

## The Arab Spring And Algeria's Exceptionalism

**Youcef Bouandel**

Associate Professor

Department of International Affairs

Qatar University

### **Abstract:**

Despite being the first country in the Arab Middle East to embark on a process of political reforms, Algeria has thus far failed in its democratic transition. When in January 2011, the Arab Spring was launched in Tunisia, Algeria, given its history of protest, was believed to follow in Tunisia's footsteps. Algeria, against expectations, remained relatively peaceful and the authorities were able to absorb popular discontent. The authorities in Algiers, have used (a) financial incentives to buy social peace; (b) deployed its security forces to swiftly deal with any uprising and most importantly (c) engaged in the "*boulitique*"; a process of self-invention and survival to confer legitimacy on an already bankrupt regime. Unlike, the other Arab Spring countries where elections are held, the Algerian Islamists made the exception and did not fare well by comparison.

### **Introduction:**

At the beginning of the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt, several observers of North African affairs predicted that Algeria would also see demonstrations of that kind. This is particularly true after the riots of January 2011, known as the oil and sugar events, (Roberts, 2011) and the different calls by several sections of civil society to hold peaceful demonstrations against the regime. Nonetheless, these predictions have thus far proved unfounded.

Larbi Sadiki (2012) correctly observes that 'Algeria's modern political history is defined by two colossal events: a stunning revolution, unique in the Third World and the Arab Middle East, which ousted the French colonials in 1962; and a military coup that ousted democracy in 1992.' The Algerian revolution against the French, whilst achieving formal independence in 1962, failed to establish the aims and objectives contained in the proclamation of 1 November 1954, which marked the beginning of the armed struggle. It is the second event, the military coup that ousted democracy in 1992 and the developments that have taken place since, that will be the subject of this chapter. Therefore, in this chapter, I am going to argue that Algeria experienced its own 'spring' back in the late 1980s, which paved the way for the democratization process. Indeed, some observers went as far as stating that 'Algeria to date is the only Arab or Muslim country that has significantly democratized its political system and the only country within an oil-based economy that has abandoned its authoritarianism.' (Dillman, 1992:31). This transition to democracy was short-lived and the military intervened in January 1992 to abort what seemed to be the first democracy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. Hence, these reforms were introduced to give the semblance of a more open political system, but in reality these reforms have been a measure to defuse the already volatile situation and seek another

source of the system's legitimacy. The military's intervention in January 1992, led to an unprecedented level of violence that claimed the lives of almost 200,000 people. Therefore, this paper highlights the Algerian reforms and points to the pitfalls that accompanied them, it also highlights the lessons that Arab countries can learn from the Algerian experience in order to ensure a smoother and more peaceful transition to democracy. However, having said that, it does not automatically follow that the 'Arab Spring' did not have any impact of the Algerian political scene. On the contrary, the Algerian authorities embarked on a series of reforms since February 2011 which would, at least in theory, strengthen democratic principles. In reality, however, these reforms, as it will be argued in this paper, were only superficial and served only to strengthen façade democracy.

### **Algeria's 'Spring'**

Given the events in neighbouring countries, Algeria's long history of demonstrations against the regime and especially the January 2011, many observers felt that Algeria would be next. However these predictions proved to be inaccurate and Algeria, (Bouandel, 2011) on the whole remained stable and has been in a position to initiate top-down reforms. This is due, I argue, to two main important and equally related factors.

The first is that Algerians argue that they experienced their own 'spring' over two decades ago, and they have little or nothing to learn from the experiences of their neighbors. On the contrary, it is these countries that are following Algeria's example and should learn from the pitfalls that the country has experienced ever since with its arduous transition to democracy.

Seasoned observers of Algerian affairs concur that the events that have been taking place in a number of MENA countries, had already taken place in Algeria in October 1988, and led to a series of reforms that opened up the political space for previously excluded groups (Boukhobza, 1991). These events, which paved the way for a process of liberalization, did not get the attention they deserve at the time for two reasons. The first is the absence of television space channels such as Al Jazeera and social media such as Facebook and Twitter, which have played an important role in what has been happening recently in the MENA countries. The second is that the events in Algeria coincided with important developments in Eastern and Central Europe. The fall of communism and the transition that was taking place in that part of the world was the main focus of politicians, policy makers, journalists and academics. Hence, the events in Algeria, by comparison, were pushed to the background.

In October 1988, demonstrators took to the streets of Algiers and other major cities to demand an end to corruption and improvement of living conditions. Unlike the response of Tunisian and Egyptian militaries, the Algerian military intervened on the direct orders of the then president Chadli Bendjedid and about 500 rioters lost their lives in the space of three days. With the riots brought under control, President Bendjedid addressed the nation and promised a series of reforms. The more conservative elements of the ruling party, FLN, such as Messaadia, were removed and a constitution that brought an end to one party rule was adopted in February 1989. This constitution in theory, paved the way for a pluralistic political system in Algeria. As a result, Algeria witnessed the mushrooming of political parties. These parties represented the wide range of political tendencies: from the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a conservative party to the more radical and secular Ettahadi Party, the former Communist Party (PAGS). This period

also saw the emergence of privately owned newspapers. Plural elections were held in June 1990 for the local and regional assemblies and the FIS proved to be a formidable political force winning 55 per cent of the vote (Iratni and Tahi, 1990). With the prospect of a legislative election looming, the authorities in Algiers, known locally as *le pouvoir* discarded the electoral system, under which the June 1990 election was held, and replaced it with the two-ballot system, similar to that used in France. This change in the electoral system was accompanied by the redrawing of constituency boundaries, to ensure that the FIS would not repeat the same success at the national level (Bouandel, 2005). Hence, on 26 December 1991, the first round of the legislative elections was held. The results showed that out of the 430 seats of the National Assembly, 232 seats were won in the first round, of which the FIS won 198 seats. The results suggest that the FIS only needed 28 seats to win an overall majority. The second round, which was scheduled on January 16, 1992, in which the remaining 198 seats were to be contested, would have seen the FIS winning a comfortable majority in the National Assembly. This is evidenced by the fact that the FIS had no less than 186 candidates contesting the second round and having a lead in almost all of the constituencies (Bouandel, 1992).

The prospect of an Islamic government in Algeria prompted the military to nullify the results and bring the electoral process to an end. A state of emergency was introduced in February and a month later, in March 1992, the FIS was banned. These events marked the beginning of a long and bloody conflict in which the protagonists, the military and the Islamists, committed unspeakable atrocities in a conflict in which the civilian population was held hostage (Zoubir and Bouandel, 1998). The results have seen over 200,000 people killed, about 20,000 disappeared, over half a million fled the country and the estimated cost of about 30 billion US dollars (Joffe, 2005).

Whilst the violence was still going on, the Algerian authorities embarked on a series of political reforms to put the country back on track. Following the appointment of retired General Liamine Zeroual, as head of state in January 1994, a number of steps were taken. First, in order to break away from the military, which brought him to power, Zeroual sought popular legitimacy by calling for presidential elections in which he stood as candidate. Hence, in November 1995, the first ever presidential elections were held which Zeroual, as expected, won in the first round (Bouandel, 1997). In November of the following year, a new constitution was approved by a referendum. This constitution and the laws that were subsequently introduced, in theory, laid the foundations for a return to the democratic process and the entrenchment of a democratic culture, but in reality, they were introduced for more stability and the continuation of the status-quo. This argument is based on the following three points.

The first is that, unlike previous parliaments, this constitution, in Article 98, called for the creation of a bicameral parliament. In addition to the directly elected lower house, the National Popular Assembly, an upper house, the Council for the Nation, would be created. Two-thirds of its membership would be indirectly elected; elected by and from the elected members of the local and regional assemblies. The remaining one-third is directly appointed by the president. Given the president's free role in appointing one-third of the membership, it is very difficult to justify not only its democratic nature, but also its representative character. This move was a step towards strengthening the president's grip on the political affairs of the country by reducing the role of the elected institution; the National Assembly. This democratic deficit is evidenced by the fact that Article 120 of this Constitution stipulates that bills are debated in both houses and for a

bill to become law, it has to be ratified by at least three-quarters (75 per cent) of the membership of the Council for the Nation. This state of affairs suggests that even if a political party wins a majority, it will be unable to introduce and/or modify legislation without the tacit support of the president, represented by his appointees in the Council for the Nation.

Secondly, in order to avoid the problems associated with the previous legislative elections, which would have seen the FIS winning a comfortable majority, a new electoral system was introduced (JORA, 1997). The two ballot system, under which the first ever legislative elections were held in December 1991, was replaced by a form of proportional representation; the closed party list. According to this particular electoral system, parties produce the final list and the ranking of candidates and the electorate votes of the party of his/her choice, not the candidates. It is also customary for these systems to introduce a threshold that parties had to surpass to gain representation. When this version of proportion representation was adopted in Algeria, a 5 per cent threshold at the constituency level was introduced to ensure the removal of superfluous parties. Whilst proportional representation as system of election is the one that is most favoured by countries that have experienced transition to democracy, the version adopted by the Algerian authorities, has had negative effects, as we shall see later after the May 2012 legislative elections, on the painful transition to democracy in Algeria. The closed party list, over the years, I argue, has diluted the electoral process from its real significance. A candidate who is ranked by his/her party's leadership, either at the top or as near as possible to the top of a party's list stands more chance of being elected than someone who is somewhere in the bottom half of that list. Hence, given the important role that parties' leaderships play in determining the order in which candidates appear on the ballot box, they would be much more inclined to offer the top positions on their lists to those candidates deemed to be acceptable. This situation fosters a submissive culture with the emergence of *beni oui oui* – yes men –encouraging corruption and clientelism, and suppressing personal initiative and creativity. Thirdly, given the nature of Algeria's political parties - weak, fragmented and subject to the *pouvoir's* meddling in their internal affairs, especially when they are deemed not to keep in line - suggests that elections and party competition are nothing more than, to borrow the words of the late Algerian thinker Malek Benabi, "boulitique" (the vocation of those who dupe the masses). Indeed, during the first half of the 1990s, the former single party, the National Liberation Front (FLN), under the leadership of the late Abdelhamid Mehri, was a source of embarrassment to the regime. After the aborted legislative elections of December 1991, the FLN was an opposition party and Mehri himself was a fierce critic of the different choices of the regime. Hence, in January 1996, members of the FLN's Central Committee, who were acting under direct instructions from the security services, orchestrated Mehri's downfall (Brahimi, 1998). He was replaced by Boualem Benhamouda and the FLN returned to playing in the hands of the regime. Similarly, Ali Benflis, was removed from the leadership of the FLN in 2003, after he declared his intention to enter the presidential race against incumbent president Bouteflika (Bouandel, 2004). Furthermore, when the Islamist Abdellah Djaballah, refused to be coopted by the *pouvoir*, he was removed twice from the leadership of the parties he led: Ennahda and Il Islah (Djaballah, 2012). Hence, it could be argued that parties' candidates are the *pouvoir's* candidates, and elections are reduced to a referendum and the role of the Algerian electorate is simply to rubber stamp decisions made elsewhere. The composition of the National Assembly, in terms of the members, not the parties, is not necessarily a product of the electorate as much as it is a product of these parties' leaderships. Furthermore, the electoral law introduced a 5 per cent threshold, at the constituency level, that parties had to surpass if they are to gain representation. Whilst the introduction of a

threshold is a necessary condition to filter and remove extremist and superfluous parties, it has led, as the May 10, 2012 election suggests, as we will see later, to an abnormal situation where so many votes have been wasted and the winning margin of some parties have been magnified by this threshold.

### **Why has Algerian been immune from the ‘Arab Spring’?**

It should be pointed out that demonstrations have been a common feature of the Algerian political landscape over the two decades. Throughout the 1990s, Algerians have had to deal with a near civil war and were concerned with security more than anything else. The situation changed after president Bouteflika came to power in 1999. He was successful in bringing the violence to an end through the adoption of first the Civil Harmony Law in 1999 and the Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation in 2005 (Bouandel, 2010). Nonetheless, despite the return of stability and the relatively high revenues, as well as unprecedented reserves of foreign currency, the country still suffers from acute economic and social problems. High levels of unemployment, shortage of housing, a deteriorating health service, an unhealthy educational system, and most importantly very high levels of corruption are some of the characteristics of the Algerian system. Consequently, expressions of the popular discontent, which manifest themselves in demonstrations against the regime and its symbols have been an almost a daily occurrence over the last decade. Open an Algerian newspaper any day of the week and you are almost certain to read about a demonstration in one part of the country to denounce the practices of *le pouvoir* and its representatives. These demonstrations are not necessarily monopolized by a certain segment of society, as every sector, apart from the security services, had voiced its discontent. Since the turn of the twenty first century, the most important demonstrations were in the Berber region, east of Algiers, in 2003 and those of in January 2011, just after the demonstrations in Tunisia (Layachi 2011).

Until very recently, demonstrations in Algeria have not necessarily called for regime change, nor for specific political reforms. They were much more concerned with the improvement of socioeconomic conditions such as housing, employment, salaries and working conditions as well as an end to corruption. Furthermore, Algerians have also demonstrated against what they call *El Hogra*. *El Hogra* (the lack of *Karama* or dignity) refers to the contemptuous treatment that Algerians are subjected to by a wide range of office holders, including the security forces. People who are in a position of power, either appointed or elected, are in theory there to serve the people; instead many abuse their position. Such a state of affairs leads to the absence of rights, the adulterating of the concept of citizen and the creation of a chasm between them (the office holders) and us (the average Algerian). In this sense, it is the experience of *El Hogra* that led Bouazizi to set himself on fire in Tunisia and compelled people in Algeria, and throughout the Arab World, to rise-up against their tyrannical governments.

At first glance, everything in Algeria suggests that an uprising and/or a general explosion is imminent. To be sure, the potential for such a scenario does exist and when events in Tunisia and Egypt started, Algeria, given its problems, seemed to be the most natural theatre for a ‘revolution’ to take place. However, to date, Algeria seems to have been immune to what has happened in the region. This exemption is based on the following:

First of all, as stated above, Algeria had already experienced its ‘spring’ in the late 1980s. This has resulted in two important and equally related outcomes that had serious consequences on Algeria’s political landscape and made an uprising a la Tunisia or Egypt, almost impossible at least in the short term. The first is that the Algerian ‘spring’ resulted in the opening up of the political space, with the emergence of political parties, organizations of civil society, independently owned newspapers and the holding of elections at regular intervals. The shortcoming of the resulting system notwithstanding, the Algerian authorities claim that the system is democratic based on the free will of the Algerian people has, to a large extent, been well received. During the author’s several research visits to Algeria over the last two years, many Algerians from different walks of life, argued that their system is much more democratic than any other country in the Arab world and as a result, there was no need for Algeria to follow in the footsteps of Tunisia and Egypt. (Focus group, Algiers, 09/01/2011)

Second, the near civil war that Algeria experienced in the 1990s left the country and its people traumatized. Algerians remember too well what happened during that decade and are not inclined to repeat that again. During my two research trips to Algeria in January and February 2011, my interviewees confirmed that they were not willing to embark on another ‘adventure’ which could result in bloodshed. It was apparent from the several discussions, that despite the people’s obvious discontent with le pouvoir and its practices, there was a general fatigue and fear that an ‘Arab Spring’ or October 1988-style uprising would only result in bloodshed. Their fears were strengthened when the uprisings in Libya and Syria and Yemen turned very violent. It is indeed these scenarios that Algerians are eager to avoid (Focus group, Algiers, 09/01/ and 12/02/2011).

Third, unlike what happened in both Tunisia and Egypt, not only does the Algerian military have a history of violently dealing with protests, as evidenced by the October 1988 uprising, the military has been at the forefront of Algeria’s politics since independence. Indeed, the Algerian military, represented in the *Armée de Liberation National* (ALN), from which l’*Armée Populaire Nationale* (ANP) emerged, preceded the establishment of an independent state. Even before independence and especially since 1962, the major political decisions have been taken by the military. Indeed, it is the military that intervened in January 1992 to cancel the results of the first round of the legislative elections and bring to an abrupt halt the electoral/democratic process. Every single head of state of independent Algeria has been either drawn from the military or brought into office by it. Hence, the military will continue to play an important role in the politics of the country and any uprising against the current regime – in which the military plays a central role - will be perceived as a threat against the establishment itself.

Fourth, Algerian political parties are too weak, fragmented and/or play in the hands of the regime to mount a serious challenge to the regime. An atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust dominates the Algerian political scene. I have previously remarked elsewhere that the ‘heated exchange of mutual accusation between Louisa Hannoune, leader of the Workers’ Party, and Noureddine Ait Hamouda, a member of the National Assembly for the Rally for Culture and Democracy, is an example par excellence of the role of the Algerian opposition’ (2011, 12).

Fifth, in Algeria, unlike the situations in Tunisia and Egypt where the political systems were clearly identified with the presidents and their respective parties, the Algerian political system is neither identified with president Bouteflika nor with any specific political party. Whilst

corruption has reached unparalleled levels in the country's history, it is not only identified with the president and his family/immediate entourage. In Algerian, there is, what I call, horizontal and vertical corruption. The first refers to the monopoly of economic activity by a select group of influential people who use their positions to further their economic activities. Some of the high ranking officers in the Algerian military or individuals backed by the military are clearly identified with a sector of the economic activity. In Algeria, it is customary to hear about 'the Sugar General', 'the Milk General' and so on and so forth. Such was the extent of these people's involvement in the economic activity of the country that a bridge, that links the Port of Algiers to one of the main highways, is sarcastically referred to in Algeria as le Pont des Generaux, the Generals' Bridge; to facilitate the movement of lorries carrying imported goods intended for the local market. The second vertical or the progressive corruption refers to its spread throughout the different levels of administration and government. The lower one is on the administrative echelon, the lower the commission is. It has become so widespread that even when withdrawing money – especially when there was shortage of liquidity- from a post office or getting a birth certificate from a town hall, Algerians are compelled to pay bribes to corrupt employees for their 'rights'. Hence, the Algerian political system which has until the late 1980s consisted of the former ruling party, then FLN, the bureaucracy, the military, has since then included, les nouveaux riches, - money men - , referred to, to borrow the words of the assassinated head of state, Mohammed Boudiaf (January - June 1992), as '*la mafia politico-financiere*'. This mafia has the monopoly over several sectors of the economic activity, as outlined above, and exerts immense pressure on politicians. In this system, Bouteflika, as head of state, is reduced to nothing more than a mere figurehead with whom the Algerian political system formally identifies. His departure would not alter the type of political system in the country.

Finally, unlike the situations in Egypt and Tunisia, Algeria is one of the richest countries in the MENA, and boasts over 200 billion US Dollars in foreign reserves. Given this fact, the Algerian authorities have indeed used financial incentives to buy social peace. Hence, several increases in salaries, in most cases backdated, have been approved, as well as generous loans for the unemployed to start their own businesses. These steps were taken for political reasons, to appease the volatile economic and social situations, without any consideration for the economic implications, such as inflation.

### **The impact of the Arab Spring on Algeria:**

Despite the fact that Algeria has, so far, been immune from the 'Arab Spring', the events in neighboring countries have had an impact on Algeria's internal political situation. Unlike the spontaneous and leaderless 'revolutions' in both Tunisia and Egypt, in Algeria, a number of political parties, such as the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) as well as organizations of civil society, such as Families of the Missing Persons, tried to provide the organizational framework for these demonstrations. Hence, the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (NCCD) was created in January 2011. The most recognized figures in this coordination were Dr Said Saadi, former leader of the RCD, and Ali Yahia Abdennour, former president of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights. The Coordination called for the state of emergency, in place since February 1992, to be lifted, the introduction of genuine reforms with the opening up of the mass media, the release of political prisoners and social justice (Layachi 2011). The Coordination planned to hold marches against the pouvoir every

Saturday, beginning on 12 February, until its demands are met. The first march was, by all account, a failure. The authorities ensured that access to the main square and streets were blocked and traffic coming into Algiers was closely monitored. The second march of February 19 was attended by a few hundred only and the idea of holding marches every Saturday was abandoned. On their part, the Algerian authorities aware of the developments taking place in Tunisia and Egypt and the domestic situation responded by lifting the state of emergency on 24 February 2011. This move was not only very well received throughout Algeria, but also signaled the authorities' desire to relax the rules. Indeed, as soon as the president announced the lifting of the state of emergency, the organized opposition to the regime started to lose momentum. To many Algerians, Saïd Saadi became a hated figure who was bound to bring chaos to the country. He was ridiculed by Algerians when they nicknamed him Saïd *Samedi* (Saturday in French – a reference to his calls for marches against the regime). Furthermore, Algerians have also exchanged SMS's that stated, Saadi *rouh El darek, Bouteflika mahouche Mubarak* (Saadi go home, Bouteflika is not Mubarak).

Indeed, whilst Bouteflika's position as head of state was never under threat from his people, however, the humiliating manner by which Benali and Mubarak left office and the events in Syria, Libya and Yemen and the volatile situation at home, compelled the Algerian *pourvoir* to revisit its position on several issues. The move to lift the state of emergency was perceived as a basis upon which further political reforms can be built. This sentiment was further enhanced by president Bouteflika's speech on 15 April in which he outlined a series of reforms to be undertaken (Canal Algerie, 15 April 2011) With these steps, the Algerian leadership was able to absorb popular discontent and to pre-empt any moves by some political parties as well as organizations of civil society to gather support against the regime.

Hence in order to elaborate of the proposed reforms outlined by the president in his televised speech a commission headed by Abdelkader Bensalah, President of the Council for the Nation embarked on a series of consultation with political figures, parties and civil society. The Commission presented its findings/recommendations to the Council of Ministers before the reforms were voted in parliament. There were some proposed changes to the Constitution, but the nature of these changes was left unspecified. It was left to the new parliament, after the May 2012, election to introduce them. The laws that regulate political activity – parties and associations – were introduced. As a result over 20 political parties, some of which have been active in Algeria's political scene albeit without formal recognition, put forward candidates for the legislative election. The reforms also introduced a quota for women in order to increase their representation in the different elected assemblies.

Nonetheless, despite the introduction of these steps, the reforms did not go far enough in resolving the Algerian stalemate and introducing genuine reforms. The *pouvoir* continues to play to the international audience by projecting an image of a democratic government. The reforms did not address one of the most significant components of the Algerian political system: the military. Furthermore, another question pertaining to the nature of the political system – presidential, semi-presidential or parliamentary and the proposed reforms to the constitution, especially the limits on the presidential mandates, were left unanswered and will be dealt with by the new parliament. Hence, the legislative election of May 2012 was held, according to the Algerian authorities, at a turning in Algeria's modern history.

### **The May 2012 legislative elections**



The Algerian authorities, fearing the lowest turnout in Algeria's history, given the indifference of the electorate, played up the importance of the elections. Statements comparing it to the July 1962 referendum, which confirmed Algeria's independence, were uttered by the Prime Minister, Ahmed Ouyahia (El Khabar (Algiers) 20 April 2012). About 46 political parties and several independent lists took part in the election. The results raised a few eyebrows. (Canal Algerie, 12 May 2102) First, the FLN, against all expectations and despite the internal fighting, came in first, almost winning the majority of the seats. Second, unlike MENA countries where elections were held following the 'Arab Spring', the Algerian Islamists were dealt heavy blows and failed to make an impression. Third, because of the female quota, almost one third of the membership of the Algerian National Assembly is female; the highest percentage in the world; something that the Algerian authorities were quick to point out.

Nonetheless, the results of the elections produced a very weak parliament and its representative character in questionable. Despite accusations of fraud, the results are closer to reality than not. Firstly, on 8 May, two days before polling day, Bouteflika, who is honorary president of the FLN, stated in a speech in the eastern city of Setif, that his political affiliation was known to everyone. This was perceived as an implicit support for the FLN (Canal Algerie, 8 May 2012). Secondly, no less than 21 political parties that participated in the election, were legalized less than three months before and did not have time to develop their programmes and membership. They simply tried to capitalize on the newly found freedom by trying to gain representation. Thirdly, the 5 per cent threshold that parties needed to secure to gain representation played into the hands of the bigger parties. Hence, it is conceivable that a party can win all the seats available in a given constituency on less than 6 per cent of the vote, if none of the competing parties manages to secure more than 4.99 per cent. This situation questions the representative character as well as the legitimacy of the elected institutions. This is particularly true when the institution's main task was to amend the constitution upon which the new rules of the game would be defined. More than two years after it was elected, the new constitution has yet to see the light. It was postponed until the new presidential election were held. Given the uncertainty surrounding the incumbent president's health, and with it the future of governance in Algeria, Bouteflika reshuffled the cabinet and appointed to key positions his close allies. Hence the Ministry of Interior, of Justice and the chairmanship of the Constitutional Council, with key roles to play in any elections went to his cronies. With these appointments and despite not addressing his people for over a year, disabled president Bouteflika, who suffered a stroke, won his fourth term in office with over 81% of the turnout; a result that is reminiscent of pre-'Arab Spring' elections in the Arab Middle East (El Khabar, (Algiers) 19 April, 2014). Thus, the legislative and presidential elections as well as the different reforms that preceded them, suggest that in Algeria, *plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose*. Whilst in theory laws are introduced, consultations and debate are taking place, political campaigns are organized, elections are held and members of parliament take up their seats, the reality is that little if anything changes. This 'boulitique' serves only to give the semblance of democracy and to legitimize a regime that lost its credibility.

## **Conclusions:**

The Algerian experience with democracy has been very arduous and at times very frustrating. However, its experience can provide very important lessons for countries in the Arab world that are undergoing political transformations. It could be argued that Algeria has experienced two waves of democratization. The first lasted almost three years; from February 1989 with the adoption of the new Constitution until January 1992, when the electoral, and with it the democratic process, was brought to an end. Several lessons can be learned from this failed transition to democracy. The first is the very relaxed laws for the creation of political parties should be avoided. In Algeria in the late 1980, just fifteen people were enough to form a political party. Furthermore, despite the fact the law stipulates that no political party can be based either on religion or ethnicity, the Algerian political landscape had seen the emergence of these very same political parties. The second lesson is the importance of the electoral system in the transition to democracy. In this period, Algeria experienced two electoral systems, in addition to the redrawing of boundaries. These constitutional changes were implemented mainly as a response to the FIS threat and to ensure that the necessary measures are in place to prevent its success. The second transition started in 1994, when Liamine Zeroual was brought to office in January. The authorities in Algiers seemed to have learned from their own past mistakes. The law on the creation of political parties were tightened; the electoral system, the two ballot system, that produced, what I call, a magnified majority for the FIS, (Bouandel, 2005), was replaced by another version of proportional representation and an upper chamber in which the president can choose the third of the membership strengthened the executive even further at the expense of the parliament. These changes were introduced not necessarily as steps towards further democratization, but to ensure stability. They simply helped to give the illusion of democracy whilst the status quo remained. Furthermore, despite continuous criticism of the type of political system in the country and promises to change the constitution by president Bouteflika himself, he has not addressed the peculiarities of his country's political system. It was only in November 2008, when his second, and constitutionally last, term in office was fast approaching that he emulated his then Tunisian counterpart, Ben Ali, when he amended the article in the constitution which limits the president's mandate to two five year terms, practically introducing a president for life.

Nonetheless, with the winds of the 'Arab Spring' blowing over North Africa, the authorities in Algiers, in an attempt to pre-empt the flames of the 'Arab Spring' catching Algeria, embarked on a number of reforms. These reforms, however, have amounted to nothing more window dressing. As long as the system is perceived to be democratic by western governments, and shower praise on the country's rulers, the latter will use these statements as a means to legitimize their tenure of power.

Since independence from France in 1962, Algerians have been living in a pressure cooker, albeit comfortable in economic and social terms, until the mid-1980s. The different reforms that were introduced since the late 1980s have served only one purpose: increase the size of the hole in the pressure cooker to let off steam so that the pressure cooker does not explode. The size of the hole –increase and decrease - had mirrored and indeed was measured by the extent of popular discontent towards the regime. The authorities in Algiers have thus far been able to control the flow of steam and managed to keep the pressure cooker from exploding. This is partly due the healthy balance of payments and Algeria's estimated foreign reserves, estimated at over 200 billion USD. With the May 10 legislative elections, the authorities were presented with, yet

again, another opportunity to manage a smoother transition to a more democratic form of government and prevent a Libyan/Syrian/Yemeni style uprising. This is particularly important in light of the proposed reforms of the constitution that the current parliament has to undertake. This need for a smoother and a proper transition is particularly important given the fact that the so-called November generation - that participated in the War of Independence 1954-1962 - is fast becoming an extinct species and the revolutionary legitimacy is a devoid concept. Should the *pouvoir* miss this chance the pressure cooker is bound to explode.

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