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2013 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 5.5
Civil Liberties: 5
Political Rights: 6

Overview

Protests against economic and political conditions in Algeria continued throughout 2012. New laws relating to political and civil liberties were criticized for failing to protect basic rights, and harassment of the political opposition and civil society were ongoing. Parliamentary elections in May were judged to be largely free by international monitors, though local groups alleged fraud and irregularities.

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) 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 imprisoned thousands of FIS supporters under a declared state of emergency.

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 an estimated 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 Civil Concord Law, which granted partial amnesty to combatants who renounced violence. Bouteflika began to distance himself from the military and won a second term in 2004. 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 the civil war. However, human rights organizations criticized the charter for not

addressing the issue of the disappeared and for allowing perpetrators to escape justice. The FLN, which had gained ground in the 2002 and 2003 elections, remained the largest party in both houses of parliament in elections held in 2007 for the lower house and 2009 for the upper house.

Bouteflika won a third term in an April 2009 election, taking about 90 percent of the vote amid widespread accusations of fraud. A power struggle developed between the ailing Bouteflika and General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène, the powerful head of the Department of Intelligence and Security, over rumors that Bouteflika's younger brother would succeed him.

In early 2011, the Algerian government remained firmly in control as political change gripped its Arab neighbors. Protests over high unemployment, rising prices, and the lack of political freedoms were violently subdued by the police. The government quickly introduced new subsidies and wage increases to head off a more widespread uprising and lifted the country's long-standing emergency law in February 2011. It passed new laws in December 2011 and January 2012 that revised regulations on political parties, associations, the media, access to information, and electoral list quotas for female candidates. The new laws on associations and the media, in particular, were criticized for continuing to restrict the activities of civil society, freedom of the press, and access to information.

In advance of the May 2012 elections for the lower house of Parliament, protests criticizing the government and calling on Algerians to boycott the elections were suppressed, on some occasions violently. In the elections, the 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, the Arab League, and other institutions declared the elections largely free and fair, and praised the new law mandating one-third representation of women on electoral lists, which led to 146 women being elected to parliament. Opposition candidates and some human rights groups, however, asserted that the elections were fraudulent 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. Political gridlock prevented the formation of a new cabinet until early September. In September, Bouteflika appointed former water resources minister Abdelmalek Sellal the new prime minister. Sellal presented a reform plan to the parliament in October which stressed the need to continue with political reforms, enhance security, boost the economy, and fight corruption.

In municipal elections held in late November, the FLN and RND dominated seats won in the People's Communal Assemblies and People's Provincial Assemblies. The government estimated voter participation at 44 percent, though the opposition alleged fraud and inflated estimates of turnout.

Attacks on Algerian police officers and political officials by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), a militant Islamist group affiliated with Al-Qaeda, continued throughout the year. The army killed several suspected AQIM leaders in the last few months of 2012, while the lead-up to an anticipated foreign intervention in neighboring Mali against Islamist extremists kept security concerns at the forefront of political debate.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Algeria is not an electoral democracy. The military and intelligence services still play an important role in politics despite their ongoing rivalries with the political establishment. 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 upper house, 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 president is directly elected for five-year terms, and constitutional amendments passed in 2008 abolished the two-term limit, allowing 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.

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 parties with fewer than 10 seats each sit in the current Parliament.

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. Algeria was ranked 105 out of 174 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

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. 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. Both government officials and private entities use criminal defamation laws to pressure independent newspapers. In 2012, several journalists and human rights activists were arrested on charges of libel. A number of journalists and human rights defenders were also the target of assaults by police officers.

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 regime, activists in Algiers and the northwestern city of Annaba accused the government of shutting down the internet and disrupting social-networking activities. In May 2012, a blogger who posted videos to the internet calling for Algerians to boycott the parliamentary elections was arrested and given an eight-month suspended jail sentence.

Algeria's population is overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim, and small non-Muslim communities do not face systematic 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 2012, 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 government continued to forcibly disrupt and discourage public gatherings and protests in 2012, despite the repeal of the emergency law in February 2011. International human rights groups criticized the suppression of demonstrations in advance of the May 2012 elections. During the year, activists protesting government policies also faced arrest, often on vague charges, and others were apprehended when they protested the detention of their colleagues. According to government estimates, there were more than 4,500 protests in the first nine months of 2012 alone, more than 3,000 of which turned violent.

The 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, 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 advocate aggressively for workers' interests. In 2012, numerous union leaders and activists advocating for the rights of the unemployed were subject to harassment and arrest for organizing demonstrations.

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.

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.

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 2012 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 more than a third of seats in the newly elected Parliament, a higher percentage than in any other Arab country. Women's rights groups praised the outcome, but some questioned whether the women in Parliament 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 2012 Trafficking in Persons Report.

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