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Familiar Threats Constrict Press Freedom in Algeria

By KATRIN BENNHOLD and SOUAD MEKHENNET

ALGIERS — At the height of [Algeria](#)'s civil war in the 1990s, Chawki Amari never slept in the same apartment two nights in a row. Like many journalists, he was caught between Islamic militants who threatened to take his life and a military-backed government that threatened to take his freedom.

These days, Mr. Amari, one of Algeria's best-known commentators and cartoonists, is under pressure once again. In May, a court sentenced him to two months in prison for defamation, his first prison sentence in more than a decade. In the months since, several editors at prominent newspapers say, they have received faxes, e-mail messages and letters signed by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, North Africa's most active militant group, vowing to attack journalists once again.

The situation today remains far different from life during the country's civil war, which erupted in early 1992 after the military intervened to cancel the second round of the country's first free parliamentary elections because an Islamist party was expected to win. The government eventually ushered in a tense peace and even a fragile national reconciliation. But the political structure remains under tight control, with little opportunity for people to register dissent.

Media freedom has proved a good barometer for the fragile space between the state and the Islamists, and dozens of people from different backgrounds indicated in conversations in recent days that this space is shrinking. The surge in threats against

journalists has coincided with popular discontent over a proposal to allow President [Abdelaziz Bouteflika](#) to run for a third term in 2009.

Journalists in Algeria still have more freedom than their counterparts in most Arab countries, thanks to the constitutional changes that in 1989 paved the way for parliamentary elections in December 1991. But, said Ahmed Fattani, a founder of two newspapers who now runs another daily, L'Expression, most newspaper advertising comes from state enterprises. And many journalists depended on the government for protection in the 1990s and increasingly do so today, if on a lesser scale.

Nobody can be certain of the origin of the recent threats and no journalists have been killed since the 1990s, when more than 70 were killed and many more fled the country, according to the Algerian chapter of the International Federation of Journalists. In that era, car bombs exploded nearly every week, intellectuals and women not conforming to Islamic traditions received death threats and as many as 200,000 people were killed.

But after six suicide bombings this year — the most recent two on Dec. 11 — some political analysts say they are worried.

“The climate today recalls, in several ways, that of the early 1990s,” Ali Bahmane, a colleague of Mr. Amari’s at El Watan, an independent newspaper, wrote in a recent editorial. “Fear and anxiety are again taking root in the country with the return of mass killings.”

Some Algerians are beginning to ask whether repression is the best way to ward off Islamic theocracy.

Mouloud Hamrouche, a former prime minister who had warned against canceling the second round of parliamentary elections in January 1992, said in an interview: “If we don’t democratize, there will be more terrorism or a general revolution. It’s only a question of time.”

Mr. Hamrouche noted that nationwide riots in October 1988 led the government to call the elections in the first place. “Repression breeds militancy — we can see that all across the Arab world,” he added. “We have to take the risk of having a Parliament that is dominated by Islamists. Let them face the challenge of governance. I am persuaded they will fail.”

Other intellectuals are still more concerned about the possibility of an Islamist government.

“Algerian society is not mature enough to experiment with democracy in its most complete sense,” said Mounir Boudjema, deputy editor of the independent newspaper *Liberté*. “By default, the current government is better than an Islamist regime.”

Algeria’s recent history is scarred with violence, with the war against French rule, ending in independence in 1962, and then the conflict of the 1990s. The first time the country’s Muslims, who make up most of the population, were allowed to vote under French rule, in 1948, ballots were rigged to mute their voice. Today, the Islamic Salvation Front, the party that was expected to win the second round in January 1992, remains outlawed, and the turnout in tightly regulated elections often barely exceeds one-third.

“Civil society has no voice,” Mr. Hamrouche said.

Sporadic threats to national newspapers over the past six months, by fax and mail, have been signed by Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, said the three senior newspaper editors who discussed the threats and who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they had not informed their own staff members.

On June 10, Anis Rahmani, an outspoken national security analyst, received an e-mail message in which Islamic militants threatened to kidnap him and a female colleague at El Chourouk, of which he was then the editor.

The message said, “We don’t attack civilians, but anyone who works for the intelligence service or the government is an unbeliever, and any person that supports them is too,” and it accused Mr. Rahmani of working for Algerian intelligence. A month later, the security services told Mr. Rahmani that evidence had emerged that a Qaeda-related group was planning to assassinate him.

Several journalists said they had also felt state control tighten. Mr. Amari, the commentator and cartoonist, is appealing the two-month prison sentence and a fine for accusing a state governor of corruption. Mr. Fattani said he had been taken to court 105 times since 1992. Last month, the [United Nations](#) Human Rights Committee said that it was concerned that the Algerian government continued to intimidate journalists and that it suspected that the government had secret detention centers for terrorist suspects.

“For us as journalists, the situation is especially difficult because we are caught in the middle,” said Faisal Metaoui, editor of the Web site for the newspaper El Watan. “We are attacked from both sides. We are war correspondents, but we are war correspondents in our own country.”