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FREEDOM HOUSE

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Freedom in the World - Algeria (2006)

Polity: No polity available

Political Rights: 6

Civil Liberties: 5

Status: Not Free

Population:
32,300,000

GNI/Capita:
\$1,720

Life Expectancy:
73

Religious Groups:
Sunni Muslim (99 percent), Christian and Jewish (1 percent)

Ethnic Groups:
Arab-Berber (99 percent), other (1 percent)

Capital: Algiers

Additional Info:

[Freedom in the World 2005](#)

[Freedom of the Press 2005](#)

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[Countries at the Crossroads 2005](#)

Overview

In a September 2005 referendum, more than 97 percent of Algerian voters backed a government-sponsored general amnesty that pardons militants and government agents alike for crimes committed during Algeria's civil war. Known as the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, the amnesty is the government's attempt to turn the page on more than a decade of civil strife. Yet serious crackdowns on civil and political liberties continued throughout the year. A number of politically motivated judicial proceedings against journalists took place, and rights of free association, assembly, and expression remain severely restricted. Despite a significant reduction in violence against women and in allegations of torture, both are still commonplace in Algeria.

Algeria's long anticolonial struggle culminated in an eight-year-long war of independence (1954-62) that ended 132 years of French colonial rule. In 1965, the military overthrew the country's first president, Ahmed Ben Bella, and installed Houari Boumedienne. The military has dominated Algerian politics ever since. The 1986 oil market collapse hit Algeria especially hard, reducing the country's key source of hard currency. Unemployment, housing shortages, and other social ills fed growing popular resentment. With no political outlet in sight, people took to the streets in violent riots in October 1988.

Once peace was restored, President Chadli Bendjedid legalized political parties after more than 30 years of single-party rule under the National Liberation Front (FLN). The Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) was formed in 1989 as an umbrella organization of Islamist opposition groups, with significant grassroots support. In January 1992, with the FIS poised to win a commanding parliamentary majority, the army intervened, forcing Bendjedid to resign, and canceled the vote. The FIS was banned and its leaders imprisoned. The FIS, whose two top leaders, Abassi Madani and Ali Belhadj, had been arrested and put into jail six months earlier, was banned and the remaining leadership imprisoned. The country was placed under a state of emergency that remains in effect.

Violence ensued on a massive scale as Islamist militants took up arms against the regime. The FIS splintered into rival armed factions, and a guerrilla-style insurgency erupted in the countryside, while urban-based extremists resorted to terrorism. More than 150,000 were killed in massacres perpetrated by Islamic insurgents, the military, criminal gangs, and government-backed militias. Human rights groups have accused various Algerian security forces of "forcibly disappearing" at least 7,000 persons.

A presidential election held in 1999 was severely flawed. Citing government fraud and manipulation, six opposition candidates withdrew, leaving former foreign minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika to run unopposed. After Bouteflika took office, the government introduced a "civil harmony" law that granted amnesty to Islamist rebels who renounced violence. By January 2000, some 5,500 members of the armed groups had surrendered, but the Armed Islamic Group (GIA) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) continued operations, killing thousands in 2003. The attacks diminished significantly in 2004, but clashes with security forces and ambushes against civilians continued. In 2005, the Ministry of the Interior claimed that about 1,000 insurgents are still active.

The May 2002 elections to the lower chamber of parliament, the APN, witnessed a significant shift to the FLN, which secured 199 of the 389 seats. The principal loser was the army-supported Rassemblement National Démocratique (National Democratic Rally or RND), whose number of seats fell to 48 from 155 in the outgoing parliament. Islah (an Islamist "reform" party) won 43 seats, with the Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix (Movement for a Peaceful Society, or MSP, previously known as Hamas) securing 38. The remaining seats were shared between left-wing and Islamist parties and independents.

The most recent elections to the upper chamber of parliament, the Conseil de la Nation (CN) election, for half of the contested seats, took place in December 2003. The FLN took 22 seats, the RND took 17, the MSP claimed four, Islah 2, and one seat went to an independent. Given the fact that three-fourths of the CN members must approve bills passed by the APN before they can become laws and that the former body is

totally controlled by the president, his FLN party, and its coalition partners (RND and MSP), it is virtually impossible for opposition forces to challenge centralized rule. What is most noticeable in the above-described processes is the absence of the FIS; it seems unlikely, however, that the Ministry of the Interior will legalize the FIS anytime soon.

In April 2004, Bouteflika won a landslide victory in a multicandidate election that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) declared free and fair. Political violence and terrorism in Algeria continued to claim lives but were considerably diminished compared with previous years. This change is attributed largely to the "civil harmony" program launched by Bouteflika involving a two-stage strategy for putting an end to the bloody civil war, or fitna (unrest), through back-to-back referendums that passed overwhelmingly in January 2000 (Civil Concord) and September 2005 (Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation).

The 2004 presidential election marked a difference from previous votes. Bouteflika ran against five other candidates, but his strongest opponent was his former right-hand man, Ali Benflis, a prime minister whom he had fired in 2002. The army, long at the political helm of the country, announced its neutrality. Other candidates included a woman, Trotskyite Workers' Party leader Louisa Hanoune; Saad Sa'idi of Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD); an Islamist leader popular in the poor districts of Algiers; and the chief of a nationalist party. Public apathy and a low turnout, combined with support for Bouteflika by some Islamists groups, nationalist parties, and the Algerian unions, delivered him a resounding 85 percent of the vote. Opposition candidates denounced discrepancies and irregularities, but international monitors from the OSCE and other organizations declared the electoral process to be free of serious problems.

After his reelection, Bouteflika took steps to consolidate his power by reshuffling senior military positions and accepted the resignation, for health reasons, of the army chief, General Mohammed Lamari, who had been at the center of the anti-Islamist counterinsurgency. The daily Al-Watan hailed the move, saying, "The time has come for the military to . . . go back to the barracks." The inner circle of generals, believed by most to have orchestrated Bouteflika's 1999 victory, has recently been receding into the background and has largely deferred to the executive branch in formulating national policy.

As a result of increasing security and political stability in Algeria, the World Bank and a number of countries started talks in 2004 on economic growth programs and structural reforms. Nearly a quarter of the population lives below the poverty level, and Algeria still suffers from a 25 percent unemployment rate and serious housing shortages.

The government claims that the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation is the final chapter in over a decade of violence. The political opposition and human rights organizations alike, however, argue that the general amnesty is seriously flawed. They claim that it absolves government agents of responsibility for some of the gravest human rights violations of the 1990s, namely "forced disappearances." It also prevents the investigation of other serious crimes. The charter fails to recommend any mechanism to uncover responsibility for past crimes and hold perpetrators accountable. Critics also maintain that the criteria for determining which militants may benefit from the amnesty are far too vague and subject to political considerations. Human Rights Watch noted that the charter "offers more to perpetrators of human rights violations than it does to victims." While the charter proposes that the state compensate the families of the "disappeared," the government fails to acknowledge any responsibility for those disappearances. The amnesty is also widely criticized for failing to reintegrate the banned FIS into the political structure.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Citizens of Algeria cannot change their government democratically. While the 2004 presidential election may have signaled a cautious new start, with opposition parties free to run nationwide campaigns, Abdelaziz Bouteflika enjoyed the army's support throughout his first term, and government control of the broadcast media gave him a clear advantage during the campaign. Bouteflika will serve a five-year term, and his changing relationship with the once all-powerful military may accrue to the benefit of the executive branch. There is speculation, for example, that the Algerian head of state is intent on amending the constitution to extend presidential terms from five to seven years and/or to allow the president to run for a third consecutive term, now constitutionally limited to two five-year terms. Yet all of this may become moot if rumors that Bouteflika is suffering from an incurable stomach cancer prove to be true.

Algeria has a bicameral parliamentary system. The lower house has 389 members serving five-year terms, and the upper house has 144 members serving six-year terms. Parliamentary elections have been largely free of systemic fraud. Although there are a number of active political opposition parties, new parties must be approved by the Ministry of the Interior before they can operate legally.

The 1996 amended constitution's central feature has been the creation of a bicameral parliament. Members of the lower chamber, the 389-seat APN, are elected by direct universal suffrage. The new upper chamber, the CN, has 144 seats, 96 of which are chosen through indirect elections by local assemblies within each of the country's 48 wilayas (provinces). The president appoints another 48 members.

Algeria continues to experience high levels of governmental corruption. Bribery, embezzlement, and fraud have been exposed on a wide scale in both the private and public sectors. Algeria was ranked 97 out of 159 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2005 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite heavy official oversight, Algeria has a vibrant press featuring more than 40 newspapers. The government enforces strict anti-defamation laws and influences content through the state-owned printing press and advertising company. Following Bouteflika's reelection, the state moved to stem reports revealing corruption or human rights violations. As a result, several newspapers were suspended, and a number of journalists were arrested and sentenced to jail terms. Mohammed Benchicou, publisher of the daily *Le Matin*, who received a two-year prison sentence in 2004 for allegedly violating foreign currency controls, remains in jail despite widespread claims of political motivation behind the charges. Benchicou fiercely criticized Bouteflika and other officials before and during the 2004 campaign. Hafnaoui Ghouli, a local correspondent previously imprisoned for his investigative reporting, continues to face legal proceedings for defamation stemming from his reports of police abuse and government mismanagement in the southern town of Djelfa.

Ahmad Benaoum, publisher of the dailies *Er-Rai* and *Le Journal de l'Ouest* and the weekly *Detective*, who was previously imprisoned for defamation, spent 11 months in pretrial detention before being found not guilty of tax evasion and other instances of business fraud in June 2005. Describing the charges as spurious, Algerian journalists insisted that they were leveled against him as punishment for his attempts to uncover corruption in Oran, Algeria's second largest city. International monitors observing his trial called it a sham.

While the print media is heavily regulated, access to the internet is virtually unrestricted, despite legislation ordering Internet service providers to monitor access to materials harmful to "the public order and morality."

Religious freedom is generally respected. Islam is the state religion, but the government rarely interferes in the practice of other faiths. Mosques are closely monitored in order to prevent political activity. The government does not actively restrict academic freedom, although self-censorship is commonplace.

Since the 1990s, Algerian authorities have exploited the state of emergency to curtail freedom of assembly. Government permits, sometimes difficult to obtain, are required for public meetings, and a decree bans demonstrations in Algiers. However, a number of groups violate this ban with little or no consequence. Security forces occasionally disperse peaceful demonstrations, sometimes violently. The emergency law has at times also impeded Algerians' right of association as well as their right to form political parties and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The Algerian workers unions are widely believed to be allied with the government, and while other professional associations maintain relative independence, some have suffered government harassment.

Human rights activists insist that the judiciary is not independent, and that several judges have been subjected to disciplinary or other repressive measures. Although there have been improvements in specific areas, especially when compared to the previous decade, Algeria's overall human rights record remains poor. While torture has decreased significantly, it still continues. Virtually all cases of "forced disappearance" remain unresolved. Investigations into human rights abuses are rarely carried out, and arbitrary and incommunicado detention remain widespread. Pretrial detention continues to be prolonged. Illegal searches and nontransparent trial procedures are also prevalent.

Berbers comprise approximately 20 percent of the population. However, their cultural, ethnic, and linguistic rights are not fully recognized, and Berber riots have erupted in recent years, leaving scores dead. The government frequently targets Berber activists and often denies Berber NGOs operating licenses. Although Bouteflika's government has repeatedly engaged Berber groups in negotiations, to date no final resolution regarding Berber grievances has been reached.

The law provides for freedom of domestic and foreign travel, as well as freedom to emigrate, yet the government has at times restricted these rights, especially for former FIS leaders. The government also does not allow draft-aged men to leave the country without a travel permit. Under the state of emergency, the minister of the interior and the provincial governors may deny residency in certain districts to persons regarded as threats to public order.

Women continue to face discrimination in several areas. The 1984 family code, based largely on Sharia (Islamic law), places women under the legal guardianship of their husband or male relative. The code allows men to have up to four wives and makes divorce easy for men but nearly impossible for women. The government has vowed to press ahead with legislation to reverse many of the code's articles, despite protests by Islamist elements and clerics, and the past year has seen some positive modifications to the code. Moreover, the government has banned sexual harassment and commissioned a study on violence against women.