

The Impact of Elections on the stability of North African Countries

Dr Bouabdallah Lamia ^{1*}

¹ University of Oran 2 Mohamed Ben Ahmed (Algeria), lamiachachi@hotmail.fr

received: 28-01-2024 Accepted: 17-02-2024 Published: 10-03-2024

Abstract:

Although elections have been an integral part of African politics since political independence, they take place with a wide range of frequencies and under very difficult political conditions. Since the 2011 uprisings, North Africa had endured a period of significant transformation, characterized by socio-economic and security challenges that continue to affect the internal and external dynamics of each country. In Tunisia, many citizens are anxious about the current political and economic situation. In Algeria, the remarkably peaceful protests have demonstrated the significant role played by the country's youth and how transition can begin to take place without causing major instability. Meanwhile, the political process in Morocco was dominated by the institution of the monarchy.

Keywords: Elections; North Africa; Protests; Instability; Democratic Transition

المخلص باللغة العربية:

لقد شكلت الانتخابات موضوعًا هامًا في السياسة الإفريقية منذ استقلال بلدانها حيث أنها تحدث بأشكال مختلفة و تحت صعوبات و ضغوطات كبيرة. منذ الربيع العربي الذي بدأ في ٢٠١١ ، وقعت تطورات هامة في بلدان شمال افريقيا خاصة في الميادين الاجتماعية والاقتصادية و الأمنية و التي اختلفت من بلد إلى اخر.

على سبيل المثال ، في تونس ، فان معظم مواطنيها خائفون من الوضع السياسي والاقتصادي لبلادهم. و كذلك في الجزائر فان المظاهرات السلمية التي شهدتها البلاد قد أكدت الدور الفعال الذي لعبه

* Corresponding author

الشباب الجزائري في تأمين السلام في وطنهم. على عكس المغرب أين الانتخابات قد فشلت في تأمين مسار ديمقراطي بسبب سيطرة النظام الملكي على الحكومة المغربية.
الكلمات المفتاحية: انتخابات ؛ شمال افريقيا ؛ مظاهرات ؛ فشل السلمية ؛ مسار ديمقراطي

INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, elections represent the best means to achieve democracy in any nation; moreover, they are the necessary tools to preserve political legitimacy and stability.

As a result, a democratic transition needs to be based on clean elections and a transparent electoral system, in order to achieve political reform.

The success of a political transformation depends on the existence of a healthy political and social environment which can lead to effective elections, having the duty to preserve and guarantee civil liberties of all segments of society.

While elections can ensure democracy, they cannot be the only means to make a democratic process successful. During transitions, elections represent a complex process, differing from one country to the other, depending on political, social, and economic structures of each country.

For example, in Tunisia, Presidential elections were organised to appoint a new post-revolution parliament in 2014. These elections were successful because they secured a clear transition between the executive represented by the President and Prime Minister, and the Legislature. Whereas in Morocco and Algeria, elections were dominated by a more authoritarian model of Constitutions. The introduction presents the specific problem under study and describes the research strategy. The first subtitle opens with an introduction that presents the specific problem under study and describes the research strategy.

1- Political instability in Algeria

1.1 The Historical Background of Algeria's political instability

The social movement in Kabylia in 1980 was the starting point of Algeria's political and economic reforms. The Berber protest aimed at recognising political and cultural pluralism, protesting widely against the Algerian economic crisis as well as the persisting one-party system.

In the late 1980's, Algeria witnessed a sharp decline in oil revenues. The post-independence generation had enough of the social problems affecting them, like unemployment, and the housing crisis. Therefore, they provoked a popular uprising

on 5th October 1988. There had been riots and protests all over cities in Algeria, giving birth to a new regime that favored a political opening and the introduction of multipartyism in 1989.

The presidential elections of January 1992 had been cancelled, giving birth to the worst decade of violence that Algeria had ever experienced. The legislative elections that had brought Islamists (FIS) Front Islamique du Salut to the forefront of the political scene, had been interrupted and a military coup had caused a conflict, provoking the death of more than 200,000 innocent Algerian citizens.

Algeria had declared the state of emergency in 1992, and the government sought to legitimize the authority of Liamine Zeroual who had become President of the Algerian state in 1994. Presidential elections were held in 1995, giving victory to President Liamine Zeroual, with a strong support of the population including Islamists.

However, violent massacres occurred in Algeria in 1995 and 1997, and President Liamine Zeroual tried to bring peace to the country by negotiating with Islamic Armed Groups. In 1999, new presidential elections were organised, culminating by the election of former Prime Minister Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

President Bouteflika sought to reconcile the Algerian people with their government, by implementing a Civil Concord Law in 1999. He tried to rebuild Algeria's international image and relaunched economic development. New laws fostering foreign investment, job creation and housing projects were pushed forward. However, violence and suicide attacks continued throughout the country.

There had been protests in Kabylia in 2001 against police violence. As a result, Tamazight was designed as a national language in the 2016 Constitution. However, the protest movement had left 126 dead, causing the political rejection of the region

President Bouteflika's reelection in 2004, in 2009, and especially in 2014, caused the discontent of the Algerian population as their president could not perform his duties due to his health problems following a stroke. Despite the deterioration of his health, President Bouteflika had run for a fifth term in 2019. The humiliation of being run by a physically incapable President, in addition to the high levels of corruption, had pushed millions of Algerians into the streets to support a peaceful democratic movement called the « Hirak ».

1.2 The political consequences of the Hirak in Algeria

This protest movement had succeeded in removing President Bouteflika from the presidency; however, the political system in Algeria remained unchanged since its creation in 1962.

On December 12, 2019, Presidential elections were held, bringing to power former Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune. Four years later, the Algerian state had not found yet a way to political stability. Instead, the state lives in a vicious cycle in which political actors continuously postpone needed economic and political reforms.

Elections were held on 1st November 2020; in addition, the recent political reforms have been efforts to gain time rather than solutions to Algeria's political crisis. President Tebboune continues to promise radical political and economic change; however, most of President Tebboune's strategic decisions are influenced by military rule.

On the political level, Algeria still suffers from repression and injustice. For example, many political activists, journalists and civil society members had been convicted or jailed, either for criticizing the government, or asking for their civil and political rights.

Moreover, the economic situation of Algeria becomes so complicated that it does not give any chance to the country to promote its economic development. At the same time, as the Algerian Dinar continues its devaluation against the Euro, imported necessities are becoming more expensive.

The COVID-19 pandemic that started in March 2020, had also seriously impacted the economic situation in Algeria. It contributed to a serious crash of oil prices on the international market, having direct consequences on the Algerian economy that depends mainly on hydrocarbons' exports. Consequently, many lockdowns and curfews resulted from this economic crash.

1.3 Abdelmadjid Tebboune's Election and Political Participation

Presidential elections previously programmed in July 2019? Had been postponed to 12th of December 2019, giving the largest majority to President Abdelmadjid Tebboune with 58,13% of the vote.

The election was held in a highly belligerent climate. All the candidates were part of Bouteflika's government, and the majority of journalists considered that the results were manipulated by the army. Only 39,88% of the electorate voted, making

this presidential election as the least credible in Algerian political history.

Many Algerian people did not vote because of a meaningful transition, and in light of repression, critical observers argued that the results of the vote were not convincing. After Tebboune's election, a commission of experts had drafted a new Constitution and a new referendum was held on November 1st 2020, casting the vote to only 23% of the population.

Later, legislative elections were held on June 12, 2021; with these elections, President Tebboune became a symbol of a civilian society whose objectives were to fulfil the political reforms demanded by the Hirak. Moreover, the military establishment intended to use the election to regain the political legitimacy of the old regime figures. However, the Constitutional Amendments of 2020, undertaken in response to popular protest, introduced important decisions : Algerian citizens were given more civil liberties, the Prime Minister's position was reinforced, the Constitutional Council was replaced by the Constitutional Court, and the Presidency was limited to two terms.

Therefore, we might say that presidential elections in Algeria have become a means to convey legitimacy to the civilian façade of the military authority, splitting Algerians between those who support presidential elections and those who refuse them, leading to the failure of the political process in Algeria.

2- Political instability in Tunisia

2.1 Historical background of political instability in Tunisia

The Tunisian Republic is characterized by a single political party system. Since Tunisia's independence in 1956, the state was presided by Habib Bourguiba, followed by President Zine El Abidine Benali.

In 2011, Tunisians fed up with corruption and repression, went to the streets, ousted a dictator, demanding freedom and dignity. Those manifestations soon followed across the Middle East in a series of Arab Spring uprisings.

Tunisia had elected a free government in which all segments of society participated. Moreover, independent and fair elections helped the Tunisian state to enter in a post-transition phase.

A democratic and free election took place in 2014, electing a President who was not a member of the old regime. Indeed, it is considered as the first free Presidential election after the Jasmine Revolution.

After Essebsi's death, a fierce opponent of the old regime, Kais Saied, tried to respond to the demands of the Tunisian Revolution. He relied on youth volunteers, and a self-funded campaign to run for the Presidency. He won the election with a large victory in October 2019, with 72,17% of the vote, reviving the hopes of the Revolution.

2.2 Tunisians in search for democracy

There had been several protests in Tunisia, in which many political leaders, businessmen, judges, civil society advocates, and many personalities were arrested.

In mid-2021, President Kais Saied had suspended Parliament and later dissolved it. Helped by security services and military courts, the President established power in his government. Tunisians would be imprisoned if they criticized their President, or met with foreigners to discuss their country's future.

The Tunisian economy did not recover from Covid-19, and the country imports mainly the most necessary goods. Saied had appointed a new interior minister in 2023 (nicknamed Stalin). However, over the last 18 months, the president's popularity has declined.

Saied has scheduled many elections for a variety of reasons to support his presidency but few Tunisians think about changing their mind over his policies. Many Tunisians still regard him as the best and hope he will solve Tunisia's problems and preserve the country's democratic character and popular freedom.

3- Political Instability in Morocco

In the years 2016-2017, Moroccan people had led a protest in the Rif region in the Northern part of the country, mainly in the city of Al Hoceima. The population was asking for better socio-economic conditions; however, they encountered severe repression by the Moroccan government, leading many protesters to imprisonment.

On the political level, the legislative elections that took place in 2016, giving the majority in parliament to the Islamist Justice and Development Party (PJD) were manipulated as the King and his cabinet were the main decision makers. It can be said that the Moroccan political system remains an authoritarian regime despite the Constitutional reforms that followed the protests in 2011.

As a result, it can be said that a democratic transition cannot be ensured in Morocco because the decisions of the monarchy dominate the Moroccan political system. Moreover, the pandemic had a negative impact on the socio-economic problems in Morocco resulting in high unemployment, social instability, and a contraction in tourism's income that decreased by 53,8% in 2020.

CONCLUSION

Elections were not a successful tool in achieving a democratic transition in most North African countries. The problem is not elections themselves, but the political instability that affects each country that renders these elections meaningless. Indeed, an unstable electoral process can create the deterioration of a solid democratic process.

To apply democratic principles, a country should use elections to ensure a peaceful democratic transition, and achieve the true meaning of democracy. However, in most North African countries, there have been uprisings, named "Arab Spring Revolutions", where elections failed to ensure real political reforms and consolidate the meaning of democracy in these countries.

Neither the states of Morocco nor Algeria had succeeded to achieve the goal of transparent and meaningful elections, despite the fact that in both countries they were carried out with real technical rules. In Morocco, elections did not change anything to the authoritarian regime of the monarchy, leading to an unsuccessful transition process, whereas in Algeria, elections were boycotted the vast majority of Algerians, resulting in the restoration of the old political regime. In contrast, in Tunisia a fair electoral system, a democratic Constitution, and a mature civil society had contributed to the success of the political transition in this country.

References

- 1-Tarek Megerisi, Autumn and the Patriarch : How to help Tunisians defend their Democracy, 30/03/2023.
- 2-Vivan Yee, Economic neglect and Political Instability in Tunisia's Democracy, 21/08/2022, New York Times.
- 3-[https://bti 2022 Algeria Country Report, org.DZA](https://bti2022.algeria.org), 15/06/2023
- 4-<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org>, Algeria's political crisis by Zine Laidine Ghebouli, 05/02/2021