

# Silent Complicity: The International Community and Algeria's Democratic Façade

by John P. Entelis

## SUMMARY

Despite the Obama administration's rhetorical support for democratic uprisings throughout the Middle East, the United States has continued to prioritize oil and security over democracy in its relationship with Algeria.

Algeria suffers from many of the same problems that led to uprisings in other parts of North Africa, but the haunting memory of its 1990s civil war combined with oil-generated wealth and a challenging geography has inhibited a nationwide opposition movement from forming.

In response to heightened demands for major political change, the Algerian regime promised free and fair parliamentary elections this spring that were expected to bring Islamists to power as they had in recent elections throughout the region.

Although the May elections were marred by flagrant fraud, the U.S. praised Algeria for implementing democratic reforms, confirming Algerian fears that the U.S. will overlook the regime's persistent autocratic tactics for the sake of its perceived strategic interests.

The U.S. needs to develop a more sustainable relationship with Algeria by providing a bilateral economic assistance package including democracy and governance assistance, encouraging the regime to play a constructive role in resolving the Western Sahara conflict, and pushing for the strengthening of ties with neighboring countries.

The Arab Spring has swept over North Africa leaving a new political landscape in every country in the region, save Algeria. To be sure, the country remains afflicted by its experience with a democratic *intifada* in the early 1990s. Not only was democracy derailed by a military coup, but a savage civil war also ensued, costing the lives of approximately 200,000 people—a legacy that still hangs ominously over the body politic. That legacy, combined with oil-generated wealth and a challenging geography, has inhibited a populist revolution of the kind witnessed in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. This relative quiescence, however, belies the broad-based discontent that has long simmered in Algeria. In fact, the Arab Spring contagion did spill over into the country, but it was quickly contained through a combination of carrot-and-stick policies.

Chief among these responses was President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to sponsor more "participatory" and "transparent" national elections. Rather than serving as the first phase of a multi-stage process of democratic institutionalization, however, the May 2012 elections became another instance of electoral engineering from the top—a smoke and mirrors strategy intended to give the appearance of authentic contestation while preserving the status quo. Although the fraud in these elections has heightened tensions, for the immediate future, Algeria will remain precariously stable—contained through a combination of coercion and selective socioeconomic incentives.

In a move that recalled its policy in the Middle East and North Africa prior to the Arab Spring, the United States, whose relationship with Algeria is narrowly focused on security cooperation and oil, praised the elections despite widespread reports of fraud. This posture stands in stark contrast to the Obama administration's rhetorical support for democratic uprisings in much of the region. While the U.S. has publicly recognized that "the greatest single source of instability in today's Middle East is not the demand for change. It is the refusal to change,"<sup>1</sup> it seems to have forgotten this lesson with Algeria. Indeed, the complicity of the United States in Algeria's electoral deception will do nothing but extend the country's day of reckoning, which could have potentially devastating repercussions for American long-term interests.

## THE ARAB SPRING EXCEPTION

The conditions that led to uprisings in other parts of North Africa—overeducated, unemployed youth, political suffocation, widespread corruption—have long

<sup>1</sup> Clinton, Hillary. Keynote Address at the National Democratic Institute's 2011 Democracy Awards Dinner. 7 November 2011.

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existed in Algeria. Riots and protests have been a regular feature of Algerian political life, with public sector strikes occurring almost daily. When such protests become overwhelming, the regime has the ability—thanks to the country’s large oil stabilization fund—to meet some of the protestor’s short-term economic demands.

Against a backdrop of dramatic regional changes, however, anti-regime activity intensified in 2011, forcing the government to agree to broader concessions. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika lifted the 19-year-old emergency laws and announced various reforms including legalizing new political parties, instituting a women’s quota, expanding media freedoms, enshrining democratic principles into the constitution, and holding parliamentary elections.

Yet given the heightened demands for major political change, most observers felt that Bouteflika’s proposals did not go far enough, especially since they lacked a timeline for implementation. Opposition groups wanted to dissolve the government and parliament and create a constitutional council. Moreover, some critics assumed these moves did not indicate a desire for reform but were rather the result of an internal power struggle between the president’s office and the military-industrial complex. The executive branch in Algeria merely represents the public face of *le pouvoir*, while actual power is concentrated in the DRS, the all-powerful intelligence service, and Sonatrach, the state-owned company that controls Algeria’s vast hydrocarbon resources. President Bouteflika thus serves more as figurehead than power broker.

Despite discontent, protests in Algeria failed to emulate the nationwide opposition movements that characterized other Arab Spring states. By hiking food subsidies, doubling state workers’ salaries, and ending the emergency laws, the regime contained the most excessive aspects of the unrest. Additionally, the haunting memory of the 1990s civil war and the chaos in neighboring Libya have served to dampen support for a genuine revolution.

It is within this relatively neutralized environment that the regime acted on its promise of “reform” by going forward with parliamentary elections.

### **PRE-ELECTION PREDICTIONS: APATHY OR ISLAMISM**

The Algerian regime devoted extensive political capital in attempting to demonstrate that its 2012 parliamentary elections were to be a model of democratic participation on par with the experiences of Tunisia and Egypt. By inviting election monitors from Europe, the United States, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab League, and elsewhere, the regime sought to achieve a degree of political legitimacy otherwise in doubt given the absence of any fundamental change.

In the weeks preceding the May 10 elections, two widely discussed counter narratives competed for public attention. The first, often supported by polling data, projected an embarrassingly low voter turnout of 25-30 percent. These numbers were consistent with the profound political malaise of the electorate—especially among its majority youth population—and declining participation rates of previous legislative elections (1997: 65 percent, 2002: 46 percent,

2007: 35 percent). In light of this trend, the regime sought to bring out the vote, stressing the theme of electoral participation as a national duty and presenting the elections as the first step in a managed transition as opposed to a bloody revolution. Despite these efforts, the electorate remained largely apathetic, assuming that the electoral script had been written in advance by *le pouvoir* just as it had in previous elections.

A second narrative focused on the expected “green wave” that would sweep Islamist-oriented parties into parliament. The prospect of an Islamist victory—particularly if it forced the president to select an Islamist prime minister—remained an unthinkable proposition in Algeria given the traumatic experience of 1991 when the army’s intervention to prevent the Islamic Salvation Front from gaining a parliamentary majority led to a bloody civil war. Nonetheless, Algerian Islamist parties, encouraged by recent Islamist victories in Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco, and the ostensibly greater political space at home (nearly 20 Islamist-orientated political parties were legalized for the first time), developed broad-based campaign strategies aimed to tap into the demand for change among a deeply cynical mass public. Fueling this narrative, heads of different Islamist parties spoke confidently about their expected electoral successes. “If the upcoming elections are free and fair, our victory is guaranteed,” declared Abderrazzak Mukri, vice president of the Movement for a Peaceful Society (MSP). Prior to these elections, the MSP had been a coalition partner in the Presidential Alliance government along with two pro-regime secular parties—the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Rally for Democracy (RND). Expecting a radically freer election environment, the previously Islamist but “pro-system” MSP now felt politically emboldened to strike out on its own with two other minor Islamist movements, forming the Green Alliance. Mukri seemed convinced that the Islamist current, “deprived of its presidential victory in 1995 and legislative victory in 1997, would achieve its victory on May 10 [2012].”<sup>2</sup> Such an outcome, of course, would only be achievable with a high voter turnout in a free and fair election.

## A FRAUDULENT MANDATE

The highly contested voting results effectively nullified both pre-election narratives—voter turnout was suspiciously high (43.14 percent), and the Green Alliance performed unexpectedly poorly, receiving only 47 seats in the 462-member national assembly. In the context of the Arab Spring, these results seemed egregiously fraudulent even for the most cynical among the Algerian electorate. The pro-regime FLN received a whopping 221 seats despite seeming more out of touch with the electorate than ever. Its coalition partner in government, the RND, won 70; the two parties together garnered nearly 63 percent of the seats in the newly expanded parliament.

The government pointed to the election results as proof of a popular mandate for its continued rule. Headlines in pro-government newspapers tried to paint this as a victory for stability, drawing a contrast with the “chaos” of the Arab Spring. Yet opposition parties across the political spectrum were outraged by the flagrant electoral fraud. Some intended to bring a legal challenge to

*“Headlines in pro-government newspapers tried to paint the results as a victory for stability, drawing a contrast with the ‘chaos’ of the Arab Spring.”*

2 Ouazani, Cherif. “Algérie: Vague Verte ou Tsunami Islamiste?” *Jeune Afrique*. 18 April 2012.

“U.S. preoccupation with defense and energy over democracy has reduced its influence with Algerian civil society.”

the Constitutional Council; others predicted that Algeria would soon collapse into chaos à la Libya. Several weeks later, the National Commission for the Surveillance of Legislative Elections, a multiparty election monitoring panel, confirmed the allegations of fraud, citing irregularities in voter registries that allowed for multiple voting, the government’s thwarting of monitoring efforts, and government pressure on security forces to vote for FLN and RND candidates. In protest of the rigged elections, the Green Alliance is now boycotting the parliament while two other leftist parties are refusing to participate in the voting process.<sup>3</sup>

### THE UNBALANCED U.S.-ALGERIA RELATIONSHIP

The outside world’s reactions to Algeria’s May 12 elections provided no comfort to those who had anticipated a meaningful transition from the country’s competitive authoritarianism to a genuine democracy. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for example, hailed the election results as a “welcome step” toward democratic reform.<sup>4</sup> She was particularly “welcoming [of] the large number of women elected (almost a third, up from seven percent in the outgoing house).”<sup>5</sup> José Ignacio Salafranca, the head of the European Union’s observer mission in Algeria, described the voting results as constituting “a first step on the path to reform which should lead to a deepening of democracy and human rights.”<sup>6</sup>

While Algeria’s relations with Europe, especially France, have been complex and multifaceted—involving broad economic, political, and cultural interests developed over decades—the country’s interaction with the United States has focused almost exclusively on security and oil. The events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent “war on terror” furthered this trend, largely at the expense of other non-oil and security avenues of cooperation. The U.S. is the largest purchaser of Algerian oil and was the first to invest in the Algerian hydrocarbon sector after a 2005 liberalization law opened it to foreigners. This preoccupation with defense and energy over democracy has reduced U.S. influence with Algerian civil society.

The Algerian regime has encouraged this security-minded relationship as part of its effort to combat Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—a U.S. designated Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO)—but also to justify the continued role of *le pouvoir* in the running of the Algerian state. Unlike Washington’s positive response to the democratic revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, the U.S. has been less assertive in demanding genuine democratic change in Algeria. Understandably fearful of the chaos and instability associated with any political revolution—and particularly that of Algeria, which has a history of bloody conflict—Washington has been more than willing to accede to the regime’s scripted pluralism as a substitute for genuine reform. One important consequence has been that the U.S. is viewed by most ordinary Algerians as complicit in the maintenance of a political status quo that suffocates choices and inhibits bottom-

3 Mouloudj, Mohamed. “Législatives de 10 mai: La CNISEL accable le gouvernement.” *Liberte*. 30 May 2012. <http://www.liberte-algerie.com/actualite/la-cnisel-accable-le-gouvernement-legislatives-du-10-mai-179056>

4 Mikail, Barah. “Old Habits Die Hard: U.S. and EU Policy in Algeria.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. 17 May 2012. <http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/05/17/old-habits-die-hard-u.s.-and-eu-policy-in-algeria/auop>

5 *Ibid.*

6 *Ibid.*

up socioeconomic development. However compelling the terrorist threat may appear to Algiers and Washington, for most Algerians the most immediate “threat” is the absence of real political freedoms, social advancements, and economic opportunities.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The transformational nature of the Arab Spring has created an uncertain but decisively different political environment within which the United States needs to operate. And yet when it comes to Algeria, the U.S. has continued to prioritize stability at the expense of political and economic development, which is not in its long-term interest. Instead, Washington should:

- *If an opportunity arises, publicly acknowledge the allegations of fraud in the recent parliamentary elections and insist that, as similar events in neighboring countries have proven, manipulating elections in order to preserve an authoritarian political order can have disastrous consequences.* In the wake of the Arab Spring, the Obama administration has sought to elevate human rights concerns into its public rhetoric on Algeria: senior officials including President Obama, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs William Burns have all commended Algeria for its recent reforms while acknowledging the need to continue expanding freedoms. Yet Clinton’s congratulatory remarks on recent elections in the face of blatant fraud undermine U.S. credibility in the eyes of the Algerian public. Future statements on Algeria should not only raise concern about the elections, but should also acknowledge the relative powerlessness of the legislature and the importance of evolving authority to elected institutions.
- *Establish a bilateral economic assistance package to Algeria, which includes democracy and governance assistance.* Algeria receives a very small amount of U.S. bilateral assistance (the President’s budget request for FY 2013 is \$2.95 million), but this funding is allocated entirely for security programs. Given its vast oil wealth, Algeria does not receive U.S. economic assistance. Yet the country is plagued by many of the same economic problems as other countries in the region, including high unemployment and corruption. Just as in Tunisia, where the U.S. restarted economic assistance after years of no USAID presence because of the country’s relative wealth compared to others in the region, the U.S. should help push for transparency and market-oriented reforms in Algeria. In addition, the United States should begin providing democracy and governance assistance. Algeria does benefit from small amounts of MEPI funding to strengthen legislative institutions, make effective use of information technology, support a free and independent press, and reform the financial sector, but these should be expanded. As the country’s experience with multiparty democracy from 1988 until 1992 clearly revealed, Algerian society is well prepared to adopt, integrate, and consolidate political democracy. Algerians’ experience with democratic elections, labor militancy, and party activism abroad in France has fostered a deep sense of independent thinking and a progressive mindset that has helped cultivate a dynamic civil society rarely seen in other Arab countries. The U.S. should be supporting these groups to have an even stronger impact on the country’s political development.

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## ABOUT POMED

The Project on Middle East Democracy is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the U.S. can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, we work to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support democratic reform in the Middle East.

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- ***Encourage the Algerian regime to take seriously the need to resolve the Western Sahara conflict with its Moroccan neighbor; failure to do so will both sustain terrorist activity in the region and forestall the transition to a genuine democracy in both countries.*** Although Algeria presents itself as a neutral actor, it has allowed the conflict to fester by serving as a crucial logistical, financial, and material supporter of the Polisario Front. Despite its claims of championing national sovereignty, Algeria's real objective in supporting Polisario is to limit Morocco's ability to contest its own hegemonic ambitions in the North African region. Morocco and Polisario are the primary parties to the conflict and diplomatic pressure should be focused on getting them to the negotiating table. But Algeria also needs to be held accountable for arming and training Polisario fighters on its territory. It can help deescalate the conflict by withdrawing support for the guerrilla movement, thereby permitting Polisario and Morocco to settle the dispute themselves. Both the House and Senate versions of the FY13 foreign appropriations bills reference the Western Sahara conflict, but with starkly different tones. The House version cites "Al Qaeda's growing ties with members of the Polisario," while the Senate version conditions military aid to Morocco on the protection of human rights in the Western Sahara. Language from both resolutions should be incorporated in the final draft as a basis for encouraging Algeria to better appreciate the broader implications for regional stability and the containment of terrorist activity that a resolution of the Western Sahara conflict would make possible. Military aid should be conditioned to Morocco based on upholding human rights in the region. Similarly, military aid to Algeria should be contingent upon Algiers adopting a more flexible and accommodating approach towards the Western Sahara dispute.
- ***Encourage the Algerian government to explore opportunities for strengthening ties and expanding trade with neighboring countries in North Africa.*** Renewed ties could potentially lead to a reinvigoration of the dormant Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), which was initially established to create a common economic market and increased political cooperation between the countries of North Africa. While the AMU has been inactive since 1995, with economic challenges at home and in Europe—the region's main trading partner—there is new impetus among the members of the AMU (Algeria, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia) to achieve economic integration, which could help overcome some of the challenges facing the region. The creation of a free trade zone among the Maghreb countries could increase intraregional trade fivefold. The economies of the Maghreb already complement one another well; thus, economic integration would serve to strengthen each country's comparative advantage, creating economies of scale and turning the region into an attractive investment hub for the U.S. and Europe. Cooperation in the political sphere is also crucial to dealing with transnational threats such as Al Qaeda. It could also have a direct positive impact on democratization within Algeria. For the Algerian regime, building a closer relationship with the Islamist governments of Morocco and Tunisia could potentially make the notion of Islamists in power more palatable. For the Algerian people, meanwhile, increased interaction with Moroccans and Tunisians would provide more exposure to successful democratization, potentially undermining the prevailing fears of instability and chaos associated with democracy.