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Freedom in the World 2009 - Algeria

Capital: Algiers

Population: 34,700,000

Political Rights Score: 6

Civil Liberties Score: 5

Status: Not Free

Overview

The security situation in Algeria worsened in 2008, as the terrorist group Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb continued to attack military, government, and foreign targets in the country. In June, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika appointed Ahmed Ouyahia as prime minister, a post he had first held under the military-dominated regime of the 1990s. The appointment was seen as a sign that the military, never far from politics, was returning to a certain level of prominence. Separately, the parliament in November overwhelmingly passed constitutional changes that would allow Bouteflika to seek a third term in 2009.

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 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 alleged fraud. 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 (AQIM) – 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, while the army-backed National Democratic Rally (RND) fell from 155 seats to just 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 won reelection with 85 percent of the vote. The poll was not a model of free and fair elections, but international monitors found that it was free of serious problems. The army was officially neutral, and Bouteflika began to distance himself from the military.

In September 2005, Algerians approved a referendum on the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. The document essentially offered a general amnesty to most militants and government agents for crimes committed during the civil war. It also called for victims to receive compensation. Although it received 97 percent support in the referendum, victims' groups criticized the charter for not addressing the issue of the disappeared, and international human rights groups denounced it for not allowing perpetrators to be brought to justice. Critics also maintained that the vague criteria for determining which militants could benefit from the amnesty were 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.

Elections for Parliament's lower house in May 2007 drew a turnout of just 35 percent, the lowest in Algerian history. Many opposition groups, both Islamist and leftist, asked supporters not to participate, arguing that the results would be rigged. AQIM also called for a boycott, but the group's popular support was 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. Islah retained just 3 seats.

Algeria was racked by terrorist attacks aimed at government and foreign targets in both 2007 and 2008. The security situation was less precarious than during the civil war, but the attacks unnerved the population. A series of bomb attacks in June killed at least 16 soldiers, a number of medical workers, and a French engineer working in Algeria. In August 2008, an attack was directed at a group of men waiting to take the police academy exam, killing more than 40 people in the town of Issers. AQIM-affiliated groups were suspected of perpetrating the attacks.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Algeria is not an electoral democracy. However, Algerian parliamentary elections are more democratic than those in many other Arab states. The military still plays an important role in politics despite fluctuations in its prominence in recent years. The June 2008 appointment of Ahmed Ouyahia as prime minister in a cabinet shuffle appeared to signal an increase in military influence, as he had first held the post as part of the military-dominated regime of the 1990s.

The president is directly elected for five-year terms, and constitutional amendments passed in November 2008 would allow President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to seek a third term in 2009. The amendments, approved 500-21 in a joint session of Parliament and

without recourse to a referendum, also increased the president's powers relative to the premiership and other entities, drawing criticism from segments of the press and opposition parties.

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. Parties close to the president and prime minister dominate the legislative branch, meaning laws sought by the government are passed with relative ease.

High levels of corruption still plague Algeria's business and public sectors. In its 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index, Transparency International ranked Algeria 92 out of 180 countries surveyed.

Private newspapers have been published in Algeria for nearly two decades, and journalists have been aggressive in their coverage of government affairs. Journalists still face an array of government tools designed to control the press, but current restrictions bear little resemblance to those during the peak of the civil war in the mid-1990s, when journalists and intellectuals were regularly murdered for their work. While Arabic and French-language satellite channels are popular, the government keeps tight control over local television and radio broadcasts. The government monitors web content to some extent, but it has not policed the internet as aggressively as do neighbors like Tunisia.

International press freedom groups continued to document numerous cases of legal harassment of critical journalists in 2008. Journalists rarely serve prison sentences, as cases tend to stall in the courts indefinitely, but defamation remains a criminal offense. According to the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists, reporter Nouredine Boukraa in October 2008 received a suspended three-month jail term and a fine for disclosing "confidential" information in a 2007 article, in which he had alleged that security officials may have abused their positions for personal gain. Also during 2008, several cases were brought against the private daily *El-Watan*. At least two of the verdicts resulted in two-month prison terms, but all of the journalists involved remained free pending appeal. In addition to its restrictions on local journalists, the government sometimes expels foreign reporters who run afoul of its interests.

Algeria's population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, and the small non-Muslim communities are able to practice their faiths without systematic harassment. However, proselytizing by non-Muslims is illegal, and the government in February 2008 began enforcing an ordinance that tightened restrictions on minority faiths. Two formerly Muslim converts to Christianity were sentenced to six months in prison in July 2008 for proselytizing. Given Algeria's civil conflict, security services monitor mosques for radical Islamist activity. Academic freedom is largely respected.

As terrorist attacks continued to disturb the country in 2008, the government grew increasingly wary of large public gatherings and restricted freedom of assembly and association. The police sometimes disperse peaceful gatherings, and the government generally discourages demonstrations featuring clear or implicit criticism of the authorities. Permits are required to establish nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Those with Islamist leanings are regarded with suspicion by the government. Workers can establish independent trade unions. The main labor federation, the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA), has been criticized for being too close to the government and failing to advance workers' interests aggressively.

The judiciary is not independent and is susceptible to government pressure. The human

rights situation remains poor, though there have been significant gains since the peak of the civil war. International human rights activists have accused the security forces of practicing torture. In July 2008, Human Rights Watch demanded that the government reveal the whereabouts of Abderrahmane Houari and Mustafa Ahmed Hamlily, who had been repatriated to Algeria earlier that month after spending years in U.S. custody at the Guantanamo Bay military base.

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. The long-standing state of emergency permits the government to restrict where certain people live and work. In addition, 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.

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