

Geographical Overview | **Maghreb**

Algeria and its Permanent Political Crisis

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Every political regime has its specificities and logic arising from its history. The specificity of the Algerian regime is that, at the State's cupola is a bicephalous structure in the form of a legitimising *real power* belonging to the military hierarchy, and a *formal power* that directs the government administration and state institutions. This duality is a heritage of the War of Independence, during the course of which the military personnel of the National Liberation Army (ALN) took the upper hand over the civilians of the National Liberation Front (FLN). It has not fired a shot since the birth of the independent State in 1962, as the ALN overthrew the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) and took power in Algiers, appointing Ahmed Ben Bella the first President. The latter was overthrown in 1965 by his Minister of defence, Colonel Houari Boumédiène. After that, the army entrusted government administration to civil elites it chose as part of a programme designed to achieve the objectives of the November 1954 Revolution. The historic legitimacy of the army is connected with these objectives, presented in official rhetoric as those of the martyrs of the war of liberation symbolically embodied by the military. Hence the military hierarchy plays the role of the source of power, insofar as national sovereignty is vested in it. This pattern was nearly broken by the electoral victory of the Islamists of the Islamic Salva-

tion Front (FIS) in December 1991, but the army, taking its political prerogatives, carried out a coup, making the elections null and void. The military is not ready to accept the emergence of a civilian power chosen by the electorate.¹

Nor are they ready to allow their designated President to attempt to emancipate himself from their tutelage. Whenever this occurs, there is a crisis at the State leadership level which always ends to the benefit of the military: overthrow of the GPRA in June 1962, arrest of Ahmed Ben Bella in June 1965, forced resignation of Chadli Bendjedid in January 1992, assassination of Mohamed Boudiaf in June 1992, and resignation of Liamine Zéroual in September 1998. Elected in 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika holds the record in longevity in the post of Head of State because he accepts the military's primacy over politics, despite his peremptory statement of not being $\frac{3}{4}$ of a President.²

The fact that Bouteflika is kept on as Head of State despite being ill clearly demonstrates that the Algerian political system functions with a President of only formal attributes. The most important political decisions are made on his behalf and the regime requires the press to print the version according to which the President is authoritarian and has brought the army to heel after appointing senior officers loyal to him to the Ministry of Defence. Subject to the blackmail of the publicity managed by a state organism (the National Publishing and Advertising Agency – ANEP),³ the press propagates the version according to which the President's clan is at the origin of all corruption cases. The President's brother, Saïd, officially advisor to the President, is accused by private

¹ Cf. Lahouari Addi, *L'Algérie et la démocratie*, La Découverte, 1995.

² "LANEP, un levier efficace de caporalisation des journaux," Belkacem MOSTEFAOUI, *El Watan*, 4 May 2015.

³ *Op. cit.*, Belkacem MOSTEFAOUI, *El Watan*, 4 May 2015.

newspapers on a daily basis of embezzling public funds and plotting to take over the presidency from his brother. Banned from speaking to the press, Saïd Bouteflika lacks the capacity to deny the rumours reported by newspapers about him. The President and his entourage play the role of scapegoat for the dysfunctions of the State, plagued by corruption and incompetence. Bouteflika's presidency has indeed been marked by very serious cases of corruption involving billions of dollars to the detriment of the state budget, the most significant being the Khalifa, Chakib Khelil and East-West Motorway Cases. Given the magnitude of the sums misappropriated, a rival clan is pushing for justice to be done, but the case file was "purged" beforehand by the Intelligence and Security Department (DRS) to spare its officers and other generals involved.

Regarding one of the cases to be tried in Algiers, the journalist Ihsane el Kadi, of the electronic newspaper *Maghreb Emergent*, wrote: "In facilities market management as well as in project governance, two decision-making chains are superposed in Algeria in the Bouteflika years. The first is official, formal and decides nothing of importance. The second is parallel, informal and decides everything of importance. In this informal chain, those giving orders remained hidden. Only the intermediaries emerged [...]. After a 24-hour hearing at the Ruisseau Court in Algiers, the informal chain was revealed. It is military. Amar Ghoul and his Chief of Staff yielded the project governance to the DRS through Mohamed Khelladi. What happened next was a family affair. Internal to the Algerian security service. The informal Algerian chain directing the Chinese portion of the East-West Motorway construction broke in 2009. Intrusion of a DRS heavy-weight, General Hassan, and his deputy. A war of networks. Weren't the commissions paid to prevent bottlenecks at the construction site fairly distributed? Did they forget a key link in the chain? Did the DRS truly wish to supply a slush fund abroad?"⁴

The military hierarchy has always presented a seamlessly united front until the unprecedented crisis of January 2013 following the attack on the In Amenas gas complex, which caused divergences to appear

regarding the political handling of the event. Let us recall that the assailants, arriving from Libya, entered the complex and took workers and managers hostage, among them foreigners of various nationalities. It was the first time Islamists had attacked gas infrastructures, the source of the energy income on which the entire economy is based. The country had experienced a decade of violence during which the strategic hydrocarbon sector had been spared. Refusing to negotiate with them, the Intelligence and Security Department (DRS) organised a bloody response that cost the lives of all the terrorists and a number of foreign executives, including Japanese, British and French citizens, as well as Algerians.⁵ It seemed that the military leadership pointed the finger at the DRS, reproaching it first for shortcomings in the security of the gas complex targeted by the terrorists, and then for the violent liberation operation, during which 33 foreign hostages were killed by shots fired from the army's helicopters. In any case, the event triggered a crisis in the top echelons of the military hierarchy, including the generals of the DRS, an institution entrusted with fighting terrorism and protecting the country's sensitive civilian and military sites.⁶ In the most complete opacity, the military leaders reassessed the action taken by the DRS, which was probably reproached for shortcomings in the protection of sensitive sites such as the In Amenas gas complex.

The day after the attack, the military leadership took advantage of the situation to readjust in its favour relations between the military staff and the DRS, which had gained enormous influence on all state institutions, including the army, thanks to its unrelenting fight against terrorism in the 1990s. There was a before and an after In Amenas, for which the DRS paid the price: it retired Generals Bachir Tartag and M'Henna Djebbar and sidelined Colonel Fawzi, in charge of controlling the press,⁷ and the prerogatives of the DRS judicial police were ended. These measures demonstrate that the DRS has lost some of its political clout with the decrease in terrorist violence thanks to which it had taken the upper hand over other decision-making centres. Recall that the

⁴ Cf. Habib SOUAIADIA, "Révélations sur le drame d'In Amenas," *Algeria-Watch*, 11 February 2013.

⁵ "LANP ouvre le feu sur le site gazier d'In Amenas. Plusieurs otages et terroristes tués," *El Watan*, 17 January 2013.

⁶ Cf. Habib SOUAIADIA, "Révélations sur le drame d'In Amenas," *Algeria-Watch*, 11 February 2013.

⁷ "Mise à la retraite de quatre hauts gradés du DRS. La décision effective depuis le 1^{er} février," *TSA*, 1 February 2014.

⁸ "Tiguentourine: Bouteflika parle enfin," *El Watan*, 18 February 2013.

DRS, an intelligence and counterintelligence agency under the jurisdiction of the army, plays the role of political police by infiltrating parties, labour unions, the press and other civil society organisations, and by exercising discrete surveillance of ministry personnel. It is the backbone of the regime and its mission is to neutralise political adversaries and thwart domestic and foreign threats. To do this, its officers have carte blanche to arrest and torture anyone suspected of undermining national security, in no way concerning themselves with the separation of powers or the independence of justice. The DRS is the organ by which the real power exercises its control over the State and oversees parties, labour unions, associations, the press, etc.

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In the sphere of policymaking, the President does not count. His role is symbolic and consists of making public opinion believe that Algeria is a state where the military obeys the President as stipulated in the constitution. The reality is quite a different story because, according to the statement by historian Mohamed Harbi, “states have armies but the Algerian army has its state.” Throughout these tragic events that made international headlines, Bouteflika remained silent, leaving Prime Minister Abdelmalek Sellal the task of answering the telephone calls of Heads of State and Government concerned about the fate of their citizens working at the complex or killed during the army’s assault. Certain observers speculated that by his silence, the President meant to indicate that he did not have any authority over the army generals. Over a month after the attack, a spokesperson read a message from the President on television, where the latter paid tribute to the army, which he called “the nation’s shield.”⁸ Entrenched behind its silence, the army did not supply

information on what really happened, and Algerian newspapers did nothing but comment on the laconic communiqués from the government and the official press agency, Algérie Presse Service (APS). Given the numerous rumours, the government organised a guided tour of the gas complex for journalists, to lend credence to the official version of events.⁹ Dissension in the military hierarchy had been kept secret until January 2014, when it became public knowledge through the press. Amar Saadani, head of the FLN, vehemently attacked General Tewfik Médiène, head of the DRS, accusing him of going against the directives of the Head of State and not respecting Rule of Law and suggesting he resign. In an interview in the electronic newspaper *Tout sur l’Algérie* (TSA), Saadani stated: “I lobby for the separation of powers. I tell you, if something happens to me, it will be the work of Tewfik Médiène. General Tewfik Médiène should have resigned...”¹⁰ Evidently, a more powerful clan than that of General Tewfik Médiène commissioned Saadani, promising him protection. Saadani’s statements had the effect of a bomb in a country where no-one dares mention the head of the political police, let alone criticise him. Especially since they were followed by the arrest of one of Tewfik Médiène’s right-hand men, General Abdelkader Aït-Ourabi, called Hassan, the head of operations for the DRS.¹¹ Politically weakened, the DRS became the object of direct attacks in the private press, which for weeks became the sounding board for differences of opinion made in the open in statements that were certainly out of the ordinary. And then, suddenly, the attacks against the DRS in the press stopped, which was a sign that a compromise had been struck between the different opposing clans. It would seem that the issue behind these tussles was the presidential election, more precisely, the incumbent’s fourth term, to which General Tewfik Médiène was not partial. The matter was settled at a conclave of generals in which the head of the DRS went over to the majority position of his colleagues. New balances were established in the utmost opacity, behind a discourse constantly referring to the President and recalling the stipulation in the consti-

⁹ “Voyage de presse à In Amenas. Retour sur la prise d’otages de Tiguentourine,” *Le Quotidien d’Oran*, 2 February 2013.

¹⁰ TSA, 2 February 2014.

¹¹ “Mandat d’arrêt du général Hassan, ancien chef de la lutte anti-terroriste au sein du DRS,” *Chouroukonline*, 21 February 2014.

tution giving him the prerogative of being the commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The reality is, however, quite different; the President remains foreign to the competition among commanders of the armed forces, over which he does not exercise any political authority. In winter 2014, tension had dropped and newspapers were busy with the matter of the candidacy of Abdelaziz Bouteflika who, a month before elections, made a laconic announcement that he would be running for a fourth term, leaving those who believed he was retiring due to his state of health perplexed. Weakened by illness, the president-candidate did not carry out a presidential campaign nor address the crowds. Election campaign meetings were led by ministers and the two parties in the administration (FLN and RND), who stated that Bouteflika's fourth term would be that of the achievement of democratic transition. He was re-elected in an expected victory on 17 April 2014 with a comfortable rate of more than 80% of votes, defeating his adversaries, who had agreed to run as 'extras' to lend the elections credibility.

Algeria's problem is that it can't seem to manage to strip the army of its political legitimacy, which allows it to control the State, appoint civilians loyal to it to institutional posts, and keep its officers out of legal proceedings when they are involved in corruption cases. The military leaders are against the emergence of an independent civilian power, considering the State as an administration and not a sphere for the expression of society's ideological trends. Hence they refuse to allow civil society organisations to gain their own legitimate representatives via free elections ensuring changeover. The Rule of Law, with its notions of the separation of powers, the independence of the judicial branch, public liberties and electoral legitimacy does not form part of the culture of the armed forces, which are still attached to a populist ideology incompatible with the institutionalisation of power relations via the constitution. This explains the authorities' inaction regarding the tragic events of Ghardaïa where there have been violent clashes between two ethnic groups for four years now. There is no solution to this conflict, which has caused several dozen deaths, because the local populations have no legitimate representatives in state institutions to state their grievances. Also remarkable is the silence by

which the government has responded to the protests taking place for over a year by populations in the South against shale gas operations, fearing pollution of the groundwater vital to their existence. In response to their protests, the government has used police force to violently disperse sit-ins in public spaces. On 24 February 2015, Bouteflika sent a message to the protesters, read over the radio and on television, informing them that shale gas is a gift from God and that Algeria does not have the right to reject it.

If the country has not experienced the events that have brought violence to the region since the Tunisian Spring in 2011, it is due to a policy of redistribution of the energy revenue allowed by high oil prices. From 2000 to 2013, the price per barrel went from \$25 to \$140, allowing the accumulation of a financial surplus of \$200 billion. The government's balanced budget was calculated for years on the basis of a \$37 rate. This financial ease allowed the government to launch significant infrastructure works, with investments of several hundreds of billions of dollars: motorways, social housing, urban tramways, etc. These billions in investment fostered direct and indirect employment, as well as opportunities for speculation that lent the illusion of economic wealth. In reality, however, the market was supplied by imported products, while the foreign trade balance indicated that 98% of exports consisted of hydrocarbons. The country was financially wealthy but had become economically impoverished. This would seem the real outcome of the Bouteflika regime, with a President who rules a country he does not govern.

Since July 2014, the international prices of the oil barrel have been falling, reducing the State's foreign currency inflow by 60%. The authorities have attempted to reassure public opinion by evoking the State's financial surplus, which could finance the equivalent of three years of imports, but at the same time, they remind civil servants to avoid waste and make rational use of public investment. If the price of oil continues to sink for longer than three years, Algeria will have to turn to the international capital market to finance its food imports. This scenario would break the fragile balance among those holding real power, whose clans are attentive to the distribution of the energy revenue.