



Algeria's Referendum: Stirrings of Democracy and the Decline of Islamism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The events surrounding the recent constitutional referendum in Algeria reflect broader trends in the region and the prospect that Algeria might eventually join the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan in normalizing relations with Israel.

Algeria is physically distant from Israel and not uppermost in Israeli minds. The last headlines featuring Algeria in the Israeli press appeared decades ago, when Algeria hosted the Palestinian National Council of the PLO in November 1988, one year into the intifada—the event at which the PLO announced the “declaration of independence” of the Palestinian state, which some interpreted as an implicit acceptance of the two-state solution.

But Israelis should pay attention to events that have occurred in Algeria over the past two years, particularly the results of the recent referendum on Algeria's new constitution. These events reflect deeper currents and developments in the world surrounding Israel that clearly affect Israel and its citizens.

What is most striking about the Algeria of today compared to the Algeria of old is its almost total focus on domestic politics at the expense of regional and international affairs.

Algeria, the radical state with close ties to the former Soviet Union that hosted many revolutionary and subversive movements, the country that spawned the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale), which was emulated by hundreds of similar movements in the Third World, is now a distant memory. Over the past three decades and particularly since the massive public mobilization to bring down a senile octogenarian four-term president, both the Algerian

political elite and wider Algerian circles have focused their attention on domestic issues.

These issues include government corruption and favoritism, persistently high levels of unemployment, flawed educational and bureaucratic systems, continuous underlying tensions between religious and secular and Arabs and Berbers, and the overlap between those social tensions. Most Berbers are secular while most religious Algerians, especially those who champion Islamism, also support the dominance of Arab culture and the primacy, if not exclusivity, of the Arabic language.

In the recent past, it was secular-religious tensions that drew attention—especially in the 1990s, when Algeria fell prey to a savage war between the military-backed state elite and its Islamist fundamentalist challengers. Most of the victims—60,000-100,000 of them—were common folk who fell into neither camp but were massacred by each side for supposedly backing the other.

In this sense, the massive recent protests against the state elite, which won the war against the fundamentalists thanks to an army financed by oil revenues, could only be welcome news. The protests were peaceful, and the state elite and the army responded largely in kind. The government aimed to exhaust the protesters, who sought the removal of the president. The protesters achieved that goal, but did not succeed in dislodging the state elite that has been ruling the country since independence was declared in 1962.

The failure to dislodge the incumbents was partially the fault of the protest movement, which failed—in keeping with so many other massive protest movements—to create large, well-organized parties that could negotiate the desired transition. An example of a bargaining chip could have been the granting of a general amnesty to the ruling elite in return for relinquishing power.

The protesters were also foiled by a factor over which they had no control: the COVID-19 virus, which put them in the position of having to choose between their political goals and the more basic goal of halting the spread of the virus.

It is against this stalemate that Algeria's constitutional referendum should be analyzed.

The incumbents decided, after the president was deposed, to try to mollify the protesters by changing the constitution. The changes they proposed were by no means merely cosmetic. The new constitution limits the presidency and members of parliament to two terms, whether consecutively or not—a real

game changer (should it be honored) in a country whose presidents have remained in office far beyond that limit. The president's power has also been clipped: he must choose the PM from the parliamentary majority rather than select anyone he wants. Another article forbids the state from imposing cultural hegemony, a bid to satisfy the sizeable Berber minority that aroused the ire of the Islamist party.

Three groups emerged in response to the constitutional referendum. The first was the protest movement, most elements of which were not mollified by the referendum and which called for boycotts against calls by the incumbents to support it. The second was the state elite that initiated the referendum, which obviously urged the public to vote in favor. The third was the Islamists, who called upon Algeria's citizens to vote "no" on the referendum in protest against the secular liberal portions of the proposal.

The results indicate that the protesters clearly won, as less than a quarter of the electorate showed up to vote. The Islamists lost the most. Not only did the vast majority fail to heed their calls to participate in the vote, but those who did vote overwhelmingly supported the incumbents (66%).

The politics of the Algerian referendum reflect much about the Arab world today. There is a palpable desire to change the political status quo and a nearly exclusive focus on domestic concerns (at the expense of regional causes like the Palestinian issue). The referendum results also represent a continuation of the decline of political Islam in the region since 2013, when an Egyptian counter-coup removed a Muslim Brotherhood president from office.

Above all, the results reflect the sense of drift pervading countries as far afield from one another as Lebanon, Iraq, and Sudan. The protesters might have won, but it was a Pyrrhic victory at best as the ruling elite is still in power. Yet the elite too has reason to worry, as it knows and fears that the protests will eventually resume.

The good news in Algeria is that bloodshed was kept to a minimum. The willingness of both sides to constrain violence is the first step toward democracy. Israelis should view the Algerian experience with hope that the new inhibition against violence in a country that has witnessed so much of it will yield a desire to normalize relations with Israel, a development that will benefit both countries.

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