



# A “Spring for Algeria”? The Prospects for Managed Transition

by *Lisa Watanabe*

## Key Points

- *Despite protests over housing shortages, rising food prices and lack of jobs, Algeria seems to be bucking the revolutionary trend.*
- *A number of factors help to explain the apparent “Algerian exception” to the Arab Spring. In addition to the scars of the civil war, the fractured nature of Algerian society works against the emergence of a broad-based socio-political movement. Civil protests have also been limited due to the lack of organizational structures within civil society and the authorities’ capacity to buy the social peace.*
- *The regime’s talk of “a spring for Algeria” is evidence that it is aware of the significance of growing domestic and international expectations for change.*
- *Yet, measures undertaken so far do not constitute the kind of fundamental reforms required to restore state legitimacy by reducing the gap between official and real power within the political system and to restructure the economy to create greater opportunities.*
- *External actors are likely to play only a limited role pushing for substantive change. The real drivers of change will be internal. Much will depend on the ability of civil society to form a broad-based movement to maintain pressure on the authorities and security services recognition that they need to gradually withdraw from politics.*

Algerians voted in parliamentary elections on 10 May 2012 – the first elections to take place in the country since the Arab Spring began more than a year ago. Against expectations that the majority of the 462 seats would go to Islamist moderates, reflecting similar developments in Tunisia and Egypt, the two parties in the previous ruling coalition – the National Liberal Front (FLN) and the National Democratic Rally (RND) – each won a greater share of the vote than the Islamist Green Algeria Alliance, comprising the Movement of Society for Peace, the Islamic Renaissance Movement (Ennahda) and the National Reform Movement (see Figure 1). At first sight, the authorities’ promise of managed transition – dubbed an “Algerian Spring” – appears to have paid dividends. Despite protests over housing shortages, rising food prices and lack of jobs, Algeria seems to be bucking the revolutionary trend. A number of factors weigh in favour of managed change. However, reforms must have real substance if the regime’s strategy of managed transition is to succeed.

**“Despite protests over housing shortages, rising food prices and lack of jobs, Algeria seems to be bucking the revolutionary trend”**

the puzzle is that Algeria already had an “Arab Spring” of sorts. The 1988 civil protests, which became known as “Black October”, were a precursor to the events that started to unfold at the beginning of 2011 in the MENA region. Public anger against the government of President Chadli Bendjedid, popularly perceived as corrupt and unjust, translated into several days of protests in Algiers that were brutally crushed by the authorities. After some 500 people had lost their lives, Bendjedid announced political reforms that had at their heart the separation of the state and the ruling party (the FLN) and the creation of a multiparty system.

In February 1989, a new constitution was endorsed that limited the role of the army to a purely military function. It also guaranteed freedom of expression and association, formalized the separation of party and state, and recognized the right of Algerian citizens to form political organizations. While this marked a considerable departure with the past, the process of transition towards a multiparty system was tightly controlled by the authorities. Parties with explicitly religious or ethnic agendas were supposed to be banned from registering.

## The Deceptive “Exception”

### **A Scarred and Divided Society**

A number of factors help to account for the apparent “Algerian exception” to the Arab Spring. One piece of

Yet, Bendjedid’s efforts to co-opt the rising popularity of Islamism meant that the major organized opposition – the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) – was able to register as



Source: <http://www.africa.com/images/maps/algeria-map-1.jpg>

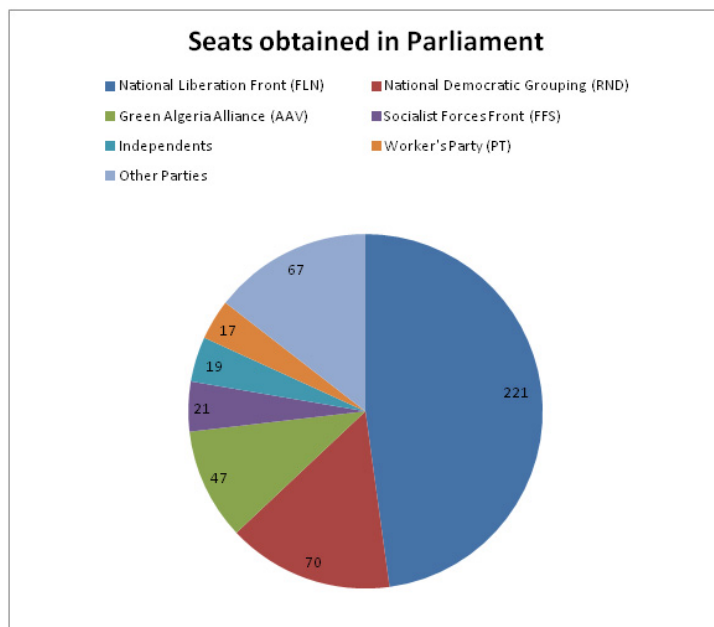
a party in the upcoming national parliamentary elections. Traditionally, Islamism had formed one of the major channels of resistance against colonial rule and the FIS claimed to be the true inheritor of the November 1954 Revolution, which it argued had been betrayed by the FLN. Indeed, the events of November 1954 and October 1988 were invoked by the FIS as instances of popular revolts against unjust rulers. The rise of Islamism as an opposition force in Algeria also had much to do with the broader geopolitical context of the time: disillusionment with pan-Arabism, the war against the Soviets in Afghanistan, and the Iranian Revolution all contributed to the rise of political Islam across the Arab world.

When the FIS won a landslide victory in the first round of the 1991 parliamentary elections and was expected to win a majority of the seats in the second round, the army's primary concern became preventing the FIS from taking power. Realizing that the FLN was unable to act as a bulwark against the FIS, the army stepped in. Bendjedid resigned, the National Assembly was dissolved, military units were deployed to the streets and power was transferred to a High Security Council (HSC), which cancelled the second round of elections. The subsequent decade-long civil war between the authorities and Islamists left some 200,000 dead, according to official figures. The war reinforced the position of the military and left the population understandably cautious about pushing for reform, given the very high price paid for what in the end amounted to essentially a continuation of the status quo. If President Abdelaziz Bouteflika is perceived differently from ousted leaders of Tunisia, Egypt or Libya it is at least partly because he is associated with restoring stability to the country.

In addition to the scars of the civil war, the fractured nature of Algerian society works against the emergence of a broad-based socio-political movement for change. The fact that the country had a "Berber Spring" in 1980, when popular protests took place to demand the official

recognition of Berber identity, and a "Black Spring" in 2001, when civil protests swept across Kabylia, is indicative of the lack of unity among the population and the different projects that exist to re-appropriate the political space in Algeria. Just as the Islamists had invoked the War of Independence, so too did Berber activists as they sought to contest the exclusion of Berber identity and language within the nation-building project of the regime. The Kabyle citizens' movement called for an end to repression in Kabylia, greater democratic control of the security forces, the unconditional acceptance of Amazigh demands of identity, language and culture, and that Tamazight (the Berber language) be recognized as a national and official language. While Bouteflika did make some concessions in 2002, the place of Berbers within the cultural and political life in Algeria continues to be the source of one of Algeria's social struggles and points of fracture within society. It is played out not only at the societal but also the political level, contributing to the difficulties of uniting around shared projects.

Figure 1: 2012 Legislative Elections



Source: <http://lecercle.lesechos.fr/economie-societe/international/afrique/221147109/algeria-rendez-in-2014>

### Weak and Fractured Civil Society Structures

Protests have also been limited due to the lack of organizational structures within civil society in general and the authorities' capacity to buy a relative social peace. Civil society in Algeria is fractured along ethnic lines. While Berber civil resistance has been strong and well-organized, using Berber tribal structures, there is a general lack of unified and organized opposition. Civil protests did occur in January 2011, but were put down fairly quickly by the security forces. The scale of protests has been less significant than in Egypt, Tunisia or Libya, although they are ongoing on a small scale. Civil society has been weakened by the use of anti-terrorist measures and ambiguous legal provisions employed to silence criticism of the authorities. There is, therefore, an absence of organizational structures, particularly among the younger generation, who one would expect to be less traumatized by the experience of civil war. While trade unions have fought harder for social demands, they did not attempt to organize the protests. This is partly because Algeria's youth, which has made up

the majority of protestors, is underrepresented in the union leadership and partly because the country's hydrocarbon wealth has helped to buy the social peace. Salary increases in sectors where strikes have occurred have helped to placate workers. As a result, industrial action in different sectors has been uncoordinated. In 2011, the government has also agreed to increase public spending by 25 percent, aimed at improving social housing, public sector salaries, to facilitate soft-loans for the young people and to subsidize basic commodities. The government has thus been able to prevent strikes from transforming into a broader form of social protest.<sup>1</sup>

## A Spring for Algeria?

### *Top-Down and Shallow Reforms*

The regime's talk of "a spring for Algeria" is evidence that it is aware of the significance of growing domestic and international expectations for change. While the police response to protests has been heavy-handed, the authorities have also responded to local and regional events by attempting to seize the initiative. Immediate measures to contain the situation included the lifting of the 19-year old state of emergency, the promise of greater media freedoms, limitation of price increases on essential goods, and the announcement of parliamentary elections. Supervision of the elections was transferred from the Ministry of the Interior to a commission comprised of judges. The regime's eagerness to demonstrate that the wind of change is blowing through Algeria is further evidenced by the number of foreign election observers invited to monitor recent parliamentary elections. Indeed, these elections were presented as the first step on the road to a managed transition to democracy. While a number of new parties were able to register for the elections, indicating an opening of the political space, a question mark remains as to how the military would react to a strong showing by Islamists that are less pro-establishment than the moderate Islamist parties that participated in these elections, the FIS still being banned. Moreover, it is unclear whether the legislative body will have genuine powers of oversight.

In response to demands for political reforms, Bouteflika also set up a consultative committee intended to submit proposals on political reform to parliament for approval or to popular referendum. The composition of the committee was already telling: the Algerian senate president, Abdelkader Bensalah, was appointed president of the committee. Moreover, political actors consulted by the committee – statesmen, party members and state associations – lack credibility with the population. Indeed, most Algerians feel politically disenfranchised and there is a widespread feeling that the current aging political leaders are unable to act as agents of change. Even the Islamist parties that have been viewed as credible opposition forces in the past are viewed today as having been co-opted by the regime, with one of the members of the Islamist Green Algeria alliance (The Movement for the Society of Peace) having formed part of the previous governing coalition until shortly before the elections. New

1 H. Darbouche and S. Dennison, "A 'Reset' with Algeria: The Russia to the EU's South", *ECFR Policy Brief*, December 2011, p.2.; M. Barah, "Algeria's Deceptive Quiet", *FRIDE Policy Brief*, No.117, March 2012, p.2.

civil society organizations, for the most part founded by young people, who are more connected with the daily realities of the population may constitute a force for reform, have been notably absent from consultations.<sup>2</sup>

The committee's consultations have led to new legislation aimed at improving freedom of expression and association. However, the new laws on information and association resulting from the committee's consultations are bitter-sweet. New legislation maintains restrictions on freedom of expression. For example, prison terms for defaming or showing contempt for the president, state institutions or courts have been lifted, but not fines. The new law on associations is also limiting: the creation of an association requires prior government authorization; any association whose aims are deemed "contrary to basic national values and to law and order; public morality and the provisions of existing laws and regulations" may be denied authorization; and financial resources of associations are in part constituted by the state, which could place civil society organizations under state control. In some respects, the new legislation is more restrictive than its predecessor: suspension of an association no longer requires a decision by a judge, but under the new law can be carried out as a result of an administrative decision; greater restrictions than previously existed regarding donations or grants from foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have been introduced, which means that the government has the potential to exert greater control over the activities and

***"The fractured nature of Algerian society works against the emergence of a broad-based socio-political movement for change"***

partnerships of Algerian NGOs. Partnerships with foreign NGOs must be pre-approved by the authorities, which was not the case before; and foreign NGOs are also subject to more stringent requirements than before.<sup>3</sup> Thus, despite the promulgation of new information and association laws, the basic rights of the people are still not guaranteed. Moreover, the Al-Qaeda presence in parts of the country may always be used as an excuse to place further limits basic civil rights that the authorities are attempting to show they are extending.

### ***Social Injustice as a Source of Continued Unrest***

In addition to the inadequacies of what are to date fairly shallow reforms, the issue of social justice, which has figured so prominently in people's demands, is likely to continue to generate social unrest and to plague the regime. Youth unemployment is a time bomb: unemployment among the 15-24 year age group is at 21.5 percent. In response to civil protests in 2011, the government introduced measures aimed at addressing the problem, which included reinforcing job programmes to help those seeking employment as well as improving the access of young entrepreneurs to credit. The private sector is currently dominated by oil and gas resources, which accounted for almost 100 per cent of exports in 2011. Measures have also been introduced to increase non-hydrocarbon sectors of the economy. Yet, whether

2 A. Cheref, "Algerian 'Reforms' Are All Smoke, But No Real Substance", *The National*, Abu Dhabi, 1 July 2011; N. Benakcha, "The Algerian Regime: An Arab Spring Survivor", *JIA Online*, 7 March 2012.

3 Human Rights Watch, "World Report 2012: Algeria", <http://www.hrw.org/world-report-2012/world-report-2012-algeria>; Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network, "Memorandum: Assessment of Law 12-06 of 12 January on Associations", 14 February 2012.

they will bring about the structural changes needed to diversify the economy and produce greater employment opportunities has yet to be seen.<sup>4</sup>

### Reforms Need Greater Substance

One of the biggest challenges for the regime will be to undertake the right kind and extent of reforms for it to be perceived as legitimate. Measures undertaken so far are not promising. While the opening of political space is an essential step towards satisfying the people's demand for greater representation, there still is a desperate need for a credible opposition that speaks to the demands of the people. Pressure from below needs to be maintained and to develop into a more unified, broad-based movement needs to develop. More fundamentally, the gap between formal and real power needs to be reduced. This implies not only that parliament be granted greater power of oversight, but also the gradual withdrawal of the military and intelligence services from politics. Yet, the latter are highly suspicious of change, due to their inability to anticipate the landslide victory of the FIS in the first round of the 1991 elections and the subsequent slide into civil war. The question will be whether the security services understand that the need for authentic political representation cannot be avoided over the long-term.<sup>5</sup> The authorities' capacity to improve people's living standards and job prospects will also be critical to a successfully managed transition and this will require significant structural changes in the economy.

***“Reforms must have real substance if the regime’s strategy of managed transition is to succeed”***

External actors are likely to play only a limited role pushing for substantive change. While both the United States and the European Union (EU) view Algeria as a key player in the Maghreb, security and energy interests are likely to favour low-key support for managed transition, even if reforms are largely cosmetic. The EU's attempt to respond to the Arab Spring by promising “more for more”: more money, more market access and more mobility, for more political reform within the framework of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) is unlikely to give a significant impulse to reforms in Algeria: increased funds are far from representing a type of Marshall Plan, how increased market access will translate into the inclusive growth in the Maghreb is unclear, and increased mobility is limited to students and business people. Moreover, it has yet to be seen whether the EU's new policies will be consistent with regards to its declared desire to support civil society and the values it wishes to promote. The presence of Al-Qaeda in parts of the territory as well as Algeria's status as an energy-producing state may act to dilute the new conditionality. Indeed, the EU, along with the United States, was quick to endorse the parliamentary elections despite serious concerns about fraud and vote-rigging. A more credible facilitator of change may be the Arab League. Despite its past lack-lustre performance, its recent actions and declarations suggest that it may be capable of playing a positive role in encouraging reform and human rights culture and consolidating democratic practice in the MENA region and, thus, in Algeria. However, the real drivers of change will be internal.

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4 African Economic Outlook, “Algeria”, <http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/en/countries/north-africa/algeria/>; Darbouche and Dennison, “A ‘Reset’ with Algeria,” p.3.

5 M. Mohamed, “State, Security and Reform”, *Arab Reform Initiative*, June 2012, p. 8.

NB: This paper is solely the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the official view of the GCSP.

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