
Do political parties matter in bringing about a democratic transition? An analysis of their role after Bouteflika's resignation in Algeria

¿Son relevantes los partidos políticos para desencadenar una transición democrática? Un análisis de su papel tras la dimisión de Buteflika en Argelia

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Abstract

President Bouteflika's resignation in April 2019, in response to large public demonstrations, opened a democratic window of opportunity for regime change in Algeria. Nevertheless, despite widespread disaffection with the regime, opposition parties have been incapable of triggering a democratic transition in Algeria. The military took control of the situation and imposed its own roadmap to put an end to the political crisis, pushing for presidential elections in December 2019. The elected president, Tebboune, a former prime minister under Bouteflika's presidency, introduced a constitutional amendment in 2020 and called for parliamentary elections to be held on June 12th, 2021. This article analyzes the political stances and actions by the Algerian political parties regarding these political processes that were intended to be the foundations of the new republic. The case study of the Algerian crisis contributes to the theories on democratization and authoritarian resilience. It does so by showing that, even under favourable conditions of intense social pressure for democratic change and widespread disaffection with the authoritarian regime, political parties cannot be a democratizing agent if: (1) the opposition remains divided; (2) the parties do not build broad opposition alliances, not only between parties but also with civil society; and (3) the political regime retains the support of a number of loyal political parties.

Keywords: democratic transition, authoritarian resilience, political parties, elections, constitutional reform, Algeria.

Resumen

La dimisión del presidente Bouteflika en abril de 2019, en respuesta a las amplias protestas populares, abrió una ventana de oportunidad democrática para un cambio de régimen en

Argelia. Sin embargo, a pesar del descontento generalizado con el régimen, los partidos de oposición no han sido capaces de desencadenar una transición democrática en Argelia. Los militares tomaron el control de la situación e impusieron su propia hoja de ruta para poner fin a la crisis política, presionando para la celebración de elecciones presidenciales en diciembre de 2019. El presidente electo, Tebboune, ex primer ministro bajo la presidencia de Bouteflika, impulsó una reforma de la Constitución en 2020 y convocó elecciones parlamentarias para el 12 de junio de 2021. Este artículo analiza las posiciones y acciones políticas de los partidos políticos argelinos frente a estos procesos políticos que pretendían ser los cimientos de la nueva república. El estudio de caso de la crisis argelina contribuye a las teorías sobre democratización y resiliencia autoritaria. Lo hace demostrando que, incluso en condiciones favorables de intensa presión social por un cambio democrático y una desafección generalizada hacia el régimen autoritario, los partidos políticos no pueden ser una agencia democratizadora si: (1) la oposición permanece dividida, (2) los partidos no construyen amplias alianzas —no solo entre partidos, sino también con la sociedad civil— y (3) el régimen político conserva el apoyo de partidos leales.

Palabras clave: transición democrática, resiliencia autoritaria, partidos políticos, elecciones, reforma constitucional, Argelia.

INTRODUCTION

Algerians has unsuccessfully tried twice to change the nature of the political regime¹. The first attempt led to a multi-party system and founding elections that were cancelled, what resulted in a ten-year civil war (Martínez, 2000). The second peaceful attempt started on February 22nd, 2019 when millions of Algerians took to the streets in opposition to the ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's intention to run for a fifth term, giving rise to the so-called *Hirak* movement². As a consequence of the demonstrations, on March 11th, Bouteflika announced that he would refrain from seeking re-election and that the presidential election would be postponed. In addition, the unpopular prime minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, was replaced by Noureddine Bedoui. However, it was not enough to put an end to the protests. As a result, in a televised speech on March 26th, the chief of staff of the National People's Army and Deputy Minister of National Defense, Lieutenant-General Ahmed Gaid Salah³, proposed

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1. Regarding the Arab uprisings, most protests in Algeria were small in size and local in focus, and posed no threat to the regime (Volpi, 2013).
 2. The peaceful protests continued every Friday and Tuesday (students) until the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis in March 2020. The movement returned to the streets in February 2021. The founding feature of the movement was that it was a mass movement, deliberately lacking a centralizing and organizing core (Joffé, 2021: 825). For a broader analysis of the social movement, see: Dris-Aït-Hamadouche and Cherif (2019); Joffé (2019, 2021); Thieux (2019); Volpi (2020).
 3. Gaid Salah suddenly died on December 23rd, 2019 and was replaced by Saïd Chengriha, what implied no change whatsoever in the military agenda for the political crisis.

starting the “constitutional procedures” —in reference to Article 102— to declare the president unfit for office. Finally, having lost the critical backing of the army, Bouteflika stepped down on April 2nd.

Since independence, the military has played a leading role in Algeria’s politics, appointing or approving every president and influencing the political decision-making process in the shadows. Whereas the president exercises the formal power, the effective power is wielded by the military commanders acting in the shadows. In the last years of Bouteflika’s presidency, the presidential “clan”⁴ sought to weaken the army’s influence, by jailing or dismissing top army officials, dissolving the powerful Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS) and placing the secret services under the president’s authority. Nevertheless, the army maintained control not only over the political sphere, but also the economy, where the military has woven a complex network of client relations that developed through the protection of public companies and the distribution of profits from hydrocarbons⁵.

Bouteflika’s resignation opened a democratic window of opportunity for regime change in Algeria. However, a democratic transition did not occur; rather, there has been a reconfiguration of the authoritarian regime under control of the military to preserve the structure of power. The lieutenant-general Ahmed Gaid Salah emerged as the real wielder of power and the military imposed its own roadmap to put an end to the political crisis, pushing for presidential elections. After an unsuccessful attempt to hold elections on July 4th, they finally went ahead on December 12th, 2019. Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a former prime minister under Bouteflika’s presidency, emerged victorious with 58.15 % of the vote. Following his appointment, Tebboune announced an extensive constitutional reform as “an essential step towards the new republic”, the amendment of the electoral law, and the election of a new Parliament⁶. The Hirak and several political parties rejected Tebboune’s reformist plans, demanding the departure of the ruling elite and a genuine democracy for Algeria, based on civil rather than military rule.

In light of these facts, the aim of this article is to analyze the role played by political parties in the Algerian crisis. Although political parties were not key to the spread of the protests —and in fact, some leaders were discredited and accused of trying to appropriate the social movement— parties adopted political stances and took actions to cope with the political crisis (Dris-Aït-Hamadouche and Dris, 2019: 5).

4. The influential circle close to the presidency included politicians and wealthy private businessmen. Due to Bouteflika’s illness, his brother Saïd Bouteflika was identified as *de facto* ruler. Saïd Bouteflika was arrested in May and sentenced to 15 years in prison for “undermining the authority of the army” and “conspiring against the authority of the state”. However, he later appealed and his sentence was quashed in February 2020.

5. For a broader explanation of Algerian power relationships see: Zoubir (2020); Hachemaoui (2020); Mañé-Estrada *et al.* (2019); Yolcu (2019); Bustos and Mañé-Estrada (2013); Szmolka (2006); Roberts (2003).

6. Tebboune’s public speech on February 23rd, 2020 (*Echorouk*, February 23rd, 2020).

Furthermore, it is worth studying why opposition parties have failed to promote a democratic transition in Algeria, despite the favorable scenario of huge social pressure for democratization. With the Hirak having refused to assume a visible leadership role and to transform itself into a political structure, political parties could have been expected to become the main interlocutor in negotiations with the regime (Joffé, 2019: 352) and challenge the military power.

Therefore, the present article can contribute to an understanding of democratization, explaining the causes of the political parties' limited capacity to trigger a democratic transition despite a domestic context favourable to democratic change: the fall of the incumbent president, widespread social mobilization against the regime and radical demands for democratization from several opposition parties⁷. By analyzing the Algerian case, this article aims to shed light on the obstacles to democratic transition, focusing on the role played by political parties.

Whereas the co-optation strategies of opposition parties through their participation in institutional politics has been broadly studied to explain the resilience of authoritarian regimes in Arab countries⁸, the influence of the political parties in triggering transition processes in the studies on this region has not attracted the same attention. Indeed, one of the criticisms levelled at the prevailing paradigm of authoritarian persistence at the outbreak of the Arab uprisings was that scholars had been more concerned with explaining the endurance of authoritarianism than studying the factors and actors that could generate democratic change (Brumberg, 2012). Hence, the article aims to contribute to both democratization and authoritarian resilience studies. The hypothesis is that citizens' distrust towards the political parties, a highly fragmented party system, a divided opposition, and the support for the political regime by several loyal parties could explain why Algerian parties have struggled to become a crucial agent of democratic change and a serious challenger to the military.

The study uses process tracing method to collect the data to trace the causality between the irrelevance of political parties to trigger a democratic transition and the characteristics of the party system in the case of Algeria. The research is based on Algerian press and political parties' declarations on their websites and Facebook. On the one hand, the article reviews press representing different stances in relation to the political regime: in terms of the pro-regime press, the focus is on the *Algerian Press Service* (APS) and *El-Moudjahid*, *Ennahar* and *Echorouk* journals; while independent and critical journals are represented by *Al-Khabar*, *Al-Watan*, *Le Matin d'Algerie* and *Liberté*. On the other hand, Algerian political parties' publications on their respective

7. On the contrary, the Algerian political crisis took place in an international context of growing authoritarianism (Lührmann and Lindberg, 2019). Although the authoritarian diffusion effect (Ambrosio, 2010; Ambrosio and Tolstrup, 2019) and the interrelation between the domestic, regional and international dimensions deserve to be studied (Cimini and Tomé-Alonso, 2021), the current research focus on a particular domestic factor, that is, political parties as agency of democratization.

8. Among other authors: Lust-Okar (2004); Storm (2014); Willis (2014); Hinnebush (2017).

websites and on Facebook have been consulted. However, some Algerian parties do not use social networks or the publications are outdated, so these sources of information are instructive only in certain cases⁹. The study covers the period ranging from February 22th, 2019 (the outbreak of the social protests) to July 3rd, 2021 (three weeks after the legislative elections). The corpus was collected and categorized based on the following items: journal/ Facebook/ website; date; political party/ alliance; political process to which the unit of analysis refers (Bouteflika's resignation/ presidential elections/ constitutional reform); party demands/ statements/ positions; and references to the relationships between parties and civil society organizations. The references cited in the article refer to the aspects that we considered more significant to illustrate party positions on the political crisis.

The article is organized as follows. After this introduction, the second section discusses the scholarly literature on the role of political parties in democratization processes. Section three deals with the characteristics of Algerian party system and the party alliances created after Bouteflika's resignation. Sections four, five and six, respectively, analyze the political parties' stances towards the 2019 presidential elections, Tebboune's constitutional reform, and the 2021 parliamentary elections. Finally, the paper concludes by evaluating the factors that have determined Algerian parties' inability to bring about a democratic transition and discussing the implications of the research findings for democratization and authoritarian resilience theories.

THE ROLE OF POLITICAL PARTIES IN DEMOCRATIZATION

While it is generally assumed that a functioning democracy requires the participation of political parties, there is division among scholars about the importance of the role played by political parties in the origin and development of democratization processes.

On the one hand, some authors provide several reasons why parties matter in democratic transitions. First, it is proposed that political parties represent the voice and aggregate interests of social groups. Political parties channel street politics into conventional institutional patterns, which helps to stabilize democratic transition (Linz and Stepan, 1996: 7). Second, political parties take part in negotiations and agreements to define the rules of the new political game (O'Donnell *et al.*, 2013: 6). In particular, political parties are often decisive in shaping electoral laws and the form of government during constitution-making processes for the regime change (Elster, 1995: 378-379). Third, political parties are an agency of socialization and diffusion of democratic culture, generating public debate, establishing a political agenda and acting as vehicles for mobilization and political participation (Storm, 2017: 64). In

9. FFS, RCD, PT, PST, UCP, MDS, PLD, MSP, Jil Jadid, MPA, TAJ, El-Moustakbal and RND (since October 2019).

brief, “political parties are critical to at least three elements of the democratization processes: coordinating, negotiating, and designing regime change; participating in competitive elections; and generating citizen support for democracy before and after elections are held” (Bermeo and Yashar, 2016: 22).

On the other hand, other authors claim that the role of parties in the process of democratization is unclear. For Lewis (2001: 546-549), political parties play a more critical role in consolidating a democratization process than in unleashing a democratic transition. Rather than participation and integration, parties are more critically concerned with establishing legitimacy in the more rapidly consolidating democracies.

There is also debate about the conditions under which political parties play a crucial role in democratic transitions. Schmitter (2010: 23-24) underlines that political parties matter even in an unfavourable scenario of party fragmentation, weak parties and limited public trust. Many a new democracy has consolidated as a regime without having first consolidated its party system. Other scholars point out several factors that influence the role of political parties in democratic transitions, such as the existence of strong opposition parties, the building of broad and cross-ideological party alliances, and the development of relationships between political parties and civil society.

Thus, Pridham (1990) posits that strong and effective political parties are crucial to any successful democratization effort. Likewise, Le Bas (2011: 246) considers that strong opposition parties generate the necessary pressure to drive forward democratization. In order to play this role, political parties must find means of boosting grassroots mobilization and maintaining opposition cohesion. Whereas studies of the third wave of democratization suggested that negotiation and consent were key factors in transition processes, Le Bas maintains that strong political parties are most likely to be built through strategies that encourage conflict with incumbent parties, in order to build the kind of oppositional identity and values that sustain mobilization and prevent selective co-optation.

In addition, the academic literature underlines the significance of alliances among political parties for a successful democratic transition. By forming alliances, political parties can increase the pressure on the authoritarian regime for political liberalization or democratization. Sato and Wahman (2019: 14) find solid evidence, in a worldwide statistical study of 74 electoral autocracies in the period 1991-2014, that democratic change is likely to happen when popular protests are combined with a unified opposition. The fact is that political parties in Arab countries have found it difficult to collaborate and maintain durable alliances (Berriane and Duboc, 2019: 400). This can be explained by a number of factors: ideological differences; mutual mistrust among parties competing under authoritarian conditions and facing an uncertain future; expectations of electoral strength; and the authoritarian regime’s engineering of the opposition field, mainly through co-optation and repression (Ghandi, 2008; Shehata, 2009; Clark, 2010; Haugbølle and Cavatorta, 2011; Buehler, 2018).

Nevertheless, not only are party alliances important in helping to ensure democratic transition, but it is also crucial that political parties and civil society build

relationships with one another (Hawthorne, 2004). Although a “natural tension” can be perceived between political parties and civil society, there is also a “mutual interdependence”. Civil society groups represent specific needs and interests, but they cannot translate their actions into decision-making, nor compromise to assemble broad coalitions that produce a governing majority. Thus, “civil society can initiate a democratic transition; but only parties, with the help of civil society, can consolidate a democratic system and institutionalize a democratic political process” (Gershman, 2004: 30).

Finally, several authors call attention to the nature of the political regime as a conditioning factor of the role of political parties in democratization. Lust and Waldner (2016: 158-162) explain the variation in the types, capacities and performance of political parties in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Iraq after the Arab uprisings, depending on the legacies of authoritarian strategies of rule based on co-optation and repression. Authoritarian legacies influence the nature and role of political parties in the transition period, affecting their ability to represent constituents and shaping the cleavages around which they do so. Besides, authoritarian strategies affect the dynamics of party competition and hence the incentives driving parties to either construct or undermine democratic institutions. In addition, Resta explains that “electoral authoritarianism” shaped transitional party politics in Egypt and led to the failure of democratic transition in 2011-2013 (2019: 1). The former regime’s practice of playing opposition actors off against each other through identity politics explains the absence of common ground among the political parties during the transition. Similarly, Bouandel points out that the Algerian transition process of 1988-1990 collapsed, among other factors, because the political parties lacked a commitment to democratic principles. They were mainly interested in “capitalizing on the new freedoms” in a political space where there was so much at stake (2003: 19).

By taking into account the theoretical considerations outlined above, the following sections analyze the role played by political parties and party alliances in the political processes that followed president Bouteflika’s resignation.

ALGERIAN PARTY SYSTEM AND PARTY ALLIANCES FACING THE 2019 POLITICAL CRISIS

After gaining independence in 1962, Algeria established a single-party regime under the National Liberation Front (FLN). As a consequence of nationwide protests in October 1988, Algeria moved from a single- to a multi-party system and started a democratic transition. This process was interrupted by the military coup of 1992, aimed at preventing the FIS from winning legislative elections, and the consequent outbreak of a traumatic civil war. Multipartyism and state institutions were restored by presidential elections in November 1995, the approval of a new constitution in November 1996, and the election of a new Parliament in June 1997. Since then, Algeria has held presidential and parliamentary elections every five years as prescribed by the constitution.

Nevertheless, these political processes have not brought about a democratic regime, but rather a hegemonic and restrictive pluralist authoritarianism (Szmolka, 2017: 22-23). Parties were permitted to participate and interact in the political system, but there was no real competition in terms of access to power. Party competition was restricted by the bicephalous hegemonic position of the former single-party FLN and the National Rally for Democracy (RND), founded in 1997 by supporters of then-president Zeroual. Both parties alternated at the head of government. Other parties were allowed to gain seats in Parliament and some even formed part of the coalition government, but they never held genuine decision-making power (Storm, 2017: 67). Algerian parties are prone to engage themselves in formal politics as their participation enable parties to benefit from the patronage and other perks of proximity to centres of power (Storm, 2014; Ghanem, 2018). Through this co-optation strategy, the political regime achieves broad parliamentary representation and prevents opposition parties from challenging the political regime.

A highly fragmented and discredit party system

At the time of the outbreak of the protests, the Algerian party system was highly fragmented. The number of parties competing in the 2017 legislative elections was 69 (out of the 71 political parties officially registered); and 35 of them obtained seats in the People's National Assembly (APN). In addition, there were several non-authorized parties, such as the Social and Democratic Union (UDS)¹⁰, and parties that boycotted the 2017 elections, including Jil Jadid (New Generation) and Talaie El-Houriat Party (Vanguard of Liberties). Lastly, the new scenario that opened up after Bouteflika's resignation prompted the legalization of a dozen new political parties¹¹.

Most of the Algerian parties are too small, lack strong internal organizations and mechanisms of internal democracy (Willis, 2002a, 2000b; Addi, 2006; Dris-Aït-Hamadouche and Zoubir, 2009). Many of them are the by-product of splits often driven by personal ambitions while others have been promoted by the own political regime. Furthermore, there is a weak relationship between parties and voters. Political parties are widely discredited in public opinion due to the perception that their main goal is to grasp some form of power (Dris-Aït-Hamadouche and Zoubir, 2009; Joffé, 2019: 354; Aghrout and Zoubir, 2016). In fact, political parties are the least trusted political institutions among Algerians. According to the Arab Barometer of 2016, only 14 % of Algerians trust political

10. The UDS was born in 2013. Its leader is Karim Tabbou, former secretary-general of the FFS between 2007 and 2011. Tabbou emerged as one of the main figures of the Hirak and has been imprisoned twice during the political crisis.

11. *Al Arabiya*, April 10th, 2019. *Algérie Eco*, November 26th, 2019. *APS*, December 21st, 2019.

parties¹². Thus, it is not surprising that Algerians have channelled their demands through protests instead of political parties.

Opposition parties have remained divided and have not promoted an agenda of democratic change or initiatives to improve conditions for Algerian citizens. Instead, “they have embraced the rules of the game, replicating the same patterns of undemocratic behaviour they have denounced in parties close to the regime” (Ghanem, 2018: 13).

Divides in the Algerian party system

The wide spectrum of Algerian political parties can be classified according to three divides: ideological, religious and ethnic.

Regarding the ideological divide, nationalism is a criterion of identification for several parties due to the legitimizing role that nationalism has played on Algerian politics. The main nationalist party is the FLN, which was born from the nationalist movement against colonialism in 1954. Other nationalist parties were created by dissidents of the FLN, such as the National Party for Solidarity and Development (PNSD), the Republican National Alliance (ANR); the Future Front (El-Moustakbal), and Talaie El-Houriat. Some of the minority nationalist parties include the Union of Social and Democratic Forces (UFDS), Ahd 54, the Algerian National Front (FNA), and the Algerian Rally (RA) which was reconstituted out of the Islamic Arab Rally. On the other hand, conservative and liberal parties are almost the exception in the Algerian party system —only the RND and to a lesser extent El-Karama are significant. Leftist parties are more numerous and can be categorized according to their different leanings: social-democratic parties, which include the historic Socialist Forces Front (FFS), the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), the Union for Change and Progress (UCP) and the Algerian Popular Movement (MPA); Marxist, including the Democratic and Social Movement (MDS) and the Party for Secularism and Democracy (PLD); and Trotskyist, with the Workers’ Party (PT) and the Socialist Workers Party (PST).

In relation to the religious-secular cleavage, there are several parties with an Islamic orientation, despite the fact that the law of political parties (Organic Law 4-12, of January 15th, 2012) prohibits parties based on religion as well as on linguistic, racial, sexual, corporate or regional grounds¹³. The political participation of the Islamist parties in the political system has represented a means of co-optation, by which the political regime has successfully neutralized and moderated them, contributing to the fragmentation of the Islamist landscape (Ghanem, 2019). The Islamist-oriented

12. Available at: https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/Algeria_Public_Opinion_Survey_2016.pdf

13. On the law on political parties, see: Pérez-Beltrán (2016).

parties have mostly grown out of the Movement for the Society of Peace (MSP) and the Islamic Renaissance Movement (Ennahda), both created in 1990 during the process of adoption of multipartism. Several of the Islamist parties have formed coalitions in order to improve their electoral results. Prior to the 2012 legislative elections, the MSP abandoned the coalition government, which it had joined in 2004 in order to form the Green Algeria Alliance, together with Ennahda and the Movement for National Reform (Islah), party created by Djaballah, former leader of Ennahda in 1999. The Islamist alliance changed in the run up to the 2017 elections, with Islah competing on its own for election, whereas the other parties coalesced around two electoral coalitions: on the one hand, the MSP and the Front for Change, a party which has its origins in a split of the MSP; and, on the other hand, Ennahda and the Justice and Development Front (FJD), Djaballah's new party in 2012. The latter two parties currently form a parliamentary bloc with the Islamo-nationalist Movement of National Building (El-Bina El-Watani), founded by a dissident from the MSP during the Arab Spring in 2013. The Rally of Algerian Hope (TAJ) was also created by a former member of the MSP in 2012, and gained prominence due to its participation in the so-called "presidential alliance", the parties which formed the coalition government after the 2012 elections. Other minority Islamist parties were born against the backdrop of the Arab Spring in 2012, such as the Freedom and Justice Party (PLJ). More recently, the vice-president of TAJ, Mourad Arroudj, formed the Welfare Party (Errafah) in June 2019.

Finally, concerning ethnic cleavage, it is worth noting the Berber parties, which gained the majority of their support from the Kabilia area and Alger. The most important are the aforementioned social-democratic parties, the historic FFS and the RCD, both opposition parties. The MPA, a continuation of an offshoot of the RCD, is also considered a Berber and social-democratic party, but it is close to the political regime as it formed part of the presidential alliance.

Opposition party alliances

In the lead up to Bouteflika's bid to run for a fifth term, there was an attempt to revive the "Coordination Committee for Liberties and Democratic Transition" (CCLDT), an opposition platform bringing together political parties of different ideologies, civil society organizations and public figures, which had emerged in June 2014 in response to Bouteflika's candidacy for the presidential elections held that year. Thus, on March 7th, 2019 the Algerian opposition held a meeting in the headquarters of Talaie El-Houriat, assembling representatives of four trade unions and 15 political parties of different ideologies including the MSP, Talaie El-Houriat, the RCD, the PT and UDS. The extra-parliamentary party Jil Jadid did not take part in the conference, refusing to engage in discussions with opposition parties that had members in the "illegitimate" parliament. The meeting showed that the CCLDT had largely been co-opted by the regime (Cherkaoui *et al.*, 2019). The participants

simply agreed to ask the constitutional council to reject Bouteflika's candidacy, with Karim Tabbou, leader of the UDS, abandoning the gathering because of the tepidity of the discussions.

Later, opposition parties gathered around two different platforms, the "Forces of Change for the People's Choice" and the "Forces of the Democratic Alternative", which differ in terms of their strategies and procedures for political change in Algeria. On the one hand, the Forces of Change for the People's Choice (FC) brought together: two secular-nationalist parties, Talaie El-Houriat and the UFDS; three Islamist parties, the MSP, the FJD and the PLJ; and the extra-parliamentary party Jil Jadid (New Generation). On April 25th, 2019 the FC released a public statement declaring its position in favour of political dialogue with the military, in reaction to Gaid Salah's offer days before.¹⁴ The most significant initiative of the alliance was the proposal for the "National Forum for Dialogue", a conference held on July 6th, 2019 in Aïn Benian. The coordination of the meeting was entrusted to Abdelaziz Rahabi, a former Minister of Communication, who tried unsuccessfully to involve the leftist parties in the discussions¹⁵. Finally, 10 political parties (the FC's parties, the RND, the Islamist Ennahda, the nationalist Ahd 54 and the Islamo-nationalist El-Bina El-Watani), five trade union federations and around 80 associations took part in the conference to discuss solutions to the political crisis. The final document proposed holding presidential elections under the supervision of an independent commission within a period of six months¹⁶. Nevertheless, the FC alliance did not survive because some of the partners changed their minds about the appropriateness of holding presidential elections given the lack of social and political consensus.

On the other hand, the "Political Pact of the Democratic Alternative Forces" (PAD) was created on June 18th, 2019 when seven leftist parties and the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights signed a statement calling for a constitutive meeting of the alliance on June 26th.¹⁷ Those parties were: the FFS and the RCD, UCP, MDS PLD, PT and PST. The PAD has advocated a radical change of the system through a democratic transition led by a sovereign constituent assembly as a solution to "the crisis of the authoritarian regime". The members of the alliance set the preconditions for negotiating the political transition in their constitutive meeting: the release of political and ideological detainees; the opening of the political and media fields; an end to judicial harassment of citizens, activists from political parties and associations, trade unionists, human rights activists, and journalists; and an end to the sale of national wealth and the recovery of looted property¹⁸.

14. *El-Watan*, April 27th, 2019. *Liberté*, April 27th, 2019.

15. Interview with Rahabi, *Le-Watan*, July 4th, 2019.

16. *APS*, July 6th, 2019. *Al-Watan* July 6th, 2019. *Al-Watan* July 7th, 2019. *TSA*, July 6th, 2019.

17. *Le Matin*, June 19th, 2019.

18. PAD, June 26th, 2019, "Political Pact for a genuine democratic transition." See also, PAD declaration, March 10th, 2019 for their concept of democracy.

The PAD alliance subsequently held two more national conventions and numerous periodic meetings. The second national convention was held on September 9th. Besides the signatories of the pact, members of civil society and representatives of the Algerian community abroad attended the conference¹⁹. The participants called for a boycott of presidential elections and reiterated their democratic demands²⁰. The third was the “National Convention for the Democratic Alternative and Popular Sovereignty”, held on January 25th, 2020 in Alger. Participants proposed a democratic solution to the “authoritarian system stalemate” through a genuine democratic transition and the organization of an independent national conference to discuss the duration of the political transition and the procedures for a constituent assembly. In addition, the PAD’s convention denounced the “illegitimacy” of the presidential elections of December 2019 and Tebboune’s reformist plans and called for the dismissal of the government and the dissolution of the two parliamentary chambers and the constitutional council²¹.

The PAD discussed enlarging the coalition to include Islamist opposition parties, which caused divisions within the alliance. Jil Jadid was invited only to the first meeting of the PAD²². This party called for an intermediate solution to the crisis, consisting of the election of a parliament with constituent power following the presidential elections²³. In addition, the eventual participation of the Islamist FJD prompted the PLD to announce its withdrawal from the PAD²⁴. The PLD returned to the alliance for the national convention of January 25th, 2020, once the participation of the Islamists had been ruled out²⁵. The radical anti-Islamist stance of some of the Algerian leftist parties is a legacy of the Algerian Civil War (Ghanem, 2019).

On August 24th, 2019 there was an attempt to overcome the differences among the Algerian opposition in a meeting in Safex, where the PAD and the Ain Benian parties (with the exception of Talaie El-Houriat Party) gathered, along with the Dynamics of the Civil Society, an alliance of trade unions, citizens’ associations and individuals formally founded on June 15th, 2019. However, the opposition parties remained in disagreement over the call for Prime Minister Bedoui’s resignation and the agenda for the democratic transition based on either holding presidential elections (FC) or electing a constituent assembly (PAD)²⁶.

19. On the evolution of the discourses and strategies used by Algerian civil society and social movements in relation to political change, see Thieux (2018).

20. PAD, final declaration, September 9th, 2019.

21. See the final document of the meeting: “National convention for the democratic alternative and popular sovereignty. Platform for the democratic culmination of the revolution.”

22. Interview with Soufiane Djilali, *Interlignes*, July 14th, 2019.

23. Jil Jadid press release, June 6th, 2019. See more details provided by Djilali, *Le Matin*, June 18th, 2019.

24. PLD statement published in *Le Matin*, November 6th, 2019.

25. *El-Watan*, January 21st, 2020. *Liberté*, January 21st, 2020.

26. APS, August 24th, 2019; *Le Matin*, August 25th, 2019.

To summarize, despite the relevance of building party alliances for democratization (Sato and Wahman, 2019), a broad cross-ideological coalition of opposition parties did not form because political parties have diverged on the procedures and the scope of political change in Algeria. In addition, some leftist parties are reluctant to collaborate with Islamist and other opposition parties, such as FJD, Jil Jadid and Talaie al-Houriat, which they consider to have been co-opted and manipulated by the political regime. On the other hand, the leftist PAD alliance has created bonds with civil society organizations but not an institutional relationship with the Hirak, which remains a social movement without visible leadership or organization (Dris-Aït-Hamadouche and Cherif, 2019). Moreover, tensions have arisen between secular activists and Islamist movements such as Rachad, which have been exploited by the regime to weaken the Hirak (Joffé, 2021).

TABLE 1.

PARTY ALLIANCES FACING 2019 POLITICAL CRISIS

	Party Members	Position	Main events	Result
Forces of Change for the People's Choice	Secular-nationalist: parties: Talaie El-Houriat, UFDS Islamist: MSP, FJD, PLJ Extra-parliamentary: Jil Jadid	Negotiation with the military	National Forum of Dialogue, Aïn Benian July 6 th , 2019	Rupture
Forces of the Democratic Alternative	Leftist: FFS, RCD, UCP, MDS, PLD, PT, PST	Democratic transition through a constituent assembly	Constitutive meeting, June 26 th , 2019 Convention, September 9 th , 2019 National Convention for the Democratic Alternative and Popular Sovereignty, January 20 th , 2020	Survival

Source: Own elaboration.

POLITICAL PARTY STANCES TOWARDS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Parties' reactions to the three calls for presidential elections: April 18th, July 4th and December 12th 2019

Presidential elections in Algeria were originally scheduled for April 18th, 2019. Even before Bouteflika had officially announced his intention to run for a fifth term—which he did on February 10th—the four parties of the presidential alliance (FLN, RND, TAJ and MPA) had nominated him as their candidate for the presidential

election in a joint meeting²⁷. Likewise, Islah (MRN) had officially announced its support for Bouteflika's candidacy in November 2018²⁸. Other parties had also taken positions before the outbreak of the protests. The MSP planned to back Abderrazak Makri —the president of the party— as candidate, despite the fact that the Islamist leader had previously discussed with Bouteflika's inner circle the postponement of the elections²⁹. Another 13 party leaders had also expressed their intention to submit their candidacies for the presidential elections (see Table 2)³⁰. On the contrary, the FFS, RCD, Jil Jadid, PLJ and the unlicensed party UDS had taken a stand calling for the boycott of the elections³¹.

As a consequence of the strength of the demonstrations started on February 22nd, there was growing internal criticism of Bouteflika's candidacy within the FLN, and the official positions of the parties in the presidential alliance became increasingly contradictory. Regarding the FLN, on March 8th several of its representatives resigned from their posts in Parliament. On March 20th, the FLN released a statement declaring its support for the protesters while backing Bouteflika's call for dialogue. And, on March 27th, members of FLN's central committee demanded the president be declared unfit to govern³². In the same vein, around 2,000 members of the RND left the party as a result of the support that its leader and prime minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, gave to Bouteflika. Later, on March 27th, under huge social pressure, Ouyahia withdrew his backing for the president, signing an official statement of the RND which urged Bouteflika to step down. RND activists called for Ouyahia's resignation, while the majority of its national council (337 out of 424 members) passed a motion in support

27. *Al-Arabiya*, February 3rd, 2019.

28. *Liberté*, November 4th, 2019.

29. The negotiations between the MSP and Bouteflika's inner circle sheds light on the relationships between political parties and the authoritarian regime. According to Ennahar, which accessed an internal document written by Makri for the Choura council, the Islamist leader held several meetings with Saïd Bouteflika and his special advisers to discuss Bouteflika's succession. Makri proposed delaying the elections to discuss political reforms in the meantime. An initial agreement included dialogue with the opposition, the holding of a national conference, a partial reform of the constitution by Parliament, the formation of a national unity government to oversee political and economic reforms and the amendment of the electoral law for the creation of an independent electoral authority. However, the representatives of the presidency made the agreement conditional on Gaid Salah's approval. Finally, Makri was informed that the regime's plan was to hold elections as scheduled with Bouteflika as a candidate and later to implement the agreed reforms (*El-Khabar*, January 17th, 2019).

30. *APS*, February 4th, 2019.

31. Declaration of the FFS national council, January 25th, 2019. See also interview with Ali Laskri, coordinator of the FFS presidential body, *Al-Watan*, February 7th, 2019. Declaration of the RCD national council, February 1st, 2019. Press release of Jil Jadid political council, November 11th, 2019. Press release of PLJ, *Al-Watan*, January 23rd, 2019; *El-Watan*, March 6th, 2019.

32. *Al-Arabiya*, March 8th, 2019. *Al-Arabiya*, March 21st, 2019. *TSA*, March 27th, 2019.

of the secretary-general³³. As for the TAJ, at first, on March 4th, the party expressed satisfaction with Bouteflika's efforts to appease the demonstrators, declaring that his calls for dialogue and reforms satisfied citizen's demands. Nevertheless, after Bouteflika's departure, a group of TAJ cadres and elected representatives signed a declaration on April 5th, supporting the HIRAK and calling for an extraordinary congress to elect a new governing body for the party³⁴. Lastly, the MPA supported Bouteflika at the beginning of the protests but ended up calling for a "concerted and peaceful democratic transition" guaranteed by the Army³⁵.

Conversely, the leftist parties' positions were clearer from the outset of the political crisis. As a case in point, the RCD called for a "rupture transition", drawing out a complete roadmap for political change and establishing as preconditions Bouteflika's resignation and the dissolution of the two parliamentary chambers³⁶. For its part, the FFS called for radical change and for the role of the army to be limited to the defence of the Nation³⁷.

After Bouteflika's departure, Parliament appointed the president of the Council of the Nation, Abdelkader Bensalah, as interim president on April 9th³⁸. The next day, Bensalah announced a new call for presidential elections for July 4th, 2019. The interim president tried to open an "inclusive" dialogue in order to discuss the political situation and encourage political parties to participate in the presidential elections. Nevertheless, the majority of political parties rejected Bensalah's invitation; not only leftist parties but also other political parties from the "moderate" opposition and those closer to the regime, such as Talaie El-Houriat, Jil Jadid, MSP, FJD, Islah, the FNA and the PNSD³⁹. Furthermore, in May, El-Moustakbal and the ANR reversed their initial decision to submit candidates for the July elections⁴⁰. Given the lack of valid candidates, on June 2nd, Algeria's Constitutional Council announced that the presidential election would be postponed.

Eventually, on July 25th, Bensalah appointed Algeria's "National Committee for Dialogue and Mediation". This kind of consultations has been a routine strategy of the Algerian regime since the 1990s in order to look for legitimacy. The committee consulted with 23 political parties and around 5,676 figures from civil society. The main absences

33. *Al-Arabiya*, March 27th, 2019. *APS*, April 20th, 2019.

34. *TSA*, March 4th 2019. *APS*, April 5th, 2019.

35. See characteristics of the political transition proposed by the MPA in a statement published on Facebook, April 21st, 2019.

36. Resolution of the RCD National Council, March 27th, 2020. The RCD, FFS and PT withdrew their members from Parliament in March.

37. Declaration of the FFS, March 28th, 2019.

38. See party reactions in *APS*, April 3rd, 2019.

39. See, for example, the following party statements: FFS, April 21st, 2019; PT, April 21st, 2019; PST, April 22nd, 2019; MSP, April 18th, 2019; Jil Jadid, June 8th, 2019.

40. See for El Moustakbal, *APS*, May 25th, 2019; and, for ANR, *APS*, May 25th, 2019.

were the parties in the PAD alliance⁴¹, the MSP and the presidential alliance parties whose leaders had not been summoned⁴². The discussions focused entirely on the organization of presidential elections. On September 8th, the committee coordinator, Karim Younes, presented his team's final report. The document recommended a number of ways to guarantee the presidential elections: the appointment of a new technocratic government; the establishment of an independent entity charged with organizing and monitoring presidential elections; and the partial amendment of the electoral law⁴³. In mid-September, the National Independent Authority of the Elections (ANIE) was formed, and the two parliamentary chambers passed two laws, one concerning electoral procedures (Organic Law n° 19-08) and the other governing the ANIE (Organic Law 19-07). However, the committee's requirement for the dismissal of Bedoui's government was not met.

Finally, on September 15th, the interim president Bensalah announced the call for elections for December 12th. The political parties once again took sides on the new call for elections. The FLN expressed their backing for the elections in several meetings and party statements, encouraging voter turnout⁴⁴. For its part, the RND considered the elections to be the "right way" to break the stalemate⁴⁵. The TAJ welcomed the presidential elections and the national council tasked the political bureau with deciding on the modalities and mechanisms to participate in them⁴⁶. The MPA underlined the idea that the elections enjoyed the legitimacy needed to accomplish the political reforms demanded by the Algerian people, and praised the role of the Army in maintaining constitutional order⁴⁷. Likewise, other parties expressed their support for elections such as El-Moustakbal, Ennahda, El-Bina El-Watani, Islah, PNSD, Errafah, RA, ANR and UND⁴⁸.

Regarding the parties of the FC alliance, only Talaie El-Houriat backed the holding of elections in December. The party published a statement declaring that the institutional and legal conditions for transparent and fair elections had been met by the establishment of the ANIE and the amendment of electoral law⁴⁹. Nevertheless, Ali Benflis recognized in an interview that previous requirements, such as a climate conducive to elections and the release of political and ideological prisoners were not met⁵⁰.

41. See, for example, the statements of the FFS and PT against the appointment of the committee: FFS, July 26th; PT, July 30th, 2019.

42. *El-Watan*, September 9th, 2019.

43. *El-Moudjahid*, September 9th, 2019.

44. Declarations of the FFS political bureau: September 5th, 2019; September 16th, 2019; November 4th, 2019 and November 20th, 2019.

45. APS, September 4th, 2019. *El-Moudjahid*, September 9th, 2019.

46. *Algérie-eco.com*, October 6th, 2019.

47. Declaration of the MPA parliamentary bloc, September 16th, 2019.

48. *El-Moudjahid*, September 23rd, 2019.

49. *El-Moudjahid*, September 19th, 2019.

50. *Jeune Afrique*, November 24th, 2019.

Conversely, the other parties of the FC alliance abandoned their initial position of supporting presidential elections, deciding instead to boycott them. On September 28th, the MSP's Choura council declared it would not participate in the elections "in the current circumstances, under which there is no consensus between the regime and the opposition"⁵¹. Likewise, on September 25th, the political bureau of the PLJ announced its refusal to participate in the presidential elections, arguing that the polls were not the result of a large national consensus, and would neither open the way to radical change nor lead to an overhaul of the political elite⁵². The FJD also declined to participate in the elections under the conditions of Bouteflika's continuing regime⁵³. And Jil Jadid deemed that the holding of elections would worsen the crisis instead of solving it⁵⁴. In addition, Ahd 54, which did not belong to the FC alliance but had participated in the Aït Benian conference, also stood against the elections despite the fact that the party had initially supported them⁵⁵.

Finally, the PAD parties called for a boycott of the elections, in line with the position that the alliance had maintained from the beginning of the political crisis. During the pre-electoral and electoral campaign, the PAD released many political declarations calling for mobilization against the presidential elections, some of which were jointly signed with civil society organizations and public figures⁵⁶. In addition, some of the members of the alliance signed individual declarations expressed in similar terms to those of the PAD⁵⁷.

Political Parties' Support for the Candidates in the December 2019 Elections

In total, 22 candidates' nominations for the presidential elections were submitted to the ANIE, 9 of which corresponded to leaders of political parties and the rest to members of civil society and independents (see Table 2). Nevertheless, only 5 out of the 22 candidates' nominations were approved by Algeria's constitutional council: Azzedine Mihoubi (RND), Ali Benflis (Talaie El-Houriat), Abdelaziz Belaid (El-Moustakbal), Abdelkader Bengrina (El-Bina El-Watani) and Abdelmadjid Tebboune (independent). The five nominated candidates can be considered a by-product of the authoritarian regime since all of them had held public office⁵⁸.

51. *Aawasat*, September 4th, 2019. *Le Watan*, September 30th, 2019.

52. *El-Moudjahid*, September 26th, 2019. *El-Watan*, September 30th, 2019.

53. *El-Watan*, November 26th, 2019.

54. Declaration of Jil Jadid national council, September 14th, 2020.

55. *APS*, May 6th, 2019. *El-Watan*, September 9th, 2019.

56. "For a strong mobilization," December 8th, 2019; "Not election against my homeland," December 9th, 2019.

57. *FFS*, September 15th, 2019; *PT*, October 21st, 2019 and November 16th, 2019; *PST*, September 4th, 2019.

58. For their respective political trajectories, see *Jeune Afrique*, November 6th, 2019.

TABLE 2.
PARTIES' POSITIONS TOWARDS PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

	Parties supporting Bouteflika's candidacy	Presidential alliance parties: FLN; RND; TAJ; MPA Other parties: FNA; El-Karama; Islah
April 2019 election	Parties backing their own candidates	MSP (Abderrazak Makri); PT (Louisa Hanoune); Talaie El Houriat (Ali Benflis); El-Moustakbal (Belaïd Abdelaziz); El-Bina El-Watani (Abdelkader Bengrina); RA (Ali Zeghdoud); Ahd 54 (Fawzi Rebaïne); MDS (Guerras Fethi); PVN (Adoul Mahfoudh); El-Infitah (Omar Bouacha); MNE (Mohamed Hadeff); Front of Democratic Youth for the Citizenship (Ahmed Gouraya); Democratic Youth Party (Salim Khalfa); FBG (Aissa Belhadi)
	Parties boycotting the election	FFS; RCD; Jil Jadid; PLJ; UDS
	Parties submitting candidacies	Accepted: RND (Azzedine Mihoubi); Talaie El-Houriat (Ali Benflis); El-Moustakbal (Belaïd Abdelaziz); El-Bina El-Watani (Abdelkader Bengrina) Rejected: RA (Ali Zeghdoud); ANR (Belkacem Sahli); UND (Mohamed Dif); PNSD (Rabah Bencherif); Errafah (Mourad Arroudj)
December 2019 election	Parties backing a candidate	Support for their own candidates: RND, Talaie El-Houriat; El-Moustakbal; El-Bina El-Watani Support for Mihoubi: FLN, MPA, TAJ Support for Tebboune: Islah
	Parties supporting holding elections	El Karama; FNA; Ennahda; PLJ
	Parties moving from support to boycott	MSP; PLJ, FJD, UFDS; Jil Jadid; Ahd 54
	Parties boycotting the election	PAD's parties: FFS; RCD; PT; PST; UCP; MDS; PLD UDS

Source: Own elaboration.

With the exception of Mihoubi, none of the candidates secured support from political parties other than their own organizations. The parties of the presidential alliance backed Mihoubi's candidacy, although "discreetly" in the case of the FLN, and "non-officially" in the case of the MPA and the TAJ⁵⁹. In fact, the FLN's official statements did not refer to Mihoubi and simply expressed its support for the holding of the presidential elections⁶⁰. For his part, Bengrina failed to gain the support of the Islamist

59. *El-Moudjahid*, December 15th, 2019. *Algeriepart*, December 3rd, 2019.

60. FLN political bureau declaration, November 20th, 2019.

parties, which mainly rejected the presidential elections and, in the case of *Islah*, it supported Tebboune⁶¹. Regarding Tebboune, he referred to himself as the candidate of all Algerians. Nevertheless, Tebboune could not avoid being publicly perceived as the Army's candidate, despite Gaid Salah's declarations that the military did not support any particular candidate⁶².

Parties' Reactions to the Electoral Results

Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the candidate without the endorsement of any political party, won the presidential election with 58.15 % of the vote in the first round. Nevertheless, the official turnout only reached the 39.88 % and 14.6 % of the registered votes were invalid ballots. These figures suggest that the call to boycott were partially successful (Volpi, 2020: 153).

All candidates accepted the electoral results⁶³, even Benflis who had challenged the results of the elections he contested in 2004 and 2014⁶⁴. In addition, the parties that had campaigned for the holding of presidential elections welcomed the "integrity" and "transparency" of the elections. Moreover, the RND and TAJ stressed the role played by the Army to guarantee the proper conduct of elections⁶⁵.

The PAD analyzed the political situation after the polls in a joint meeting, describing the elections as a "masquerade" and "coup d'état" and denouncing the repression against the supporters of the election boycott. According to the alliance, abstention would have reached 90 %, although the ANIE declared a turnout of 39.88 %⁶⁶. In addition, several of the parties belonging to the PAD offered their individual assessments of the presidential elections. The FFS denounced the "non-democratic" and "non-transparent" vote and questioned the president's legitimacy because of the high level of electoral abstention⁶⁷. The RCD pointed directly to the Army command as responsible for "setting up the fraud scenario" in a party declaration following its national secretariat meeting⁶⁸. The PT considered that the elections were not the right response to the problems of the citizens and that only through a

61. *Liberté*, November 12th, 2019. *Jeune Afrique*, December 11th, 2019; DIA, November 22nd, 2019.

62. *Echorouk*, September 29th, 2019.

63. RND, December 16th, 2019. For Mihoubi, *Liberté* December 14th, 2019; for Belaid, *Liberté*, December 14th, 2019; for Bengrina, *Liberté*, December 14th, 2019.

64. Benflis resigned as secretary general of Talaie El-Houriat at the end of December.

65. *APS*, December 13th, 2019; *APS*, December 18th, 2019. See also RND press release, December 17th, 2019.

66. PAD declaration, December 13th, 2019.

67. FFS declaration, December 14th, 2019.

68. RCD press release, December 14th, 2019.

constituent assembly could such a solution be found⁶⁹. The PST did not recognize the legitimacy of the elections and called for the intensification of social mobilization⁷⁰. And the MDS was one of the most sharply critical political parties, labelling Tebboune a “pirate president”⁷¹.

TABLE 3.
RESULTS OF THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION OF DECEMBER 2019

Registered voters	24,464,161
Total votes	9,755,340
Turnout rate	39.88%
Valid votes	8,510,415
Invalid votes	1,244,925

Candidates	Votes	% votes
Tebboune (independent)	4,947,523	58.13
Bengrina (El-Bina El-Watani)	1,477,836	17.37
Benflis (Talaie El-Houriat)	897,831	10.55
Mihoubi (RND)	619,225	10.55
Belaïd (El-Moustakbal)	568,000	6.67

Source: Algeria’s Constitutional Council.

TEBBOUNE’S NATIONAL DIALOGUE AND THE CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

The 2020 constitutional reform followed a top-down process dominated by the Presidency and an expert committee appointed by president Tebboune. Just after taking the presidential oath of office, Tebboune called for a national dialogue and promised a profound constitutional reform in order to strengthen rights and freedoms, to guarantee the separation of powers, to reduce presidential powers in favour of the prime minister and Parliament, and to ensure the judiciary’s independence and fight corruption. In addition, he announced a reform of the electoral law and the holding of legislative elections in one year’s time.

Most of the political parties—mainly the traditional pro-regime parties—adopted a positive attitude towards the dialogue proposed by Tebboune⁷². A declaration of the

69. PT press releases: December 14th, 2019; December 22nd, 2019.

70. PST declaration, December 14th, 2019.

71. *El-Watan*, December 18th, 2019.

72. APS, March 3rd, 2020.

political bureau of Talaie El-Houriat showed it to be in favour of collaborating in the constitutional amendment, underlining the need for a transparent process and the participation of all political and social forces in the constitutional debate⁷³. The MSP, in party statement after an executive committee meeting on December 16th, 2019, expressed its support for a “transparent, serious, responsible, sincere and credible” national dialogue, and declared its intention to be “a part of the solution to the crisis and not part of the crisis”. Moreover, the MSP gave a positive evaluation of the formation of the new government appointed on January 2nd.⁷⁴ Likewise, in a press release, the FJD referred to the need for political dialogue and working for peaceful change and power rotation⁷⁵. Nevertheless, both the MSP and the FJD demanded the release of protesters, media freedom and the end of civil rights restrictions as measures to guarantee the discussions⁷⁶. A similar position was taken by the PLJ, which pointed to cooperation as an imperative for political reform, and the necessity of social appeasement measures⁷⁷. At the Choura council meeting, Islah expressed its support for Tebboune’s initiatives in relation to the national dialogue and the constitutional reform⁷⁸. Lastly, the leader of Jil Jadid, Soufiane Djilali, announced in a press conference on December 17th, 2019, the party’s decision to participate in the national dialogue initiated by President Tebboune waiting for “strong movements” by him⁷⁹.

Between mid-January and March 2020, President Tebboune consulted with delegations of several political parties and political figures about the overall situation of the country and the amendment of the constitution. The parties which were summoned and accepted the presidential invitation were Jil Jadid, MSP, Talaie El-Houriat, El-Moustakbal, FJD, El-Bina El-Watani and Islah. Nonetheless, the procedure for the constitutional amendment was established before the presidential consultations with political parties took place. On January 8th, President Tebboune appointed a panel of 17 constitutional and legal experts charged with drafting proposals to review the constitution in three months’ time. The president received the proposal for the constitutional amendments on March 24th.⁸⁰ The end of the committee’s work coincided with the outbreak of the coronavirus crisis, which led to the postponement, until May 7th, of the scheduled discussions on the drafting of the constitution with political figures, political parties, civil society and unions⁸¹.

73. *Liberté*, January 19th, 2020. *Al-Khabar*, February 1st, 2020.

74. Abderrazak Makri, January 4th, 2019. *El-Moudjahid*, December 17th, 2019. *Liberté*, December 17th, 2019.

75. *El-Khabar*, December 14th, 2019.

76. *El-Khabar*, December 14th, 2019. *El-Khabar*, December 17th, 2019.

77. *El-Moudjahid*, December 23rd, 2019.

78. *APS*, January 5th, 2020.

79. *El-Moudjahid*, December 18th.

80. Post of the Presidency on Facebook, March 24th, 2020.

81. Posts of the Presidency on Facebook: March 24th 2020; May 7th 2020.

The substance of the constitutional reforms was mainly the limitation of the presidential terms to two consecutive and non-consecutive terms; the stipulation that the country's prime minister should come out of a parliamentary majority, although the president would hold on to his power to dismiss the prime minister); and regarding the military, the formalization of the political role exercised so far informally by the Algerian army and the inclusion of a clause to let the army intervene outside Algeria's borders.

The aforementioned parties that took part in the presidential consultations showed their support for the process of constitutional amendment.⁸² Besides, the FLN, RND, ANR declared their satisfaction with the procedure and the content of the constitutional reform and campaigned for Algerians to vote favorably⁸³. The MSP expressed certain doubts related mainly to the lack of clarity regarding the form of government (it supports a parliamentary system), the non-obligation to appoint the prime minister from among the parliamentary majority, and the ambiguity surrounding the new figure of the vice-president⁸⁴. Likewise, Jil Jadid expressed a degree of caution in relation to the creation of the vice-president figure, the role of the High Security Council and the need for members of the government to be non-military⁸⁵. Finally, the Islamist MSP, FJD and Ennahda backed a "no" vote in the constitutional referendum.

On the other hand, the PAD parties were totally opposed to both the procedure and the content of the constitutional amendment, in accordance with their demand for a sovereign constitutional assembly. Thus, the alliance refused to participate in the presidential consultations and rejected the commission of experts for the constitutional review, calling the constitutional process "a new show of force by the system". The alliance argued that the constitution was going to be passed without a broad public debate and a process led by a sovereign constituent assembly⁸⁶. In general, the leftist parties distrust the reform processes stemming from the political regime, which have not led to any significant change in the past and are aimed at maintaining the status quo and the "antidemocratic and antisocial nature of the power"⁸⁷. Opposition parties were prevented from holding public meetings and several supporters of boycott were arrested.

Finally, the constitutional amendment was approved by Parliament in September and by popular referendum on November 1st 2020, with 66.8 % of the vote cast and a historically low official turnout rate of 23.8 %.

82. El Moustakbal press release, May 8th, 2020. Talaie El-Houriat, June 26th, 2020.

83. *APS*, June 13th, 2020.

84. Resolution of the national council, May 19th, 2020. See also *El-Watan*, May 15th, 2020.

85. Interview with Soufiane Djilali, *Al-Watan*, May 11th, 2020.

86. PAD declaration, May 8th, 2019.

87. *El-Watan*, January 1st, 2020. *Le Watan*, January 14th, 2020. *Liberté*, January 9th, 2020. Resolution of the RCD national council, January 12th, 2020; Declaration of the PT, May 15th, 2020. *Liberté*, December 15th, 2019. *Liberté*, January 14th, 2020. *Liberté*, January 14th, 2020.

TABLE 4.

PARTIES' POSITIONS TOWARDS CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

Parties supporting the constitutional amendment	FLN; RND; TAJ; MPA; ANR; El-Moustakbal; FNA; El-Karama; FAN; PNSD; Errafah; Jil Jadid; Talaie El-Houriat; El-Bina El-Watani; Islah; PLJ
Parties backing a “no” vote	MSP; FJD; Ennahda
Parties boycotting the constitutional referendum	PAD's parties: FFS; RCD; PT; PST; UCP; MDS; PLD UDS

Source: Own elaboration.

THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF JUNE 12TH, 2021

The elections for the APN on June 12th, 2021 constituted the third stage of the renewal of the authoritarian system after the 2019 presidential elections and the 2020 constitutional reform. The elections took place in a growing context of arrests of activists and the banning of unlicensed demonstrations (Joffé, 2021: 821).

Before the legislative elections, the electoral law was reformed in March 2021 to introduce open lists. In addition, the number of seats was reduced from 462 to 407. According to the new law, the competing parties were required to have won at least 4% of the votes in previous parliamentary elections or to have gathered 250 citizen signatures in each constituency. Nevertheless, due to criticism from political parties, these criteria were suspended for this particular ballot and instead political parties had to gather 25,000 citizen signatures representing at least 23 wilayas (with no fewer than 300 signatures in each one)⁸⁸.

The participation of political parties in the legislative elections can be seen as an indicator of support for the political regime. On the one hand, according to the ANIE, 55 parties submitted candidate lists, although only 28 parties met the requirements to run for elections⁸⁹. On the other hand, the PAD parties and the UDS, whose leader Karim Tabbou was arrested two days before elections, called for the boycott of the elections. The FFS bureau maintained an ambiguous position regarding participation in the elections, but eventually the party grassroots imposed a stand against the elections⁹⁰. Other leftist parties adopted a firmer stance regarding the elections, such as the PST and the UCP⁹¹. The authorities have recently initiated judicial proceedings for the suspension and banning, respectively, of these two

88. *Le Matin*, Mars 15th, 2021.

89. ANIE statistics (in Arabic). The electoral commission has not provided the list of the parties competing in the poll.

90. *Le Matin*, April 3rd, 2021.

91. PST declaration, April 12th, 2021; UCP declaration on Facebook, Mars 27th 2021.

parties⁹². Besides, the leader of the MDS has been arrested on multiple charges, including for allegedly “insulting the president” and “dissemination of information that could undermine national unity”⁹³.

The boycott of the elections by the Hirak and opposition parties is reflected in the high rates of abstention⁹⁴. Voter turnout was only 23%, the lowest level ever for a legislative election in Algeria. In addition, 24.1% of the registered votes were invalid ballots. These figures reveal the “longstanding alienation of Algerians from the political system” (Joffé, 2021: 819).

One of the most remarkable outcomes of the elections is that independents have become the second-largest political force in parliament, increasing their number of seats from 28 in 2017 to 78. Independent candidacies were encouraged through direct financial incentives for their electoral campaigns. The rise of the independents reveals the regime’s intention to create a new loyal political force. In fact, in a recent meeting attended by almost all of the elected independents, they expressed their support for President Tebboune⁹⁵.

On the other hand, a total of 14 parties gained representation, which represents a considerable decrease in comparison to the 2017 legislature (down from 34 political parties)⁹⁶. The FLN remains the largest party in the lower house, although it has seen a substantial reduction in its number of seats (from 161 to 98), as has the RND (from 100 to 58), which confirms the weakening—but not the loss—of the traditional ruling parties’ institutional influence. Regarding Islamist parties, the MSP ranked in third place with 64 seats (31 more seats) and El-Bina El-Watani went from having no seats in the 2017 legislature to becoming the fifth largest party in the lower house, winning 39 seats. The MSP has offered himself as a “loyal opposition” (*ibid.*: 822). In addition, El-Moustakbal increased the number of seats from 14 to 48. Nine other political parties secured minor representation with a few votes. Four of these were newcomers—LVP (three seats), FBG (two seats), El-Fadjr El Djadid (two seats), and Jil Jadid (one seat)⁹⁷—while Islamist FJD and PLJ returned with two seats each, and the nationalist parties, FAN, El-Karama, and FNA, with one seat each.

To sum up, the political regime sought a new source of legitimacy in the parliamentary elections, which has not achieved due to the high levels of abstention.

92. *El Watan*, May 25th, 2021.

93. See MDS declaration, July 3rd, 2021.

94. See PAD declaration June 2nd, 2021 on legislative elections and regime’s repression against protesters and opposition.

95. APS, June 21st, 2021.

96. On the contrary, the two other parties of the former presidential alliance, TAJ and MPA, did not win seats, as well as Talaie El-Houriat, Ennahda, Islah, PNSD, Ahd 54, among others.

97. Jil Jadid moved from boycotting 2017 elections to participating in the recent elections in order to “defend the democratic process and participate in the modernization of the Algerian state” (Jil Jadid, April 12th, 2021). Likewise, Talaie El-Houriat also changed its position regarding elections from the boycott in 2017 to participation.

Nevertheless, the regime has managed to renew its parliamentary support through the rise of independents, the emergence of new loyal parties and the rise of influence of parties that are aimed at playing the role of a “soft” opposition. Therefore, no significant political change can be expected to come from the members of parliament.

TABLE 5.
RESULTS OF THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF JUNE 2021

Registered voters	24,453,992
Total votes	5,622,401
Turnout rate	23%
Valid votes	4,610,652
Invalid votes	1,011,749

Party	Votes	Seats
FLN	287,828	98
MSP	208,407	65
RND	198,758	58
El-Moustakbal	153,987	48
El-Bina El-Watani	106,203	39
LVP	13,103	3
PLJ	10,618	2
FJD	7,667	2
El-Fadr El-Djadid	7,433	2
FBG	3,724	2
FAN	7,916	1
El-Karama	5,942	1
Jil Jadid	3,576	1
FNA	1,207	1
Independents (total candidates)	3,794,283	84
TOTAL	4,610,652	407

Source: Algeria's Constitutional Council.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has sought to explain why political parties have not been able to trigger a democratic transition in Algeria. The Algerian party system has remained divided regarding the solution to the political crisis. Many political parties have remained loyal to the military-backed regime, supporting their roadmap and concept the

political change because they expect to obtain some kind of political influence. They range from the parties of the former presidential alliance (FLN, RND, TAJ, MPA) to others which backed the presidential elections of December 2019, Tebboune's constitutional reform and the legislative elections of June 2021 (El-Moustakbal, PNSD, FAN, Errafah, El-Karama, RA, ANR, UND and others). Even a supposedly opposition party such as Jil Jadid has ended up backing the constitutional reform and participating in the 2021 legislative elections. Moreover, Talaie al-Hourriat chose a policy of not opposing the political regime, participating in the national dialogue as well as in the presidential and legislative elections, albeit with negative results. Besides, a new set of loyal parties have emerged in parliament, such as the Voice of the People, the Good Governance Front, El-Fadjr El-Djadid and the aforementioned Jil Jadid.

Regarding Islamist parties, they do not represent a challenger to the political regime and they are unlikely to pursue a democratic agenda. The main Islamist party—the MSP—has changed its position on the political crisis on several occasions. Before the outbreak of the protests, the MSP tried to compromise with Bouteflika's inner circle on the postponement of the April elections in order to prepare the succession of the president, although it was unsuccessful due to Saleh's opposition. Once the crisis started, the MSP was in favour of dialogue with the military and the holding of presidential elections, but it decided later not to take part in the 2019 presidential polls. Moreover, the MSP participated in the constitutional reform process, although the party eventually backed a “no” vote in the referendum. Lastly, the MSP stood for the legislative elections with the goal of gaining significance as a parliamentary (and governmental) political force. Ennahda and the FJD took a similar stance regarding the constitutional referendum and parliamentary elections. Islah has maintained unconditional support for the military-backed regime and El-Bina El-Watani has participated in all three political processes, becoming the second-largest Islamist party in the APN.

The only credible democratic opposition is represented by the PAD alliance, which has played an active role in boycotting all political processes launched by the political regime. Throughout the political crisis, the alliance has maintained its initial position in favour of a constituent assembly and a genuine democratic transition for Algeria. Nevertheless, opposition parties have not been able to unify around a single platform. The PAD rejected the collaboration with “soft” opposition parties and Islamist. On the other hand, despite the fact that the PAD has established relationships with members of civil society, there is no institutionalized alliance between the political parties and the Hirak. Lastly, the fact is that Algerian political parties are widely discredited in the public eye after years of cohabitation with the *pouvoir*, despite some of them, such as the MDS, PST and FJD have never colluded with the regime. The fact is that opposition parties have failed to channel citizen democratic demands and negotiate a democratic transition with the military-backed regime.

To conclude, the Algerian case study provides some insights for democratization studies and authoritarian resilience studies. Firstly, widespread protests are not a sufficient condition for unleashing a democratic transition. The limited democratic scope

of social protests reopens the old question of whether democracy is more likely to reach the Arab region through an “evolutionary” and elite-driven process than a “revolutionary” one. Popular demands for democratic change have persisted in many MENA countries. In particular, there have been strong protest movements in Sudan, Lebanon and Iraq, but they also have momentum in Morocco and Jordan. Nevertheless, social movements have not spread as in the Arab Uprisings nor have they provoked significant changes. The “evolutionary” alternative also seems a distant prospect in Algeria, due to the way the army acts as a veto player against democratization. The military commanders have no intention of negotiating a democratic transition and handing over the reins of power. Secondly, authoritarian rulers use institutions and political processes, such as elections and constitutional reforms, to reshape political regimes. However, they are a long way off gaining the legitimacy they seek, due to the widespread opposition to these processes. Finally, the findings underline the limited ability of political parties to bring about a democratic transition. Even under favourable conditions of intense social pressure for democratic change, widespread disaffection with the authoritarian regime and a confrontational attitude of opposition parties towards the political regime, political parties cannot achieve democratic change if the opposition is divided, the parties do not build broad opposition alliances —not only between parties but also with civil society— and the political regime retains the support of a number of political parties.

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ANNEX. ALGERIAN POLITICAL PARTIES (CITED)

Ahd 54	Generation of 54 (1991)
El-Bina El Watani	Movement of the National Building (2013)
El-Karama	Dignity Party (2012)
Ennahda	Renaissance Party (1990)
Errafah	Welfare Party (2019)
FAN	New Algeria Front (2012)
FBG	Good Governance Front
FFS	Socialist Forces Front (1963) (1990)
FJD	Justice and Development Front (2012)
FLN	National Liberation Front (1954)
FNA	Algerian National Front (1999)
FF	El-Moustakbal (Future Front) (2012)
JJ	Jil Jadid (New Generation) (2012)
LVP	Sawt al-Chaab (Voice of the People) (2019)
MDS	Democratic and Social Movement (1966) (1990)
MPA	Algerian Popular Movement (2012) (former UDR, 2003)
MRN	Harakat al-Islah al-Watani (Movement for National Reform) (1990)
MSP	Movement for the Society of Peace (1990)
PLD	Party for Secularism and Democracy (former MDSL 2008)
PLJ	Freedom and Justice Party (2012)
PNSD	National Party for Solidarity and Development (1989)
PST	Socialist Worker Party (1989)

PT	Workers' Party (1990)
RA	Algerian Rally (1990)
RCD	Rally for Culture and Democracy (1989)
RND	Democratic National Rally (1997)
TAJ	Rally for Algeria Hope (2012)
UCP	Union for Change and Progress (2012)
UDS	Social and Democratic Union (2012, non-authorized)
UFDS	Union of Social and Democratic Forces (2012)
UND	National Union for Development (2012)
Talaie El-Houriat	Vanguard of Liberties (2015)

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