

*Viewpoints*  
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*Algeria's Islamists  
Crushed in First Arab  
Spring Elections*

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Algeria's first elections since the beginning of the Arab Spring have resulted in the unexpectedly crushing defeat of moderate Islamist parties, leaving this country the notable exception to the general trend of an Islamic rise to power across North Africa from Egypt to Morocco.

The results were a shock to most Algerians, particularly Islamists who had expected to win a plurality of seats in the new National People's Assembly and even possibly the post of prime minister. Instead, the two main pro-government secular parties increased their hold over the assembly substantially, winning 288 seats, or 62 percent of the total, in Thursday's elections.

The vote was supposed to mark the first step in the rejuvenation of an ossified political system; to provide greater democracy with 21 new parties and increased Islamic participation. But the lopsided results may well convince Algeria's moderate Islamists that cooperation with the government is no longer worth the political cost and outright opposition the only alternative.

### **The Results**

Three Islamic parties united in the Algerian Green Alliance captured just 48 seats, four less than the largest of them alone, the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), had held in the previous assembly. MSP leader Bouguerra Soltani called the results "illogical and unacceptable" and another party official insisted the alliance had actually won twice that number but that the government had engaged in "massive manipulation" of the results.

So far, various foreign observer delegations, including the Washington-based National Democratic Institute, have not reported any major violations but noted scattered irregularities and a lack of transparency at some stages of the electoral process. Over 500 European, Muslim and African observers were allowed in for the first time to assess Algerian elections, a move taken by the government to give them increased credibility in the eyes of both Algerians and outsiders.

The main early complaint of the European Union delegation was the refusal of Algerian Authorities to provide access to the electoral lists. It said nothing about the government proceeding to announce the distribution of seats without disclosing how many votes each party had won.

Because the history of Islamists here is unlike that in any other Arab country, their defeat at the

polls does not necessarily serve as a good indicator of Islamists' likely fate elsewhere. The MSP has been in government for 17 years and was even part of a coalition supporting President Abdelaziz Bouteflika before the latest elections.

MSP Vice President Abderrazak Makri said in an interview that his party was considering various options in response to the election results including a boycott of the new assembly and a withdrawal of his party's four ministers from the government. "The overwhelming view inside the MSP is to withdraw and go organize and lead the opposition," he said.

The government had missed its "historic chance" to respond positively to the pro-democracy movement sweeping the Arab world since early last year and would now be responsible for the consequences, he warned.

Makri challenged the government figure of a 42 percent turnout of registered voters, estimating it at only 25 percent. The government has a long history of rigging election figures in the past, which is one reason turnouts have been on the decline over the past decade.

Algerian officials have been denouncing the Arab Spring, which saw the toppling of long-ruling dictators in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya, as either a Zionist or NATO "conspiracy." During the election campaign, Bouteflika appealed repeatedly to Algerians' intense sense of nationalism, born of a successful war of independence from France, to show their continuing support for their current aging leaders who led that struggle.

While Algeria boasts a special history, the setback of Islamists here still stands as a stark warning to others coming to power in Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and possibly Libya as well that they risk becoming tarnished by the failures of the governments they participate in. All these countries face unresolved social and economic problems that helped bring Islamists to power in the first place.

The election results also raise serious questions whether much promised and badly needed political reform is in the offing, and if not, what the reaction will be of millions of young Algerians already disaffected because of high unemployment and an acute housing shortage. Even after an intensive campaign to get voters to the polls, including an unprecedented six personal appeals from President Bouteflika to the youth, only 42 percent of 21.6 million registered voters bothered to show up according to the government's own figures.

Of those who did turn out, an incredibly high 1.7 million (17 percent) cast blank or spoiled ballots in an unprecedented display of disillusionment with the country's parties and politicians.

While the overall turnout was six percent higher than in the last 2007 parliamentary elections, it

was hardly a strong vote of faith in Bouteflika's repeated campaign promises to make major changes in Algeria's secretive system of governance dominated by the military and security forces.

### **Shattered Expectations**

Islamists and other losing parties interpreted the results rather as a return to the one-party system under the Front for National Liberation (FLN) that ran Algeria from the time of its independence from France in 1962 until a multi-party system was introduced after a popular uprising in 1988.

The FLN is Bouteflika own party, and it alone won 220 seats, giving it 84 more than it held previously and nearly half of the total 462 seats. The National Rally for Democracy party of his prime minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, captured another 68, assuring the president of ample support for whatever course he now chooses to take.

One Algerian commentator compared the elections to those held in late 2010 in Egypt, where the ruling National Democratic Party assured itself of a huge majority and drove the opposition Muslim Brotherhood out of Parliament. Those elections infuriated Egyptians and helped spark a popular uprising two months later that led to the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak.

The rout of Islamic parties overshadowed the victory of Algeria women in the elections thanks to a new quota system that saw 145 of 7,700 female candidates elected to the new assembly, 31 percent of the total. This compares very favorably to Egypt where only a handful of women sit in the new post-uprising Parliament. It is even considerably higher than their percentage in Tunisia's new Constituent Assembly where 59 women account for 27 percent of the body.

The biggest surprise of the latest elections, however, was the failure of moderate Islamists to even hold their own. Green Alliance leaders were so confident of victory they had already begun discussing which cabinet posts they would demand in the new government.

The results put an abrupt end to such great expectations. The alliance partners now have 12 fewer seats than they held collectively in the outgoing assembly. Two other Islamic parties won 11 additional seats, giving Islamists a total of 59 seats in the 462-seat body.

More conservative Salafi Islamists showed no interest in the elections, while the Algerian branch of al-Qaeda and the outlawed Islamic Salvation Front that almost won the 1992 parliamentary elections called for a boycott.

The Salvation Front was poised to sweep those elections when the army abort them and re-took power, touching off an Islamic insurrection that lasted eight years and resulted in 200,000

deaths.

In the midst of the insurrection, the MSP, a local branch of the Egyptian-based Muslim Brotherhood, took the considerable risk of endorsing the government by running for presidential elections in 1995. It was rewarded by having anywhere from two to seven of its officials serving as ministers or head of various government agencies ever since. Then starting in 2004, the MSP became the third member of a three-party coalition backing Bouteflika.

With a record of loyalty to the government and the winds of the Arab Spring behind them, the MSP had expected to win at least a plurality in the new assembly and to provide the next prime minister, as happened last year as a result of Islamic election victories in neighboring Tunisia and Morocco. Now the prospect for an Islamist being named prime minister in Algeria seems remote.

### **Pathways Forward**

If the MSP does decide to quit government, it does not seem likely that it will turn to violence as happened in 1992 when the Islamic Salvation Front was denied its election victory by the military. Algerians have still not forgotten or forgiven the front for causing massive death and destruction during its insurrection.

President Bouteflika may seek to head off a crisis with the Islamists now by offering them more ministries or even a leadership position in the new People's Assembly. One report circulating before the elections was that he intended to name the current MSP minister of public works, Amar Ghoul, its next president or possibly even prime minister.

Ghoul is extremely well known to the public and more importantly is said to have the confidence of the security authorities running Algeria behind the scenes and commonly referred to as "the power." He has held his position as public works minister the best part of a decade during which he oversaw the construction of the \$11 billion, 800 mile east-west highway spanning the entire country from the Tunisian to the Moroccan border. Nearly completed with three lanes in each direction, it is said to be the largest infrastructure project anywhere in Africa.

Bouteflika had been proposing to give greater authority to the People's Assembly, an institution that to date has served as a rubber stamp operation for whatever laws and decisions he dictated. He has said its first task will be to amend the constitution to strengthen its power and also re-establish a two-term limit for the president. It was Bouteflika himself who changed the constitution before the last presidential elections in 2009 so that he could stay in power indefinitely.

However, there are now doubts he will finish his current mandate expiring in 2014 because of his declining health. He has been president since 1999 and remains fairly popular because he is

credited with ending the Islamic insurgency. His problem is that he has no children, relative or other apparent favorite waiting in the wings to take his place if he dies or decides to retire early.

Some Algerian commentators believe the importance of the current elections has less to do with Bouteflika's desire to breathe new life into Parliament than to shape the coming presidential transition by re-establishing his FLN as the main power broker rather than the military and security apparatus.

Makri, the MSP's vice president, offered another explanation. Bouteflika had rigged the election results in favor of the FLN to head off any attempt in the new People's Assembly by his party and other opposition groups to end military and presidential rule and establish a parliamentary system of governance in Algeria.



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