

Spoiled ballots reflect loss of confidence in Algerian regime, politicians

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunis

Algerian voters jolted the predictable routine of the country's parliamentary elections by disfiguring ballots or casting blank votes in record numbers, exposing discontent with the status quo amid anxieties over the leadership transition from ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Algerian Interior Ministry figures for the May 4 elections indicated that the number of spoiled and blank ballots equalled the combined vote total received by the two ruling parties – the National Liberation Front (FLN), led by Bouteflika, who has rarely been seen in public since a 2013 stroke, and the Democratic National Rally, led by Bouteflika's top aide, Ahmed Ouyahia.

A total of 8,624,199 ballots were cast with 2,109,917 spoiled or blank papers, official figures showed.

“The elections showed the regime has ruined its own legitimacy.”

Algerian political commentator Saad Okba

The turnout was 35% of eligible voters compared to 43% in the 2012 election.

The FLN and the Rally together won 264 of the 462 parliamentary seats. They were trailed by an Islamist alliance led by the Muslim Brotherhood's local branch, Movement for the Society of Peace, with 33 seats.

More than 30 opposition groups and alliances shared the rest with main secular parties, Socialist Forces Front and Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), winning 14 and nine seats, respectively.

Voters wrote on ballots their grievances about unemployment, corruption and the rigidity of a regime that has remained fundamentally the same since the country's independence in 1962. Many also took issue with the opposition, which they branded as tame and docile, local media reported.

“The elections showed the regime has ruined its own legitimacy,” said Algerian political commentator Saad Okba. “The spoiled ballots have nullified the legitimacy of the upcoming parliament and the government is to blame for this disaster.”

“The government threatened youth that they would lose all social benefits from the state if they failed to vote and the youth spoiled the ballots to punish the government,” he said.

The government had hoped for a high turnout to claim a victory after it secured the participation of opposition parties from all political hues for the first time in decades.

“The leaders of ruling parties and of this government of misery do not understand and care about the meaning of legitimacy. That's why they undertook such actions that severed the core trunk of their legitimacy,” said Okba.

“A large majority of Algerians had perfectly expressed this view during the May 4 polls. For them, the parliament, like other bodies, does not represent their interests and even less so defend them,” political scientist Chadly Benguesmia said.

“That is why the divorce is con-



Low turnout. Algerian women cast their votes at a polling station in Algiers, on May 4.

(AFP)

summated between the population and both politicians and politics.”

Opposition Jil Jadid (New Generation) leader Soufiane Djilali said: “The massive abstention is a total rejection of the regime.”

Other politicians slammed the government for the outcome of the vote. Far-left Socialist Party chief Louisa Hanoune called the results a “hold-up.”

Parliament will play a key role in sustaining Algeria's social and political stability for the next five years at a time when leadership is searching for a way to manage the transition from Bouteflika's 20-year rule, if his health permits him to complete his mandate in 2019.

Bouteflika, 80, was wheeled in a chair to vote but was unable to physically cast his ballot; one of his nephews did it for him. He also had trouble with the fingerprinting afterward.

“The after-vote government will be squeezed between a deficit of legitimacy as the unpopularity of

those who manage the country had come out beyond worse forecasts and the necessity to make painful economic and financial adjustments,” said Algerian political analyst Rabia Said.

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“And in politics there is a rule of thumb that had not changed: No demands of sacrifices from the people in times when there is a shortage of legitimacy,” he added.

Analysts said there were no political challenges to the government from organised opposition but feared popular discontent could fuel jihadism decades after Algeria emerged from a civil war that shook the country between 1992 and the early 2000s.

Sociologist Mohamed Taibi from Algiers University said: “Algeria's opposition is conventional and formalistic. It is focused on short-term tactics. It has no strategy and the absence of a charismatic opposition leader further deepens the crisis.”

Algerian officials shrugged off criticism of the elections and the pessimistic conclusions drawn by analysts about the low participation, insisting that the country will remain stable.

They said Algerians enjoy fundamental rights in a multiparty system with 72 registered political groups.

Algerian Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra cited the “peaceful and fair elections” of May 4 as an example of what he called the “significant progress of democracy.”

“Democracy in Algeria is neither a campaign slogan nor a caprice of intellectuals. It is rather a day-to-day reality experienced by the Algerian people,” he said.

Parliamentary elections in Algeria where everybody lost, except women

Viewpoint



Khaled Omar Ben Guiga

The results of the parliamentary elections in Algeria were quite different from what the participating parties, especially the Islamist ones, had expected.

While the outcome offered surprises, there had been a clear conflict discernable on four levels during the campaigns.

First, there was an obvious generational gap between the old guard from the days of the Algerian revolution and independence and a younger generation not convinced of the prevailing traditional political discourse.

Second, the competing institutions fought a particularly fierce campaign relying greatly on social media.

Third, the conflict between political parties and the public. By not voting it sent the parties a resounding message of disapproval. The voter abstention rate was 61% and 10% of the cast votes were annulled.

The fourth aspect of conflict was, of course, the ruthless competition between the parties themselves. The elections revealed the relative political importance of each party and particularly exposed the utter

failure of the Islamist parties.

The reactions to the results of the May 4 vote were as expected. The old parties either played down the significance of them or doubted their transparency. Secretary-General of the National Front Djamel Ould Abbas claimed the elections had only a minor impact on the political scene, while Abderrazak Mokri from the Islamist Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) and Louisa Hanoune from the Workers' Party simply described the elections as rigged.

The truth, however, is not found in their explanations. There are new realities in Algeria that cannot be ignored.

Here are some of them:

Fifty-seven parties took part in the elections but most of the electorate stayed away. This means that, except for parties that boycotted the elections, all of the others were lumped in the same camp. There were no opposition parties.

The government's alarmist campaign had failed. The authorities wanted the public to believe that abstaining or boycotting the elections would plunge the country into chaos. That has not happened and the majority of the people showed they no longer trust the state's institutions, especially the parliament. Still, the social explosion is coming, no doubt.

The party that made the most

improvement in terms of results was the National Democratic Rally (NDR), led by Ahmed Ouyahia, with 97 seats won, an increase of 29 from the 2012 elections. The NDR represents 21% of the new parliament.

Although still leading the election results with 164 seats, the National Liberation Front lost 44 seats from the 2012 polls.

The biggest losers in the 2017 elections were the Islamists. They had been confident of a sweeping victory. However, the total number of seats mustered by all the Islamist parties did not exceed 67 seats – 14.5% of the parliament seats. This result could hardly be useful to the Islamists even in case they are joined in a political bloc by the independent candidates, who totalled 28 seats.

The Islamists entered the elections represented by two poles. The first was an alliance between MSP and the Front for Change. They represent the Muslim Brotherhood and won 33 seats, a drop of 15 seats from 2012. The second Islamist pole was an alliance between three parties: the Ennahda Movement, the El-Bina Movement and the Justice and Development Front. The alliance won 15 seats.

Leftist and socialist parties also regressed. The oldest opposition party in Algeria, the Socialist Forces Front, won 14 seats. In the 2012 elections, the Front won 27.

139 seats – 30% – of the new parliament will go to women.

The Workers' Party did no better. It has won 11 seats this time, a significant drop from the 24 seats won in 2012.

All the major political forces in Algeria have regressed in the polls, especially the Islamist parties. In previous elections, these parties had found a place on the political map thanks in part to their alliances with the government. One indirect factor behind the overall regression of the major parties is the participation of small parties, which have been able each to lay hands on a seat here and there.

The major losers in the 2017 parliamentary polls remain the Algerian people. The Algerian Parliament is going to be composed mostly of members who have not won the public's trust. The same goes for the state's institutions and the government in general, led by President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The government simply keeps postponing dealing with the country's problems.

One positive result in the elections was the rise in the number of women elected to the parliament: 139 seats – 30% – of the new parliament will go to women, mainly as a result of enforcing election laws and observing international standards.

Khaled Omar Ben Guiga is an Algerian writer and journalist.

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