

## Legislative Elections in Algeria: No Algerian Spring but a Women's Spring Instead



*In this post, Latefa Guemar argues that, following the Arab spring the Algerian regime fell back onto “populism” by once again using women to negotiate and maintain power, and as was believed at the time, stability. In fact, no-one, except for the women, has engaged with serious measures of social transformation that might reshape both the “democratic” and the “popular” which mark the Algerian Republic.*


*“Congratulations to the success of Algerian women ... 147 out of 462 seats in parliament. The highest rate in the Arab World !”*

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of May 2012, as soon as the results of the Algerian Legislative elections were officially released, this comment was circulating widely on social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter. The photograph below seemed to encapsulate the mood. In fact, while expecting to see the Islamic coalition winning a majority in Algeria, as was the case in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt, the surprise was instead to see the election of 147 women to parliament, winning 30% of the contested seats. But, what matters most for democracy: women's quotas or the quota allowed to political parties they are representing?



The Algerian regime can now claim to be the main defender of women's rights in the country with the recent implementation of a new law allocating a quota within the parliament which permitted this success and allowed women's access to parliament. Surprisingly enough, **none of the political parties that participated in the process has achieved this 30% level of women's participation in any instance** (Ghezali, 2012). Moreover, and despite the rhetoric and the demagoguery, Algerian politicians or elitists who take time to seriously consider the question of women's political role are a rarity, even though they recognize it to be of great importance in the development of the country.

If we consider the perverse effects of authoritarianism and the pivotal role played by the police state, it is evident that political parties use the handling of the issue of women to negotiate their places within both society and the regime. To fulfill their democratic remit and to maintain a popular base, political parties have to take account of women. Instead, they prefer to yield to the ease with which misogynistic prejudices are widely shared within broader society. In fact, no-one, except for the women, has engaged with serious measures of social transformation that might reshape both the “democratic” and the “popular” which mark the Algerian Republic. Following the Arab spring and fearing a high incidence of election boycotts, the regime fell back on such “populism” by once again using women to negotiate and maintain power, and as was believed at the time, stability.

Although universally grounded in the same patriarchal desire for dominion and control, the imposition of restrictive codes of conduct on women differs from one society to another (Guemar, 2009). In fact, it is the case that Algeria, a newly independent country, limits its principles of autonomy and freedom to the public sphere to which women, as protectors of the private sphere's values, are not allowed access. Moghadam (1994a) explains that the ideology of nationalism is more supported in the Third World where ‘woman’ becomes a symbol of collective liberation and a role model for the new nationalist patriarchal community. It is now recognised that despite her full participation in the liberation army, the status of Algerian woman was quickly reshaped  the

urgent needs of the male to restore Islam as the religion of the state, Arabic as the unique language and themselves as sovereigns of the family” (Benoune, 1999:23). Consequently, one can see that the optimistic vision of Frantz Fanon, who declared the post-colonial Algerian woman's emancipation as a model for women in the Third World, might have faded (Guemar, 2009).

Nonetheless, Algerian women continue to fight struggle, investing more in the public sphere, slowly but surely, although not without experiencing social isolation and ill-treatment. Who can then blame them for negotiating with any part of the regime or society which could provide women with the space to exert full citizenship? The 30% recently won is only one part of these negotiations and can be seen as a politic of “positive discrimination”. Argument against it posted online sought to explain how a quota of 30%, not even elected in a proper democratic process, even more, in an atmosphere of fraud, will achieve no change in a country where a girl cannot cross the road without being harassed or even physically violated, simply because she dares to walk down the street on her own. Another argument suggested that: *“It is true that there is some kind of fairness in the fact that finally males are no longer the only beneficiaries of the system of privileges”*. From a democratic point of view, it is important to question how a women's quota could counteract the arbitrariness of the Algerian regime, including arbitrariness towards women themselves. On Facebook, and from a feminist stand point, FH's response was: *“You can argue that there was a fraud, you can argue that the process is not democratic but please leave the word “women” in place, it is important for us to occupy the field of citizenship”*.

In reply, RH (Male) says:” *With this quota allocated to women, there will definitely be 70% of men and 30% of women promulgating the ideology of the so contested and corrupted parties such as the FLN, the RND and the Islamic coalition”*.

To return then to the question posed earlier, what matters most for democracy: women's quotas or the quota allowed to political parties they are representing? Let's be fair towards Algerian women and more objective, even if less “populist” by saying that the few places that Algerian women have recently been able to make their mark are within the professional and academic spheres. I remain convinced that more than 30% of women would have accessed this new Parliament, if these elections had happened under the aegis of a *trias politica*, a rule of Law and an open political debate, permitting widened participation at every administrative stage, and a replacement of the family code by a non-corrupted civilian judicial system. Meanwhile the dialectic of “populism” versus “popular” seems to take precedence over the “democratic” of the Algerian Republic.

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Guemar, LN. (2009), With reference to specific examples, explore the ways in which the proper behaviour of women is used to signify the difference between those who belong to the collectivity and those who do not. Explain the implication of this process for the refugee experience. Unpublished Essay.

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June 21st, 2012 | [Development](#), [Politics](#), [Society](#) | [4 Comments](#)

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