

# ALGERIA'S ELECTIONS – A TEST FOR DEMOCRACY

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An emerging coalition of Algerian opposition figures Tuesday [19 March] rejected President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's plan to remain in office while overseeing a political transition from his 20-year rule, echoing the demands of street protesters that he step down next month. The group also urged the military to stay out of any political handover and not repeat the mistakes of other Arab countries where armies stepped in to take control, often violently, as long-time rulers were ousted during the Arab Spring protests of 2011. The opposition figures' call for the president to step down came as Mr Bouteflika and his allies were trying to steady themselves following a month of massive street protests, sparked by

his announcement he would seek a fifth term in office. Last week, Mr Bouteflika, 82, said he would drop his re-election bid and postponed elections set for 18 April. That move unleashed a wave of euphoria throughout the country that has since turned into a renewed round of street protests demanding he leave immediately. (*Washington Post*)

## **Background**

Algeria gained independence from French colonial rule in 1962, after an eight-year war that is said to have claimed the lives of up to 700,000 and displaced an estimated two million. It is interesting to note that in 1988 Algeria experienced nationwide protests that produced a new, apparently liberal constitution. It led some analysts to conclude that Algeria was the most democratic country in the Arab world. However, within just over a decade of the constitution being approved, Algeria fell into civil war after the military generals cancelled election results as they were concerned by the imminent victory of an Islamist party.

The civil war of the 1990s was so horrific that it continues to weigh on the minds of many Algerians who lived through that period, who prefer stability over anything that could potentially reignite violence. That period was marked by torture, terrorist attacks, and other atrocities, and ultimately led to more than 200,000 deaths. The youth have been prominent in the current protests and the large majority of them would not have experienced anything of that dark period in their history.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika is widely credited for stemming the violence and initiating Algeria's economic regeneration when he came to power in 1999. However, his rule has not been entirely beneficial and gradually the Algerian Constitution was amended to allow his almost perpetual rule. He built a durable regime that relied on strict control by the nation's security and intelligence services and tightly controlled political participation by opposition political movements. An elite group, known as 'le pouvoir' (the power), has gained tremendous power and wealth during his authoritarian rule. According to *Vox*, after his 2013 stroke, this elite group within the political, military, and business communities helped run the country in Mr Bouteflika's name — not only to maintain their authority but also because there was no consensus regarding a successor.

## **Unprecedented protests**

It was the declaration that the largely incapacitated Mr Bouteflika (wheelchair bound, and seldom seen in public since his stroke) would run for a fifth term in the upcoming April elections that greatly angered tens of thousands of Algerians, especially young people, who since 22 February have taken to the streets in various cities — including the capital, Algiers, where protests are legally forbidden — to demonstrate. Chanting slogans like "Bouteflika: get out!" the protesters shocked the country's elites. The rebellion against the president, however, has now become a call for much deeper political and social change.

There are two key driving forces behind the protests: a deepening economic crisis, with many youths facing an uncertain future and potential unemployment; but more importantly protestors are tired of having unknown and unseen forces run their country behind the scenes.

## ***Algeria after Bouteflika***

The 'le pouvoir' does not have a solution and any attempt to play for time on their part will not resolve Algeria's underlying problems. To most Algerians, the current president is an object of derision or pity. Algerians cannot say what will happen when the 'strongman' dies. But, far from preventing another civil war, the government currently risks stoking one.

Potentially, a temporary government could oversee a transition to a more open system, creating a national conference to develop reforms. Presidential and parliamentary elections could then be held after the opposition, which is weak and divided, has been able to become more organised. The country's next leader could improve things by encouraging entrepreneurs, rather than standing in their way, breaking up the government's business empire and inviting foreign investment. Much like Mr Bouteflika, Algeria has been ailing for some time, but there is hope that the country can still be saved.

It remains to be seen who the current government will choose to succeed Mr Bouteflika, and therein lies the potential for violence if a power struggle erupts. If that's the case, violence could once again erupt in Africa's largest nation. However, even as democracy faces an uphill struggle, recent tentative successes such as Ethiopia's transition and that of Armenia, provide a glimmer of hope. Thus, the possibility for true change in Algeria is certainly not doomed. Neighbouring Tunisia, which is often cited as the only "clear success" of the 2011 Arab Spring protests, showed that democracy can take hold even amid a downturn. Transitions to democracy are rare and even when they do succeed, they are not as durable as previously believed. However, it is possible that Algeria will defy the odds.

## ***FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE***

There were times in Algeria's not too distant past when spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ was far easier than now and foreign workers as well as the Church were less 'underground'. However, in recent times there's been a greater clamp down. Algeria is 97% Muslim, with approximately 99,000 Christians (0.25%). In Algeria it is illegal to "incite a Muslim to change his religion". Over the last year, Algeria has seen an increasing number of churches closed. At the same time, Christian converts have become more open about their faith, leading to a backlash by Muslim families and an often-intolerant society. If democracy has an opportunity to gain a foothold in Algeria, a period of openness for the Church would need to be guarded and utilised to grow the Church's resilience to face the next period of resistance and persecution.

Something similar was experienced in Afghanistan after years of profound persecution, a window of opportunity opened just briefly – but in that season good 'seeds' were planted that have subsequently flourished and these resilient believers continue to grow spiritually and numerically, even amid renewed oppression and persecution. Algeria could face a similar season.

Scripture reminds us that God appoints earthly leaders (Daniel 2:21). It will be no different in Algeria's case, but prayer is needed during this time of great uncertainty.

## **PRAY**

- **For a peaceful resolution to the political crisis**
- **For Algeria's leadership to respond constructively to criticism**
- **For the Church to offer peace and hope in these times of uncertainty**

## **IMAGE SOURCE:**

[https://static01.nyt.com/images/2019/03/13/world/13int-algeria-1/merlin\\_151959267\\_034a609a-3da1-45fc-bd4e-247f7403d0c3-articleLarge.jpg?quality=75&auto=webp&disable=upscale](https://static01.nyt.com/images/2019/03/13/world/13int-algeria-1/merlin_151959267_034a609a-3da1-45fc-bd4e-247f7403d0c3-articleLarge.jpg?quality=75&auto=webp&disable=upscale)