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World: Africa

Analysis: A people tired of conflict



Turnout will be crucial to President Bouteflika's credibility

By Jim Muir in Algiers

Many Algerians hope the vote will herald a new period of serious effort to end a crisis which has lasted seven years and taken the lives of an estimated 100,000 people.

President Bouteflika's success in an unopposed poll on 15 April was seen as more of a referendum than a bona fide election.



All his six opponents had withdrawn in the preceding days, alleging that the powerful military establishment was preparing to rig the voting heavily on behalf of its favoured candidate.

So the current real referendum is being seen by some Algerians as a way for the president to regain the credibility he lost through the manner of his election.

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Mr Bouteflika has pulled out all the stops



Paris correspondent
James Coomarasamy
finds the Algerian
community in France
in favour of the
changes

Political analysts also believe the new president is hoping to mobilise a huge display of public support for his peace programme, in order to deflect criticism from some parts of the military, from political opponents who are against the rehabilitation of the Islamic movement, and from the families of those who died in the crisis - the so-called victims of terrorism.

It would be surprising if Mr Bouteflika failed to garner a high percentage of those who bother to vote.

“
Are you for or against
the president's move to
realise peace and civil
concord?
”

Referendum question

How many will turn out, remains to be seen. But in the days preceding the referendum, the president pulled out all the stops to put his message across directly to the people.

He toured the country addressing public meetings which were also televised nationally at length every evening, and apparently struck

a chord among many ordinary people.

The Algerians had never seen anything like it before. Previous presidents had been remote, inaccessible figures who clearly felt no need to communicate directly with the citizenry.

“
A lot of blood has been
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”

'Yes' voter

Many ordinary people in the streets said they were going to vote an enthusiastic "Yes" to Mr Bouteflika's plan.

"The referendum is the only solution for Algeria," said one passer-by. "I'm very optimistic about the plan, and I think the majority of the people will share that view." "We've had enough since 1991," added another.

"A lot of blood has been shed. It's high time to put an end to this total folly which has stricken every part of Algeria."

Stricken economy

For most Algerians, the overwhelming preoccupation nowadays is how to survive in a country where the economy is in ruins.

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Unemployment is soaring, especially among Algeria's huge population of young people, and there is a dire shortage of housing.

President Bouteflika argues that those problems can only be tackled once the foundations of national peace have been consolidated - and many people clearly agree.

That is what lies behind his plan for 'civil concord'. The plan is not in fact awaiting the seal of approval from the referendum.

The new law has already been codified and passed by both the parliament and the senate. Regional 'probation commissions' have already been set up to process Islamist rebels who take up the state's offer of amnesty and leniency if they give up arms and return to the national fold.

Under the law, those who have no blood on their hands will go free, though they may be put on probation for a period of time.

No amnesty for violence



A member of the Armed Islamic Group is interviewed after handing in his weapons

Those guilty of murder, rape or the placing of bombs will be prosecuted, but there will be no death penalty and no prison sentence longer than 20 years.

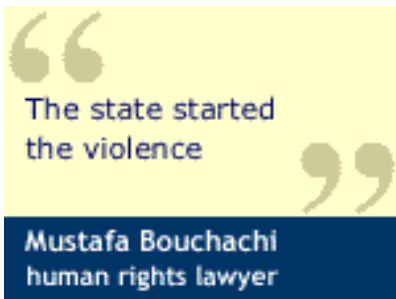
Hundreds of Islamists serving prison sentences have already been released - though many more remain behind bars, and many of the thousands who disappeared have not been freed or accounted for.

The moves are based on an unpublicised understanding with the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) - which would have won the parliamentary election in 1992 if the army had not stepped in to prevent it - and with its military wing, the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), which has pledged to give up arms and put itself at the disposal of the authorities.

The FIS may be allowed to change its name and rejoin constitutional politics.

Most vocally opposed to this process are the families of those who perished in the many atrocities of the past seven years, mostly blamed on Islamic extremists belonging to such factions as the Armed Islamic Group (GIA).

But human rights lawyer Mustafa Bouchachi believes the



emphasis on the Islamic role is unbalanced, and that the state itself should also take a measure of responsibility if there is to be true reconciliation and a solid settlement.

"The new president is saying one thing : 'The Islamists are responsible for everything that happened in the past seven years,'" he said.

"But the problem is more complicated than that. The military people are responsible for the violence.

"The state started the violence, in cancelling legal general elections. We're going to have the end of violence. But I wouldn't call it real reconciliation between the Algerians.



Mothers of the 'disappeared' protest in Algiers

Although some of its elements have reportedly 'repented' and handed themselves in, the GIA and other ultra-radical splinter groups have vowed to keep up their violent struggle.

Diplomats believe August was actually one of the worst months on record in terms of the number of incidents.

"All the elements of a solution are there, but whether it will all come together is still not sure," said one western diplomat.

"Residual terrorism will probably continue. The terrorists who remain in the maquis are the toughest and most experienced ones."

January deadline

The rebels have until January to hand themselves in. After that, the signs are that Mr Bouteflika - armed, he hopes, with a clear display of public support - will move against them mercilessly.

But some Algerian political commentators detect an authoritarian - some say dictatorial - tendency in the president's actions which they believe does not augur well for the stable development of a real democracy in the long run.

"The Algerians cannot be tamed so easily," said one.