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Algeria's Parliamentary Elections: A Setback for Democratization

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The May 17 parliamentary elections in Algeria provide an unsettling snapshot of the country's political situation. Although the voting process was carried out without major disruptions, the elections were overshadowed by a low voter turnout, reflecting public disenchantment with Algeria's political leaders. While Algeria's domestic security situation has somewhat stabilized over the past few years, and the specter of Islamist-inspired violence appears less threatening to the state's existence, the prospects for genuine amelioration of the country's underlying problems through fundamental political reform remain dim. Political life is dominated by an increasingly authoritarian presidency, which has diminished the role of political parties and the parliament. The Algerian military also maintains a strong, albeit partially hidden presence in public life, further impeding the ability to build a robust democratic edifice..

Algeria has held several parliamentary and presidential elections since the aborted multi-party elections of December 1991 and consequent descent into large-scale violence between government forces and Islamist insurgents. All of these electoral exercises were designed primarily to bolster the regime's legitimacy and begin rebuilding the country's battered political institutions. The outgoing parliament, elected in 2002, failed to develop as an important political institution able to challenge the executive branch of government and incorporate popular involvement in public life. Most Algerians concluded that extant political parties and the enfeebled parliament had little chance of affecting policy, and thus kept their distance from

them.

The parliament's weak position within the political system was further eroded by the growing influence of the Algerian presidency. Since his re-election to a second term in 2004, 'Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika has consolidated his power and established the presidency as the nexus of political life. Bouteflika has successfully reduced the military's direct involvement in politics, and asserted his primacy over other components of the political system. The stature of the country's parliament was correspondingly diminished, and it was increasingly viewed as a mere rubber stamp for approving presidential policies. This in turn raises questions concerning the prospects for replacing the president in future elections. The constitution prescribes a two-term limit, which Bouteflika may well seek to amend in order to remain in power. Doing so may add to the sense of political stability, but would obviously run counter to the proclaimed goal of promoting democratization. Indeed, this sort of measure has been the topic of debate in Algeria's lively and contentious press. Another question circulating among Algeria's political class concerns Bouteflika's health. Following an extended unexplained hospital stay in France in late 2005, the president has increasingly limited his public appearances and seems to be less involved in day-to-day politics. A turn for the worse in the president's health could threaten the political stability that Bouteflika has worked to achieve, and lead to a new round of turmoil. Some observers have likened this situation to the current Egyptian model of government, in which the presidency towers over the political system. Algeria's domestic political malaise, however, is far more serious than any form of Egyptian stagnation, entailing security challenges, socio-economic difficulties, and prevailing uncertainties concerning the nature of Algerian national identity.

Meanwhile, the Algerian government has failed to adequately address the widespread socio-economic problems that afflict most citizens. Chronic unemployment, poverty, and housing shortages have raised public bitterness, particularly during a period of higher income from Algeria's oil and natural gas reserves. Many Algerians openly complain of corruption that prevails across the political spectrum, and refer to parliament members as "bandits" and "profiteers" who benefit from illegal transactions that improve their personal financial status.

Under such circumstances, the parliamentary elections generated little excitement among the public. Most Algerians were indifferent to the political campaign, and ignored official exhortations to flock to the voting stations and "manifest their attachment to democracy". Moreover, they were disinclined to view the vote as a referendum against a recent upsurge in Islamist violence (particularly last month's suicide attacks in Algiers). To be sure, the newly re-named radical Islamist *Al-Qa`ida of the Islamic Maghrib* mocked the elections as a "comedy" and called for the public to boycott them. But some former activists of the banned *Islamist Salvation Front (FIS)*, whose rise to power was thwarted by the military in 1992, urged Algerians to vote. Several even explored the possibility of running for parliament. Taken together, these moves reflected a growing trend among former FIS members to reengage in political life.

The debate over participating in the elections was not limited to the Islamist camp. The mostly Kabylean Berber Socialist Forces Front (FFS) boycotted the elections, arguing that the elections were not free and geared to achieve a victory for the ruling

regime's parties.

The low election-day voter turnout reflected the public's overall alienation with the established political order. Only 35.7% of eligible voters participated, a decline of more than ten percent from the previous parliamentary elections. Ironically, voter apathy was so widespread that there were few allegations of fraud, a typical occurrence in Algerian elections. Out of the 6.6 million ballots cast, nearly one million of them were blank, a further sign of disaffection. The three main parties which support Bouteflika (led by the National Liberation Front-FLN) lost a number of seats but still maintained their large majority in the 389-member assembly.

While Algeria's interior minister conceded that the elections underscored the need for political parties to adapt to the changes within Algerian society, and emerge as a viable force, the prospects for such a change remain unlikely in the current domestic climate. This weakened political system is a common feature in other Arab states, but is particularly ominous in the Algerian context. Given the magnitude of Algeria's problems, there is a dire need for expanding participation in political life in order to begin a true healing process and bolster democracy. The incoming parliament, along with other political structures, will unlikely be able to meet this challenge. Last week's elections, therefore, consist more of an impediment to democratization than a step towards it.