Algeria's upcoming election will not instigate meaningful change

On June 12, a snap election will be held in Algeria to elect 407 members to the People's General Assembly, the lower house of the country's parliament. The vote was initially scheduled to take place in 2022, but President Abdelmadjid Tabboune moved the election date forward in response to ongoing anti-government protests in the country.

A protest movement, known as Hirak, emerged in Algeria in 2019 in response to the announcement of then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth presidential mandate. Weekly mass protests led Bouteflika, who had been in power since 1999, to step down in April 2019. Bouteflika's departure from the political scene, however, did not mark the end of this grassroots movement. Protesters continued to regularly take to the streets, this time demanding a complete overhaul of the political system, which – notably – would involve the distancing from the political sphere of the country's all-powerful military.

The Hirak movement's protests largely came to a halt in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the protests returned with full force in February 2021, after the country managed to bring the outbreak under relative control.

In recent months, the economic fallout from COVID-19 and the fall in oil prices led to a rise in unemployment and a significant decrease in the buying power of Algerians, heightening further protests. The government's recent crackdown on dissenting voices, including members of the Hirak movement, also increased unrest.

The military leadership, which is unwilling to concede to the public's demands for a truly civil and democratic state, has attempted to contain the unrest through varying levels of repression as well as political tactics such as a constitutional amendment in 2020. And the upcoming snap legislative election is another effort by the military-controlled regime to ease tensions.

However, the Hirak movement and many political actors in Algeria swiftly rejected the show election. And, as demonstrated by ongoing protests and growing public criticism of the state, a significant portion of the Algerian population seems to agree.

As a result, a majority of the population is expected to boycott the upcoming election. Moreover, despite promises to remain neutral, the military will likely have a say in which parties rise to power after the election. In Algeria, it is still very difficult to imagine a scenario in which a party wins the majority against the wishes of the military. It is even more improbable that, following the election, the power dynamics in Algeria will change so far as to allow any political actor or body to challenge or check the military's significant powers. Consequently, it is highly unlikely for the June 12 election to instigate any real change in the country.

About 24 million eligible voters are called to vote on Saturday to elect a new lower house of parliament for a five-year mandate. There are 1,483 electoral lists; 646 of these were submitted by political parties and 837 by independents. Of the 22,554 candidates, 10,468 are from political parties while 12,086 are independent. The number of independent candidates is higher than that of candidates from political parties – a first in Algeria's history.

Given that they are viewed as pro-regime and are considered by the popular movement to be partly responsible for the ongoing political and economic crises, established parties such as the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the Democratic National Rally (RND) will probably earn fewer votes than they did in the 2017 legislative election. Whether they will lose their share of influence in parliament, however, will depend on the performance of other, smaller parties. Especially, the performance of Algeria's Islamist parties will likely determine the makeup of the next parliament and government. Islamist parties have long been struggling to win popular support in Algeria. In 1992, the military dismantled the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), an Islamist political party, when it became clear that it was on course to win the general election. The move triggered a bloody civil war, which lasted until 2002, and caused an estimated 200,000 deaths. The legacy of this bloody civil war pushed Islamists to the margins of Algeria's political sphere, leaving them without much opportunity to reclaim power.

The ongoing unrest, coupled with the regime's crisis of legitimacy and the lack of a credible alternative, however, could present Islamist parties with an opportunity to gain more influence in parliament after Saturday's election.

Nevertheless, the Islamist parties may still struggle to seize this moment of opportunity and maximise their votes. Throughout their election campaigns, Islamist parties tried to appeal to non-Islamist and less radical voters. This may cause them to lose the support of some of their core voters, namely "radical Islamists", in the upcoming election. Furthermore, some Islamist parties have expressed their desire to work with the regime to bring about change, which could result in them losing the support of voters who want the regime's departure. These parties may also be hurt by the very fact that they have not rejected these elections or have been in government in the past.

For example, the Movement of Society and Peace (MSP) which is allied with the Muslim Brotherhood – whose leader Abderrazak Makri recently said his party is ready to govern and has good relations with the authorities – has continuously participated in government between 1997 (Algeria's first post-civil war parliamentary elections) and 2011. The head of the El-Binaa party, Abdelkader Bengrina, who came second behind Tebboune in the 2019 presidential election, meanwhile, has used his campaign platform to call for reconciliation and moving past the civil war.

These parties may still earn enough votes to lead the lower chamber of parliament. However, they are unlikely to pursue the radical reform agenda sought by the Hirak movement.

Thus, they do not constitute a threat to the regime. In fact, President Tebboune recently said he is not bothered by these parties' moderate Islamic ideology and that he is ready to work with them. Therefore, if Islamist parties end up forming Algeria's new government, they would most likely be in a similar position to neighbouring Morocco's Justice and Development Party, which was previously in opposition but has since bowed to the regime.

All signs indicate that Algeria's June 12 elections will not lead to any substantial change or reform, and will instead be used by the regime as a tool to reclaim some form of legitimacy.

But the regime's apparent plans to treat the election result as a stamp of approval is complicated by the expected low voter turnout. Many Algerians have been boycotting elections in recent years – the 2019 presidential election had a 40 percent turnout, while the 2020 referendum to the constitution had a record-low 24 percent turnout. With the Hirak movement and several left-wing and Amazigh political parties rejecting the election, the voter turnout on Saturday will also likely be low. This will be a problem for the regime which not only aims to placate the popular movement through the election of a new lower chamber of parliament, but also seeks to create the impression that it has the support of the Algerian people. It will likely find itself unable to do either, as political actors and citizens alike are aware that this election is part of the regime's illusionary liberalisation strategy and that the military leadership would never allow true democratisation. Regardless of which parties come on top in the election or what type of coalition is formed in its aftermath, there are two takeaways.

The poverty of 'economic growth'

There is a village in the rainforests of Southeast Asia that I have visited on and off for over 40 years, doing long-term anthropological research. As the decades have ticked by, I have witnessed a process of extraordinary economic growth that has completely reshaped the village.

On the face of it, that might sound like a good thing. After all, we're told that growth is good. We're told that more income lifts people out of poverty and improves their lives. This narrative is drilled into us by development institutions like the World Bank, and echoed by media outlets around the world. But what I have witnessed calls this simplistic story into question.

The village is in Sarawak, which is on the Malaysian side of the island of Borneo, the third-largest island in world, larger than France or Texas. When I first visited Sarawak in the 1970s, the Indigenous communities living there had virtually no money, but they lived well. Now they have money, and can barely feed themselves. They have been impoverished even as incomes rise. It is a story of brutal destitution that is completely obscured by the GDP growth statistics.

In the 1970s, Borneo had the most extensive rainforests outside Brazil and central Africa, brimming with life and biodiversity. People who lived in communities in and around the forests had little money, but they controlled their own abundant food supply. They grew their own local varieties of rice, supplemented with game from the surrounding rainforest and fish from the river. They had a balanced diet, and were impressively fit and healthy.

The village I regularly visited comprised about 350 people all living under one roof, in a traditional longhouse that was typical of central Borneo at the time. An open verandah ran along the side of the house facing the river, while the other side consisted of a row of family apartments. Their farms were some hours away by canoe, along small streams that led into the hills. During the season of cutting and planting, and again during the harvest, everyone was busy at the farms and the longhouse was empty. At other times, it was bustling and full of life. There was a powerful sense of shared history and tradition, including elaborate seasonal festivals and feasts. No one went hungry in the longhouse.

Starting in the 1980s, everything changed. Borneo's forests were destroyed at a rate unprecedented in human history. Ruthless timber barons, fuelled by capital from West Malaysia, Hong Kong and Japan, and aided and abetted by crooked politicians who sold off timber licenses to the highest bidder, tore through the forests of Sarawak and stashed their fortunes in luxury apartments in London.

Indigenous communities resisted the destruction of the rainforest, but they were brutally suppressed. In addition to the police and army, the timber companies hired goons to intimidate anyone trying to obstruct the roads. I heard rumours of violence, but very little news got out because the government tightly controlled the access of outsiders, especially foreign journalists. It's disturbing to think how easily and thoroughly this news blackout worked.

After the forest was cut, something happened that had never happened before: the forest floor dried out. Then it caught fire. The government blamed slash-and-burn agriculturalists, but that was absurd. In all the hundreds of years that this technique had been used in Borneo, the forest had never burned before. Now every year during the dry season from March till October thick clouds of smoke spread downwind as far as Thailand. It is devastating to watch. And the contribution to global warming is incalculable.

What the fires accomplished was that they cleared the land for plantation agriculture. Malaysia and Indonesia between them account for 85 percent of the world's production of palm oil, which is used in cosmetics and processed foods. The great majority of that product is grown on the ashes of the Borneo rainforest, and the very same companies that did the cutting now own the largest palm oil estates.

With the forests gone and the rivers polluted, the only way for the longhouse people I knew in Sarawak to make a living is by working for meagre wages on the palm oil plantations.

A whole generation of young men had grown accustomed to life in the lumber camps. After the timber was worked out in one area, they moved on with the camps – if given the chance. The ones that weren't hung around in the longhouse, idle and disoriented. Many went off to the cities on the coast, where they live in squatter settlements and comprise a new lumpen proletariat.

For the longhouse people, food sovereignty and economic independence has been traded for a cash dependency that they cannot now escape. Their resource base has been destroyed, the farming skills of their grandparents are forgotten, and their invaluable

Islamic organizations hail 'declaration...

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"This historic announcement reflects the great efforts made by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as the current president of the Islamic Summit, and its pivotal role in reconciliation among the parties in the Islamic countries," said Dr. Yousef Al-Othaimeen, secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

He added that he values the work of the MWL that led to Thursday's declaration and an agreement to find a lasting and comprehensive solution that will support the process of peace, reconciliation, stability, progress and prosperity in Afghanistan.

The Islamic Broadcasting Union expressed its appreciation for the pivotal role Saudi Arabia has played in helping to spread peace and stability in the Islamic world. It also praised the efforts of the MWL to find solutions.

Sayed Jalal Karim, the former Afghan ambassador to Saudi Arabia, told Arab News: "The peace conference was very fruitful for peace and stability in Afghanistan. It came at a very good time that will help to further strengthen relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"There is a role for Ulema (Muslim scholars) for peace in Afghanistan. And the senior scholars have gathered to sign the historic declaration of peace in order to resolve the crisis."

He noted that the speeches given during the conference by government ministers from Afghanistan and Pakistan were very measured and balanced, which he said reflected their sincerity and support for finding a solution to the crisis in Afghanistan through negotiation.

The final statement from the conference "did not make any accusation against any party," he added, "it only stressed peace, solidarity and bringing Afghans together." Earlier, Ahmed Javed Mujadadi, Afghanistan's current ambassador to Saudi Arabia, emphasized the symbolic importance of holding the conference in Makkah, in the presence of senior scholars, saying that the Kingdom has never failed Afghanistan and is working to establish security and peace in the country. He added that the event reflected a message of brotherhood, love and peace. Shafiq Samim, the permanent representative of Afghanistan to the OIC, said that the country has been suffering from the effects of war for four decades. The Council of Senior Scholars, Saudi Arabia's highest religious body, also welcomed the outcome of the conference. It called on all warring parties to be reasonable, abide by the declaration, cease hostilities and engage in peace talks. **The Kabul Times**

MoFA welcomes European Parliament resolution on...

From P1

The Afghan government welcomes the continuation of Europe's support and cooperation with Afghanistan following the withdrawal of the Resolute Support forces and stresses the consolidation and expansion of relations within the new chapter of cooperation with the world. **The Kabul Times**

Nation mourns demise of well-known archeologist, university...

From P1

Another message from the High Council for National Reconciliation also extended its grave condolence on his demise as saying Prof. Bawary was one of the country's known archeologists, author and analyst who beside remaining as Kabul University lecturer, wrote tens of scientific analysis and hundreds of essays for the readers.

The Ministry of Information and Culture also expressed its deep condolence on the death of the former deputy minister and said that Prof. Bawary dedicated long years of his age working for the country's history and archeology as well as the culture.

He also worked as the Kabul University lecturer and trained many students and cadres, the office of the country's Minister of Information and Culture said in message. The message reads that late Prof. Bawary held many provincial visits to hold cultural weeks and worked for growth and expansion of Afghanistan culture and art and his death was a great loss. Meanwhile Haroon Hakimi, who has recently been appointed as Deputy Minister of Culture and Art and late Bawary's successor, called his death as a tragedy for the entire nation, adding that Bawary spared no efforts to define and strengthen the Afghan identity.

Meanwhile dozens of Afghan culturists, archeologists, youth and government officials took into social media to condole death of Bawary and called him one of the greatest cultural figures and archeologists of the country.

Late Bawary was born in Dhrawoot district of Uruzgan province in 1957. He earned his master's degree in history of Afghanistan from Kabul University, and has served in different positions, including Deputy Minister of Culture and Art, Professor in Archaeology Department of Kabul University as well as rector of Shaikh Zayed University in Khost. **The Kabul Times**

Turkey key ally to run...

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Turkey is today a key ally when it comes to the running of the airport," he said. "There is a dialogue now going on between different Allies, including Turkey, on exactly how we can try to continue to provide support for the airport and make sure the airport continues to operate at international standards." He said that this is important not only for NATO, but an airport and all the critical infrastructure is important for the whole international community, for the diplomatic presence of all countries, and for development aid and different aid organizations. He said that he expects that the issue will be addressed at the Summit on Monday. Stoltenberg reiterated that NATO's military presence is ending, but its support for the Afghan forces and people will continue. "We are very clear-eyed about the challenges, the difficulties we all face in Afghanistan. And we are also clear-eyed about the risks the decision to end our military mission entails," he added. He also mentioned that NATO will continue funding for Afghan Security Forces and that all allies are committed to continuing to do so. US President Joe Biden announced in April that he will withdraw all American troops from Afghanistan by Sept. 11. However, US officials have predicted that the withdrawal will be completed in July. US Central Command last week said that the withdrawal has been completed by more than 50%.

The Kabul Times