

Islam and Democracy: Algerians Try to Blaze a Trail

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MÉDÉA, Algeria, April 8 - Algeria managed to elect a president to a second term last week with voting that was widely celebrated as free and fair. That might not sound like much, but after a decade-long civil war with radical Islamists that left as many as 150,000 dead, it seemed monumental to many Algerians. And the exercise came with a lesson for would-be Arab democracies: timing is important and participants must agree to the secular principles needed for democracy to work.

Algeria's initial attempt at multiparty elections in December 1991 ended in disaster. The problem, Algerian officials say, was that the country picked the wrong moment to open the doors to pluralism and then opened them too wide. Algeria had slogged away for decades under a military-backed, single-party socialism that left the country's imams as the only credible opposition. By the late 1980's, the economy was in shambles - brought down by the oil-price collapse of 1986 - and the public was still angry about an incident in 1988 in which the military opened fire on antigovernment rioters and killed hundreds. Trying to address the discontent, the government began steps to liberalize in 1989 and held parliamentary elections in 1991.

"At that moment, we opened the doors to pluralism and the volcano blew," Ahmed Ouyahia, the country's prime minister, said of the parliamentary elections.

In a country that had not had any opposition political parties, fundamentalist Islamists had the popularity and organization to capitalize on the moment. They swept the first round of parliamentary elections and were almost certain to emerge from the second with the two-thirds parliamentary majority needed for the constitutional reforms that would have turned Algeria into an Islamic state. Among their stated goals: basing the country's justice system on the strict dictates of the Shariah, or Islamic law.

At that point, the military stepped in and stopped the process, outlawing the Islamic Salvation Front, which was close to gaining power, and arresting thousands of its members. That set off the brutal civil war and earned the military rulers near universal condemnation for interfering with democracy.

Before risking another round of multiparty elections, the military-backed government banned members of the Islamic Salvation Front from taking part in politics and rewrote the Constitution to prohibit the formation of political parties based on religious belief.

Still, the military kept such tight control over politics that the country's opposition parties withdrew from presidential elections in 1999, leaving the military's candidate, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, to stand alone.

The generals claimed neutrality in the latest elections, but the rules sidelined a large slice of the political spectrum. The government used various other means to limit the opposition, refusing to register one would-be party, for example, on the ground that it included former members of the Islamic Salvation Front.

Frustrated Islamists have called foul, claiming that they still have broad support.

"Even now we would have won," said Ali Benhadjar, a former Islamist leader with a long russet beard, sitting among cartons of Ecuadorean bananas in the cramped wholesale warehouse he operates here.

Mr. Benhadjar refused to vote in the election last week because none of the candidates for president agreed to meet a list of the Islamists demands. He remains bitter about having been prevented from taking the parliamentary seat he won in the first round of the 1991 elections. After the military coup, he took to the hills with a band of fighters and didn't come back until he accepted a government amnesty in 1999.

Mr. Benhadjar insists that a secular minority stands in the way of Algerian Muslims' Islamic program. "They have to accept the will of the people," he said. But he gives a hint of the intransigence that the country's secular politicians fear if he and his associates were ever to assume power. While an Islamist-led government would not suspend the democratic process, he explained, areas deemed sacred would become untouchable - Shariah justice, for one. He cited the democracy of Iran as a model.

Many political analysts in Algeria believe that the electorate's support for the Islamists in 1991 was less a vote for the imams than a vote against the corruption and mismanagement of the military-backed status quo. Without a culture of political parties, there was no other credible alternative.

By banning the Islamists and outlawing religious-based parties, they say, Algeria has given itself time to create political alternatives other than hard-core political Islam.

The country still has a long way to go. A military-backed political elite still dominates politics and has yet to allow a strong opposition to grow.

But the government has managed to isolate Mr. Benhadjar and other members of the Islamist political leadership, partly by encouraging the formation of more moderate Islamic parties that have drawn away much of the radicals' support. One of the largest, the Movement of the Society for Peace, supported Mr. Bouteflika in the election last week. Even the former leaders of the Islamic Salvation Army, the Islamists' armed wing, endorsed the president's candidacy. In Médéa, a bastion of conservative Islam, the Islamists have lost ground.

It is difficult to know how much support remains for Mr. Benhadjar and his fellow believers. Polls that might measure their popularity have not been developed in Algeria.

Yet the country cannot keep the volatile segment of its population shut out of the political process forever.

"There remains an Islamist reservoir in the heart of this society that could be reactivated," says Hamida Ayachi, an Algerian journalist who has written extensively about the movement. As is the case in so many Arab countries, nearly three-quarters of Algeria's population is under the age of 30 and half of those below the age of 25 are unemployed. The Islamist movement easily influences them.

Mr. Benhadjar and his Islamist associates are pushing the government to allow them to form a new political party, and the government may eventually acquiesce - if the Islamists renounce both violence and their goal of an Islamic state.

The lessons Algeria holds for occupied Iraq and other nations trying to escape authoritarian rule is obvious: insist that everyone subscribe to democratic principles and, whatever you do, do not try to rush the process. The first is relatively easy to put into practice, the second far more difficult.

The prime minister, Mr. Ouyahia, said young democracies needed to "give it time."