

# Hope returns to Algeria

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Dawn

Africa

HOPE has returned to Algeria after a long time. Its fulfilment depends on the men who hold the reins of power in that tormented country. As nature is kind to Algeria, sorrows upon this sunny and beautiful Mediterranean land have always been inflicted by men.

As elsewhere in colonial time, hope in Algeria has been aroused by the promise of elections. Last October, Liamine Zeroual, the President of Algeria announced that he will step down before his term expires, and a new president will be elected by the people. Citizens were sceptical at first. But when the date for polling, April 15, was announced and presidential aspirants, forty in all, started to pop up, hope was aroused. Mr. Zeroual remains in office but does not seek re-election, a further assurance that the promise of holding fair and transparent elections may be honoured. Whether he actually keeps his promise would depend on those whom citizens obliquely call "le pouvoir", the largely invisible military commanders who in fact rule Algeria.

Since its hard won independence in 1962, when from an excess of ambition Ahmed Ben Bella cleared the military's way to the centre of power, the army has held the monopoly of power. After the death of Colonel Houari Boumedienne in 1978, the real and formal structures of power have been separated. The formal, that is the constitutionally legitimate authority, is represented by the president. But whenever the president fell afoul of "le pouvoir" he exited — dead or alive. Ben Bella was overthrown in 1965 by his ally Colonel Boumedienne who — so Ahmed Ben Bella would belatedly realize — wielded effective power. Boumedienne was followed by Chadli Benjedid, a military man but not quite a free man.

By avoiding decisions that could antagonize one powerful military faction or another, Benjedid survived for 13 years. When he opposed the annulment of the December 1991 elections (the Islamic Welfare Front had won the first of two rounds), his erstwhile allies — Generals Larbi Belkeir and Khalid Nezzar — 'advised' him to resign. Enter Mohammed Boudiaf, one of nine "historic chiefs" who had launched in 1954 the liberation war against France. An authentic revolutionary, Boudiaf was determined to hold elections and before that impose civilian authority over the military. He proceeded to retire some top officers including General Mohammed Lamari, the Chief of Staff since 1993.

Boudiaf was assassinated. Another president.

have floated since the fall of 1996 when the war between the state and the Islamists took an ugly turn with mass slaughter of civilians in the countryside. The massacres — 200 have been committed so far — probably started in response to the government's programme of arming "village defence committees" to combat the Islamists, particularly their militant faction — al-Jama'a al-Islamiyya al-Musallaha (Armed Islamic Group) — which was founded by veterans of the Afghan Jihad.

Both, the Islamic groups and the government-sponsored militia, are believed to have hit civilians ruthlessly, and Algerians have expressed deep repugnance over the brutal murders that have included infants. In the military circles also, sentiments are believed to have divided between the "conciliators and eradicators". The former group, on whose support President Zeroual is said to rely, favours a 'civilianization' of Algerian polity as a means to end the civil war. But how much free choice they will allow,

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Hamrouche, a former prime minister and also a strong presidential candidate, describes Nahnah's disqualification as "a suspicious election trick."

Sheikh Nahnah is not a political light-weight. In the 1995 presidential election (for which he had qualified) he polled 25 per cent of the votes taking second place after Liamine Zeroual. His party is a participant in the current government, with 69 seats in the 380-member Algerian parliament. His supporters have threatened that if his appeal is rejected they will hold street demonstrations and sit-ins which, in Algeria's tenuous environment, may disrupt the electoral process.

Of the seven candidates who have received the Council's approval Abdel Aziz Bouteflika is widely regarded as being favoured by Le Pouvoir. El-Mudjahid, the government controlled organ of the FLN, consistently describes him as the "national consensus" candidate. Mohammed Yazid describes him as the candidate of the "dark inner cabinet", a reference perhaps to the support he is believed to have of General Tewfik Medienne, the chief of military intelligence.

Bouteflika was Algeria's foreign minister under Houari Boumedienne, and gained international prominence as a spokesman for the "New International Economic Order" and other Third World causes. Until the lure of the presidency brought him back to Algeria recently, he has been living in Switzerland for most of the last two decades. Notably, he has not felt the need to spell out a programme. Says he: "Just as some people exercise the right to speech, I exercise the right to silence." Informed observers report that his negotiations with Sheikh Nahnah to form an electoral coalition broke down, and this contributed to Nahnah's disqualification. Assuming that the polling itself is not rigged, Ahmed Talib Ibrahim has the best chance of beating Bouteflika. Ibrahim spent years in French prison, has held senior government positions including minister of foreign affairs, education and justice and, most importantly, comes from a respected religious family (in Pakistan some people may remember his father who lived in Karachi as an official of the Mu'tamar Islami), and is himself viewed as a reformist Muslim. He advocates national reconciliation, does not dub the Islamists as terrorists, and is likely to get the quiet support of the proscribed Front Islamic de Salut (FIS). If Sheikh Nahnah loses on appeal the Hamas party may also support him. As the election approaches other parties too may lend their support to Ibrahim. The urge to beat Bouteflika is widespread and strong.

The military's more than four decades of

stain since 1955.

Boudiaf was assassinated. Another president, Ali Khafi was forced to resign. President Liamine Zeroual is the latest to go. Notably two powerful men — General Lamari and Tewfik Mediène — have survived them all. One, as mentioned earlier, is currently the army chief and the other is the head of Military Security (intelligence).

But Liamine Zeroual, a military man like all other presidents of Algeria except Ben Bella and Mohammed Boudiaf, is exiting in a unique manner. His disagreements with "Le Pouvoir" had become a public secret when he went on television to announce his plans to retire prematurely and hold elections. In this unusual style of departure lay the reason for hope.

In Algeria, as in all dictatorships, one reads signals. In this case, Zeroual's announcement signalled divisions within the army command on how to resolve the civil war which has cost since 1992 some 60,000-80,000 mostly innocent lives. At least one powerful faction in the military has supported his move. Perhaps it will prevail and the elections shall be permitted to be free and transparent. This expectation was strengthened when General Lamari pledged in El-Djeish, the military's organ, that except for keeping the public peace the army will have no role in the elections.

Rumours of division in the officers' corps

and how much independence they are willing to grant the civilian leader? The signals are mixed and Algeria's hope hangs in mid-air.

Of some forty candidates who had filed for nomination to contest for president only seven have received the required approval of the Constitutional Council. In itself this is not a surprise. But among the candidates whose nomination has been rejected is Sheikh Mahfouz Nahnah of the Movement for Peaceful Society (MPS), a moderate Islamic party popularly known as Hamas. The reason offered for disqualifying him is that he did not participate in Algeria's liberation struggle of 1954-62, a requirement for candidate born before 1942. The justification being spurious, a dark shadow has thus been cast on the electoral process.

Most Algerians question the fairness of the Council's ruling. Leading personalities and organizations associated with the war of independence testify that Sheikh Nahnah did in fact participate in the struggle for independence. Among them are such prominent nationalist leaders as Mohammed Yazid, who gained worldwide fame as the FLN's information chief during the war of independence, and former officers of the National Liberation Army such as Youssef Khatib who is one of the seven presidential candidates approved by the Constitutional Council. Similarly, Mouloud

The military's more than four decades of political dominance has caused Algeria much agony. Its economy has been mismanaged, society distorted, and the polity riven with tension, repression and strife. Algeria's agony cannot begin to end until its military rulers relinquish their hold on state power, let civilians elected by the people govern the country, make mistakes and give an accounting of their failures and accomplishments through the democratic process. Whatever its failings, democracy is the only system of government in our time that offers a mechanism of correction, renewal and reforms.

In the Muslim world I knew of no country whose people were better prepared for democracy than were Algerians. Seven years of a most demanding struggle for liberation had raised their level of political consciousness and instilled in them a degree of organizational capability, social and political discipline that I have not witnessed in a dozen other countries I know from Morocco to Pakistan. Yet, no people other than the hapless Afghans are more tragically enchained by the forces of militarized authoritarianism and religious obscurantism than the Algerians. They know this all too well, which is why the promise of fresh elections has aroused so much hope. And that is why the disillusionment can be so devastating.