continuing to restrict the formation, funding, and operations of civil society. Permits are required to establish nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and those with Islamist leanings are regarded with suspicion by the government. Reports of NGOs facing barriers to registration continued in 2013. Algerian authorities reportedly prevented 96 Algerian civil society activists from travelling to Tunisia for the World Social Forum in 2013.

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. Algerian authorities have increasingly clamped down on efforts to form independent unions and to organize, including using administrative measures to prevent independent unions from operating. Authorities have blocked peaceful demonstrations and strikes, arbitrarily arrested trade unionists, and prosecuted some of them on criminal charges that appear to have little basis in fact or are based on the peaceful exercise of their union activities. In

one incident in September 2013, a peaceful demonstration by the Contractual Workers Union in front of the government compound in Algiers was violently broken up by the authorities, and 20 people were arrested; they were released later that day.

F. Rule of Law: 5 / 16

The judiciary is susceptible to government pressure. International human rights activists have accused the security forces of practicing torture, and have also highlighted lengthy delays in bringing cases to trial. Prison conditions in Algeria generally do not meet international standards due to overcrowding and poor nutrition and hygiene. In 2013, Algeria's bid to fill a vacant seat on the UN Human Rights Council was denied because of an unfulfilled request for human rights experts to visit Algeria.

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 Algeria's 1991-2002 civil war. Human rights organizations criticized the charter for not addressing the issue of the roughly 7,000 people who disappeared during the war, and for allowing perpetrators of human rights violations from both sides to escape justice. The 2005 charter provided for compensation to the families of the war's victims and the disappeared, but the broad amnesty program prevents discussion of the period.

Attacks on Algerian police officers and political officials by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continued throughout 2013. In January, militants led by former AQIM leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar attacked the Tigentourine gas plant at In Amenas, a southeastern town near the Tunisian border, jointly operated by British Petroleum, Norway's Statoil, and Algerian state energy company Sonatrach. After a four-day siege, the plant was stormed by Algerian forces; a total of 40 oil workers, including 39 foreigners, died in the incident. At least one arrest has been made in connection to the attacks; the militants reportedly had inside knowledge of the facility.

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. The Berber-dominated Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) party was one of the few parties to boycott the May 2012 elections entirely.

Same-sex sexual relations are illegal and punishable with two months to two years in prison. Although no one was prosecuted under that law in 2013, at least two individuals were detained for immoral behavior.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 7 / 16

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, but 2013 saw their access to elected office expand. A November 2011 law required that female candidates comprise one-third of any candidate list for legislative elections. As a result, women occupy 146 seats – about a third – in the recently elected People's National Assembly, a higher percentage than in any other Arab country. Women's rights groups praised the outcome, but some questioned whether the female lawmakers would be able to have an impact on the overall political system. Under the family code, which is based on Islamic law, women do not enjoy equal rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance. 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 2013 Trafficking in Persons Report.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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