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## Risky Betting on a Big Gambler in Algeria

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Is the UK making in Algeria the same blunder that France did in Tunisia? In the midst of the general unrest in Algeria, at a time of regional upheavals, and before the so called National Commission for Consultations on Political Reforms (headed by Mr. Abdelkader Bensalah, president of the Senate and General Mohamed Touati) could really kick off the consultation sessions. Mr. Alistair Burt, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State at the *Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)*, with responsibility for the Middle East and North Africa declared, on 23 April, 'I welcome the start of these discussions which will cover important areas including the Constitution and electoral laws, the information law and role of the press, the decentralisation of power and the participation of women in public life'. <http://ukinalgeria.fco.gov.uk/en/news/?view=News&id=599714582>. This hasty FCO announcement came as a surprise to most close followers of Algerian affairs and even the regime itself, as the well-informed Algerian daily *El Watan* noted on June 1st [http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/bouteflika-est-il-sorti-de-la-zone-de-turbulences-01-06-2011-126859\\_109.php](http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/bouteflika-est-il-sorti-de-la-zone-de-turbulences-01-06-2011-126859_109.php), at a time when the key political figures, genuine opposition parties and civil society groups declined the Bensalah Commission's invitations.

Indeed, well respected personalities such as the former prime ministers Dr. Ahmed Benbitour, Mokdad Sifi, and Mouloud Hamrouche, as well as the leader of the FFS party Hocine Ait Ahmed, the former foreign minister Dr. Taleb Ibrahim, and Dr. Mustapha Bouchachi, the president of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights have all boycotted the consultations, which they considered lacked the sincere willingness on the part of the current regime to introduce the genuine deep political reforms necessary to avert what most close observers of Algerian affairs consider an inevitable popular explosion; given the severity of the ongoing social unrest across the country, overshadowed only by the international media's focus on Libya, Yemen and Syria. The commission's setback was even damaging for the regime when the consultations were considered as buying-time tactics devoid of willingness for serious change by Hocine Ait Hamed and former president Ali Kafi [http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/ali-kafi-refuse-de-cautionner-la-demarche-du-pouvoir-14-06-2011-128617\\_109.php](http://www.elwatan.com/actualite/ali-kafi-refuse-de-cautionner-la-demarche-du-pouvoir-14-06-2011-128617_109.php) and Lamine Zeroual. Faced with such an embarrassing situation the regime went ahead with its plans of pseudo-consultation sessions with leaders of the facade opposition entities and co-opted civil society parasite groups, such as the *Mouvement de l'Entente Nationale*

The consultations circus is still ongoing but with the completion, a week ago, of the session dedicated to hearing the proposals of PM Ahmed Ouyahia, as leader of the Democratic and National Rally, this phase in the regime's roadmap for reforms, as declared by Mr. Bouteflika on 15 April, can be ticked as done now. Mr. Burt should have waited at least until last weekend to make an assessment of the so-called consultations which would have enabled a more nuanced reading of the credibility of those discussions. Instead of meeting the aspirations of Algerians for effecting a real transitional period during which an open and inclusive dialogue is established with all the respected personalities and authentic opposition parties, the regime offered Algerians a pre-prepared roadmap consisting of amending the electoral, parties and media laws following consultations with its facade corrupt and co-opted clients. Once approved next Autumn by the rubber-stamp parliament ('elected' in massively rigged 'elections', which were largely boycotted by Algerians) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/africa/6664165.stm>, the amended laws would allow for a more "democratic" life in Algeria; whereby new parties (blocked since 1999 when Bouteflika came to power), new publications, and tolerated access for the opposition to the state-controlled media (private and semi-private TV and radio stations are not allowed in Algeria) would be granted in preparation of yet another amendment of the Constitution (the last one took place in November 2008, when Article 76 which limited presidential mandates to two consecutive terms was amended to pave the way for a third term and theoretically presidency for life for Bouteflika). The regime's reform roadmap envisages putting the amended constitution to a vote by the new parliament mid next year and should the reforms turn out to be deep, a general referendum will be held thereafter. The irony is that the roadmap justifies this calendar by the fact that the current parliament is 'not representative' and hence should not pronounce on matters pertaining to crucial matters of the nation. The double irony is that it was this same parliament that voted the last constitutional amendment in November 2008!



The extension of invitations to some respected figures and former presidents was merely meant to legitimise the regime's demarche internationally. The big surprise was when some of, what is referred to in the Algerian political parlance as 'sons of

the regime' not only declined their invitations but also released open letters and declarations explaining their positions and in which they denounced the regime's gamble with the stability and future of the nation at a crucial time in the country's history. Former prime ministers Benbitour (who resigned after only 8 months in Bouteflika's first government) and Sifi, who assumed the premiership at the peak of Algeria's political violence in the 1990s, denounced the regime's survival tactics the ruling establishment is preoccupied with its survival rather than seizing a closing window of opportunity for peaceful transition and change. In an unprecedented frank and open letter, Mokdad Sifi asks: *'Should we change the electoral law and maintain fraud? Or instead replace those responsible for fraud? The political parties' law allows the creation of parties which the regime blocks illegitimately for more than 12 years now. Should we change the Law or the regime?'*

But unfortunately, at the end of Mr. Bensalah's discussions with PM Ouyahia the very well-informed daily *Le Soir d'Algerie* informed its readers that consultations are *de facto* over and that the promised profound reforms were already decided during the Council of the State's emergency meetings held last March at a time of very high panic following the geopolitical earthquakes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. Basically, the reforms to come are those that were agreed last March and put forward by Ouyahia as leader of his RND party, detailed in a press conference at the end of his consultations with the Bensalah Commission. The rest was an exercise in cheap PR aimed mainly for the West.

In my opinion the logic prevailing among the ruling establishment is as follows: There is most probably a conviction that yes these are times of severe social and political turbulence, but, that as they have always done in the past they can survive. Their analysis must be that they have made it through the turmoil of the political conflict of the 1990s at a time of *de facto* international embargo, isolation, payment defaults, very low oil revenues at \$9 per barrel, strong opposition parties and powerful personalities both from inside and outside the regime. Despite all the odds, the ruling establishment thinks it survived what no other comparable regime could. The regime seems to have reached the conclusion that they could not possibly lose *now*, when the country has around \$160 billion in reserves, a barrel of oil trading at a decade-long average of \$75, a decimated opposition, a laminated youth movement, and most importantly for them the strong international backing from the West offered in the form of declarations such the one made by Mr. Burt, and Washington's blessing as reiterated by AFRICOM's Commander General Carter F. Ham, last Tuesday in Algiers. General Ham said, *'the level of cooperation and the ways in which we cooperate with Algeria are extensive and broad ranging. But it has long been our national policy to not discuss matters of intelligence sharing or matters of operational security, but I would underline the level of cooperation is quite strong'*. Yes there is a nation-wide social unrest of daily strikes, riots, and protests in almost every sector, but, the security forces can deal with the situation, is the logic in Algiers.

In all this the regime is gambling Algeria's stability and future by engaging in fake reform measures aimed at ensuring the regeneration of the regime under more acceptable banners to be in tune with the changing regional reality. After a period of panic last February and March the ruling establishment is now assured that the tragic curve the Libyan uprising took would deter Algerians from following suit, given the recent tragic memory of the 1990s. Internationally, they think that Algeria, despite all its appalling human rights record has become an island of stability in a turbulent ocean, with lucrative investment opportunities for the EU and the U.S which are struggling to recover from recession. Therefore, they can continue to repress the youth's and Algerians aspirations for genuine reform in the most brutal way while the West looks the other way or hails their so-called reform initiatives. As for the ongoing strikes there is a lot of money to buy social peace. Dr. Said Saadi, leader of the opposition Rally for Culture and Democracy said at a press conference, a week ago, that the Algerian government has spent \$30 billion on peace buying measures, since January! I have argued elsewhere that in its desperate effort to buy social peace and deny the opposition the possibility of harnessing the popular unrest the regime ended up opening the floodgates on itself with every sector and corner of the country on strike or rioting in the streets. As we approach into summer things are getting complicated with universities on strike for over two months now, resident doctors escalating their protests and pretty much every other sector on strike. Algeria has been basically in a state of paralysis since the Arab Spring started. It's a big gamble on the part of the regime while the window is closing very fast. Algerians are known for being no stranger to uprising. But, would you bet on a gambler? The UK and the U.S seem to be doing exactly that.

Whenever UK-Algerian relations are evoked at Westminster or Whitehall two themes dominate the discussions: counter-terrorism and business opportunities in Algeria. In early April Mr. Burt arrived in Algiers on the occasion of the fifth session of the joint UK-Algerian Committee on Counter-terrorism. A week later the UK-Algerian Business Council led a trade mission of 33 British businessmen to Algiers. Three weeks ago UKABC organised a conference on doing business in Algeria, at the London Chamber of Commerce. The Algerian government has dedicated \$386 billion for its 2010-2014 development programme, so no wonder it got several western governments rushing to Algiers, and the UK is no exception. The British government should rather strengthen its relationship with the Algerian people. Regimes change, history remembers and nations last.

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