



Authoritarianism and media in Algeria

A REPORT BY INTERNATIONAL MEDIA SUPPORT (IMS)

Author: Rasmus Alenius Boserup. The author is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Danish Institute for International Studies in Copenhagen.

Cover photo: Newspapers on sale in Algiers.
Photo: Michael Irving Jensen/IMS

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1. Introduction

Like its North African neighbours, Algeria faces deep social, economic and political challenges. It boasts the region's highest youth unemployment, widespread corruption in the public and private sector, a slow and inefficient state bureaucracy, a state-dependent economy, and an unpopular government presiding over a political system that lacks popular legitimacy and participation.

In December 2010, tens of thousands of Algerians simultaneously took to the streets in a number of major cities including the capital protesting against price hikes of a number of state-subsidised, basic alimentary products. While parallel protests in neighbouring Tunisia developed into an anti-regime revolt that in mid-January 2011 forced Ben Ali out of power and ignited the Arab Spring in Egypt, Algerian protests quickly dissipated, however, and calls for regime change never succeeded in mass mobilising Algerians outside the narrow circles of activists engaged in opposition parties, independent unions, and rights groups. Besides the deterrent impact of recent civil war, protracted "residual" terrorism, a strong hand of the military in politics, and the massive financial capacity of the state generated from export of natural gas, a co-factor in curtailing mass protest in Algeria in early 2011 was a raft of reform initiatives launched by the regime. As protests intensified in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the Algerian government increased public spending on social welfare programmes targeting what it assumed to be the causes behind the initial mobilisation. The state bought food supplies and reintroduced massive subsidies on a range of basic food products like meat, oil, wheat, sugar, and salt. It also introduced state-sponsored loan packages to youth entrepreneurs. Besides these economic instruments, Algeria's aging president Abdelaziz Bouteflika who had come to power in a disputed election in 1999, promised in a series of speeches in early 2011 to carry out a political reform programme to further develop an accountable democratic government in the country. In February 2011, few days after the fall Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak, president Bouteflika lifted the 19 year-old state of emergency imposed in 1991 in the wake of the civil war. The president also used his constitutional prerogative to issue two "organic" laws, which defined the overall ambitions for new legislation regulating the activities of NGOs and political associations, as well as information and media. While Algerian print media was liberalised with the introduction of private ownership in a reform package in 1989, ownership of audio-visual media (TV and radio), which constituted the largest sector of media consumption in Algeria, had remained a monopoly of the state over two decades.

This report addresses the question of whether the initiative to reform the Algerian audio-visual media sector has the potential to influence the enduring authoritarian governance in Algeria. This report suggests on the one hand that the introduction of private ownership of TV and radio holds the potential to radically change the media sector and its ability to challenge political processes for the first time since independence in 1962, opening up the possibility that an independent politically active public can emerge as a counter-weight to the state. On the other hand, the report suggests that authoritarian governance may be so deeply rooted in three key state institutions, namely the presidency, the military and state security, all of which elude parliamentary control, that they are unlikely to be fundamentally challenged by a reform of the audio-visual sector.

Background and structure of the report

This report on the Algerian media landscape responds to a specific Terms of Reference elaborated by International Media Support (IMS) that commissioned the report. It is drafted in October 2012 and based on field studies and interviews with stakeholders in Algeria carried out in September 2012 and on desk studies. It opens with three short background sections summarising, respectively, the core dynamics of authoritarianism in Algeria, alterations in power balances in the country over the last year, and the most pressing internal policy issues that are likely to influence any attempt to reform the political order. The report continues with a short summary of the developments linked to the influence of the "Arab Spring" in Algeria. The last three sections of the report maps and analyses the media landscape in Algeria, focusing respectively on the general composition of the media sector, the print press and the audio-visual sector (excluding radio). The report is based on consultations with a number of Algerian media professionals, academics, social media activists and human rights advocates.

2. The authoritarian challenge

Algeria's political system was constructed by the military during the civil war which erupted after a group of generals seized power in January 1992 and annulled the democratic elections that would have brought victory to the Islamist mass party, Front Islamique du Salut (FIS). Official numbers suggest that 200,000 people were killed during the civil war that pitted armed Islamist rebels against police, army, other armed rebel groups and civilians. The political system that was rebuilt by the army during the 1990s without the FIS (which had been banned and repressed from 1992-1993), consists roughly of the same set of governing institutions as prior to the civil war. It reinstated Algeria as a constitutional republic with a government elected in multiparty, universal elections presided over by a president elected in multicandidate elections. The legislative branch is bicameral and consists of a lower house, the Assemblée Populaire Nationale whose 462 members are directly elected every five years, and an upper house, the Senate or Conseil de la Nation whose 144 members are indirectly elected by the regional and communal deputies or are appointed by the President.

Aside from persistent reports about electoral fraud and insufficient administrative transparency, widespread corruption in and around government and administration related to the distribution of the oil and gas rent, and access to privatised state assets, two major factors have hampered a transition towards a more liberal democratic governance in Algeria over the past decades:

The first factor is the constitutionally guaranteed predominance of the presidency over the rest of the political system – a mandate that weakens the influence of all other elected bodies (lower house, upper house, regional and local administration) and limits institutional accountability. The president simultaneously serves as head of the council of ministers and as chief of the armed forces. He is responsible for national defence and for foreign policy. He appoints the prime minister, the president of the Upper House, the General Secretary of the government, and a series of important administrative positions such as the director of the Central Bank – and he may dismiss them. He may legislate by presidential decree (a practice that the current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika has excelled in), and he has the right to pronounce presidential pardons and change judicial convictions. He also has the right to organise referendums and ratify international treaties. The wide prerogatives of the presidency and the inability of any other authority to control its performance has not only undermined the credibility of parliament, but is furthermore believed to foster state corruption by diminishing the institutional accountability of the presidency.

The second factor that hampers the transition towards liberal democratic government is the hegemony held by the General Staff of the armed forces over the presidency. Since independence this institution has either furbished candidates for the post from within its own ranks or "screened" candidates for the post. The General Staff was created as an institution within the military hierarchy during the war of independence (1954-1962) and came under the leadership of Defence Minister Colonel Houari Boumedienne at a later point. In 1968 Boumedienne himself dissolved the General Staff three years after he led a successful military coup against his former ally, Algeria's first elected president, Ahmed Ben Bella. The dissolution of the General Staff was enabled

by Boumedienne's influential position within the army's hierarchy and permitted him to transfer his authority into the "civil" state administration that over the following decades was built around the presidency. The presidential control of the armed forces began to erode, however, after Boumedienne's sudden death in late 1979. Having taken over the presidency in 1980, Colonel Chadli Bendjedid reinstated the General Staff, thereby ensuring the Army High Command an autonomous decision-making apparatus outside the control of the civil institutions of the defence ministry and the presidency. During the reform period from 1989 and 1991, the Army High Command further undermined the prerogatives of the president and by January 1992 forced the president to resign and hand over power to the military. Over the following six years between 1992 and 1998, the General Staff functioned as a counter-balance centre of power to the presidencies of Mohammed Boudiaf (1992-1993) Ali Kafi (1993-1994) and Liamine Zeroual (1994-1998). This period by some referred to as the "dual powers" period, came to an end in 1998 when president Zeroual resigned after finding his "reconciliatory" policies towards the Islamist opposition consistently blocked by the General Staff. Zeroual's resignation paved the way for the current president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika to receive the backing of the army to win a criticised electoral victory in 1999 during which all opposition candidates withdrew complaining that checks and balances were annulled and that Bouteflika's candidacy was favourably treated by the supervising institutions.

The influence yielded historically by the army over the civil political institutions has created a deep popular mistrust in the capacity and intentions of civil political institutions. Many Algerians will declare without hesitation that neither parliament nor president have much say in politics and that "real" power is exercised as a consensus between members of "clans" and "deciders" representing big business interests, military leverage, and intelligence muscles – a phenomenon they refer to as "le pouvoir".

2.1 From military to civil authoritarianism

During his past 13 years in power, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has altered the governance balances in Algeria in two ways that by and large have strengthened the role of the presidency in policy-making.

Firstly, Bouteflika has strengthened the authority of the presidency and the ministry of defence vis-à-vis the armed forces by taking the Army High Command out of its prominent position in political decision-making that it acquired in the 1990s. Observers have pointed to two instruments employed by Bouteflika to strengthen civil rule. On one hand, he offered the Army High Command a comfortable way out of politics in the shape of total amnesty to all members of the armed forces for crimes committed during the civil war – an offer presented in two policy documents ratified in popular referendums: the "Concorde Civile" of 1999 and the "Law on National Reconciliation" of 2004. The documents not only clear the armed forces of complicity in the many cases of human rights abuses and war crimes, but also glorify the role of the army as the national saviour. On the other hand, Bouteflika has managed to lead the army out of politics by allegedly aligning himself with the secret service, the Direction de Renseignements et Sécurité (DRS). During the field mission to Algeria in September 2012, interviewees recurrently spoke about the increasing role of the DRS as an actor meddling in even the most banal affairs of Algerian social, economic and political life. While such claims are difficult if not impossible to verify, they are mentioned in this report due to their persistent occurrence during interviews.

Secondly, Bouteflika has increased the mandate of the presidency by improving Algeria's international reputation and cooperation after the low level of international support experienced by the Algerian state in the wake of the military coup and the escalation of anti-civilian violence in the 1990s. The success of the president has depended on at least two factors. A dramatic decrease in violence linked to the civil war during his presidency was instigated by the army's eradication of the most brutal armed group, the GIA in 1997-1998 and by the parallel negotiation led by the Army High Command for permanent cease-fire with the most well-organised armed group, the AIS in late 1997-1998. As part of the Concorde Civile of 1999 and the Law of National Reconciliation of 2004, Bouteflika offered a conditioned amnesty (excluding terrorists condemned for or sought after for cases of mass killings and rape) to the armed rebels who laid down arms and declared that they would not take them up again.

Bouteflika was also able to take advantage of the changing winds of international politics, and notably in the US in the wake of 9/11. The event transformed the Algerian regime into a firm and experienced ally of the US in its "War on Terror" and provided a historical opportunity for the Algerian diplomacy to be welcomed in Washington and, after the attacks in Great Britain in 2005, in London. It could even be argued that Algeria's position in international politics is, in fact, better than it was at any time in the post-colonial period. Rather than going through France, Algeria has in the 2000s been able to have its own direct communication lines with the centres of Western diplomacy.

The successful alterations carried out by Bouteflika of governance balances have expanded the manoeuvring space of the president and his supporting civil institutions. However, authoritarianism remains a strongly conditioning factor of any political developments in the country. While the problem pertaining to the Army High Command's curtailing of the president's power has been handled at present, a process towards democratic governance remains challenged by the accumulation of executive power in the hands of the president, as well as the alleged increase in the influence of security forces on domestic politics. Democratic governance is furthermore threatened by the fact that there is little reason to believe that Bouteflika's ability to keep the military at bay will survive his own period as president, which is scheduled to end by 2014.

2.2 Policy challenges

Bouteflika's time in power has seen the emergence or continuation of a number of policy challenges that are likely to influence the country's political development.

The political conflict between the incumbent "nationalist" government and the members of the banned Islamist party, FIS has not been solved. The Islamist movement remains banned, but also the country's strongest opposition group, which is dormant, but omnipresent, much like the Tunisian Nahda movement prior to the fall of Ben Ali. The poor results obtained by the major Islamist coalition, "The Green Alliance" in the parliamentary elections held in May 2012 (the number of Islamist seats dropped from 52 to 42 of 462 seats in parliament), and the surprising victory of the "nationalist" party that has formed government continuously since 1962 (as a single party until 1989), *Front de Liberation Nationale*, does not signify that Islamism is a phenomenon of the past. More likely it signifies that the "accepted" Islamist parties of which the largest one, the MSP, took part in the governing

coalition between 2007 and 2012 do not enjoy broad credibility among the voters. Only an incorporation of the activists and former members of the banned FIS party provide a reliable electoral counterpart and a subsequent power-sharing balance between the two parties in the conflict.

Bouteflika has also offered neither "truth" about the past violence nor "reconciliation" with the Concorde Civil and with the Law on National Reconciliation. Instead the process has relied on amnesty and amnesia as a way forward with the consequence that it has been rejected by the troubled segment of the population that represents the relatives, families and friends of the thousands of "disappeared" or presumably "unjustly" killed victims of the civil war. Only by reintegrating these marginalised segments of the population into the transitional justice proposed in the laws of 1999 and 2004, could the hope for long-term national consensus on the new post-civil war political order be sustained.

Bouteflika's presidency has not seen the complete halt of terrorist violence. A fortnight does not pass without the Algerian media reporting on new acts of "residual terrorism" allegedly carried out by the transformed faction of the GIA-AIS, GSPC (renamed Al-Qaida in Islamic Maghreb in 2006). The build-up of armed conflict in both Libya, Mali and in the Sahel region more generally may jeopardize the foundations for civil peace initiatives that Bouteflika's ability to govern rely on, as in the case of the In Amenas terrorist attack in January 2013.

Another challenge that is likely to influence the country's political development is the fact that Bouteflika has failed to diversify the economy and make it less dependent on international oil and gas prices. Algeria remains one of the world's least diversified economies with a state apparatus built as a distributive model without noticeable production. The vulnerability of the regime that emerges from such dependency on external factors is obvious and has on several occasions over the past decades destabilised the political and social order in the country (e.g. in 1988 and again in 2010).

State corruption and the importance of the black market have reportedly increased during the presidency of Bouteflika. This has led to further erosion of the capacity of the state and of accountability processes in general and continues to deter international investors from engaging in the Algerian market.

The strengthening of the security services in Algerian politics under Bouteflika's rule is furthermore a challenge to democratic governance. This development has allegedly curtailed the manoeuvring space of both civil society and media in Algeria. It has contributed to the negative outlook of many actors in civil society who deplore the "loss" of for example press freedom due to the state's inability to exercise tight control in the period of near-state collapse during the civil war in the 1990s. The divide between state and civil society makes it even more complicated for the regime to mobilise support in times of crisis.

Finally, Bouteflika's term as president has seen a steady erosion of the public confidence in government. This has been reflected in the declining electoral participation over the past 10-15 years. In 1997 the regime reported that 65 per cent of the population participated in parliamentary elections, in 2002, the number was down to 46 per cent, and in 2007 it was 35 per cent. In elections held in May 2012, the government announced a surprisingly high voter turnout of 43 per cent marking a net increase in political participation of 8 per cent. A closer look at voter behaviour reveals, however, that the 8 percentage point increase corresponded to the increase in blank votes – a tendency

expressing an active boycott rather than the passive boycott expressed in the 65 per cent abstention of 2007. The low confidence in formal politics has furthermore been reflected in the steady increase in contentious politics, i.e. street protests, sit-ins, roadblocks and other forms of organised signs of public discontent. In 2007, the Algerian police reported that they had arrested 7,318 persons for disturbing public peace and order. In 2008, when food prices jumped upwards leading to increased rioting, the number of arrests for "disturbing public peace and order" climbed to 12,822 where it remained throughout 2009 and 2010. Most of these contentious acts concerned rather banal administrative issues; cuts in electricity during the hot months of the summer, a shortage in delivery of gas during the cold months, a lack of repairs of a local community's only paved road etc. Street protests to raise attention around policy issues and discontent with the formal political system have thus become a new way of expressing political claims in an absence of credible and effective institutionalised politics.

The above list of challenges to a future of democratic governance is of course not exhaustive, but constitutes an overview of some of the continually pressuring internal conflicts that the Algerian regime under the leadership of president Bouteflika has proven incapable of solving. Any transition towards a new or reformed political order will have to take these issues into consideration in order to create viable political stability.

3. The aborted spring

On 28 December 2010, protests occurred in and around Algiers in response to hikes in prices on basic food products such as sugar, cooking oil, wheat, vegetables, and fruit which according to Western and Algerian news media increased between 10 per cent and 40 per cent within weeks in response to price fluctuations on the world market. For one week, from Monday, 3 January to Friday, 7 January 2011, protests, rioting, looting and other forms of contention spread from the villages west of Algiers and Oran to a large number of towns and villages all over the country, while being sustained firmly in and around the capital. When police managed to secure most of Algiers on Friday, 7 January, rioting continued after the Friday prayers in a number of provincial towns. Only after government intervened to reduce food prices by massively increasing subsidies and purchasing stocks of wheat, the riots died out over the weekend of 8 and 9 January 2011.

Besides the looting of shops and destroying of luxury goods stores presumably representing Algerian middle class consumerism (car vendors were for instance targeted), Algerian press reported about a few events with more political overtones. Rioters assaulted police stations, they marched on government offices and buildings and in a few instances called for the Minister of Commerce to step down. The core call was however not reform, but government action to ensure the national ability to purchase basic food products. In this respect the Algerian version of the Arab Spring was deeply socio-economic. It reflected a nation-wide concern that the government should fulfil its part of the social contract by ensuring the availability of low price basic commodities. The means for expressing this socio-political demand, street protests, was not new in itself as seen from the past decade of street politics. The novelty consisted in the national character of the street politics, which had hitherto resounded only on a local level to strains experienced on a community level. However, the combination of what in early January 2011 seemed to have the potential to create a national, country-wide protest movement and the political turn that protests in Tunisia took in early January, motivated several actors to try to bring about a distinct political reform-oriented grass-roots movement. A wave of 30 to 40 self-immolations occurred between 14 January and late February. These copycat actions that sought to repeat the Tunisian trigger event¹ were in general performed inside or in front of local administration buildings all over the country. They all failed however to generate mass mobilisation of the public.

A group of small left-wing political parties, led by the Berber dominated party RCD, also organised two strictly political demonstrations in late January – one in Algiers in defiance of the 19 year-old state of emergency that prohibited demonstrations, and another one in a neighbouring town in the Kabyle littoral east of Algiers, Bejaia that according to the RCD gathered thousands of supporters. None of these events gave rise to broad mobilisation.

In late January 2011 secular left-wing political parties including the RCD, the country's most prominent human rights organisations (including the LAD-DH), and unofficial workers' unions, attempted to start a popular campaign for political reform. The concerted efforts of the campaign led to a series of

¹ The protests in Tunisia were sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on 17 December 2010 and led to the ousting of President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali 28 days later on 14 January 2011.

demonstrations held in Algiers between 12 February and early March 2011, but this initiative also failed to gain mass support. The number of protesters never went above a few thousand and they were systematically outnumbered by Algerian police by ten to one.

In late February the window of opportunity in Algeria to experience a Tunisian or Egyptian "spring" that could have altered the power balances from below seemed to have closed. In February 2011, the government increased salaries to those professional groups that had taken to the streets or carried out sit-ins from teachers, to police officers to physicians. Furthermore, the government allocated an eight-figure euro sum to social development projects including a 25-year zero per cent interest bank loan to young "entrepreneurs" and made investments in job creation. At a political level Bouteflika lifted the 19 year-old state of emergency in February 2011 that for 19 years had restricted Freedom of Expression and of assembly. A ban on public meetings and demonstrations in Algiers dating back to 2001 was however upheld by the government with reference to "security". In April 2011, Bouteflika furthermore announced a raft of reforms touching the core areas of the policy: the law on associations, the law on political parties, the law on media and, eventually, the constitution itself. In January 2012, the process led to the adoption by parliament of several so-called "organic" laws that had been promulgated by the president in late 2011 and set out the general framework for the legislation concerning freedom of assembly and information.

4. The media sector

The structure of the Algerian media sector dates back to the “reform period” between 1989 and 1991 when President Chadli Bendjedid and Prime Minister Mouloud Hamrouche introduced a broad reform package aimed at ending the former monopoly over public life held by the former single party, FLN. Until then, the media sector had been driven entirely by the state. In April 1990, however, journalists and businessmen were given the possibility to lawfully own and operate print media while audio-visual media remained a state-monopoly. Besides the audio-visual sector, the state has continued to operate several public media institutions that are formally under the tutelage of the Ministry of Communication. These include the national news agency, *Algérie Press Service*, and the national press archives, *Centre National de Documentation de Presse et d'Information* and a few other institutions.² The state media institution with the most direct impact on the composition of the media sector is the *Entreprise Nationale de Communication, d'Édition & Publication*, known under its French acronym, ANEP, whose chairman is appointed directly by the president of the republic. The main activity of ANEP consists of distributing and placing public advertising in all Algerian media, print as well as audio-visual. This prerogative is exercised in a vacuum of legislation and decisions seem to be taken on a decentralised level. The combined lack of clear guidelines for ANEP and a towering role of the state in the largely distributive Algerian economy make ANEP a major player in tailoring the composition of the state media landscape. It is common lingo among media professionals in Algeria to claim that ANEP operates politically by “rewarding” regime loyalist outlets with lucrative public publicity campaigns while “punishing” outlets whose editorial line at a particular time displeased influential sectors in the regime. An often-cited example of the latter is the alleged informal decision to deprive *El Watan* newspaper of public ads for several years during the late 1990s.

This current division between a public, national vs. a private, international TV and radio broadcast organisation is, however, changing. The “organic” law on information that was issued by the presidency in December 2011 and adopted by parliament in January 2012 aims to liberalise the entire media sector – including TV, radio and Internet. The law thus holds a potential to introduce a new dynamic into the Algerian media sector.

The implementation of the reform process has, however, already been challenged, and has accordingly met criticism from media professionals and experts. Notably the claim that it does not sufficiently guarantee Freedom of Expression and the right to information has been criticised. In spite of the government's claim to base itself on a broad process of consultation with civil society, critics have pointed out that the adoption by parliament of the law (12-05) in January 2012 entirely overruled the critical points raised by civil society thereby rendering the “consultation” void of impact and meaning. Critics, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to freedom of opinion and expression, furthermore uphold that the new law in spite of its claim to adhere to safeguarding the Freedom of Expression, suppresses this freedom by way of twelve vague conditions that provide the magistrates with a broad mandate to curtail critical journalism. Examples include the new law's explicit criminalisation of journalist activities that harm Algeria's “national identity”, its “economic interests”, and its “public order”. Another point of criticism has

2 The Centre International de Presse (CIP), the *Entreprise Nationale des Arts Graphiques* (ENAG) and the *Établissement National de Télédiffusion* (TDA)

been that the new law complicated the exercise of freedom of information by imposing an imbalanced *droit-de-réponse* in the case of articles that criticise e.g. national values and interests. Critics have furthermore pointed out that the establishment of media outlets is controlled by a procedure of aggregation rather than simple notification, and that international publications are controlled by the Ministry of Communication. Finally, observers have long requested the creation of an institution for regulation of the press, but the nomination of half of this new institution's members, including its chairman, by the president of the republic, by the head of the parliament, and by the head of the Senate, has been criticised for allowing a disproportionately large role for the political institutions in meddling with the affairs of regulation.

4.1 Print media

When the Algerian print media was opened to private ownership in 1990-1991, the state introduced a number of incentives and subventions to facilitate the transition away from public monopoly. The incentives included a two-year salary package paid for by the state to journalists who engaged in starting up private newspapers. It also included low-rent housing within the two so-called "media cities" (one in central Algiers, another in Koumba), state support to imported printing paper, and low-cost printing in the state-owned printing houses. In return for this, the newspapers agreed to sell at fixed prices (El Watan and *al-Khabar* have as a result of their disengagement from the system of state support been able to raise their single issue prices a bit). Combined with an exceptionally liberal legislation for Arab standards, the policy generated a boom in print media in Algeria in the period from 1990 to 1992 that most experts and professionals agree constituted a "golden age" characterised by optimism and a large increase in the number of privately owned newspapers, as well as journals and other types of publications.

The military coup in January 1992 had severe consequences for the print media. In 1992, the military reinstated a partial state censorship on issues related to "the security of the state". As the armed conflict between Islamist rebels and the regime gradually overshadowed other types of politics, the army control over "security issues" not only obstructed investigative journalism, but also made basic reporting about day-to-day news events dependent on information created and censored by the military. Partially as result of their inability to serve as a critical counterweight to the military's perspective on the conflict, journalists became objects of a campaign of targeted assassinations of critics and intellectuals orchestrated by the Islamist rebels.

In 1993, the national emir of the most important rebel network, GIA, issued a warning to public figures in Algeria explaining that those who fought the GIA "with the pen" would be countered by the GIA "with the sword". Hereby the emir referred both to the critical tone towards the Islamist rebels that were aired in newspapers relying solely on army sources as prescribed by the law, and to the initial support of a military coup that a number of "liberal", "nationalist" and "left-wing" political groups and parties, public figures, and newspaper editors had aired in late 1991 and early 1992.³

Between 1993 and 1998, about 100 Algerian journalists and editors were killed – several of them in bomb explosions targeting media institutions. Most of these killings were attributed to the GIA – and in particular one of its subgroups known as the FIDA. But in some cases doubt has lingered as to whether one or another "regime clan" with ties to the army and business circles used "Islamist terror" to cover up their own silencing of a critical journalist. Over the past ten years, this type of violence has ceased completely,

³ These include El Watan (French-language) and Arabic-language al-Khabar.

but conditions for journalist practice remain tough, and there are recurring reports about journalists facing difficulties in their daily work, presumably arising from the low or politicised status of the journalist profession.

In spite of these constraints, the Algerian print media has remained a relatively vital field in continuous development over the past two decades. Today the print media consists of more than eighty daily newspapers – primarily in Arabic, but with a substantial minority published in French. The former state newspapers have been transformed to party newspapers for the FLN. This goes in particular for the long-term “historical” French language *El Moujahid*, which was established by the guerrilla in 1956. From its heyday as the guerrilla propaganda outlet edited by Frantz Fanon in the late 1950s to its status as a tightly controlled state newspaper, and indeed as the only daily newspaper in Algeria during the early decades of postcolonial history, *El Moujahid* has today a very limited readership and circulation.

The duo *al-Khabar* and *El Watan* constitute the most important private “quality print media”. Both newspapers were established in 1992 by collectives of journalists who moved from the public sphere into the private with support from the government.⁴ *El Watan* and *al-Khabar* have over the past decades been the frontrunners in the privatisation of the print press in Algeria. They have established their own print and distribution mechanism with regional centres in the East and West of the country financed through international bank loans. Seen by their critics as being editorially “close to the military” due to their editorial support to the military coup in 1992 and due to their subsequent privileged access to military sources during the war, they are by their supporters hailed as the single most reliable news source in the country. The journals have been objects of both Islamist rebel terrorist attacks and protracted state harassment ranging from the aforementioned informal “ban” on placing public ads in the journals to the delaying of licenses to purchase and build new headquarters. Legal court cases have been brought against their journalists on charges of defamation. Seen from the perspective of *El Watan*, this is a major constraint on the development of a free quality press capable of exercising its critical role in the partial and flawed privatisation of the press.

The most widely read private newspapers are, however, neither *El-Watan* nor *al-Khabar*, but the two privately-owned Arabic-language dailies *al-shuruk* and *al-Nahar*. None of these outlets enjoy compassionate endorsement from the political elite outside the state administration, but appear to be doing well business-wise and to enjoy sufficient government endorsement to acquire ongoing permission to expand their activities. Observers typically distinguish between the two by categorising the editorial line of *al-shuruk* as less populist than what is found in the more sensational *al-Nahar*. *Al-nahar* is by many observers not considered to carry high quality journalism. This paper has acquired a reputation amongst its critics as an outlet running personalised, xenophobic, and populist campaigns against single persons often from within the regime who have fallen short of ensuring support from the “clan” within the “*pouvoir*” that owns the journal and imposes its editorial line. Since ownership structures of the press is one of the least documented areas of the media sector, such allegations remain entirely dependent on content-analysis of the editorial line of the newspapers. Since this criticism is, however, encountered persistently and across the entire ideological set of observers in Algeria, it may be taken as an indication of the general mistrust of the editorial independence exercised by privately owned media in Algeria in the post-civil war period, rather than necessarily as an expression of the truthful story about how editorial policies are made within the different newspapers.

⁴ The team that created *El Watan* came from *El Moujahid* and the team that created *al-Khabar* came from the Arabic-language state-owned daily newspaper, *al-shaab*, both of which in 1990-1991 were gradually becoming FLN-party press outlets.

Besides these major private outlets, there is a true myriad of private newspapers in Arabic and in French, many of which have a relatively short lifespan. The majority of them do not contribute substantially to quality journalism. They have little or no impact on the media agenda, and they are economically dysfunctional with accumulated debts to the state. Critical observers estimate that there are perhaps only five or six truly independent newspapers. There are persistent, but undocumented, rumours that the rest of the journals in circulation are able to run solely because they enjoy "protection" from the state bureaucracy, being a means to create an illusion of plurality – or as a means to ensure a propagandist reporting on behalf of different "clans" with relations to the army, the secret service, and big businesses. The closing of the daily newspaper, *La Nation*, and the imprisonment of its editor in chief, Mohammed Benchikou in 2005 on administrative charges concerning a fiscal case, is an often-cited example of the dangers encountered by editors who ally themselves with a particular political faction. Benchikou had, according to these critics, aligned himself closely with an "anti-Bouteflika clan" and engaged critically in campaigning against the president. When Bouteflika nevertheless won a second mandate in the presidential elections in 2004, *La Nation* was closed and the state pressed charges against Benchikou.

4.2 Television and Internet

Awaiting the adoption by parliament, the new law regulating the operation of audio-visual media (originally scheduled for January 2013, but later postponed), Algerian TV and radio continue to be formally under the monopoly of the state, a monopoly that the state has exercised since independence in 1962. The five Algerian state-run TV channels are: the terrestrial "mother channel", ENTV (Entreprise Algérienne de Télévision) established in 1967, and four satellite broadcast channels: Canal Algérie (a French copy of the ENTV), Canal A3 (in Arabic), TV AM (in Amazigh/Berber), and TV Coran. The state operates two national radio stations and about 40 local radio stations with an estimated audience of some 30 million people.

The state monopoly on television broadcasting has since the early 1990s been challenged by widespread consumption of international news and entertainment channels via satellite receivers. Many Algerians watch pan-Arab channels like al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya, and MBC and French national and European international news and entertainment channels.

Furthermore, the state monopoly on TV broadcasting has, in the wake of the Arab Spring and in the anticipation of the coming privatisation of the audio-visual sector been challenged in Algeria. In late 2011, a small number of actors launched their own private TV outlets in Algeria ahead of the expected deregulation of the sector. In general, those who have ventured into the field may be divided into two groups.

First, a small number of opposition channels with an Islamist outlook have emerged, operating from outside the country and intensifying their media activism in what seems to be an attempt to push forward a broader mobilisation based on the Islamist successes observed during the Arab Spring in neighbouring countries: Their emergence can also be seen as an early launch pre-empting the coming privatisation of broadcast media. The most important of these outlets is *al-Maghribiya* TV, which was launched as a news channel in mid-December 2011. According to Algerian observers the channel faces difficulties in filming and producing content in Algeria, and to some extent relies on content uploaded to YouTube by critical Algerian bloggers.

Second, private TV channels launched by Algerian businessmen based on existing privately owned print media. In this category one finds the news channel *al-Nahar TV*, which is based on the daily newspaper of the same name. There is also the entertainment channel, *al-Shourouk TV* based on the private newspaper of the same name. According to the management of *al-Shourouk TV* the newspaper operates based on the entertainment TV models developed by the MBC. Neither *Shourouk TV* nor *Nahar TV* face administrative obstacles comparable to those faced by the Islamist-oriented *Maghrabiya TV*. The channels claim to be operating "in complete legality" (although several experts in the field claim the opposite) as "external networks" broadcasting material produced in Algeria from Jordan via satellite to viewers back in Algeria.

The two channels have so far been tolerated by the government and have thus acquired a comparatively advantageous position to dominate the private TV market once a full liberalisation takes place. Although the quality journals, *El Watan* and *al-Khabar*, reportedly plan to request permission to establish private TV channels, the permission by the government to let *Nahar TV* and *Shuruk TV* operate ahead of time may lead to the commercialised development of the sector with a repetition of some of the problems observed within the private print press: low political credibility, low standards in news reporting, alleged affiliation with business interests inside the regime and so forth.

Internet

A third challenge to the state monopoly on audio-visual media has developed over the past decade with the increasing, but still slowly growing Internet penetration. Perhaps due to the historical links to France, a country which itself was slow to engage in adopting the Internet⁵, and partially due to the general closing down of investments in technology and infrastructure during the civil war, the Internet was more slow to arrive in Algeria than was the case with its North African neighbours. Internet penetration in Algeria does not exceed 20 per cent. The weak penetration is partially linked to the low number of available fixed telephone lines (in 2010 there were about 4.5 million active fixed telephone lines compared to approximately 35 million active mobile lines). It is also due to government policy. Having opened for private (and foreign) investments between 1998 and 2000, the government passed a law against cybercrime in 2009 that amongst other things slowed the spread of the Internet by imposing a number of surveillance obligations on Internet providers and owners of Internet cafés. While cell phone usage is widespread (the number of active cell phone numbers has surpassed the number of inhabitants), wireless Internet technology (3G) has not been introduced, although the main mobile networks reportedly sold one-off 3G SIM cards during Ramadan in 2012 as a test case.

The slowly developing Internet penetration has resulted in a slower and more nascent development of critical online media outlets compared to other North African countries. In consequence, blogging and Facebook activism only began in the late 2000s and is still in a pioneering and individualised phase, possibly a factor that influenced the weak ability of the Algerian protest movement to mobilise in the spring of 2011.

One particularly interesting field of media development is the cross-over between unionist activism which over the past few years has found a way of invigorating nascent, independent, youth-based workers' movements and online activism. Several of the most popular bloggers who occasionally exercise a noticeable impact on the broader media agenda wholeheartedly engage in issues directly emanating from local union-like concerns: economic hardship,

5 Until the late 1990s the French state still operated its own Minitel system. The service was finally discontinued by France Telecom in 2012.

social injustice, worker's solidarity, and national responsibility. But they also pick up themes concerning human rights issues and, the most audacious of them, treat cases of corruption and subversive activities of the secret police, the DRS. These activities have led to increasing police surveillance and administrative harassment of the bloggers by the police. During the autumn of 2012, several bloggers were to stand trial before a local court charged for what was widely believed to be trumped up charges aiming at discrediting them in the broader public and intimidating other activists from following their example.

5. Conclusion

Authoritarianism is likely to remain the predominating form of governance in Algeria in the foreseeable future. The rooting of political decision-making in the duality of the military and the presidency with additional weight in intelligence services and big businesses makes decision-making only vaguely accountable and transparent to the public. The combined ability of the state to sharply increase public welfare spending with the absence of widespread political protest has allowed the regime to avoid major political concessions. The improved status within the international society under Bouteflika gained through anti-terrorism collaboration with Washington and London in the aftermath of 9/11 and the 2005 bombings in London furthermore lessened the international pressure on and criticism of the regime.

As a consequence, none of the reform initiatives taken by the Algerian regime in the wake of the revolts of 2011 are likely to fundamentally alter the power balances between the regime and those who challenge it. Civil society has persistently criticised the new associations' law, the new law on political parties and the law on media for further restricting the manoeuvring space of civil society and challengers of the regime. The "organic law 12-05" leaves too much room for the state to meddle in editorial politics and the consultation process leading up to its promulgation displayed a considerable disregard for civil society criticism. There is therefore little reason to expect that the announced constitutional amendments will improve the democratic checks and balances. It also gives little reason to believe that the law regulating the privatisation of the audio-visual media, rescheduled for June 2013, will be more than a half-hearted attempt to stall and control the handing over of the audio-visual sector to private actors capable of or interested in fundamentally challenging the regime. There are already processes in motion in which the regime tolerates the hampering of free competition envisaged in the legislative reform by allowing for a pre-emptive launch of privately owned satellite and online TV channels.

Although authoritarianism is likely to persist and the reforms – including the media reform – is unlikely to fundamentally alter the power balances in Algeria, the privatisation of the audio-visual sector could profoundly change the Algerian media sector and generate a previously unseen pressure on the regime. The privatisation of print media in Algeria in the 1990s created a framework within which both political, businesses and military groups could enhance their interests by using private print media to push forward key messages. But it also led to the creation of several high-quality journals in French and in Arabic. The inability of these to fundamentally challenge the interests of the regime in Algeria was, in part, linked to their lack of a sufficiently large audience. TV and radio, on the other hand, remain the most important sources of information in Algeria in spite of the poor production quality, public monopoly and lack of credible outlets covering Algerian affairs. The opening up of private ownership of audio-visual media therefore provides an opportunity to create media platforms outside the direct control of the state bureaucracy that could speak to a far larger audience than any newspaper will ever be able to. The poor quality and low credibility of the existing public TV and radio further strengthen the likelihood that private channels – much like what has been seen with the rapid emergence and domination of the media field by Shourouk TV and Nahar TV – could quickly outrun the public outlets.

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