



African  
Democracy-  
Meter Reports  
Initiative (ADRI)

Algeria

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## Message from the President

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# The Democratic Recession is not Slowing!

With the actions of China and Russia in 2020, as well as the end of Donald Trump's reign as President of the US in 2020 which marked the 15th consecutive year of decline in global freedom and democracy, today the data shows that countries experiencing deterioration in advancement and entrenchment of democracy outnumbered those with improvements by the largest margin recorded since the negative trend began in 2006. The long democratic recession is deepening.

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**The long democratic recession is deepening.**

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**Godbless Otubure  
Global President  
ReadyToLeadAfrica**

The impact of the long-term democratic decline has become increasingly global in nature, broad enough to be felt by those living under the cruelest dictator, as well as by citizens of long-standing democracies. Nearly 75 percent of the world's population lived in a country that faced deterioration last year according to Freedom House USA.

For us all, the work to preserve, protect and promote democracy has never been more urgent. For us at ReadyToLeadAfrica, we believe that our effort to make the case for African democratic development and sustainability can not be over-emphasized.

We are Ready to do our best. Ours is to PLOUGH, Not to PLUNDER.

# Abstract

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On June 12, 2021, Algerians went to the polls for their first legislative elections since the Hirak movement forced the resignation of their autocratic President Bouteflika.

The leaders of the Hirak movement called for a boycott of the election, pointing to the continued reign of the old guard and the election's limited transparency as signs that the election would not be free and fair. The boycott was widely followed by Algerians, particularly young Algerians. As a result, the 2021 Algerian legislative election had the second-lowest voter turnout of any Algerian election in the six decades since the nation gained its independence. This report examines why the boycott was implemented, the possible long-term effects it may have on Algeria's people and government, and what the next steps are in Algeria's transition to democracy.



An Algerian woman walks past campaign posters. Source: BCC.

## History and Background

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The current political climate in Algeria has its roots in the civil war of the 1990s. In 1991, Algeria held its first elections for the legislature under a new constitution. In the first of two rounds, the widely-popular Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won a near majority of legislative seats. To prevent FIS from winning an absolute majority in the second round, the army intervened and canceled elections. Violence broke out between Islamist groups and the army, claiming the lives of roughly 100,000 Algerians over a decade (Brown et al., 2021). Recently the Algerian government has been blamed for the majority of the violence, but the truth-seeking process is still ongoing. Quick amnesty and a lack of information on “disappeared” civilians continue to contribute to popular discontent with the government.



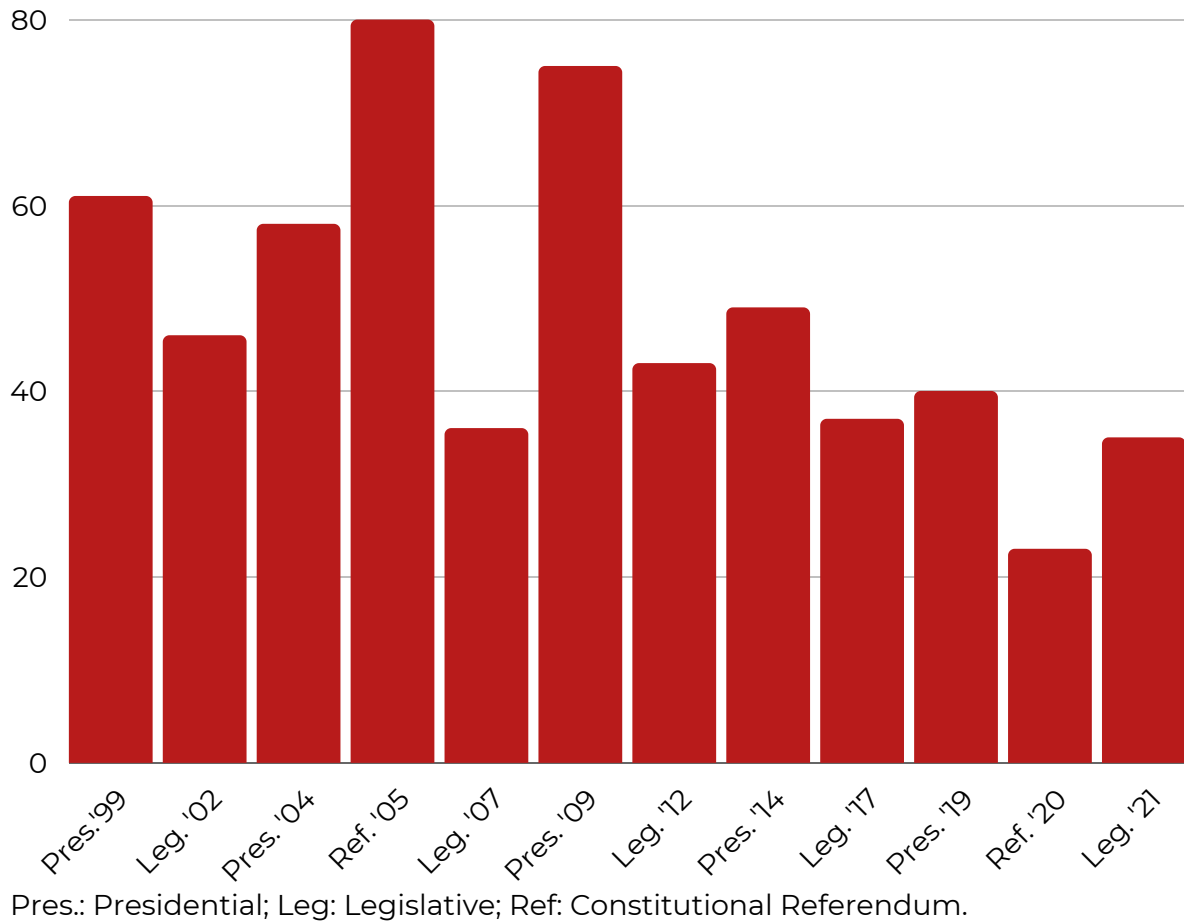
Family members of the "disappeared" from Algeria's civil war. Source: ICTJ Algeria.

In the elections of 1999, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, of the ruling National Democratic Rally, ran for president unopposed; most opposition parties refused to field candidates in the possibly-illegitimate election. Bouteflika was reelected in 2005, this time in an election generally agreed to be free from manipulation. In 2006, he initiated a peace deal, ratified by referendum, that put an end to the civil war. He had shown himself effective in ending the violence, earning him widespread popular support. However, in 2008, he amended the constitution to abolish presidential term limits. In the absence of viable opposition, Bouteflika swept the likely-illegitimate 2009 and 2014 presidential elections. The opposition attempted boycotts, but political apathy and Bouteflika's popularity, bought with oil profits and secured by the threat of a return to war, prevented those boycotts from taking hold among the public.

In February of 2019, despite a reinstatement of presidential term limits and a debilitating stroke he suffered, Bouteflika announced he would be running for a fifth term. The nation erupted in a series of protests known as the Hirak, which was led by young people and backed by the judiciary and the military. Under this intense pressure, Bouteflika stepped down from the presidency on April 2; however, his administration of old-guard elites, known as “*le pouvoir*”, retained their hold on power. The administration has begun implementing reforms, but Hirak says these reforms are just shallow distractions from continued corruption and authoritarianism in the government.

Hirak and the general public are deeply distrustful of elections held by this administration, given its history of election interference under Bouteflika. This fear was confirmed in the first presidential election since Bouteflika stepped down: the only approved candidates were of the old guard. Hirak and the public attempted to postpone and interfere with the election, but the army stepped in to ensure the election occurred. Just under 40% of the electorate participated (France 24, 2019).

## Figure 1. Voter Turnout by Election



## Election and Boycott

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Voting at the Bouchaoui polling station on June 12, 2021 in the parliamentary elections. Source: France24.

On June 12, 2021, Algeria held its parliamentary election with 407 seats open. The National Liberation Front (FLN) won 107 seats, the Islamist Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) won 64 seats, and independent candidates won 78

seats (Aljazeera, 2021). The election had its lowest turnout in the past 20 years, with only 30.2% of registered voters voting (Deutsche Welle, 2021). One of the reasons for the decrease in voter turnout is due to Hirak boycotting the elections. Controversy has surrounded this election, along with the previous government, due to the fact many Algerians involved in Hirak view the election as a sham. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the previous Algerian president for 20 years, resigned in April of 2019. However, Hirak and other Algerian groups believe that Bouteflika was just the public face and the actual political climate of the country is still the same (Al Jazeera, 2021). Consistent with these claims is that the FLN, one of the ruling parties in Algeria currently, is linked to Bouteflika's rule (The Arab Weekly, 2021). The aforementioned reason is one of the main reasons why supporters of Hirak believe that any election that takes place under these conditions of army intervention in politics, and military-backed elite cannot be a true and fair representation of democracy. Due to knowing it will not be completely free of intervention, Hirak has boycotted the election. The role of young people in Hirak cannot be emphasized enough. Hirak is a largely youth-led movement, with millions of students and other young people peacefully protesting for government and political form in Algeria. Additionally, Government officials and authorities did not express concern or distraught over Hirak's decision. However, the lack of trust in the government along with the lack of political transparency in Algeria creates an atmosphere where boycotting is a likely alternative. Unfortunately, this is a reality many countries face, where free and fair democracy is not fully actualized but rather is twisted and discourages the citizens from taking part.

# Comparison to Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution

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Before comparing these two countries, we must clarify the criteria by which we will be making these comparisons. Geographically, Tunisia is a North African country like Algeria. We decided to only consider a country in the same region as Algeria in order to control the amount of variability between the nations. Historically, both countries have seen social movements in which a long-standing president was ousted. Politically, both nations are in the process



Map of Algeria and Tunisia. Source: Africa Fundacion Sur.

of moving toward a more democratic governmental structure. The objective of this section is to analyze the similarities and differences between the effects of the two revolutionary movements and consider how these movements impacted the countries' recent elections.

In early 2011, Tunisia had a revolution known as the Jasmine Revolution, which began the Arab Spring movement in North Africa and the Middle East. This movement is comparable to the Hirak because they had similar goals and results, but different strategies and long-term effects. This section



Tunisians during the Jasmine Revolution. Source: TRTWorld.

will compare the impacts of these particular movements on future democratic processes and attempt to contextualize Algeria's recent parliamentary election. In offering any comparison between social



movements and political systems, it is necessary to remember that each country has a unique history, culture, and people. These factors can have an impact on the unfolding of events such as the Jasmine Revolution in Tunisia and the Hirak in Algeria.

In Tunisia, in December of 2010, a street vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in front of a municipal office, so as to protest the unjust treatment he received from the government as a member of a lower socioeconomic status. This act inspired protests throughout Tunisia known as the Jasmine Revolution, the first movement of the Arab Spring, a wave of pro-democracy demonstrations across parts of North African and the Middle East in 2011. In Tunisia, millions protested against unemployment rates, poverty, food inflation, political corruption, and violations of basic rights and freedoms. Soon after the start of the revolution, protests became violent and took the lives of over 300 Tunisians. The increasing violence and international pressure forced President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali to decrease food prices, loosen Internet censorship, and eventually resign from the position and flee the country. Protestors recognized that this resignation changed very little in the system which they protested against, so after continued demonstrations and increasing violent interactions between the police and the people, the government declared a state of emergency and agreed to the complete dissolution of the government with legislative elections being held before the



"Free at last", on a wall in Tunis, January 2011. Source: Encyclopedia Britannica.

## Figure 2. Goals of the Jasmine Revolution

Tunisians were asked, "Which of these was the most important goal of the revolution?"



Note: 156 answered, 2 skipped.

end of the year. Just days after this announcement, Prime Minister Mohamed Ghannouchi announced the formation of a new “national unity government,” which marked the beginning of Tunisia’s journey to democracy.

Outside of the resignation of the acting presidents, the Hirak and Jasmine Revolution had similar short-term impacts. Similarly to the recent parliamentary elections in Algeria, the first election after the Jasmine Revolution (the country’s first transparent election), had only 17% of youth participation because a majority of this population was disappointed by the lack of social reform. This low voter turnout only applied to the youth, though, because 69% of all registered voters in Tunisia participated in the October election (British Council, 2013). This occurred for the same reason that less than one-third of registered voters in Algeria participated in the election: young people are less trusting of the government and more critical of their inability to meet the movement demands. In Tunisia, many young voters believed that the political reforms strayed too far from what protestors really called for in their campaign slogan “shughl, hurriyya, karama wataniyya,” which translates to work, freedom, and national dignity. Figure 2 depicts the results from a survey conducted by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, which asked the question of “what was the most important goal of the Jasmine Revolution,” it is clear that people were less concerned with the political motivators, such as removing President Ben Ali, reducing corruption, and improving women’s rights and political participation (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018). The goal with the highest percentage is reducing social marginalization, which is more closely aligned with the movement’s slogan and origin (the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi).

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## The crisis of democracy in Algeria boils down to one cause: broken trust.

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Over time, however, there was a shift in youth attitudes towards voting in Tunisia. On October 13, 2019, Tunisia held their second Presidential election in history, which resulted in a victory for Kais Saied, a conservative, anti-establishment law professor, dubbed “Robocop” for his cold, stern demeanor. In their 2019 presidential election, approximately half of the country’s population of registered voters cast a ballot, but Tunisian youth swept the vote in the direction of Saied. “Around 90 percent of 18-25 year olds voted for Saied, according to estimates by the Sigma polling institute, compared to 49.2% of voters over 60.” (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2019) This shows that despite the general frustration about the lack of social reform, younger Tunisians can now trust that the electoral processes put in place by this new government are transparent, legitimate, and reliable. That is the difference between Tunisia and Algeria: after their social movements, the Tunisian government transitioned into a democracy, being the only country from the Arab Spring movement to achieve this, while Algeria’s government only made cosmetic changes to quell protests and ultimately keep the power in the hands of *le pouvoir*, or the political elite. The crisis of democracy in Algeria boils down to one cause: broken trust. For decades, Algerians have been shown time and again that the government has the best interests of *le pouvoir* at heart. The Hirak-led boycott of the election empowered youth and sent a message to the government, but it raises the question: how will Algeria achieve a stable democracy if the people do not have enough trust to participate in it?



Young protestors in Tunisia. Source: Huffington Post.

# Analysis

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## The 2021 Boycott

In Algeria there is a broken trust between the government and its citizens. The democratic process cannot come to fruition unless there is a strong, reliable base from which it can build. Unfortunately, due to the distrust and ruling political elite in the Algerian government, the democratic process is destined to be an inaccurate representation of the Algerian people's desires and hopes for the future of the country. Until this long history is corrected, boycotting of elections is an understandable action taken by Hirak. Ideally, continuing to stand against the corruption of the government will lead to the reform that Algerians have advocated for in the past. When that government reform is actualized and there is more trust between the government and its citizens, democracy can reach its true potential in Algeria.



Algerians protesting the election of Abdelmadjid Tebboune in December, 2019. Source: The New York Times.

## Image of Algeria's Future

Algeria should follow the example of the Tunisian government by adopting parts of their unity government structure and principles. There are few similarities between Tunisia's democracy and that of Algeria, but ultimately Algeria falls short. For instance, though multiple political parties are represented in Algeria's government, power is still concentrated in the hands of the ruling coalition. Given the barriers to entry from the existing political system and extremely low voter turnout, the future is bleak for newer or smaller political parties. However, with the implementation of transparent elections and other measures that ensure electoral legitimacy, there is hope for increased civic participation and a more diverse government. The peaceful transition of power is a vital step in the transformation of the Algerian government. In the democratic system that Algerians deserve, registered voters would have the power to elect officials who represent their best interests in government, rather than be subjected to oppression from the class of political elite who act in their own self-interest.

## The Transition to Full Democracy

Long-term change cannot be brought about without democratic input from the Algerian people. Therefore, Hirak and the Algerian public must push for key reforms to their electoral system to ensure elections in the near future are free and fair. Transparent and competitive elections will break *le pouvoir's* stranglehold on political power in Algeria and allow deeper reforms to begin with the true input of the Algerian people. To accomplish this, Hirak should invite neutral international observers to monitor the election and ensure it is executed without corruption. With faith in the election's integrity restored, Hirak should encourage non-*le pouvoir* candidates to run and ensure that those candidates make it on to the ballot through financial and logistical support. The international observers should step in if any candidates are arbitrarily rejected from the ballot. Lastly, when Algerian elections shift to the electronic form in 2024, increased transparency measures must be put in place, including print-out "receipts" of votes so voters know their vote was counted.



A voter registration drive in Algiers, 2019. Source: AP News.



Tunisian campaign posters, 2019. Source: Washington Post.

## Tunisia as an Example of Revolutionary Reform

In order to achieve long-term changes, Algerians and the Hirak movement must make long-term demands. Many people cite a lack of organization as one of the leading factors in the downfall of the Hirak. Mainly, this applies to the demands of the movement. A reflection from the Washington Institute cites this as one of the main limitations in the social movement: “the Hirak’s political and social actors who adopted radical positions failed to provide a viable political alternative to the system they sought to overthrow.” (Washington Institute, 2021) This lack of uniformity allowed the political elite to be highly selective in the changes that they made to the government, which explains why Algerians saw not much more than Bouteflika’s resignation as a result of the movement. Fortunately, though, Algerians can look to Tunisia as a template for an alternative to their current system. While many Tunisians are still highly frustrated with the lack of social equality seen after the revolution, this country is the only one to transition to democracy after the Arab Spring and has achieved a number of exemplary improvements to their political structures and processes. After the resignation and fleeing of their former president during the 2011 Jasmine Revolution, Prime Minister Mohammed Ghannouchi announced their transition from an autocratic regime to a “national unity government.” The political changes made in this transition included: transparent elections, allowing multiple political parties to be represented in their government, and drafting and approving a new constitution in 2014 to replace the Constitution of 1969.

## Rebuilding Trust

One of the first steps that Algeria needs to take in achieving a democracy based on trust is to amend the constitution or completely re-draft it. Former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika changed the constitution throughout his presidency by removing presidential term limits, increasing his power and that of the political elite which he represented. This is wildly oppressive to the people of Algeria, as they have little to no say in the constitutional amendments process and cannot defend themselves against le pouvoir. In order for Algeria to completely move past the trespasses against constitutional authority, the government must do the following: make a public effort to amend the constitution to resolve any lingering violations of political processes, consider completely redrafting the Constitution to usher in a more modern, inclusive form of representation, and above all else, involve the people in this process. There has been an “attempt” at this by the Algerian

**Progress is  
not progress  
at all until it  
involves the  
voice of the  
people.**



Young Algerian protestors, 2019. Source: Vox

government, but it took place when the COVID-19 pandemic prevented citizens from sharing their input through protests. A constitutional referendum was approved, but this vote followed similar voter turnout trends in Algeria, with very few people participating. Therefore, this progress is not progress at all because it does not involve the people. As stated above, the crisis of democracy in Algeria is a lack of trust between the people and political actors, so it is vital for these actors to extend an olive branch, welcoming leaders of the Hirak movement and voting-age citizens alike to participate in all parts of all political processes. Only from this point can Algeria begin to rebuild the trust that existed before the Civil War and allow the country to maximize its potential for political, economic, and social harmony.

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Stella Banino is a summer 2021 intern with ReadyToLeadAfrica from Sleepy Hollow, New York. She is in her second year at the University of Virginia, where she is studying Systems Engineering with a concentration in Global Development. At RTLA, Stella has helped launch The Ready Letter e-newsletter and works on outreach, graphic design, and voter turnout initiatives.

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