Algeria: Between Internal Challenges and International Courtship

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Theme: At the global level, Algeria is a key player in the fight against international terrorism. At the national level, the draft Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, unveiled by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika and put to public referendum on September 29, appears to grant impunity to the authors of the internal conflict of the 1990s.

Summary: A year after winning a second mandate at the ballot box, President Bouteflika now faces a double challenge: at home, in order for state institutions to regain their legitimacy, he must try to free political power from military control, improve socioeconomic conditions and shed light on military involvement in Algeria’s so-called dirty war. At the international level, the proliferation of agreements and the gradual recognition of Algeria as a partner in the fight against international terrorism could lend new legitimacy to a government suffering from a serious lack of credibility within the country. Algeria now finds itself in a contradictory position as fighting terrorism becomes the key to solving internal challenges and gaining international recognition.

Analysis

Towards Independent Political Power?

On the eve of the presidential elections in April 2004, a spokesman of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) said, ‘At the political level, Algeria is an atypical country in the Arab world. The government leader cannot impose his son as his successor, or even organise elections with a sole candidate or win elections with 99% of the vote’. Although these statements describe one of the facts of Algerian politics—that it is a more democratic country than its Arab neighbours—the Algerian elections remain a political ritual used to perpetuate power. For lack of a real multi-party system that includes moderate Islamic groups in opposition, a truly free press, an independent justice system and clarification of what happened during the years of domestic conflict, the Algerian government continues to lack the most important ingredient of a democracy, one that has not been present since independence in 1962: political legitimacy.

The political class now finds itself seriously weakened: the Mouvement de la Société pour la Paix (MSP), a moderate Islamist party, has been discredited due to its support for Bouteflika; the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), the leading political force in the Cabilia region, is led by Ait Ahmed, now in his seventies; and the FIS has lost authority due to its role in the civil war and has been relegated to a clandestine existence. Also, the FIS’ delicate situation makes it impossible to assess how much electoral capital it retains of the three million votes it received in 1991.

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Since 1965, the National Popular Army (ANP) has deprived Algerians their political freedom, replacing French tutelage with the rule of generals who have hand-picked a parade of presidential candidates. Bouteflika's first term was not considered legitimate because he won an election in which the other six candidates withdrew from what they considered to be a fraudulent process. By contrast, the latest presidential elections, which granted a majority to President Bouteflika\(^1\) occurred in the exceptional circumstances of the army announcing its neutrality for the first time. However, news of this neutrality was not repeated either by the administration or in the news media, which were put to the service of the current president. Another unique feature of these elections was that they pitted Abdelaziz Bouteflika against Ali Benflis, his former government leader and secretary general of the National Liberation Front (FLN). This political battle clearly revealed divisions within the party itself.

Internal divisions are not limited to the FLN, however, but also affect the ANP. The resignation of the chief of the general staff, General Mohammed Lamari, in July 2004, allegedly for health reasons, and of General Fodhil Cherif (figures representing Algeria’s black decade), have apparently allowed the conciliatory wing of the army to return to the political arena. General Touati seems to be the latest victim of the forced retirement syndrome, along with General Larbi Belkheir, who has been appointed, not entirely willingly, ambassador in Rabat, separating him from the military command. Bouteflika has proved that he can walk a political tightrope and skilfully manage the corrupt political system he has inherited –one that has been firmly entrenched for fifty years–. However, although there appears to be a trend towards a separation of the army and the government, the presence of key figures such as Larbi Belkheir and Generals Mohamed Mediane and Smain Lamari in the Intelligence and Security Department (DRS), along with an entire network of internal collaborators, suggests that the hard line faction of the army remains present.

Most Algerian political leaders belong to the War of Independence generation. Now reaching their sixties, these leaders are at a far remove from the perceptions and concerns of most of the population. How to change the political elite is the main problem facing Algeria on its path to true democratic change. However, democratic practices are not ingrained in Algeria and a population largely in its thirties, unable to take part in political life, is long accustomed to the underground economy and to violence as a means to rise socially. The three associations most representative of university students have mimicked the organisational structures of the political parties with which they are linked. It remains to be seen if the politicisation of these associations is simply structural or if they have also inherited murky operational methods. The gap between the political classes and young people could be bridged by a gradual changing of the guard in military institutions, political parties and the public administration. Education undoubtedly plays an important role in eventually opening the doors to a political elite of a new generation.

**Between National Reconciliation and General Amnesty**

In 1995, under the presidency of Lamine Zeroual, the rahma (clemency) law emptied the conflict-ridden Mitidja region of 2,000 fighters, mainly members of the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS). In the same spirit, Bouteflika put the Civil Harmony Act to a referendum in 1999, in an attempt to pacify the conflict by providing fighters with a dignified exit. This law, which was approved by an overwhelming 98% of voters, granted amnesty to those

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who had not committed violent crimes, including murder and rape. However, practically all reformed Islamists (between 5,000 and 7,000) benefited from the clemency measures, regardless of the type of crime they had committed.

Bouteflika now intends to launch a second phase with the draft Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation, which was put to a referendum on September 29. This project has intensified the debate among Algerians in the street and it seems there will not be the same consensus as six years ago. The desperation that reigned over Algerian society in 1999, in a climate of continual violence and a deteriorating economy, forced Algerians to accept a clean slate in the hope of an immediate end to the violence. Today, with more stable socioeconomic conditions and only residual violence, Algerians may not give their blessing to a measure that is more logistic than reconciliatory in nature—at least not as overwhelmingly as in the 1999 referendum—.

The Civil Harmony Act provided legal coverage to some Islamists, but it has not proved to be sufficient, since it has not led to real political dialogue on the deeper causes of the crisis or, in turn, to real political integration. However, the 1999 Harmony Act made it possible to solve part of a problem created by the government itself: the weapons held by the patriots. These militias gave up their weapons to the state—and along with it their monopoly on violence—thereby isolating the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) as the main remaining enemy.

National reconciliation unequivocally involves integrating Islamists into political life, but it is also necessary to clarify the involvement of the military in the fate of the country’s disappeared (estimated at around 10,000 by some associations and around 5,000 by government sources). The national commission for promoting and protecting human rights, created by Bouteflika in 2001, would appear to be taking over from the state in the search for a solution to this problem. The government’s shortcut for solving this thorny issue is simply to give economic compensation.

While the main goal of the project is national reconciliation, the text announced by Bouteflika on August 14 would appear to partially compensate military personnel who peacefully accept their retirement. The text includes two recurring ideas: paying homage to the ANP and to state security agents in their fight against terrorism (and exonerating the army and the state of any implication in the massacres) and rejecting any foreign interference in the peace project.

The text asks Algerians to give the government a blank cheque to bring about reconciliation as it sees fit, with goodwill being reduced to the granting of a general amnesty. The names of Islamist terrorists will not be made public; nor will the process that certifies they have not committed rape or participated in attacks or massacres be made known. In the text, responsibility for the war falls solely on the Islamist terrorists, while the government reserves the right to ‘ban those responsible for the manipulation of [the Islamic] religion from political activity under any guise whatsoever’.

The text also establishes two categories of victim: families of the disappeared, who will not obtain justice or the truth (though perhaps a pension), and the families of victims of terrorism, who will receive a pension and the official version of who was responsible for the events. It seems that neither the clemency policy of 1997, nor Civil Harmony in 1999, nor the September 29 referendum will close the wounds of the war. As regards
involvement in the violence perpetrated against Algerian society, the responsibility of Army personnel and dissident guerrillas is certainly unequal. The various measures launched by the government have helped reduce the number of guerrillas, but no military officer or soldier has been judged for his participation in the massacres.

It is the Algerian people who have paid the price of the war: more than 150,000 dead, between 5,000 and 10,000 disappeared, tens of thousands tortured, more than a million and a half displaced, more than half a million exiles and hundreds of orphans and incapacitated people, not counting the psychological scars left on society. Several international organisations have implemented psychological aid programmes, but other programmes are needed for reformed terrorists and their families –since the national reconciliation programmes make it possible to identify them– in order to help integrate them fully into society.

International Courtship

The Algerian economy continues in the grips of corruption. Occasionally a head rolls and someone in a high place is paraded before the press as a scapegoat. However, these financial scandals are not really an economic cleanup; rather, they are the result of internal restructuring that serves to launder the government’s public image and adjust the balance of power at the highest levels. Corruption is no longer something intrinsic only to the oil market (a sector that accounted for 97% of exports in 2004, but strikingly, was entirely unaffected by Islamist terrorism) and has now spread to consumer goods under the monopoly of small groups close to the military elite.

The underground economy competes with the formal economy. This directly affects a significant part of the population, especially young people without job options who see contraband as the only way to economic prosperity. Unemployment affects nearly 30% of the population and young people are those most affected.\(^2\) Despite the government’s affirmations of financial good health, average Algerians feel no tangible effects of this in their day to day lives. This has led to strikes and popular protests against the government. At the regional level, relations with neighbouring Morocco have deteriorated in recent months due to the dispute over the Western Sahara, undermining relations between the two countries and torpedoing regional integration. Border closures persist and negotiations within the Arab Maghreb Union (UMA) are at a standstill.

Faced with internal challenges and regional lethargy, Algeria is for sale on the international market. Numerous organizations and countries are courting Algeria, whose economic potential is attracting attention on the north shore of the Mediterranean and across the Atlantic. The inexplicable silence that enveloped the country during the civil war years has now given way to the bustle of the Algiers International Fair –where foreign companies meet each year– and a proliferation of bilateral agreements. The association agreement with the EU, in the framework of the Barcelona Process, took effect on September 1, 2005 (the EU provides Algeria with 56% of its imports and buys 64% of its exports), but the government’s ambitious economic reform plans have not yet borne fruit. The government and some economic agents in particular are reluctant to undertake a full-scale economic liberalisation that they believe is premature and asymmetrical. Temporary measures to protect incipient industrial products, as well as rural economic development projects, could palliate the asymmetric competitiveness of the EU and Algeria, and prevent

the demise of the small merchants and family businesses that dominate the Algerian economy. Algeria’s inclusion in regional and international organisations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) could impose greater transparency and help accelerate the transformation of the Algerian economy into a true market economy.

The Bouteflika government has cast its foreign policy net wide and its pragmatism has successfully included Algeria in a vast network of regional and international bodies. Algeria now has an important presence in the African Union (AU), the Arab League and the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). The country has also managed to maintain relations with old partners such as Russia, while developing new ones with the United States. In this respect, the year 2001 seems to have been a turning point in US policy towards Algeria. The conciliatory attitude of the Algerian government was demonstrated by its mediation in the Arab-Israeli conflict and, particularly, in the conflict between Eritrea and Ethiopia, where its work won US approval.

However, it was the Civil Harmony project that most stirred the enthusiasm of then president Bill Clinton. In four months in 2001, Bouteflika was invited twice to the United States, publicly inaugurating a new stage in Algerian-US relations. Algeria has also skilfully combined its regional role as a driving force in the African continent and in the Arab world with its desire to find its place in the international arena. Algeria’s desire to take part in international organizations (WTO and NATO), combined with the interest it has shown in regional initiatives such as the Euro-Mediterranean Association and the US-led Broader Middle East and North Africa (BMENA) initiative, seem to be bearing fruit.

The US presence in Algeria is on the rise, both in the energy sector and in terms of trade, which reached eight billion dollars in 2004. The United States became Algeria’s biggest customer in the first quarter of 2005, absorbing 16.26% of its total exports. This is of particular concern to France, which once considered the country to be chasse gardée –its own preserve–. In recent years France has increased visits to Algeria by high-ranking officials in an attempt to promote a new friendship treaty between the two countries. Jacques Chirac’s visit in March 2003 made it clear that France wants to maintain its historic ties in a new relationship to combat budding foreign interference by third countries in the region. Meanwhile Spain, which has marked Algeria as a priority country in its cooperation and development policy, has a comparative advantage over France in the sense that it has no colonial past that could cause a public backlash or political recrimination. Spain is also geographically closer than France, but does not have to deal with the demographic pressure of nearly a million resident Algerians.

**Residual Terrorism vs. Potential Terrorism**

The United States courts Algeria not only for its economic potential, but also as a partner in the fight against international terrorism, particularly after it forced the GSPC (considered a branch of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb) into the south of the country. The potential threat of terrorist training camps being set up in the Sahel has sped up cooperation between the two countries and has helped launch scheduled joint operations between the US European Command and African troops. The first stage of the so-called Pan-Sahel Initiative will allocate 8.4 million dollars to the fight against terrorism in the form of military equipment, expert advice and joint exercises with the armed forces of Mali, Chad, Mauritania and Nigeria. The Flintlock 2005 operation launched the second stage, known as the Trans-Saharan Counter Terrorism Initiative, which has included Senegal and Algeria as members (with Morocco, Tunisia and Nigeria participating as
observers) and has a bigger budget, 500 million dollars over five years. There is also allegedly a US base in the south of Algeria, near Tamanrasset, where about 400 special forces troops could have been deployed. US strategic interests overlap in the Maghreb, especially in Algeria, Libya and Mauritania, where there is both the threat of terrorism and the promise of energy resources. Algeria supplies 30% of Europe’s gas and 17%-19% of the US’s. A new trans-Saharan gas pipeline project between Algeria and Nigeria is in the study phase. Crossing Niger, it would connect an energy-rich corridor 4,500 kilometres long, running from Algeria to the Gulf of Guinea.

There is enough terrorist activity and political instability in the region to warrant an increased US presence, including a recent attack against Mauritania’s Lemghicity military base (for which the GSPC claimed responsibility) and a recent coup d’état in Mauritania. In the wake of the July 7 attacks in London, the exchange of calls between UN Secretary General Kofi Annan, British Prime Minister Tony Blair and the Algerian president suggest that Algeria will be taking more action on this issue and that there will likely be new agreements.

On the subject of terrorism, the Algerian government engages in doublespeak: at home it is treated as a residual phenomenon, while abroad it is touted as a potential threat. The fight against terrorism would appear to catapult Algeria onto the international scene, bringing to mind the years of the Algerian civil war, when the terrorist threat was used to place the military elite at the front and centre of political life. The spiral of violence that followed served to legitimise military usurpation of key government posts. A return to the same anti-terrorist rhetoric, without national dialogue to heal the wounds of the civil war, could lead Algeria back to the old military mindset.

Although the government has been insisting since 1999 that the country has only residual terrorism, Algeria’s newspapers continue to report a constant trickle of deadly attacks. International cooperation is requested, but the draft Charter unveiled by Bouteflika makes it clear that the international community should not interfere in his government’s particular exit strategy for the authors of the war. The Algerian government, and the generals in particular, have climbed on the bandwagon in the global fight against terrorism, sometimes even retroactively justifying the excesses committed by security forces.

The international context of Algeria’s war cannot be understood without taking into account the particularities of Algerian history, and Algeria’s problems are not going to be solved simply by eliminating al-Qaeda. It is equally predictable that the upcoming referendum will not end the country’s domestic troubles. No one is against a referendum for peace, but this project could open new areas of conflict within Algerian society. A reading between the lines of the draft charter suggests the likelihood of new measures contrary to international human rights law, preventing the participation of Islamist parties in the political arena and imposing a version of history that paints those responsible for the war as liberators, totally exonerating them of their crimes.

Conclusions: The Algerian government is at a crossroads where it could at least partially restore the credibility of its institutions by establishing the independence of political authority. However, the lack of young people involved in political life and the lack of experience with the workings of democracy reduce the likelihood of a change of guard at the highest levels. Instability in the domestic economy, a high unemployment rate, a housing shortage and scarcity of food and water, all sow the seeds of unrest, leading to
strikes and social protest. The lack of infrastructure and a weak industrial fabric are aggravated by a lack of regional mobility.

Energy resources and terrorism are Algeria’s calling card abroad. In order for the national reconciliation project to be more than cosmetic, it is essential that the government encourage real national debate that does not confuse amnesty with general amnesia. At the same time, the Bouteflika government seems to have slowly begun to retire generals, though it will have to act with surgical precision in the cuts it chooses to make. The changes made up to now appear to have been successful, however, two possible scenarios could hinder further retirement of generals: first, some generals could refuse to give up their posts and try to cause confrontations between other high-ranking military officers and the government; also, families of the disappeared could be successful in taking military officers to international courts of justice.

Since the 1992 elections were cancelled, the government has not recovered enough legitimacy to regain the confidence of society at large. Measures such as a possible constitutional reform to allow Bouteflika a third term in office speak clearly of Algeria’s democratic deficit and of its leaders’ habit of maintaining their hold on power. The inclusion of opposition Islamist parties in both political and social affairs is another key pending issue.