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2015 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

Ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's reelection in April to an unprecedented fourth term with 82 percent of the vote sparked both protests and a new level of coordination among diverse opposition forces. Former prime minister Ali Benflis, the runner-up with 12 percent of the vote, alleged "fraud on a massive scale." Debilitated by a 2013 stroke, Bouteflika had made only one campaign appearance. Following his election, Bouteflika proposed a new package of constitutional reforms – including a return to a two-term presidential limit that would be effective after he steps down. Former prime minister Ahmed Ouyahia led a constitutional reform discussion on the president's behalf in May and June; the new opposition coalition, the National Coordination for Liberties and a Democratic Transition (CLTD), boycotted a June meeting. While Bouteflika's presidency remained largely focused on increasing the power of the presidency vis-à-vis rival elements in the security establishment, his proposed reforms would actually decrease presidential power in favor of the parliament and prime minister.

Throughout the year, thousands of small protests flagged deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. These were accompanied by infrequent larger protests against political and economic stasis.

Internal and external threats posed by the Islamic State (IS) and other armed groups on the Tunisian and Libyan borders, involving Algerian insurgents and terrorists, prompted new domestic and international pressures on Algeria to play a vigorous role in regional stabilization. Memories of the long civil war, along with the 2013 war in Mali and new terrorist attacks, gave support to elements of the Algerian state advocating harsher treatment for Islamist radicals and a more robust role for Algerian security forces.

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, allowing Bouteflika to run for a fourth term. Amendments also increased the president's powers relative to the prime minister and other parts of the government, as Bouteflika continued to wrest power away from rivals in the security services. Each of Bouteflika's four elections to the presidency has been tainted by accusations of fraud by his chief adversaries. In September 2014, Benflis issued a blistering 270-page report on fraud in the April election, alleging among other things that local authorities were illegally forced to support the election of the president and that electoral roles were inflated by 3 million voters to facilitate ballot-stuffing and multiple voting. The chief Western expert organizations did not participate in election observation. The official voter participation rate dropped precipitously from 75 to 42 percent, and opposition figures and informal foreign observers stated that the actual participation rate may be half or even less than half 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. Prior to the 2012 legislative elections, the size of the People's National Assembly, the lower house, was increased from 389 to 462 members, who are directly elected for five-year terms. In the 2012 elections, the National Liberation Front (FLN) won 208 seats, the military-backed National Democratic Rally (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.

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 explicitly along ethnic or religious lines, and the Front Islamique de Salut, which swept the 1990 and 1991 elections, remains banned on this basis. Thousands of its leaders have been excluded from participation in politics or are in exile.

Increasing ethnic and sectarian communal violence attests to 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 power struggle between President Bouteflika and General Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène, the powerful head of the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), continues over a variety of issues, including control over the security services, accountability for the conduct of the intelligence services during the civil war, and corruption.

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.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

High levels of corruption plague Algeria's business and public sectors, especially the energy sector. A shake-up at Sonatrach, the national oil company, during the global hydrocarbon price collapse in July 2014 reconfirmed Bouteflika's intent to assert more control over the most important source of revenue for the Algerian government. An international arrest warrant was issued in 2013, but was subsequently lifted on procedural grounds, for former head of Sonatrach Chakib Khelil; he may have avoided arrest and extradition due to his relationship with the president.

According to Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal, more than 2,000 corruption cases were investigated in 2012, and many subsequently, but these have resulted in few convictions. Despite the existence of anticorruption laws, a lack of government transparency, low levels of judicial independence, and bloated bureaucracies contribute to corruption. Algeria's east-west highway has been dubbed "the most expensive highway in the world," with a significant percentage of the contracts allegedly distributed through bribes. In 2014, Algeria dropped to 100 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 23 / 60*D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 7 / 16 (+1)*

Reporting on counterterrorism has improved since the peak of Algeria's civil war in the mid-1990s. Privately owned newspapers have been published since 1990, and journalists remain 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 2011 press law contains 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 January 2014, the government passed a new law formally authorizing the creation of privately owned television channels, though authorities had tolerated several private broadcasters for years. The law also introduced numerous restrictions on content – most notably, a ban on news coverage without prior authorization.

Press reporting during the presidential campaign and elections remained aggressive, with coverage including accusations of fraud and corruption. However, many foreign journalists had their visa applications rejected or severely delayed, and visas restricted the areas of the country to which journalists were authorized to travel. A number of local journalists were arrested, though later released, while covering demonstrations in the run-up to the election. Secrecy surrounding the health of Bouteflika was relaxed to some degree in 2014, but a near-complete media blackout on the topic of the 2013 In Amenas terrorist attack continued unabated.

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 February, cartoonist Djamel Ghanem was charged with insulting the president after attempting to publish a political cartoon mocking Bouteflika. He was acquitted in March, but after prosecutors appealed the ruling, Ghanem fled Algeria and sought political asylum in France. In June, Youssef Ouled Dada was convicted of "insulting state institutions" and "publishing material that threatens public interest" for a video allegedly showing police officers robbing a store during violent protests in a town near Ghardaia.

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, and Muslims are also sometimes harassed for a perceived lack of piety.

Academic freedom is largely respected, though debate is somewhat circumscribed. Private discussion can take place relatively freely outside of certain sensitive topics. In 2014, citizens and political parties were permitted wider latitude than in the past to discuss electoral issues, including the movement against Bouteflika's reelection.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12 (-1)

Although the state of emergency was lifted in 2011, the government has continued to forcibly disrupt and discourage public gatherings and protests. Amid the April 2014 protests, several hundred members of the movement against Bouteflika's reelection were arrested. In May, activist Mohand Kadi and Tunisian national Moez Bennecir were given suspended six-month sentences for their participation in the assemblies. Activists protesting government policies continue to face arrest, often on vague charges, and others have been apprehended when protesting the detention of their colleagues. In June, a Laghouat court sentenced 26 defendants – including some in absentia – to imprisonment ranging from six months to two years on charges that included participation in an "armed gathering" and violence against the police. According to Human Rights Watch, among those convicted in absentia were prominent Algerian human rights activists; a number of them were acquitted in a new trial after turning themselves in.

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. Authorities have blocked peaceful demonstrations and strikes, arbitrarily arrested trade unionists, and prosecuted some of them on criminal charges that appear to be spurious or are based on the peaceful exercise of union activities. In April 2014, authorities imposed a one-year suspended sentence on Houari Djelouli for distributing flyers calling for a peaceful right-to-work sit-in, which the government deemed "likely to undermine the national interest." A strike by schoolteachers early in the year was declared illegal by the courts, and participants were threatened with dismissal.

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 2014, Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) continued to attack Algerian police officers and political officials. In April, AQIM killed 14 soldiers near Tizi Ouzou – one of the deadliest attacks in recent years. French hiker Hervé Gourdel was kidnapped and beheaded in September. In

December, the government announced that it had killed the perpetrator, Abdelmalek Gouri, along with two associates from the IS-affiliated Jund al-Khilafah group.

Algeria's ethnic composition is a mixture of Arabs and Berbers. 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. However, in March, intercommunal violence in Ghardaia killed three, and two more were killed in violence in October. After the March violence, Berber leaders alleged pro-Arab bias within the security forces and called for greater autonomy from the central government.

Same-sex sexual relations are illegal and punishable with two months to two years in prison, though no prosecutions were reported in 2014. Traditional social mores create an extremely hostile environment for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people. However, small openings have been reported in recent years, such as the establishment of underground organizations for LGBT persons, as well as the proliferation of websites dedicated to these communities.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 7 / 16

While most citizens are free to travel domestically and 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 official consent.

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, but according to the U.S. State Department's 2014 Trafficking in Persons Report, the Algerian government has made little effort to enforce it.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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