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Freedom in the World 2016 - Algeria

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Freedom Status: Not Free

Aggregate Score: 35

Freedom Rating: 5.5

Political Rights: 6

Civil Liberties: 5

Quick Facts

Capital: Algiers

Population: 39,948,000

GDP/capita: \$5,498.10

Press Freedom Status: Not Free

Net Freedom Status: N/A

OVERVIEW

Although it continued to project stability amid broader regional turmoil, Algeria began to confront the first signs of several impending economic and political challenges in 2015. The country's natural-resource-dependent economy forced a number of difficult policy changes after the collapse in global oil prices during the year. While previously the government had envisioned slowly raising taxes and reducing subsidies to cope with decreasing revenues, in December it reversed course with an austerity budget that raised taxes on key commodities including electricity, fuel, and telecommunications services, sparking protests from opposition parties. The government also expanded its use of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, throughout the year to harvest shale gas to compensate for declining oil prices, which led to widespread and persistent protests in communities impacted by environmental damage.

Concerns also continued regarding the country's future political stability, particularly in the event of the death of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, now 78 and a victim of serious health problems. Sequestered from the public and most high-level officials for more than a year, Bouteflika is widely believed to be incapacitated while a small clique of advisers, led by his brother Saïd, rules the country.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: 11/ 40

A. Electoral Process: 4 / 12

The president is directly elected for five-year terms. Constitutional amendments passed in 2008 effectively abolished the two-term limit, as well as increasing the president's powers relative to the prime minister and other parts of the government. Each of Bouteflika's four elections to the presidency has been tainted by accusations of fraud by his chief adversaries. The 2014 presidential vote was allegedly marred by ballot-stuffing, multiple voting, inflated electoral rolls, and the misuse of state resources to benefit the incumbent. The chief Western monitoring organizations did not participate in election observation. The official voter participation rate dropped precipitously from 75 to nearly 40 percent, and opposition figures and informal foreign observers stated that the actual participation rate might have been half or even less of official tallies.

The president appoints one-third of the members of the upper legislative house, the Council of the Nation, which has 144 members serving six-year terms. The other two-thirds are indirectly elected by local and provincial assemblies. In December 2015, elections were held to replace half of the 96 elected members of the upper house, with 23 seats going to the National Liberation Front (FLN), 18 seats to the military-backed National Democratic Rally (RND), and the remainder to smaller parties and independents. The People's National Assembly, the lower house, has 462 members directly elected for five-year terms. In the 2012 elections, the FLN won 208 seats, the RND increased to 68, and the Green Algeria Alliance – comprised of multiple Islamist parties – dropped to 49. The government estimated the election participation rate at 42 percent. While 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 asserted that the results were manipulated by the Ministry of the Interior. Fifteen parties that won a combined 29 seats boycotted the parliament. The National Election Observation Commission, a judicial body, condemned the elections as "not credible," though FLN and RND members on the commission refused to sign the final report.

A 2012 law required that female candidates comprise between 20 and 50 percent of any candidate list for legislative elections, depending on the number of seats in the electoral district.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 4 / 16

The Ministry of the Interior must approve political parties before they can operate legally. A 2012 law liberalized the party registration process, and 23 new political parties were allowed to register for the first time since 1999 as a result. The FLN, RND, Green Alliance (comprised of the Movement of the Society of Peace, Ennahda, and Islah parties), the Front of Socialist Forces, the Workers Party, and a number of smaller parties sit in the current parliament. Parties cannot form along explicit ethnic or religious lines, and the Front Islamique de Salut (FIS), which swept the 1990 and 1991 elections, remains banned on this basis. A number of Salafi movements have attempted to establish political parties in recent years but are routinely denied permission by the state. In August 2015, Madani Mezrag, a former leader of the armed wing of the FIS, announced the creation of a new Salafi party, but the government subsequently refused to grant it legal status.

Increasing ethnic and sectarian communal violence is evidence of the perception of political marginalization and alienation experienced by most Algerians. Parliamentary seats in Algeria's rentier economic system help garner public funding for local needs, which give parliamentarians tax breaks and allow them to create small politico-economic fiefdoms. The Amazigh-dominated Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) party boycotted both 2012 and 2014 elections entirely.

The military and intelligence services continue to play an important role in politics, fueled by their ongoing rivalries. A longstanding power struggle between President Bouteflika and General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène, the powerful head of the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), came to an end in September 2015 when Mediène was dismissed as the head of DRS. This

marked the culmination of Bouteflika's efforts to reduce the agency's power over political and economic affairs.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

In 2015, Algeria placed 88 out of 168 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Rampant corruption plagues Algeria's business and public sectors, especially the energy sector. Despite anticorruption laws, a lack of government transparency, low levels of judicial independence, and bloated bureaucracies contribute to corruption. Few corruption investigations ever lead to indictments much less convictions, though there were a number of exceptions in 2015. In May, a court in Algiers sentenced two dozen people to prison for embezzlement of public funds and the payment of bribes in connection with the construction of Algeria's east-west highway, one of the country's largest ongoing infrastructure projects. In March, more than a dozen former top officials at state oil company Sonatrach were put on trial over a graft scandal; the case was later postponed and remained ongoing at year's end.

Civil Liberties: 24 / 60 (+1)

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 7 / 16

Although some newspapers are privately owned and journalists remain aggressive in their coverage of government affairs, most newspapers rely on the central government for printing, and the state-owned advertising agency favors progovernment newspapers, encouraging self-censorship. A 2011 press law contains vague language that reinforces the government's ability to block reporting on certain topics, including those deemed to undermine the country's security or economic interests. Privately owned television channels were only formally authorized in 2014, although authorities had tolerated the existence some private broadcasters previously. Television faces numerous restrictions on sensitive content.

Authorities routinely use legal mechanisms to harass the press and censor controversial reporting. In February 2015, Mohamed Sharki, a former editor at the state-owned newspaper *Eldjounhouria*, was convicted on blasphemy charges for printing an article questioning the divine authorship of the Quran. He was initially sentenced to three years in prison and a \$2,000 fine, though this was reduced to a one-year suspended prison sentence in November. Also in February, the Communications Ministry revoked the accreditation of Boualem Ghomrassa, a journalist with the London-based *Al-Sharq Al-Awsat* newspaper, over political opinions he expressed during an interview on a foreign television station. In April, the satirical television program *Weekend* was suspended after it reported on the wealth and foreign real estate holdings of government officials.

A 2009 cybercrime law gives authorities the right to block websites "contrary to the public order or decency," and a centralized system monitors internet traffic. Both government officials and private entities continued to use criminal defamation laws to pressure independent bloggers and journalists in 2014. In April 2015, police arrested cartoonist Tahar Dehejiche for publishing a cartoon critical of both the president and the practice of fracking in Algeria's energy sector. After his initial acquittal in May, he was sentenced on appeal in November to a fine and six months in prison for "attacking the president."

Algeria's population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim. Small non-Muslim communities do not face harassment, but they may gather to worship only at state-approved locations. Proselytizing by non-Muslims is illegal, and a 2006 ordinance tightened restrictions on minority faiths. Security services monitor mosques for radical Islamist activity. The rising influence of Salafi religious movements has alarmed the authorities, who had previously encouraged their growth. In February 2015, the government granted itself sole authority to issue fatwas, or religious judgments, in order to restrict the influence of independent Salafi imams.

Academic freedom is largely respected, though debate is somewhat circumscribed. Private discussion can take place relatively freely outside of certain sensitive topics.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 5 / 12 (+1)

Since the state of emergency was lifted in 2011, the government has regularly used force to disrupt and discourage public gatherings and protests. In 2015, large-scale crackdowns lessened as compared to 2014, when several hundred members of the movement against Bouteflika's reelection were arrested. Nevertheless, mass protests swept Algeria throughout 2015 in connection with the government's increased use of fracking to extract shale gas in the country's south. In February, opposition parties organized a march to protest the fracking policy in Algiers, where all demonstrations are banned; they were forcibly dispersed by police. Also in February, eight labor rights activists were convicted of "unauthorized gathering" under the penal code for demonstrating in support of another activist who had been sentenced to 18 months in prison on the same charge. The eight were each sentenced to one year in prison, with six months suspended.

The law on associations that came into effect in 2014 has been widely criticized for continuing to restrict the formation, funding, and operations of civil society organizations. Permits and receipts of application submission are required to establish and operate nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Both new and old organizations experience bureaucratic labyrinths while waiting not just for permits but also for application receipts. New cooperative agreements are required to work with foreign NGOs, but these relationships remain largely unauthorized.

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 for workers' interests. Algerian authorities have increasingly clamped down on efforts to form independent unions and to organize, including by using administrative measures to prevent independent unions from operating. In July 2015, tramway workers in multiple cities launched a strike demanding better wages and a collective bargaining agreement under a new, independent trade union. The French management company that operates the tramway allegedly dismissed several union activists for organizing and refused to recognize any new union.

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 2015, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continued to attack Algerian police officers and political officials. In June, AQIM killed an army colonel and four other security force members in two separate attacks. In July, AQIM claimed responsibility for another attack that killed 11 Algerian soldiers in an ambush near Ain Defla.

Algeria's ethnic composition is a mixture of Arabs and Berbers. After years of marginalizing the Berber community, officials have made modest efforts to recognize the community's cultural demands. Tamazight, the Berber language, is now a national language. However, ethnic violence between Berbers and Arabs has worsened in recent years, particularly in the southern city of Ghardaia. In July 2015, clashes there between the two groups killed 22 people, leading to dozens of arrests. The government subsequently increased the security presence in the city to try to quell the tensions.

Same-sex sexual relations are punishable with two months to two years in prison, though no prosecutions were reported in 2015. Traditional social mores create an extremely hostile

environment for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. In 2015, LGBT advocacy groups focused mainly on personal safety due to an increase in the intensity of hate speech coming from conservative clerics and the media.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 7 / 16

While most citizens are free to travel domestically and abroad, the authorities closely monitor and limit access to visas for non-Algerians. Men of military draft age are not allowed to leave the country without official consent. The land border between Algeria and Morocco has been closed for years, separating families that live in the border areas and forcing many to resort to illegal smuggling networks for routine travel.

The government plays a dominant role in the economy, leaving little room for private competitors. Numerous regulations make Algeria one of the most difficult environments in which to establish and operate a business. Property rights are not secure; some observers blame the lack of economic development.

Women continue to face discrimination at both the legal and societal levels. In 2013, 146 women were elected to the parliament, comprising a third of the body – a higher proportion than in any other Arab country. However, female lawmakers have a limited impact on the overall political system. Under the conservative 1984 family code, women do not enjoy equal rights in marriage, divorce, or inheritance.

A 2009 law criminalized all forms of trafficking in persons, and Algeria reported its first ever conviction under the law in 2015. However, according to monitors, the government is making virtually no effort to systematically enforce the ban, and trafficking victims themselves are frequently detained and harassed by authorities.

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