

# Algerian regime stages fraudulent elections

by Muriel Mirak Weissbach

How can a military regime, which has been waging war against its population for five years, causing the death of up to 120,000 citizens, convince the world that it has become a peace-loving democracy which respects the rule of law? Simple: Orchestrate elections, whose modalities, organization, and results are controlled, in the minutest detail.

This is what occurred in Algeria on June 5, when the military government of Liamine Zeroual presided over elections for a new parliament. The vote constituted the climax of a long process of deception which the junta has directed over the past year and a half, in an effort to put on a democratic face.

The last legitimate elections had been held in December 1991. The massive victory of the Front Islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front, FIS) in the first round of the elections led the military to annul the second round and seize power in a coup d'état in January 1992. It outlawed opposition parties, especially the FIS, whose members fled abroad, or were imprisoned, or went underground. In 1992, the political confrontation turned into a military clash, as opposition forces mounted an armed resistance to the junta's campaign against them. Very soon, the confrontation was sharpened, as British assets in Afghansi networks were infiltrated into Algeria, to set up a terrorist operation known as the Groupes Armée Islamistes (Armed Islamist Groups, GIA). The GIA was controlled by the wing of Algerian military security known as the "eradicators," those who promoted a campaign to "eradicate" physically the Islamist opposition. This sector of military intelligence then, in 1994, set up civilian militias, and armed them, to wage war against the Islamists.

Thus, for the last three years, the country has been the theater of brutal bloodletting of civilians. GIA atrocities against civilian villagers have led to vendetta actions of the militias against supposed Islamist sympathizers, while the "eradicators" have continued sweeps against supposed Islamist terrorists. The GIA itself has been deployed increasingly against the FIS and its armed resistance movement.

All efforts to end the bloodshed through dialogue with the legitimate opposition, have been rejected by the regime, which refuses any contact with the banned FIS. These efforts

included a very promising initiative backed by a Catholic lay organization, the Community of Saint Egidius, in 1995, which brought together a coalition of opposition parties committed to a platform for a political solution to the crisis.

It was largely in response to the political pressure which the Saint Egidius initiative placed on the junta internationally, that it decided to orchestrate a fraudulent process of democratization. In 1995, Presidential elections were held to clothe Zeroual in the first mantle of legitimacy. In November 1996, he organized a referendum to endorse the constitution, which had been duly altered in the direction of greater powers for the Presidency. The parliament as an institution had been divested of any real power, and only parties accepted by the regime would be allowed to run candidates in elections.

Once these preconditions had been fulfilled, elections could be organized. They were set for June 5. From February, during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan, the manipulated violence between GIA and militias was escalated and, again, just prior to the actual vote. Thus, when citizens went to vote, there were up to 600,000 armed personnel—police, military, and special units—to "ensure" security.

## A 'victory of the mathematicians'

The results of the vote were a foregone conclusion. According to a report in the French daily *Libération* on June 7, a group of police officers commented on the results as presented by the interior minister, with the following: "This is a victory of the mathematicians. We have the best in the world."

The official results were indeed worked out with mathematical precision. The 380 seats of the National Assembly were divided up as follows: 155 to the National Democratic Rally (RND), a brand-new party founded by Zeroual himself just a few months prior to the vote; 69 to the Movement for a Peaceful Society (MSP, the former Hamas), which is a moderate Islamist party led by Sheik Mahfoud Nahnah, and accepted by the regime; 64 to the National Liberation Front (FLN), the former ruling party which has aligned politically with the regime; 34 to the Ennahda party, also considered Islamist; 19 each to the secular parties, the Front of Socialist Forces (FFS) led by Hocine Ait Ahmed, and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) of Said Saadi; 16 to pro-government independents and tiny parties; and, 4 to the leftist Workers Party. Although no forecasting polls had been taken before the vote, government circles had leaked their "predictions" of the outcome, which turned out to be absolutely precise.

The results are such that the only possible coalition government would be made up of Zeroual's RND and the FLN. This, as the Paris daily *Le Figaro* pointed out on June 8, allows the regime to ward off the dual menaces of an Islamist bloc and a secular bloc favorable to a dialogue with the outlawed

FIS. Furthermore, as *Libération* noted, even if the moderate wing of the FLN, which is open to some contact with the opposition, were to prevail inside the party, it would be powerless to change the government policy, with only 64 seats. In the improbable case that the FLN were to ally with the Islamists and the secular parties, still they would not have enough seats to constitute a majority. A victory of the mathematicians, indeed.

### **Protests organized**

As soon as the results were released, opposition party figures announced their intention to organize political protest against the manifest fraud. No one, not even in the French press, could believe that a party just formed by Zeroual, a rather unpopular figure to say the least, could garner a relative majority. Nor is it credible that both the FFS and the RCD should receive significantly lower scores than in 1995. Most blatant is the fraud against the MSP, whose leader Nahnah had been credited with 2.9 million votes in the 1995 Presidential election; here his party was given 1.5 million. Finally, even the numbers of voters taking part in the election were doctored. Official statistics claimed that 65.5% of those eligible went to vote, whereas experts estimate it was less than 50%, and in the capital, Algiers, not the official 43.2% but rather only 30%. If, indeed, fewer than half the eligible voters went to the polls, this means that the real winner was the FIS, which had called for a boycott of the entire electoral farce.

The fraud was organized in quite a straightforward fashion. Citizens voted, often in the presence of monitors, but when their votes were counted, the monitors were not allowed to be present. The security escorts, which the government insisted on providing for the 200 international observers, prevented them from gaining access to the places where the ballots were counted. Not even representatives of the Algerian parties were allowed to attend the tally. Two parties complained that their ballots had been ripped up, so that supporters could not vote for them.

The most spectacular aspect of the fraud was the enormous logistical operation mounted to carry it out. Aside from the half-million gun-toting security personnel, there were mobile polling booths made available, allegedly to reach voters in outlying areas, especially among Bedouin populations in the south. Of the 37,273 polling places, 3,586 were mobile. But, it was reported, the number of mobile polling places for the north was doubled, allegedly to reach remote villagers. The FIS estimates that there were over 5,000 mobile units. In all cases, election observers or monitors were prevented from being anywhere near these mobile booths. In some cases, 100% of the votes cast in a mobile unit, were counted for Zeroual's party!

As for the armed soldiers deployed at every turn, their function seems to have been to protect the fraud. It was re-

ported in the *Washington Post* that observers from the Workers Party "were fired on when they tried to follow a vehicle carrying ballot boxes to outlying areas not served by fixed polling stations." And the London *Financial Times* reported that an MSP observer "was wounded after being shot by a government-armed communal guard in southwestern Algeria."

While some of the international monitoring teams there, from the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and the Arab League, went along with the fraud, the mission sent by the United Nations spoke out. The delegation, which included monitors from 30 countries, pointed a finger at the "special" polling booths, reserved for the military, the police, and other security units, who account for about a million voters. The UN denounced the lack of "neutrality" at these sites, and also complained that they had been denied access to vote-counting procedures.

### **No one was fooled**

Despite the massive effort undertaken to conduct fraud, no one seems to have been fooled. No matter how loudly Zeroual may claim that the vote was a victory for his regime, and a guarantee that the process of democratization has prevailed, Algeria remains in the grip of a brutal dictatorship. The fact that the military perpetrated such outright fraud, even against parties which it rightly considers under its political control, demonstrates the arrogance of its power. Yet, as several of the opposition figures emphasized, the government's rejection of real elections may only feed the spiral of violence, and those who had held out hopes for progress toward the rule of law, are further frustrated.

The lessons of the June 5 vote are many, but the most relevant for Algeria's future, is that the situation in the country cannot be changed from within. There is no hope for Algeria, unless the political forces which truly represent the aspirations of the citizenry are allowed to participate in the political process. This means, first and foremost, the FIS.

Far from despairing, the FIS leadership in exile has applauded the courage of the Algerian electorate, which manifested its rejection of dictatorship and war, by abstaining in large part, by casting blank ballots, or, by voting for parties which ran on a platform for peace and dialogue with the FIS. In addition, it has circulated a proposal for reviving the process launched with Saint Egidius, toward dialogue. In a paper called "For a Strategy to Overcome the Crisis in Algeria," issued at the end of May, the FIS calls for direct bilateral discussions between it and the "real holders of power, the generals," to be followed by multilateral talks, including all political formations in the country, in a national conference, which would set real elections. This, however, cannot be done, the FIS asserts, unless a third party or parties intervene, not to "interfere" but to "mediate," and offer a venue.