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# A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYTICAL APPROACH TO POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN ALGERIA

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze political participation in Algeria and the impact of the political system, civil society, and press freedom on this participation. The findings indicate that the political system has remained authoritarian despite reforms, limiting the effectiveness of political pluralism and maintaining elections as a tool for reproducing power rather than achieving democratic transformation. Civil society suffers from government intervention and limited resources, while press freedom remains restricted despite periods of openness. Due to the absence of effective participation channels, political violence has escalated, as seen in the events of October 1988 and the Black Decade. Meanwhile, the Amazigh issue has evolved from an elite-driven movement into a significant political cause, ultimately leading to its official recognition.

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## KEYWORDS

Political Participation, Algeria, Political System, Civil Society, Press Freedom

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## Introduction

Political participation is one of the key indicators for assessing political systems and the extent to which democratic values and freedom of expression are entrenched within society. In Algeria, this participation has undergone significant transformations due to changes in the political system, the emergence of political pluralism after decades of single-party rule, and the role of civil society and the media in shaping political awareness. However, political participation continues to face several obstacles related to the nature of the political system, the effectiveness of democratic institutions, and the independence of political and social actors, raising questions about the feasibility of democratic transition in the country.

In this context, the study poses the following research question: To what extent have political reforms contributed to enhancing political participation in Algeria, and what factors hinder the achievement of a genuine democratic transition?

To address this issue, the study is based on two main hypotheses. First, despite being constitutionally enacted, political reforms have not led to a true democratic transition due to the continued dominance of the ruling authority over the political process. Second, social and economic factors, along with political

interference in the functioning of civil society and press freedom, have impeded the activation of political participation as a genuine democratic practice

### **1- Indicators of Political Participation in Algeria**

Political participation, as one of the fundamental processes for the functioning of the political system and political development, has become a crucial variable used by politicians, researchers, and critics in the fields of political science, media, and sociology, among others. It serves as a key tool for assessing political systems and the level of political freedoms and democracy within these systems by examining indicators that reflect the state of participation.

Based on this perspective, several key indicators have been identified to analyze political participation in Algeria. These indicators include:

- The structure of the political system.
- Civil society.
- Press freedom.
- Elections.
- Political violence as a margin of political participation.

#### **1-1 The Structure of the Political System**

Immediately after independence, the National Liberation Front (FLN), having achieved military and political victory over French colonialism, became the legitimate heir to all institutions under the Evian Agreements. However, it failed to withstand internal divisions, as the faction that had prioritized armed struggle lacked a political project or ideological vision beyond achieving independence. Once independence was secured, the objective shifted to a struggle for power. The crisis of the summer of 1962 was not driven by ideological differences but rather by competing personal ambitions among members of the same petite bourgeoisie, rather than between this group and any external forces. Meanwhile, the general populace remained excluded from the political process, despite the opposing factions claiming to speak in its name (Addi, 2010, p. 46).

The authoritarian system has been the closest political model to Algeria's reality since its independence, where a single party seeks to rally citizens' support for its policies. The one-party system eliminated competition and rejected negotiation mechanisms without strengthening cohesion. The forced coexistence of opposing factions, which refused to clearly define the social forces they relied on, emerged as an unquestioned reality (Harbi, 1992, p. 186).

The 1976 National Charter considered the National Liberation Front "the primary official institution, standing above all others. It is not merely part of the state but the state itself, serving as its tangible expression, while the state is merely the abstract representation of the nation." (Ammar, 1996, p. 46) , However, this did not prevent the emergence of opposition. Naturally, violence and the use of military force became the only means to resolve conflicts after the failure of negotiations. "The disputes that shook the Algerian political system were settled outside the framework of the party, which in reality proved ineffective and incapable of containing conflicts and contradictions within the ruling group or attracting the opposition. It functioned merely as an administrative body, bound by a duty of restraint, discipline, and strict hierarchical order." (Addi, 1990, pp. 103-107) , The role of the party remained limited to the decisions of the president, a phenomenon known as the personalization of power. Many political systems in the Third World have experienced this trend, characterized by the president's strong personal appeal, particularly charisma, which enables a single individual to dominate the political system. As a result, the relationship between the president and the people becomes one of the most powerful means of mass communication and guidance on one hand, and a key tool for mobilization on the other, Algeria has experienced this type of authority since the early stages of state-building, even after the introduction of political pluralism.

During Ben Bella's rule, he sought to strengthen his political influence through a system of self-management and land distribution to farmers. At the same time, he consolidated all powers in his hands under the 1963 Constitution, holding the positions of Head of State, Head of Government, Secretary-General of the Party, as well as Minister of Interior and Information. Although the constitution granted broad authority to the party—tasking it with defining national policy, guiding state actions, and overseeing the National Assembly and government—Ben Bella largely bypassed these provisions. This trend continued under President Houari Boumediene, who similarly marginalized the party and placed key state institutions under his direct control.

As Chairman of the Revolutionary Council, Head of the Council of Ministers, and Minister of National Defense, he further entrenched centralized power by suspending the 1963 Constitution. Like his predecessor,

he sought to cultivate a charismatic image, rallying mass support through major initiatives such as the industrial and agricultural revolutions and the 1971 nationalization of hydrocarbons (Belhimer, 2001-2002, p. 43). However, his ambitious project suffered from many contradictions; while he sought to mobilize the people, he did not establish the necessary organizational structures to make this mobilization politically effective (Addi, 1990, p. 120).

Chadli Bendjedid did not deviate from the traditions of his predecessors, as he worked to eliminate his rivals in power and monopolize popular support for himself. He also sought to assert control over the party by amending its fundamental statutes during an extraordinary congress in June 1980. However, tensions escalated between the party, which represented the conservative faction opposed to any attempts at change, development, or reform, and the reformist faction led by the president and the government. The dynamics of the new phase, particularly the events of October 1988, ultimately weakened the conservative faction, leading to the triumph of the reformist camp. This victory secured the president another term and paved the way for political reforms, most notably the adoption of a new constitution on February 23, 1989 (Belhimer, 2001-2002, pp. 47-45). This phase introduced new dynamics, particularly the emergence of political parties openly competing for power, alongside escalating cultural and social conflicts. Additionally, the institutionalization of power rotation became a reality after the transitional phase, which, lacking clear objectives and stages, led to endless disputes (Harbi, 1992, p. 222).

The conflicts during this phase can be identified on two fronts: on one hand, the traditional power struggle within the ruling establishment persisted, and on the other, a confrontation emerged against rising political forces, particularly the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). This ultimately brought matters back to square one. Despite the various conflicts of this period, which led to an institutional vacuum and then a severe security crisis, those who led this phase, according to Rabah Lounici, were the same figures from the past. During this turmoil, they sought—by all means—to adapt to political institutions and transformations without successfully legitimizing their approach to managing change (Lounissi, 1999, p. 231).

"The political elite within both official and unofficial leadership structures were aware of the disconnect between the state and society. Through democratization, they attempted to restructure the system, either by repositioning themselves within the new power structure or by shifting to the now widely legitimized private sector." (Addi, 2010, p. 132).

### **1-2 Civil Society**

Political and social participation, as a fundamental pillar of the democratic process, cannot be built on social disorder or impulsive individual or collective actions. Instead, it requires the presence of organizational and communication channels. In other words, it necessitates a diverse institutional and associative fabric that facilitates social participation in its various forms, directions, and interests, acting as an intermediary between society and the state to protect individual and collective rights and convey their demands. In this regard, "society must have a vigilant, independent, and diverse sample of civil associations based on self-organization, which is essential for strengthening democracy." (Tocqueville, 1990, p. 247).

Since independence, the Algerian state has pursued a populist policy, positioning itself as the sole guardian of society and subjecting it to its authority, disregarding social, intellectual, and political differences that could have been reflected in a pluralistic system with the right to participate. During this period, the concept of participation was closer to mobilization in moments of national fervor or a controlled form of participation within a solidarity framework to address sectoral issues. (Hermassi, 1989, p. 99).

Thus, conferences, mass rallies, and sectoral organizations became directly subordinate to the state, operating in the form of unions such as the General Union of Algerian Workers, the National Union of Algerian Youth, and the National Organization of Mujahideen, among others. The labor movement, exemplified by the General Union of Algerian Workers, illustrates the relationship between civil society and the state, as it was transformed into a tool for mobilizing workers in support of the state's economic and social projects. Union leadership became integrated into party structures, with the party itself appointing union leaders to serve its interests instead of allowing the grassroots to carry out this function. This subordination extended further, as union structures were used as instruments of political struggle within the system or between the regime and the opposition, as well as for organizing election campaigns, making it a tradition for the union to act as an electoral machine. This dependency—where the union was subordinated to political authority—diminished its role, reducing its demands to defending only limited workers' rights, rarely resorting to conventional labor actions such as strikes. The connection between unionism and politics was so strong that political shifts were directly reflected in union leadership, as seen in the transition of union leadership from figures of Kabyle and

Algiers origins to those from the eastern regions, mirroring the changes occurring at the state leadership level within the party and the political power center in Algeria, namely the military. (Gaby, 2001, pp. 90-95).

In this manner, the government sought to highlight what was collective and national on one hand while eliminating any expression of difference or contradiction within society on the other. This resulted in the dominance of the political society over civil society (see Appendix No. "1").

Civil society remained in this state almost until the late 1980s, marking the beginning of political and democratic transformation<sup>1</sup>. Along with this transformation came constitutional reforms that covered various aspects, including civil society. In this regard, and in accordance with Article 40 of the Constitution, freedom of expression and organization was permitted within the framework of civil society. To provide a legal and practical framework for this, regulatory texts and laws were introduced, starting with Law No. 89-11 of July 5, 1989, on associations of a political nature, followed by Law No. 90-11 of December 4, 1990, concerning associations of a social nature.

The development achieved by civil society after the period of political pluralism can also be observed through another indicator: the quantitative indicator. The mere announcement of these laws as a legal framework for associative activities gave new momentum to civil society, reflected in the massive number of associations established at both national and local levels.

*Table 1. Number of national associations founded each year from 1988 to 1996.*

Year	Number of National Associations Founded Each Year
1988	12
1989	81
1990	151
1991	135
1992	92
1993	63
1994	70
1995	74
1996	12

Source: (Boujit, 1997)

The table illustrates the rapid growth of the associative movement. In a short period, various segments of society moved towards organizing themselves into legal associations to participate. Before October 1988, participation under the previous system was extremely limited or even nonexistent, as it was based on a model of (affiliation–participation). However, once the new concept of participation was introduced—guaranteeing freedom of expression and assembly while lifting state control over various organizations—the associative movement emerged in a remarkable manner. Nevertheless, this development gradually declined in recent years compared to the initial phase, mainly due to the security crisis the country experienced and its repercussions. On one hand, the state dissolved many associations, particularly those of a religious nature, such as the Islamic Labor Union (SIT), affiliated with the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), as a direct consequence of the party's dissolution following its involvement in armed activities (Gaby, 2001, pp. 109-110). On the other hand, fear of attacks by armed groups also discouraged associative activities.

It is true that the quantitative development of civil society in pluralist Algeria was an important indicator that civil society had taken a significant step toward democracy and political participation. However, this progress remains dependent on the qualitative aspect that the associative movement has reached, which determines its ability to be active and effective. Despite the numerical boom in organizations and associations, the majority lack real effectiveness. This can be attributed to the following reasons (Dessouki, 2000, p. 74):

➤ The lack of financial and material resources keeps these associations in a state of constant dependency on their funder (the state), which takes the opportunity to impose its conditions.

<sup>1</sup> As a simple comparison between the transformation process in Europe and the emergence of the concept of civil society with the same process in Algeria, a clear difference between the two experiences emerges. The democratic transition and radical reforms that took place in Europe came after a social, intellectual, and economic revolution following fundamental changes in social systems. In this context, civil society was the real driving force behind this transformation, which contrasts with what is happening in Algeria.



➤ The inability of associations to adapt over time, both functionally and structurally, leading to discontinuity and lack of sustainability due to generational gaps.

➤ Personal conflicts, lack of coordination and cohesion in their activities, and the absence of democratic behavior within or among them.

➤ The lack of rationalized and modernized participation based on civic awareness and modern standards, due to the weakness and novelty of the democratic experience in Algeria.

➤ The continued pressure from the state<sup>1</sup> on many associations by restricting their scope of work and creating bureaucratic and administrative obstacles to prevent the formation of more associations. The state also seeks to mold civil society into various councils under its influence, such as the Supreme Council for Youth, the Supreme Council for Education, and the Civil Society Academy, among others, to reinforce its control over active forces in society, limiting their role to mere formal consultations without allowing them to be real decision-making actors.

➤ The ongoing politicization of these associations, as they have been infiltrated by political rivals, turning these organizations—originally meant to be neutral—into a microcosm of the political and social crisis in the country.

### 1-3 Press Freedom

Like in other countries, the state of journalism and media in Algeria is shaped by the prevailing political climate and the framework set by the political authority, which journalists are expected to adhere to or at least not deviate from. Therefore, we will examine press and media freedom in Algeria across two distinct periods: the era of the one-party system and the era of political pluralism.

After regaining national sovereignty, the state took control of most media institutions inherited from the colonial era, placing them under the supervision of the Ministry of Communication. From that point on, the authorities left no room for individual freedoms. The Tripoli Program, which emerged from the second congress of the National Liberation Front in 1962, endorsed collective ownership of production means in the cultural sector (Brahimi, 1989, p. 30), The ruling authority monopolized the media and used it as a tool to disseminate its messages and socialist ideologies, aiming to mobilize the masses for comprehensive development. As a result, journalists were confined to roles of advocacy, mobilization, and recruitment, which significantly affected the quality of journalism itself. Algeria was no exception to the general rule applied in many newly independent countries: “The media is considered a means to reinforce the political and ideological influence of governments by promoting their narratives, decisions, and governance methods. Most newspapers accommodate only the official viewpoint, reflecting a one-way flow of information from the authorities to the public. Reader feedback is rarely published, and opposing views to government positions are largely absent. In rare cases where they are allowed, they undergo various modifications by media gatekeepers.” (Aouatif, 1984, pp. 129-131)

Although the 1976 National Charter proclaimed the right to information, this principle was not implemented in practice due to legal loopholes that allowed officials to dominate the media sector. As a result, the journalist's role remained limited, ambiguous, and poorly defined for a long time. Official regulations treated journalists as bureaucratic employees, subordinated to higher authorities, creating a state of uncertainty and instability within the profession.(Brahimi, 1989, p. 356)

The events of October played a crucial role in breaking away from the practices of ideological monopoly, prompting a reassessment of the situation and the search for alternatives that would ensure political and media pluralism. The 1989 Constitution emerged as a product of this shift, affirming freedom of expression and opinion. This transformation, dictated by reality, led to changes in media legislation. On April 3, 1990, a new law was enacted, ending the state's monopoly on media ownership. Despite the debates surrounding it, this law allowed for the emergence of dozens of media outlets and, for the first time, introduced an official discourse on the role and function of journalists. Whereas journalists had previously been mere employees and political activists, the new law recognized them as professionals accountable for their work from a professional rather than a political or ideological perspective. (Boujemaa, 1998, pp. 144- 145)

The transformations experienced by the media landscape since October 1988 have clearly shown the emergence of the print press sector, which transitioned from a weak, monolithic press in terms of quantity and quality to a diverse press. However, this development was short-lived, as it quickly regressed. This regression

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<sup>1</sup> Complete independence from the authorities was not entirely possible, as the union leadership continued to perform its traditional political roles, such as endorsing the candidate for the 1995 presidential elections and actively participating in his campaign.

is due to a series of factors affecting the national arena in general and the media sector in particular during this period. The most significant of these factors and circumstances include:

- The fluctuating political situation, followed by a deterioration in the country's security conditions, had a profound and direct impact on press freedom. The press was subjected to and restricted by a series of laws and regulatory bodies responsible for monitoring the news broadcasted and published, especially security-related news. This created a negative image in the social imagination of the Algerian citizen regarding Algerian media and journalism, which were tasked with proclaiming that Algeria was fine and that the crisis it was overcoming was minor. These media outlets sufficed by publishing scant information that neither satisfied nor benefited the Algerian people, who were eager to know every detail concerning the crisis. This situation forced them to turn to foreign channels, which had their own ways of dealing with such crises. On the other hand, as a result of tightening these laws, this period witnessed the suspension of many newspapers and the arrest of numerous journalists, some of whom were even imprisoned. We must not forget the other party that exacerbated the press crisis during this period (armed groups), which worked to eliminate many media and press figures. As for those who remained alive, many emigrated abroad and joined foreign channels (Mohamed, 2008, p. 7)

- The debt issue burdened many newspapers, forcing them to reduce their print runs. These debts were used as leverage to pressure and blackmail these newspapers, placing them at the mercy of authorities or hidden forces that financed them in exchange for achieving specific interests, compromising professional ethics and press freedom. (Ben Kharfallah, 2003, p. 53)

The national press managed to somewhat emerge from this crisis and gradually achieved some stability. Starting from 1996, certain titles spread and maintained a readership base, while some public sector newspapers declined as they remained bound by top-down directives. (Ben Youb, 1999, p. 35)

As for audiovisual media (radio and television), the situation remained unchanged, and plurality in this field was not permitted despite private individuals' requests to invest in this domain, which remained a state monopoly, posing an obstacle to development. (Mohamed, 2008, p. 7)

Elections are a crucial mechanism that modern political systems rely on to build their institutions and structures. They also serve as decisive indicators for political scientists, specialists, journalists, and media professionals to assess the general situation and judge the nature of the political system. Elections are among the best means to study the balance of social and political forces, social alliances and their stance on elections, and the extent of public participation in this process.

#### **4-1 Elections**

The electoral process is one of the important mechanisms relied upon by political systems, especially in the modern era, for building their institutions and structures. At the same time, it serves as a crucial indicator used by political scientists, specialists, journalists, and media professionals to assess the general situation and evaluate the nature of the political system. It is also one of the best means for studying the balance of social and political power, social alliances, their stance on elections, and the extent of public participation in this process.

The Algerian political system has experienced this process since independence. However, it has undergone variations and differences from one period to another. Therefore, we will address this by examining two significant phases in the political system: before and after political pluralism.

In the aftermath of independence and beyond, political discourse was not only hostile to elections as a mechanism and to political parties but also to social groups advocating for this approach. This hostility extended to intellectual exclusion, particularly targeting the bourgeois classes, which included the educated elite, accused by the prevailing social culture of being reformist rather than revolutionary, defending narrow self-interests, and lacking popular support. Relying on economic determinism as a means of political change, this political culture led to the absence of political life, activism, and dialogue within society, except for certain groups that resorted to clandestine activities and regional popular opposition, which later became a political tradition marked by low participation in elections and referendums. Consequently, the core values shaping political culture did not manifest collectively at the political level but remained confined to the social sphere, appearing in individual behavior. This was the form of democracy experienced by Algerians, practiced in their daily interactions with the administration and the state, as well as by intellectuals as individuals, workers in their workplaces, and students in universities. (Gaby, 2001, p. 71)

Thus, based on the above, the electoral process is organized by the state, with local administration—including the province, the party's provincial office, security agencies, and, above all, the military official of the region—playing a major role in selecting candidates. Meanwhile, the citizen's role begins and ends with

placing the ballot in the box, effectively becoming just a number or, more precisely, a voice expressing a “yes” vote. In some cases, a single individual could vote on behalf of an entire family. Therefore, citizen participation was merely symbolic, serving to legitimize the elections and, by extension, the political system as a whole. This explains the extremely high voter turnout rates during this period, as reflected in the following two tables.

**Table 2.** voter turnout rates in the constitutional elections of September 10, 1963.

Registered Voters	Voting Voters	Abstentions (%)	Valid Votes (%)	Invalid Votes (%)	Yes Votes (%)	No Votes (%)
6391818	5287229	1104589 (17.29%)	5271056 (99.70%)	16173 (0.30%)	5166195 (98.01%)	104861 (1.89%)

Source: (Journal officiel de La république algérienne, 1963, p. 911)

**Table 3.** voter turnout rates in the constitutional elections of November 20, 1976.

Registered Voters	Voting Voters	Abstentions (%)	Valid Votes (%)	Invalid Votes (%)	Yes Votes (%)	No Votes (%)
8,076,843	7,504,669	572,138 (7.08%)	7,479,689 (99.66%)	25,007 (0.33%)	7,407,626 (99.03%)	67,683 (0.90%)

Source: (Official Gazette, p. 129)

The second phase that characterized the electoral process in Algeria was the period of political and party pluralism, which emerged due to significant upheavals across social, economic, cultural, and political fields, both domestically and internationally. This phase brought radical changes to the role of elections in Algerian society following the democratic opening guaranteed by the February 1989 Constitution and the Political Parties Law, which led to the establishment of around 60 parties from various ideological currents. Additionally, associative and cultural movements were allowed to operate, and press freedom was recognized. Within this context, the local (municipal) and legislative elections of December 1991 took place, resulting in a victory for the Islamic Salvation Front.

However, the electoral process was soon halted, plunging the country into an institutional vacuum and a wave of violence that sidelined elections from political life until November 23, 1995, when the High Council of Security called for presidential elections despite failed political dialogue with opposition parties. This rendered the elections a risky endeavor, raising doubts about key indicators such as voter turnout and candidate profiles. Surprisingly, despite security threats, difficulties, and boycott calls, voter participation was high, signaling a shift in the political balance in favor of the ruling system. However, this shift remained uncertain and depended on the success of future elections, which were crucial for completing the institutional framework of the political system, (Gaby, 2001, p. 14) with their success ultimately tied to voter participation, as illustrated in the following table:

**Table 4.** Voter turnout rates in the presidential elections of November 23, 1995

Registered Voters	Voters Who Voted	Abstentions	Valid Votes	Invalid Votes
15,969,904	12,087,281 (75.67%)	3,882,623 (24.31%)	11,619,532 (96.13%)	467,749 (3.87%)

Source: (Official Gazette, 1995, p. 4).

Political elections in a country like Algeria are still characterized by novelty and a lack of consensus on their role as a means of governance and change—not only among elites and institutions but also among many social forces. In general, Algeria, like other Arab and Islamic countries, faces a series of challenges that hinder the successful implementation of the electoral system and prevent the full establishment of electoral practices according to the required standards and levels necessary to fulfill popular demands. These challenges can be summarized as follows:



- The Islamic identity that characterizes Arab countries, particularly their large populations, where many sects and groups go as far as prohibiting electoral participation.
- Economic and social underdevelopment and its impact on political engagement through active participation in elections, opinion polls, referendums, and other forms of political communication and involvement.
- The dominance of the military institution (the army) in the political arena and its influence on the success of elections by pre-determining the winning party or candidate.
- The negative outcomes of previous elections, which pose a challenge to the success and progress of the electoral process in the future, as the same parties continue to dominate the political scene.
- The authoritarian, charismatic leadership tendencies prevalent in Arab societies, which act as obstacles to the effective implementation of the electoral system.
- The structure of Arab and Islamic societies does not facilitate the success or effectiveness of the electoral process, as they are composed of factions, tribes, clans, sects, and religious groups. Additionally, the weakness of political institutions, especially parties, limits their ability to raise awareness and promote political culture, which is essential for increasing political participation. (Helou, 2005-2006, pp. 214-217)

## 2- Political Violence as a Margin for Political Participation in Algeria

In the absence of communication channels with the ruling elite, and as the latter remains preoccupied with power struggles, self-preservation, and serving its own interests, the citizen becomes alienated from his political, cultural, and social environment due to exclusion, marginalization, and co-optation. If the existing political system fails to integrate willing and qualified forces into political life through peaceful means, these forces will inevitably resort to violence, especially when the system employs force and coercion to suppress their demands. (Djarbel, 2008, p. 2)

Algeria's history—as is well known—has witnessed numerous episodes and scenes of political violence to such an extent that they became a focal point of both internal and external attention. This interest was not confined to political, media, and academic circles but extended to a wide segment of public opinion, with these events varying according to the active parties involved and their underlying causes. In light of this diversity, we have selected a sample from which one can capture the nature of political violence in Algeria. The selection was based on the magnitude of these events at all levels, the duration over which they occurred, and the outcomes they produced, both material and moral. These events are: the Berber issue, the October 1988 events, and religious extremism, also known as the Red Decade.

### 2-1 The Berber Issue

The Berber issue remained primarily an elite concern since the time of the Liberation Revolution and did not gain popular traction until the discussions surrounding the 1976 National Charter. (Mouawad, 1986, p. 68) The lack of political response to the Berber issue, particularly the omission of any reference to it in the National Charter, led activists supporting the cause to seek a platform that could embrace their demands. France proved to be the most fertile ground for this, where a group of Berber activists established the **Berber Association for Cultural Exchanges and Research (A.B.C.R.C)** in Paris. Its primary objective was to promote and disseminate Berber culture and language, eventually evolving into the **Berber Academy**. (Ben Naaman, 1997, p. 229)

The Berber issue became more pronounced with the introduction of Arabization in Algerian schools, which was perceived as a threat to the future of Amazigh culture and language. The government's flexibility in implementing Arabization further fueled demands for cultural and linguistic rights.

In the early 1980s, specifically on March 10, 1980, the Berber issue took a decisive turn in its history, an event known as the "**Amazigh Spring**." Its origins trace back to the intervention of local authorities in Tizi Ouzou, who prevented a lecture by Mouloud Mammeri at the university. The lecture was to focus on ancient Amazigh poetry. In response, students sought to pressure local authorities to reverse the ban by organizing protests, demonstrations, and submitting a petition demanding non-interference in the university's cultural activities. Coordination committees were also formed to raise awareness about the Berber issue among different segments of the local population. The protests quickly spread beyond university grounds to schools, factories, streets, squares, and even bus stations. The movement then extended to other regions, including Béjaïa and Algiers. The government responded harshly, dispersing demonstrators, arresting students, and tightening security in Kabylie. However, instead of suppressing the movement, this reaction only strengthened it, expanding both its demands and popular support. As a result, the protesters escalated their actions by

launching a **general strike** that paralyzed the entire region. This was the first strike of its kind led by the Berber movement in Algeria and marked a significant turning point in its history. The scale of the events affected not only the local population but also the central authorities, which were eventually compelled to intervene directly in Tizi Ouzou as the crisis escalated. (Guenoun, 1999, p. 47), The authorities gradually began to ease tensions in the region by allowing academic research on Berber literature, culture, and heritage, as well as turning a blind eye to student activities aimed at advancing the Berber cause.

The end of the strike and protests did not indicate that the Berber movement was convinced by the political discourse of the central authorities. Instead, its activities continued, entering a new phase marked by political pluralism. During this period, the movement split into two factions at the **Second Conference of the Berber Cultural Movement (MCB)** due to differing views on political engagement—one faction saw political participation as essential for advancing the Berber cause, while the other rejected its politicization and preferred to keep it as a cultural movement. Despite these divisions, political parties emerged with the primary goal of defending the Berber cause, including the **Socialist Forces Front (FFS)** and the **Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD)**. However, despite internal disagreements, the Berber movement managed to achieve key gains, the most significant being the establishment of the **High Commission for Amazigh Affairs** on May 27, 1995.

Another chapter in the Berber issue emerged at the turn of the millennium, reviving memories of the Amazigh Spring but with a different scenario. It began with the killing of the young man **Mohamed Guermah**, known as **Massinissa**, by National Gendarmerie officers in **Beni Douala**, just two days before the 21st anniversary of the Amazigh Spring. This incident sparked outrage among the local population, leading to protests in which demonstrators attacked National Gendarmerie and police stations in the region. The unrest quickly spread to other areas with a predominantly Berber population, such as **Tizi Ouzou, Béjaïa**, and some municipalities in **Sétif Province**. In **Algiers**, the situation nearly took a different turn, escalating into a regional conflict due to clashes between protesters from the Kabyle region and groups of youth from the capital during the **June 14, 2001**, march. These new confrontations reignited demands for cultural and identity recognition, leading to the formation of the **Arouch Coordination**, which presented a list of **15 demands**, known as the **El-Kseur Platform**, to the presidency (Ben Djilali, 2002-2003, p. 102).

Thus, based on the history of the Berber question mentioned above, it can be said that it is like a dormant volcano that may erupt at any moment when the conditions and factors fueling the explosion are met.

## 2-2 The Events of October 1988

Since the early 1980s, a wave of social discontent began to rise, reaching its peak in the events of October 1988. These events reflected a severe crisis that had matured to its fullest extent before erupting in a striking manner. This widespread popular uprising was preceded by local uprisings, such as those in Tizi Ouzou in the spring of 1980, in Constantine and Sétif six years later, in Oran in western Algeria, in Ouargla in the south, and in Bordj Bou Arréridj, among other cities. All of these movements raised slogans either calling for recognition of Amazigh culture as a national heritage, denouncing social injustices such as favoritism and inequality, or expressing frustration over issues related to supply shortages and unemployment. (Belkacem Behloul, 1993, p. 114).

This uprising was preceded by a wave of rumors a day earlier, warning of a general strike affecting all vital sectors. On that same day, schoolchildren and high school students in the popular district of Bab El Oued took to the streets in protest against the shortage of consumer goods. The following day (October 5), they were joined by unemployed youth and school dropouts. (Abed, 1989, p. 95) The scale of these demonstrations expanded both in time and space, spreading to other parts of the country, such as Oran, Annaba, and Constantine. For two days, destructive violence targeted public institutions, including farmers' markets, the headquarters of the National Liberation Front, state properties, and government vehicles.

The magnitude and intensity of the protests led the authorities to intervene and suppress the demonstrators. On October 6, the President of the Republic declared a state of emergency in accordance with Article 119 of the 1976 Constitution. Additionally, a military statement was issued, announcing a curfew from midnight to 6 a.m. (Mansaf, 1996, pp. 187-198).

The toll of the events was heavy, with numerous casualties and significant damage to property and equipment. According to the Minister of the Interior at the time, the official death toll was estimated at 150, with 500 injured. (Abed, 1989, pp. 73-127).

Interpretations of the causes of these events varied. Some attribute them to the decline in external resources since the mid-1980s due to the drop in oil prices, along with the growing needs of the industrial

sector<sup>1</sup>, which was experiencing increasing deficits day by day. All these factors led to the outbreak of these events, whose primary objective was not an explicit and conscious demand for democracy but rather the fulfillment of social demands that the regime had guaranteed up until that time. (Abed, 1989, p. 86)

Some attribute the causes of these events to the ongoing power struggle in the mid-1980s within the ruling circles between conservatives, who defended the socialist approach and the one-party system, and reformists, who advocated for market liberalization—a stance represented by the President of the Republic. Seeking to exert pressure on the situation, he launched a counteroffensive in his famous speech on September 19, 1988, which was a direct accusation against the party's bureaucrats. He followed this with a statement to the people, urging them to oppose those resisting reforms under the pretext of loyalty to the regime. (Boukraa, 2003 pp. 102-103).

Regardless of the causes that led to these events, their consequences were profound at all levels, particularly in the political sphere. These events exposed the fragility of the political system and highlighted the urgent need for reforms while eroding the foundations of the one-party system. In this context, a new constitution was adopted through a referendum in February 1989, institutionalizing political change, particularly in the following aspects:

- Transformation in the composition of the political elite.
- Restructuring of the political system.
- Changes in the internal political environment.

### **2-3 Religious Extremism:**

The signs of religious extremism were not solely linked to the political transition of the early 1990s but had emerged earlier. They date back to the early 1980s with the rise of the "Bouyali Movement."<sup>2</sup> The violent actions carried out by this movement in various locations were significant, but our focus will be on the 1990s, as this was the period when extremism became more visible and had a profound impact on society. It was also a direct cause of the emergence of political violence, which gradually escalated due to the development of extremism on one hand and the influence of other contributing factors on the other.

The events of October 1988, as previously discussed, marked a fundamental turning point, directly leading to political transformation. This shift also legitimized the activities of the Islamic movement through various political parties, the most prominent of which was the Islamic Salvation Front, founded on March 10, 1989. This party reflected the ideological foundations of multiple and diverse currents, whose influence and effectiveness within the party varied according to their weight. Some of these currents were radical, such as the Hijra wa Takfir movement and factions influenced by the ideology and organization of armed jihad (the Bouyalists), while others were more moderate, such as the Algerian nationalist current. Despite the party's diverse composition and its lack of a clear political program capable of providing decisive solutions, it managed to become a formidable force that posed a serious threat to the political system. This was largely due to its control over mosques, which were used as platforms to disseminate its agenda—controlling approximately 8,000 out of 10,000 mosques—allowing it to mobilize around 3.5 million members. (Ammar, 1996, p. 68) The party's strength was further demonstrated by the results of the local elections, in which it won 853 out of 1,539 municipalities, securing 55.42% of the total votes cast. (Boukraa, 2003 p. 249)

The results were surprising to everyone, including the government, which—as a precautionary measure ahead of the legislative elections and to curb the rise of the Islamic Salvation Front—introduced a new electoral law. The most significant change was the increase in the number of electoral districts from 295 to 542, with most of the new districts established in the south, a stronghold of the National Liberation Front, at the expense of the north, where the Islamic Salvation Front had achieved a sweeping victory. In response, the party called for a general strike in May 1991 and urged demonstrations and sit-ins. The state intervened by declaring a four-month state of emergency and later amended the law, reducing the number of electoral districts to 430.

Thus, the democratic process resumed with the legislative elections held on December 26, 1991, in which multiple political parties participated, including the Islamic Salvation Front, which once again caused a major surprise by winning the majority of seats in the National People's Assembly with 188 seats, compared to 25 for the Socialist Forces Front and 16 for the National Liberation Front. These results marked the beginning of a storm that reshaped Algeria's political and even security landscape. The army made its decision,

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<sup>1</sup> At the turn of the years 1985-1986, oil prices collapsed, with the price per barrel suddenly dropping from \$30 to around \$10. This led to an 80% decline in the state's foreign currency revenues.

<sup>2</sup> Named after "Mustafa Bouali," who founded the first Algerian armed Islamist organization under the name *Mouvement Islamique Armé (MIA)*. Its operations began in November 1982, targeting National Gendarmerie checkpoints and state institutions.

unwilling to accept the Islamic Salvation Front securing an absolute majority in parliament. As a result, it chose to cancel the second round of elections and suspend the electoral process. On January 11, 1992, President Chadli Bendjedid resigned, and on January 14, 1992, the High Council for Security declared a power vacuum and established the High Council of State, (Boukraa, 2003 pp. 262-263)

Following the president's resignation and the suspension of the electoral process, the Islamic Salvation Front shifted from a position of legitimate opposition to an illegal opposition force seen as a threat to state security, leading to the emergence of guerrilla warfare. This escalation was driven by the increasing wave of arrests carried out by security forces and the rising violence and confrontations from certain factions affiliated with the party. This outcome was inevitable given the party's fragile structure and composition. While some radical elements saw armed confrontation with the state as necessary, others chose to withdraw rather than engage in conflict.

The intervention of security forces to enforce the state of emergency declared in February 1992, the decision to dissolve the Islamic Salvation Front in March 1992, and the trial of the party's leaders on charges of conspiring against state security all contributed to an escalation of violence. This violence entered a new phase characterized by organization within Islamist groups, which primarily took shape in three major organizations: the Armed Islamic Movement (MIA), the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), and the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS).

Thus, the situation escalated into a state of heightened and extremely dangerous tension. On one hand, the regime gradually lost its legitimacy and ability to control the internal evolution of the crisis and its external repercussions. On the other hand, the emerging political forces failed to find an alternative means—other than violence—to express their demands and, in turn, lost their legitimacy as a result of the regime's crackdown. The crisis once again became linked to ongoing sacrifices that weighed heavily on all sides. One of the most telling indicators of the severity of the crisis was:

- The heavy loss of lives and property.
- The increasing extent of foreign intervention.
- The difficulty and high cost of finding a compromise solution between the conflicting parties. (Ammar, 1996, p. 79)

Political violence is not an isolated phenomenon but is closely linked to various political, economic, social, and cultural transformations. In Algeria, violence was tied to the conditions of a societal crisis that the regime failed to address effectively, leading to contradictions and tensions that triggered violent reactions.

In general, political socialization is a process concerned with transmitting political experiences, attitudes, and knowledge (political culture) either directly or indirectly in a continuous manner throughout different stages of life—childhood, adolescence, youth, and maturity. This process is facilitated by various institutions and groups, including primary ones such as the family and peer groups, as well as secondary ones such as schools and the media.

It also became clear that political participation takes various forms and levels. Individuals may engage through voting, running for office, or involvement in civic organizations. Others may participate through protests and violent demonstrations, while some choose not to participate at all, contributing to a political participation crisis. This issue is particularly evident in newly independent developing countries, such as Algeria, where restrictions on public participation are widespread. In fact, the lack of political participation has become a defining feature and a common trait among these nations.

### **Conclusions**

Political participation in Algeria reflects the complexities of the political and social landscape, influenced by various factors such as the structure of the political system, the role of civil society, press freedom, the nature of elections, and political violence. Despite the reforms introduced since the late 1980s, significant challenges still hinder effective and genuine political participation. The continued monopolization of power, military interventions, and the weakness of political parties and civil society remain obstacles to establishing a comprehensive democratic system. Therefore, enhancing political participation requires fundamental reforms, including restructuring the political system, ensuring the independence of civil society, reinforcing press freedom, and conducting transparent elections that reflect the people's will, ultimately contributing to a genuine and sustainable democratic transition.



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