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ALGERIA'S POLITICAL DROP-OUTS HEAD TO THE POLLS

Algerians seem indifferent to the impact that the election on 9 April will inevitably have on the entire region

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A presidential election will be held in Algeria on April 9th

Posters of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who is standing for a third term of office, are plastered all over the cities of Algiers, Oran, Constantine and Bejaia. Algerian state television and radio channels and much of the print media are full of the froth and bubble of electioneering. The government is doing what its peers worldwide enjoy doing in the run up to polling day – throwing money at different groups of electors. Last month the government cancelled the debt owed by farmers to state banks and told university students that individual grants would be increased from Dinars 2700 (Euros 270) every three months to Dinars 4010 – as of 2010. Algeria's hard currency reserves stood at \$138.5bn last December 31st so there is no shortage of spare cash.

M. Bouteflika's two terms as president have coincided with an end of the violence which, in the 1990s claimed 200,000 victims and 6,500 people killed after last being seen in the hands of the security forces – they are still deemed to have "disappeared". Most of the Islamist guerrillas have come down from the hills and amnesties have helped get them back into civilian life. They have often bought a shop or gone into trade of some kind. Among them are veterans of the Afghan wars, disaffected youths from the slums but also members of criminal gangs for whom the politicizing of banditry offered a unique means of social rehabilitation. Some of the worst massacres of civilians in the late 1990s, not least in the region of Algiers, can be explained by land grabbing - much coveted farming land changed hands. The bitterness between those who are receptive to Islamist ideas and the more secular inclined may have abetted but among the latter group an estimated 600,000, often well edu-

cated, have moved abroad. Ordinary people find it very hard to accept former *guerrillas* whom they know were responsible for killing members of their family being *reinserted* into their neighbourhood with the help of state subsidies.

As groups of young students mix on the campuses of *Ben Aknoun* at the University of Algiers, of *Es Senia* at the University of Oran and of *Aboubakr Belkaïd* at the University of Tlemcen, women who sport a veil are usually as smartly turned out as those who do not and both men and women mingle with ease. Many of them were very young when the civil war raged and appear to have forgotten. They all know however that life is not about to become easier. A recent poll concludes that half of men between 15 and 34 "certainly" or "probably" intend to emigrate – although such polling underestimates

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the craving for travel and work abroad. For these young people the depth of the crisis in Europe has yet to sink in. They crave what Europe has, until recently, offered: more job opportunities, more freedom and more fun.

Meanwhile, a groundswell of religious observance is sweeping over Algeria. On state controlled television, the five ritual calls to prayer now interrupt news bulletins, something which would have been unthinkable ten or fifteen years ago; debates on the death penalty on TV are deemed unnecessary because the Koran "settled" the issue; a well orchestrated campaign led by the Ministry of Culture, acting as the guardian of public morality has closed a number of restaurants in Algiers since last au-

turn on the pretext that their licence to sell alcohol had run out or had not been paid, charges which were usually unfounded. Such matters are traditionally dealt with by the local authorities. The Ministry of Culture is thus acting as the state's *gendarme* and taking over the prerogatives of other ministries. Whether such moralising attracts more voters to cast their ballot for Abdelaziz Bouteflika is doubtful. Restaurants will still serve alcohol, increasingly they serve wine in jugs and customers drink it out of mugs in order, the visitor is told, to avoid offending Muslim sensitivities. It comes as little surprise, in such circumstances, that the former leader of the *Armée Islamique du Salut*, Madani Mezrag says he never intended to stand as a candidate in the forthcoming election as Abdelaziz Bouteflika is his preferred candidate. A handful of carefully vetted opponents pose no risk to the incumbent's chances of being elected for a third five year term of office.

The annual volume of imported cars increased more than three fold to 350,000 between 2000 and 2008 and explains

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why the streets of the capital suffer from semi-permanent traffic gridlock. Imports of consumer goods from the West and China have risen fast, fuelled by the country's fast rising oil and gas income which accounts, as thirty years ago, for 98% of hard currency receipts exports. As a senior IMF official visiting Algiers for the first time in nearly twenty years remarked – the country's economic "model" has hardly changed since 1990. Only recently has the government taken measures to rein imports in.

The president has been dogged by ill health for the past three years and as a result government can be paralysed for weeks. But major projects are moving, often thanks to the hard work of the 60,000 Chinese workers who have completed the new *Houari Boumedienne* airport terminal in Algiers (a project which was initiated in the early 1980s) and the new hospital in Oran while continuing to work on the East West motorway. New enterprises are springing up, some Algerians are returning with good degrees from abroad to try their luck, others born in France of emigrant parents are coming back to test the waters – many sense there will be more opportunities in the years ahead if only the leaders show any real vision of what they want Algeria to look like in ten years time and enact the appropriate economic policy; if only they understand that the country's future wealth lies in its Diaspora, the hundreds of thousands of highly qualified Algerians spread across Western Europe, the Gulf and North America where they are entrepreneurs, senior executives in international companies and banks, doctors whose skills and new patents are highly appreciated. All would be willing to help their former motherland move forward and open up to the world. But oil wealth has mesmerised many of the leaders and simply fuelled corruption and an import boom.

Complaints about the election being rigged in favour of the outgoing president are rife among the political and chattering classes but fall on deaf and very cynical ears outside this small

group. Few people will bother to vote. Algeria's leading politicians have all refused to enter the fray: former general Liamine Zeroual who steered the ship of state through the very difficult years from 1994 to 1999 and was elected president in 1995 in what remains probably the only honest presidential poll ever held; Mouloud Hamrouche, the former army officer who, as prime minister launched bold economic and political reforms between 1989 and 1991; Hocine Ait Ahmed, the only surviving member of the group of *historiques* leaders of the rebellion against France in 1954; Ali Benflis who directed Abdelaziz Bouteflika's presidential campaign in 2000 and dared to stand against the president in 2004 and the moderate Islamist leader Abdallah Djaballah are nowhere to be seen.

Speculation about what the president's intentions might be after he wins a fourth term is rife. He might reappoint Ahmed Ouyahia his prime minister who can be a competent administrator and has developed a nice line in insulting his political peers. But, does it really matter who is prime minister since

the job only requires distributing spoils to second tier stakeholders in the system? Higher up, in a universe of perpetual deal making, where little is recorded let alone written down, power

and money are distributed through informal alliances, through networks of kith and kin which bear little relation to the type of analysis of culture and religion so often favoured by western observers. Such analysis simply does not offer the key to really understanding the political and social behaviour of the Algerian ruling class. What matters among such people is sibling and regional rivalry, fascination with modern technology, notably the latest means of communication, the attraction of women, the latest trendy shops in Paris and New York and money. Increasing piety cloaks their behaviour which is often tinged with a sprinkling of prickly nationalism.

Political factions in action

The intense competition between factions reminds some observers of Russia except that in Algeria, speaking of "liberals" and "conservatives" makes no historical sense. For other observers, Algeria looks very much like any other Arab country, even if some of these have polished up their act so well that they deceive western observers into believing they are more "modern" or more "democratic." Stale continuity is a hallmark of Algerian political life. The head of the *Departement de Recherche et de Sécurité* has been the same ubiquitous General Mohamed Mediene – universally known as Tewfik and now in his early 70s - for the past twenty years. Some observers argue that he has been outfoxed by the president and his powerful minister of the Interior, Nourredine Yazid Zerhouni who has more than trebled the police force since 2000. Such a line of reasoning is too simple: Tewfik plays a game of chess, Abdelaziz Bouteflika a game of draughts. Both hold pawns, usually in the form of rich private businessmen whose dealings, were they to be publicly scrutinised, could seriously damage the other's hold on power. The collapse of Khalifa Airways and Bank a few years ago was simply the most spectacular episode of clan warfare, aptly described in the thriller *L'Envol du Faucon Vert*.

A number of senior army officers who held considerable power for a generation have retired or died – former officers in the French army, they were well acquainted with the old Gaullist networks known in Paris as *Franceafrique*, whose real boss was, for a generation the former French Minister of the Interior, Charles Pasqua. As he moves against these officers, Abdelaziz Bouteflika has enjoyed the support of the French president Nicolas Sarkozy who is himself busy breaking up *Franceafrique* to build a network of support on whose loyalty he can rely.

The minister of Energy, Chakib Khelil controls the oil and gas sector more tightly than any of his predecessors. Thousands of oil and gas engineers and senior cadres have left the country in the past few years, tiring of the rigid control to which they are submitted and seeking a better life for their families abroad. Algerian oil and gas technicians and managers are good and the world knows it. In Abu Dhabi they have virtually built the emirate's oil and gas sector from scratch since the late 1970s. Elsewhere in Europe and the Middle East, the skills of such people are highly appreciated. Scaremongering about the conflicts within the ruling elite as reported in the print media which is often scurrilous is often misleading. It might signify an attempt to unite an increasingly divided ruling class or it could simply be a way for the elite to consolidate its hold on power.

Low turnout is foreseeable

On one point, there is no doubt: the mass of ordinary Algerians are exhausted, demoralised and in no state to rebel. Algeria has been through a bitter colonial war, socialism, a bold attempt at economic reform, the rise of fundamentalism, a civil war of unspoken brutality and crony capitalism – the country has simply lost its way. True 50,000 people, including many young ones, demonstrated publicly in favour of the Palestinian plight in Gaza last January, secondary school kids have marched through the streets, the less pious among them waiting for their brothers and sisters to come out of their prayers in the mosques and walk hand in hand. Riots occur frequently at local level: the causes of bitterness and injustice are rife, class differences are huge and growing; kidnapping has become endemic in the Berber heartland of Kabylia and spread to the eastern suburbs of Algiers; gun running is common in the vast Saharan desert south. An *époque* is slowly coming to a close but no one knows what the next act of the play might bring.

Much hangs on the president and the younger and more professional officers – whom he has promoted and who are unlikely to step out of the barracks unless the country's leaders fail to agree on a successor to the head of state. Everything hangs on M Bouteflika's health. The fundamental question however is when will those who took power in 1962 when they were still in their twenties hand it over to a new generation? Will they ever do so without another fight? Will the new leaders be any better than their elders? As they ponder these questions, fewer Algerians than ever before will cast their ballot next April 9th.

They have watched their leaders, French until 1962, native since then, cook the polls in so many ingenious ways in successive elections since 1948 that they have all but given up. True, in 1995, when they did turn out in large numbers to vote for General Liamine Zeroual, they wanted to give *le système* another chance. Maybe our leaders are capable of redeeming themselves after all, they thought. In 1999 quite a few, notably in the countryside and among older men, voted for M. Bouteflika. In the presidential election of 2004, fewer voters went to the polls and during the local elections of 2006 voter turnout dropped even further: in certain districts of Algiers, an estimated 2% of those entitled to vote cast their ballot. Local elections have traditionally been more important than presidential ballots because real power and influence could be wielded at municipal level. But now, even that power has been emasculated: the *walis* (governors) rule supreme, they are the absolute masters of the land.

Europe understands only too well that it has a vital interest in the stability of North Africa

Massive abstention is hard to cover up but who in the West really cares? Can anyone imagine a new American leadership, less inclined to meddle in the internal affairs of other countries than its predecessor and seriously weakened economically paying much attention to an Algerian election? Can anyone believe that the Europeans, aware of the suction effect of an unstable periphery, which they first encountered in the Balkans in the 1990s criticising the outcome of the election? The conflict which followed the break up of Yugoslavia was confined to the relatively manageable Balkans region but the unstable periphery of Europe will stretch in the future in a long arc from Balarus and the Ukraine, through the Caucasus and the Middle East to southern rim Mediterranean countries and Morocco. Europe understands only too well that it has a vital interest in the stability of North Africa.

No doubt some foreign press commentators will fly in briefly and file articles which explain that the turnout was not so bad after all or they will hold Algeria to the high standards they used with Palestine before Hamas triumphed at the polls. When reading such articles or hearing such broadcasts on western TV or radio, Algerian men will spit on the ground, cursing the duplicity or indifference, as they see it, of the West. Some western leaders might utter a few encouraging or critical words - the echo of such mutterings will travel to and fro across the Mediterranean, making he who utters them even more despicable in the eyes of ordinary Algerians. Algerians are politically savvy, most of them have close family ties with France and Belgium, they watch Arab and western TV channels avidly – they are well appraised of the fact that a strange beast called *the international community* sent a large number of foreigner observers to check the general elections in Ukraine in December 2005. Algerian presidential elections, they reason, are only deemed worthy of a few Arab League and Organisation of African Unity observers. They feel despised - better have no international observers at all and keep the shame in the family, better avoid elections altogether.

Stability, not democracy, is now the priority

In 1990 and 1991, the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won local elections and the first round of the general elections. In the early 1990s “free elections” were all the rage, democracy western style was seen as being on the winning side of history – the West succumbed to an outbreak of “ballot chic”. This intoxicating fever was fed by a series of assumptions about the virtues of democracy, the moderating influence of what has come to be known as “civil society” and the cleansing role of the ballot. The key ingredient of the Third World’s recovery was deemed to be free and fair elections. The outcome of the elections of December 1991 was all the more keenly awaited because of the key role Algeria had played in the Third World movement during its heyday in the 1970s. The resulting violence shocked many around the world if only because the *Battle of Algiers* had become so symbolic of the wars of independence from colonial rule which characterised the two decades following the end of the Second World War.

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The result was the *décennie noire* and a mass exodus of the middle classes from Algeria. We do not know what turn events might have taken had the FIS not been denied the parliamentary majority it would undoubtedly have won had the second round of voting not been snuffed: it would not necessarily have been a copy cat of events in Teheran after 1979 – indeed the army and police had little sympathy for the FIS nor did the employees of the powerful state oil and gas company Sonatrach and major state corporations. Many ordinary men and women were totally opposed to Islamist ideas. Over the past decade, the Algerian regime has gradually taken on the traits of a caricature of itself. Having rattled on for so long in a monotonous idiom, using words which are but distant echoes of ideas of Third Worldism that date back to the 1970s, Algeria has ended up isolated, out of touch, with no one left to chat but itself. Nonetheless we are back in 1991, with a difference: the state has gradually lost fragments of sovereignty, to trans-national religious affiliations, to the informal economy, to family or regional alliances. Ordinary Algerians have retreated to the privacy of their homes.

As the state recedes, people have acted quite rationally in seeking alternatives, organising themselves in accordance with competing allegiances. Algerian society was relatively self confident and united a generation ago, the state delivered free health and education, it offered many university scholarships abroad but now it is insecure and diversified, diffuse. The social fabric has loosened and people seek alternative channels of support and symbolic orders. Society increasingly makes use of informal tools of social intercourse that once were trivial but, given the novel situation, must be summoned up from the collective memory: the use of informal tools of family and clan have spread and presidential elections have lost any meaning of the symbolic or political order. On April 9th the system will be chatting with itself and a few observers from the Arab League. A mock play will be being enacted in an empty theatre from which the audience has long departed.

Algerian leaders do however enjoy the support of the United States whose bitter experience in Iraq has led them to giving up their long held view on the cleansing role of free elections in the ushering in of democracy. American leaders have come round to the view that long transitions towards a more modern form of governance are the only reasonable way in which relations with Arab world can be managed. Appearances however have to be maintained, hence the need for Algeria and other states in southern rim Mediterranean countries, to show a modicum of freedom of expression, especially in the print media. This freedom is however very constrained as no non governmental organisation, print media let alone political party, trade union or professional organisation is allowed – those who dare to challenge that non written rule face tough consequences. Hence the very idea of a long transition towards a more democratic society is emptied of any meaning because civil society is denied any hope of organising itself outside of the state embrace. The justification for such a tight fist policy – in Washington as in all Arab capitals is a fear that fundamentalist parties might rise to prominence again.

Europe has no policy to speak of and even France has fallen into line with the United States on this issue

– as was amply demonstrated after Hamas won its electoral victory in Gaza. The European Union is thus deprived of any serious leverage on Algeria and the soft power it pretends to project is just that – soft, in other words non existent. Whatever criticism they may utter vis a vis Algeria, European leaders appreciate that Abdelaziz Bouteflika has stabilised Algeria – the fundamentalists have not been allowed to conquer and civilian society is attempting to assert its presence, in ways which will become clearer as time goes on. Meanwhile endless seminars on good governance seem destined to *amuser la galerie* if nothing else. The point which has yet to be fully grasped in some Northern Mediterranean capitals is that how Algeria evolves will have a decisive effect on the fate of North Africa.

For all its faults, the Algeria of Houari Boumediene and Chadli Bendjedid (during the brief period of reform) was pulling the Maghreb up – bringing it into the modern world, making its voice felt in the concert of nations. Since 1992 events in Algeria have acted as a drag on the whole region. Hence the pointlessness of the beauty contest which unfolds in Brussels and elsewhere - who is the most democratic or the better managed? Who succeeds in building the closest ties with Europe? Who is more in favour in Washington or Peking? The current economic crisis will speed up the transition into a new world whose outline cannot yet be discerned. As matters stand, the EU cannot hope to have any impact on how events unfold in Algeria insofar as it appears to have abdicated to the US. The course Algeria takes in the years ahead is however likely to influence countries beyond its borders, as happened in the 1990s and during the fight for independence in the 1950s. That is why it is an interesting country to watch.