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Algeria: Democratic Transition Case Study

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About the Center on Democracy, Development and the Rule of Law (CDDRL)

CDDRL was founded by a generous grant from the Bill and Flora Hewlett Foundation in October in 2002 as part of the Stanford Institute for International Studies at Stanford University. The Center supports analytic studies, policy relevant research, training and outreach activities to assist developing countries in the design and implementation of policies to foster growth, democracy, and the rule of law.

Within the context of CDDRL's project on democratic transitions, this paper explores the causes for the failure of Algeria to democratize in the 1990s. Adhering to the project's common case study framework, the paper outlines the impact of long term structural variables before moving on to an examination of the domestic, then external variables that acted around the moment of potential transition in 1991-1992. In conclusion, the paper highlights the mutual interaction of domestic and external variables in explaining the 'failed transition' outcome in the Algeria case.

I. Outcome

The outcome studied in this case study is that of Algeria's failed democratic transition in the early 1990s. From the late 1980s, the government implemented a number of liberalizing reforms in Algeria, leading the country to a moment of potential democratic breakthrough in 1991. However, a military junta overthrew the government, revoked election results and re-established authoritarian control. The junta stopped the transition before it unfolded.

Algeria's democratic transition emerged from a severe economic crisis. The crisis was triggered by long-standing structural deficits, combined with a fall in world oil prices and price rises for basic goods imposed under an IMF stabilization plan led to the outbreak of public riots in October 1988. Algeria's single-party socialist Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) government saw its position increasingly weakened as its reliance on high oil prices started to backfire. As a result of the riots, it shifted course in an effort to stabilize the country and secure its own rule. In 1989 the government introduced a new democratic constitution that abolished references to socialism and one-party rule, and made a commitment to multiparty elections. Between 1989 and 1991 a range of measures of political liberalization were implemented. During this time, the newly founded Islamist party *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS) was able to establish itself as the most effective and successful opposition party. The FIS's victory in the June 1990 local elections was the first time an Islamist party gained a majority in a free vote in any Arab country. The victory revealed their potential to win nationally.

Algeria's putative transition to democracy, however, came to a sudden halt. The FIS won the first round of national legislative elections held in January 1991, emerging as the strongest political force in the country. In response, the army intervened on 11 February 1992 in a violent coup in the name of safeguarding democracy from religious extremism. President Chadli Benjedid was forced to resign. On 5 March, the government officially banned the FIS, jailed its leadership and banished thousands of followers to desert detention camps. It curtailed political rights and freedoms, reversing the process of political liberalization. Violent confrontations between the army and Islamists ensued, and within months, a civil war had broken out. The perpetuation of violence throughout the rest of the decade, which claimed over 150,000 victims, impeded any resumption of political liberalization.

II. Long Term Structural Variables

Prior to the October 1988 riots, Algeria had for decades been a socialist single-party autocracy with a single-commodity rentier economy, characterized by centralized planning. When, by the mid-1980s the **structural problems** of the socialist development model became apparent, rampant deficits in employment, housing and education put the regime increasingly under pressure. Corruption and the inefficient implementation of important structural reforms undermined the effective trickling down of the benefits of economic liberalization to ordinary citizens, and the growing gap between rich and poor led to

considerable popular unrest in the course of the 1980s. The government's reforms came short of solving problems, and these problems became worse following a harsh fall in oil prices in 1986. The government, highly dependent on hydrocarbon revenues, found itself subject to particularly severe pressure as rapidly rising unemployment, shortages of goods and natural-resource mismanagement fuelled public discontent. This led to demonstrations and violent protests which culminated in the October 1988 riots in various Algerian cities, the final straw in forcing the regime to shift course.¹

Underlying the October riots were not only long-term economic problems but also a series of deepening **social factors**. The education sector, designed for socialist-led industrialization, had failed effectively to adapt to the requirements of new economic circumstances. Graduates could no longer expect jobs in state-owned industries, and their industry-specific training did not provide the necessary mobility for a capitalist labor market. In fact, Algerian Islamists gained their popular following when the crisis of the mid-1980s hit the first post-independence generation just as it was entering the labor force.² The 1988 riots were also seen as a protest against the humiliating conditions the Algerian people had faced for decades at the hands of power-holders exercising arbitrary authority, routinely denying people their notional rights (also known as *la hogra*). Such frustration now found new avenues of expression though a broadened space of public articulation. The uneven distribution of the benefits of economic development thus led to a "volatile combination of socio-economic inequality and new freedoms to express unsatisfied expectations and resentments."³ In this context, the FIS's success in the early 1990s was not a sudden development, but empowered by enduring political mismanagement since independence.⁴

However, if a number of such structural factors pushed Algeria towards a perceived need for political reform, other variables acted as long-term *impediments* to liberalization. The negative effects of high **natural resource revenues** on democratic development have been widely studied, and in particular in the Arab world, where government-controlled oil and gas reserves have been seen as a major obstacle to democratization. Algeria's 1991 experience strongly corroborates such explanations.⁵ This factor conjoined both domestic and international factors, as will be described below. The overwhelming dependency of the Algerian economy on hydrocarbon revenues (amounting to an estimated 98.5% of all state revenues) made Algeria "a wretched poster child"⁶ for the rentier theory of the petrostate, and a "bunker state *par excellence*".⁷ The hydrocarbons sector had long lacked substantial linkages with the broader economy, choking off the prospect of broader modernization.⁸

When world oil markets plunged in the mid-1980s, Algeria's oil and gas dependency momentarily became a pro- rather than anti-reform variable. With the fall in revenues the regime and army could "no longer deliver on their promises of a just and equal society [...and] Algeria faced the dilemma of

1 Michael Bonner, Megan Reif and Mark Tessler: *Islam, Democracy and the State in Algeria: Lessons for the Western Mediterranean and Beyond: Introduction*, in: The Journal of North African Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp.1-33.

2 Ibid

3 Ibid

4 Claire Heristchi: *The Islamist Discourse of the FIS and the Democratic Experiment in Algeria*, in: Democratization, Vol. 1, No. 4, August 2004, pp.111-132.

5 Clement M. Henry: *Algeria's Agonies: Oil Rent Effects in a Bunker State*, in: The Journal of North African Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 68-81; Michael L. Ross: *The Political Economy of the Resource Curse*, in: World Politics, No. 51/2 (January 1999), pp. 297-322; Hazem Biblawi: *The Rentier State in the Arab World*, in: G. Luciani (ed.), *The Arab State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Kiren Aziz Chaudhry: *The Price of Wealth: Economies and Institutions in the Middle East* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1997); Terry Karl: *The Paradox of Plenty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

6 Bonner, Reif and Tessler (2004), op. cit, p. 69.

7 Henry (2004), op cit, p. 74.

8 Ibid

‘performance legitimacy’ common to authoritarian regimes.”⁹ Massive structural deficits appeared when state services towards an expanding and increasingly demanding population diminished with the decline in oil revenues. This was a key factor in pushing the government to contemplate reform. But, the energy factor was ultimately and over the longer-term an obstacle to democratic dynamics taking firmer root.

The structure of the Algerian economy ensured the salience of economic interests hostile to democratization. Key economic actors (both domestic and international) with privileged political linkages had high stakes in maintaining the regime.¹⁰ These actors had supported the gradual development of a market economy, but most did not want this to facilitate the development of major productive capacities outside the hydrocarbon sector that would limit the scope for their importing activities. Economic actors also saw political reform as risking instability.¹¹ The linkage was also tight between Algeria’s hydrocarbon dependence and the army’s continued political role: oil rents helped ‘entrench’ the military, making the shift from political liberalization to democratization more difficult.¹² The lack of economic diversification prior to the 1991 elections meant that few independent and diversified economic actors had emerged to militate in favour of democracy.

Key international actors also had an interest in continued stability to secure energy supplies. In June 1992, the Spanish gas company Enagas and Algeria’s Sonatrach signed a 25 year contract for the annual delivery of six million m3 of gas to Spain, via a new pipeline transiting Morocco. In 1991, Gaz de France extended three major supply contracts with Algeria from ten to fifteen years. By this time, Algeria provided one-third of French gas supplies.

Some degree of economic opening was deemed important for Western energy interests. The fact that the nationalization of foreign assets was no longer perceived to be a risk helped trigger several new joint ventures with Western companies. But at the same time, privileged protection and treatment from the political system continued to be important. The Algerian government, for example, provided security officers to guard foreign plants. These guards often outnumbered foreign workers. State of the art technology was used to provide secure compounds, in dramatic contrast to the rudimentary domestic conditions of production. In short, collaboration with the security apparatus provided positive benefits to Western interests.¹³ In exchange, international oil deals directly replenished the army’s coffers, reducing its incentives to compromise with the opposition and withdraw definitively from politics.¹⁴

After Algeria’s rentier economy collapsed in 1986, European governments and the US pressed for the 1988 IMF structural adjustment plan, and thus contributed to the Algerian government’s initial decision to commit to democratic transition. Indeed, Mouloud Hamrouche’s project of rapid liberalization of the Algerian economy was said to be ‘the brainchild of Parisian advisers.’¹⁵ But experts observed that the international community did not press for structural adjustment in either the hope or expectation that it would assist democratic transition.¹⁶ Western governments did not seek an economic reform process that

9 Mohammed Akacem: *The Role of External Actors in Algeria’s Transition*, in: *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 /Summer 2004), pp. 153-168.

10 Ibid

11 Hugh Roberts, *The Bouffefika Presidency and the Problems of Political Reform in Algeria*, transcript of a presentation at FRIDE, Madrid, 3 February 2005, available at <http://www.fride.org>.

12 M. Akacem (2004) , op cit, p.154.

13 Richard Youngs: *The European Union and the Promotion of Democracy*, Oxford University Press, New York (2001), pp. 94-114.

14 M. Akacem (2004) , op cit, p.154.

15 Hugh Roberts: *The Battlefield: Algeria 1988-2002. Studies in a Broken Polity*, Verso, London, 2003, p.313.

16 Hugh Roberts: *Dancing in the Dark: The European Union and the Algerian Drama*, in: R. Youngs, R. Gillespie (eds): *The European Union and Democracy Promotion. The Case of North Africa*, Frank Cass, London, 2002, pp. 106-134.

would endanger the political management of the hydrocarbons sector that formed the basis for the privileged relationship between the regime and powerful external interests.

Southern European governments, in particular, feared the consequences of Algeria's democratization. They were increasingly concerned with **migration** flows and the risk of a mass exodus to France, Spain and Italy in the case of an Islamist takeover in Algeria. At the same time, the possible impact of instability in Algeria on the large Algerian immigrant community worried European governments, particularly France, which at the time was home to a million Algerian residents. "Any excessive commentary [ie critical comment of events in Algeria] could incite them, even to fight among themselves on our own territory", argued French Prime Minister Michel Rocard, at the same time noting the wrath that the many French citizens still living in Algeria may face if the French government were perceived to be interfering in the country's domestic affairs.¹⁷ After the results of the first round of elections were released, the French embassy in Algiers reportedly prepared for a massive influx of refugees, taking stock of tents and blankets available.

An additional factor militating against fully-fledged democratic transition was the traditionally **dominant role of the army** (by 'army' in this paper we refer to the organization's politically-engaged senior leadership rather than the entirety of its rank and file). The army's role was a long-term variable in the sense that its role in Algeria's independence struggle had imbued it with a store of legitimacy.¹⁸ The military was said to identify itself with the people, the revolution, the unity of the state and a strong state structure, values which were also important for Algerian citizens.¹⁹ The army's role in economic development projects also increased its popularity. The army's political role was tied to its extensive involvement in the economy and its identification with a model of autonomous national economic development. According to one expert, the army was seen by many Algerians as 'the mirror of the people, a reliable model and an example to be followed.'²⁰ While the army's popular legitimacy suffered after its violent repression of popular riots and strikes in the late 80s and early 90s, its self-image continued to be that of the defender of national sovereignty, the republic and security.

Crucially, this helped ensure that the process of political liberalization that took Algeria to the point of transition did not in practice significantly weaken the power of the army. With its harsh repression of the 1988 'Black October' riots, the Algerian military lost some of its popularity and stepped back from direct political rule. However, the army was not brought under formal and firm constitutional rule, but had only agreed to withdraw from the forefront of politics temporarily, maintaining a watching brief over events.²¹ Chadli was a compromise choice of president, giving the military leadership control over the incipient process of liberalization.²²

Civil and military structures had become tightly intertwined, predicated on a threefold, largely blurred structure consisting of the military, the bureaucracy and the FLN. These three strongly interwoven institutions were dependent on each other for the continuation of the regime, and shared a common 'socializing background.'²³ The army's sanctioning of a process of political liberalization had to be

17 Steven Greenhouse: *French Government Is Criticized For Mailing to Condemn Algeria*, New York Times, 18.10.1988.

18 M. Akacem (2004), op cit, p.154.

19 John P. Entelis.; *Algeria: Technocratic Rule, Military Power*, in: I. William Zartman, Mark A. Tessler, John P. Entelis Russell A. Stone, Raymond A. Hinnebusch and Shahrough Akhavi (eds): *Political Elites in Arab North Africa: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Egypt*, Longman, London and New York, 1982, p. 110.

20 Robert Malley: *The Call From Algeria: Third Worldism, Revolution and the Turn to Islam*, UCLA Press, Berkeley and London, 1996, p.12.

21 Aylin Güney, Aslihan Çelenk: *The European Union's Democracy Promotion Policies in Algeria: Success or Failure?*, in: *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, March 2007, p. 112.

22 Robert Mortimer: *State and Army in Algeria: The 'Bouteflika Effect'*, in: *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2006, pp. 155-171.

23 Entelis (1982), op. cit, p.93.

understood as having been granted within such ideational parameters. While the FLN, in its political platform emphasized the primacy of 'the political' over 'the military', this view was 'rapidly...contradicted by discourse and practice.'²⁴ Behind the political reforms implemented from 1989 onwards army generals retained a strategy of manipulating the new sphere of political parties.²⁵ By 1991, many in the West believed democratizing Algeria was a question of dislodging the FLN, while in reality, the FLN rule in itself was a façade power structure and the army had never relinquished guardianship.²⁶

III. Short Term Precipitating Factors

i) Domestic factors that kept the regime in place

a) *Weak reform legitimacy*

The government's democratic reform process lacked robust popularity in part because it was launched when the government's legitimacy had already declined. The Chadli government intended democratic liberalization not out of a genuine commitment to democracy but to protect its own position. As pointed out, by the mid-1980's, the FLN's socialist development model had engendered rampant unemployment and housing shortages. After having opened political space in the hope of political survival, the Chadli government failed to respond to citizens' grievances and demands. Some observers concluded that the Algerian transition failed because it was initiated in an undemocratic manner, and in the absence of a previously negotiated agreement on the basic rules of the game.²⁷

Rather than gaining credit for committing to democratization, the Chadli government hemorrhaged support to the FIS. The FIS succeeded in challenging the state's legitimacy in moral terms through the prism of Islam. Moreover, the FIS took on the same discourse and basis of socio-economic legitimacy as the FLN. FIS leader Abassi Madani was indeed a founding member of the FLN at the very beginning of the revolution. The FIS succeeded in spreading the notion that the government's whole reform project was a perversion of the values of the revolution. Moreover, by the late 1980s, generational change had made the link to the struggle for independence as the main source of governmental legitimacy increasingly weak.²⁸ The government lacked a pool of strong support for its reform project; there was no mass mobilization when that democratizing project was interrupted. Indeed, many commentators argued that much of the popularity of the FIS was not rooted in the people's enthusiasm for the Islamists, but consisted mainly a protest vote against decades of FLN misrule.

b) *Social polarization*

A profound polarization of Algerian society contributed significantly to the reversal of the country's democratic opening. On the one hand, a number of factors led to the radicalisation of public opinion, expressed by the rise of and support for the FIS. On the other hand, opposing sectors of society were acutely fearful of the FIS. Algeria lacked a consensus on the basic political 'rules of the game' as it stood on the cusp of potential democratic transition. Algerian democrats feared that a potentially undemocratic

24 Güney and Çelenk (2007), op. cit, p. 110; Malley (1996), op. cit, p. 127.

25 Hugh Roberts, *Bouteflika's Presidency and the Issue of Political Reform in Algeria*, Presentation at FRIDE, Madrid, 3 February 2005.

26 Ibid

27 Yahia H. Zoubir: *Stalled Democratization of an Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Algeria*, in: Democratization, Vol.2, No.2, Summer 1995, pp. 109-139.

28 Heristchi (2004), op cit, p. 115-117.

party was about to come to power by democratic means, and were accordingly torn over what response to the FIS was appropriate. Some argued that the party's victory in a democratic election process must be respected. Others argued that the FIS was not to be trusted; that its program was not compatible with a democratic, pluralist society; and that as much as their victory represented in itself a success for democracy, it would soon lead to an eradication of the very pluralism and openness that brought the party to power (this fear being symbolized by the subsequently much-repeated line 'One person, one vote, one time').²⁹ It is impossible to know to what extent a FIS government would have reversed the democratic opening. While some sections of the FIS (notably Ali Belhaj and his broad base of followers) had been notably anti-democratic in their statements, the party's official stance was pro-democracy.³⁰

Much analysis on this period in Algerian politics has focused on explaining the rise of the FIS. The regime's political mismanagement since independence had empowered Islamists to become a strong political challenger.³¹ The very young demographical structure that coincided with accumulated discontent was another decisive factor. The social explosion of October 1988 'provided the opportunity for the Islamist movement finally to capture spontaneous popular unrest and turn people's anger and resentment into a powerful basis for political mobilization and action.'³² The Islamists therefore constituted the first post-independence political movement capable of mobilizing people massively for political action against the authoritarian regime. The movement grew quickly through a network of independent mosques that served as places of preaching, mobilization and criticism against the regime and its policies. The mosques network attracted votes by facilitating grassroots social welfare and charity while systematically opposing the regime.³³

Our concern here is not directly to assess the reasons why citizens' frustration with the regime translated into support specifically for the FIS. Rather, what is pertinent is that in Algeria's case, the fastest-rising opposition party prior to what were supposed to be a set of founding democratic elections provoked such polarization. Parties broadly acceptable across the spectrum of social opinion failed to emerge as serious contenders. And also reflecting this polarization, and resulting ambivalence over democratic transition, no mass civil society organizations emerged to take to the streets as in other parts of the world. The next section explains the implications of this polarization for democratization in Algeria.

c) Opposition divisions and weakness

A manifestation of this polarization was the failure of those opposing the coup - the FIS, other Islamist and secular opposition parties, as well as parts of the FLN government and party leadership - effectively to respond to the army's 1992 takeover. On one hand, this incapacity was due to the opposition's failure to unite. On the other hand, opposition forces' lack of institutional and organisational capacity also contributed to their ineffective response. In addition, the lack of a significant secular opposition front with broad public support allowed the regime to portray the FIS as the fundamentalist threat to a secular-oriented (i.e. democratic) government.³⁴

After being banned, the FIS split into different groups reflecting existing divisions among party members. The democratic means for acquiring power having been discredited, the younger and more urban

²⁹ Bonner, Reif and Tessler, (2004), op cit, p.2-3.

³⁰ Heristchi (2004), op cit, p.111-132.

³¹ Ibid

³² Azzedine Layachi: *Political Liberalisation and the Islamist Movement in Algeria*, in: The Journal of North African Studies, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 46-67.

³³ Heristchi (2004), op cit, p. 117.

³⁴ John P. Entelis, Lisa Arone: *Algeria in Turmoil: Islam, Democracy and the State.*, in: Middle East Policy, Vol. 1, 1992, pp. 23-35

segments of the FIS gravitated towards violent groups wanting to spearhead a new revolution. This was countered by the 'old guard' willing to adopt a more cautious approach involving political pressure and appeals to the international community. Rivalry between the groups resurfaced without the delicate power-sharing balance that had previously been ensured by the combined Madani/Belhaj leadership.³⁵

Not only the FIS, but the Islamist movement as a whole failed to unite. The leader of Hamas, one of the most notable among the newer Islamist parties, Sheik Mahfouz Nannah, advocated the co-existence of Islamist parties with secular opposition parties in a democratic political structure. In the autumn of 1991, a number of smaller pro-democracy Islamist parties that disagreed with the FIS' radical course (displayed in the municipalities that had recently come under FIS rule) formed an Islamic alliance. This was popular but failed to rally enough support in the months before the legislative elections to be a real challenge to the FIS.

Secular opposition parties also failed to unite for the cause of democratization. Some secular parties, such as the National Party for Solidarity and Development, vehemently opposed the Islamists and called on other secular parties to form a united front against them. Two of the major centrist parties, the Front of Socialist Forces and the Populist Movement for Democracy, both led by well-known veterans of the struggle for independence, boycotted the 1990 local elections, saying that they were rigged in favour of the FLN. A third major secular party, the Rally for Culture and Democracy, blamed the former two for indirectly strengthening the position of the Islamists by boycotting the elections. The communist Party of Socialist Avant-Garde (PASG), the only party to boycott the 1991/92 parliamentary elections, called the poll "anti-constitutional" and called for a dissolution of all Islamist parties.

In case of the FLN, the party itself had been considerably weakened and left in disarray after the loss of its party monopoly and subsequent ending of its decade-long single-party regime. Hamas (which received 5.3% of the votes during the 1991 legislative elections) in fact supported the army's decision to interrupt the political process.³⁶ Deep antagonism reigned between the FIS and the secular left, feminists and Berbers. The FIS refused to acknowledge that a successful social rebellion required a wider alliance that included both the religious and the non-religious opposition. It was not until 1995 that the FIS sought such a rapprochement, under the aegis of the Sant 'Egidio mediators in Rome.³⁷

d) Escalating confrontation between regime and Islamists

Tactics were adopted that widened rather than tempered differences between the regime elite and the FIS. During the 1988-1992 period, the relationship between the Algerian regime and the FIS became increasingly antagonistic, with the regime shifting from an initially accommodationist to a confrontational approach. The military leadership behind the Chadli administration was opposed to a 'pacted' arrangement in which Islamists along with other oppositional tendencies would work out new rules of the game with the government, army and state bodies.³⁸

From the mid- to late 1980s the regime adopted an increasingly repressive policy towards Islamists including mass arrests, all of which radicalized many Islamists.³⁹ After political liberalization had been

³⁵ Heristchi (2004), op cit, p. 117.

³⁶ Amel Boubekeur: *Political Islam in Algeria*, CEPS Working Document No. 268, May 2007.

³⁷ Layachi (2004), op. cit, pp. 46-67.

³⁸ John Entelis: *Islamist Politics and the Democratic Imperative: Comparative Lessons from the Algerian Experience*, in: *The Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2004), pp. 202-215.

³⁹ Heristchi (2004), op. cit, p. 116.

set in motion, the government then belatedly attempted various means of ‘containing’ the FIS.⁴⁰ This included manipulation of the electoral process, whereby elections were delayed to allow the regime to modify electoral laws to the apparent disadvantage of the FIS and the withdrawal of funds from local councils to undermine the FIS’s credibility. Such measures widened the breach between government, army and the FIS in the crucial period prior to the 1991 elections.

The FIS feared that if it fought the election under the new rules it would suffer defeat. It therefore declared, on 25 May 1991, that it would boycott the elections due on June 27. Instead it called its supporters out onto the streets to demonstrate and participate in a general strike. The strike call was neither well received nor generally obeyed, but the call for anti-government demonstrations turned Algiers into a city under siege during the first week of June. The whole affair precipitated the resignation of the Hamrouche government and its replacement by an administration under the leadership of Sidi Ghazali, who agreed to rescind the new electoral laws. The FIS consequently agreed to participate in the parliamentary elections arranged for December 1991/January 1992, despite the internment of its leaders.⁴¹

In June 1991 the Algerian Ambassador to France, Smail Hamdani, had still claimed the choice was “not between tanks and fundamentalists but between a democratic process, legality and those who negate them”.⁴² However, the FLN refused to respond with moderation when the FIS won the first round of national elections of 26 December 1991 with 47.3 per cent of the votes – while the FLN only won 23.4 per cent. It became known later that Chadli and some FLN leaders at this point approached the FIS to propose a power sharing scheme according to which Chadli would keep the presidency, the Islamists would control non-strategic ministries such as education, justice and religious affairs, and the FLN would run the technical ministries. But the military leadership scuppered such a potential arrangement.⁴³ Notwithstanding his own reservations regarding the FIS, Chadli claimed that he was prepared, as the head of state, to work with them as partners in government if need be; but the upper echelons of the FLN and the armed services saw any concession to the FIS victory as ‘beyond the pale’.⁴⁴

After the military coup in January 1992, the FIS, FLN and FFS announced their joint opposition to the High State Committee (Haut Comité d’Etat or HCE) and called for a return of the electoral process. After Chadli’s demission, the first talks on an official basis between the FLN and the FIS were held, involving also the FFS, but talks failed to lead to an agreement. The FIS even announced the formation of a second, parallel parliament composed of the 231 candidates elected in the first round of the elections (188 of which were FIS members). Later attempts at dialogue between the FIS and the government failed, as the military-political nomenclatura remained split over whether or not the FIS was fit for engagement, and if so, under which conditions this could take place.⁴⁵ With escalating rhetoric and confrontation, police and troops countered with massive arrests. The FIS was banned and dissolved, its (remaining) leadership put in jail and thousands of activists interned in detention camps in the Sahara. Violent confrontations between the army and Islamists militants ensued, with each side blaming the other for having started the violence. Between 1992 and 1998, an estimated 150,000 people lost their lives, adding to 1.5 million displaced citizens.

e) The army’s ability to consolidate the coup

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.117.

⁴¹ Jonathan G. Farley: *Algeria: democracy ‘on hold’*, in: Contemporary Review, Vol. 262, Issue 1526, March 1993, pp.130-135.

⁴² Youssef M. Ibrahim: *Algeria Imposes a Curfew and Promises to Use Force*, New York Times, 7.6.1991.

⁴³ Layachi (2004), op. cit, footnote 11.

⁴⁴ Farley (1993), op cit, p.3.

⁴⁵ Jacques de Barrin: *Algerie: après la proposition du porte-parole du FIS peut-il avoir dialogue avec des “islamistes de bonne foi”?* Le Monde,

19.09.1992; Ferran Sales : *Los integristas argelinos amenazan con crear un Parlamento paralelo*, El País, 16.01.1992.

The 1991 elections represented a clear moment of interrupted democratic transition; but also significant in the Algerian case was the new military-led regime's tactics in closing off any reopening of the stalled transition.

In the run-up to and right after the second round of the general elections, president Chadli Benjedid tried to negotiate a power-sharing agreement with the FIS, in which he would keep the presidency and rule in cooperation with a FIS-controlled parliament. Secret meetings were said to have taken place to negotiate the terms of the pact. When Chadli finally had to resign on 11 February, Algerian officials and press confirmed that his demission resulted from an ultimatum by the army's top command, which opposed his power-sharing plans in cooperation with the FIS. Chadli was reported to have argued to the army leadership that he could use his broad presidential powers to block any fundamentalist parliamentary initiatives, but this failed to convince the generals.⁴⁶

Formally, the HCE was not strictly a military junta, only one of its members (General Khaled Nezzar) being a military officer. This was soon replaced by the High Council of State of five members dominated by military officers with almost unlimited political powers. An important factor was the army's strategic instrumentalization of new president Mohammad Boudiaf to head the HCE. A point often made is that Boudiaf's 'clean' image plus his charisma as a leadership figure were deliberately employed by the generals to provide the de facto interim government with sufficient legitimacy to guarantee the stability of the situation and avoid rebellion. When Boudiaf, after a few months of his presidency, started to implement his own policies and the army 'lost control' of him, he was assassinated.

ii) External factors that kept the regime in place

a) Lack of international criticism

It is well-known that the international community responded uncritically when the army revoked the electoral process in January 1992. Equally important was that in the run up to the 1991/92 elections external actors' policies failed to make successful transition more likely. In particular they had supported a political reform process aimed at stability rather than democracy, without seeking to challenge the army's continuing power.

The key international actor was **France**. The interruption of Algeria's electoral process engendered deep divisions within the French political elite. Many critical French voices were raised, especially initially. But the French government eventually retained a normality of relations with the new Algerian government in the wake of the coup.

Prior to the elections, France even sent advisors to engage in gerrymandering, to help the FLN win the majority of seats.⁴⁷ According to the resident correspondent of Le Monde (who was expelled from Algeria a few months after the coup), shortly after the results of the first round of elections were known, an envoy of the Algerian regime was sent discreetly to find out what the French reaction would be in case of an interruption of the Algerian electoral process. The French government was reported to have given only very guarded responses, limiting itself to a series of non-committal remarks on the virtues of democracy. It remained in the role of a passive observer. This passivity was also influenced by concerns that the National Front might exploit the discourse of an Islamist regime one hour's flight from France in the upcoming French elections, and by concerns that a stabilization of the Algerian political situation may

⁴⁶ Youssef M. Ibrahim: Rulers Taking Power in Algeria Halt Elections to the Parliament, New York Times, 13.01.1992.

⁴⁷ M. Akacem (2004), op. cit, p.158.

entail the need for massive additional aid, which neither France (with its high unemployment rates close to elections) nor its European neighbors (which were either engaged on other fronts or not particularly interested in the Maghreb) were willing to bear.⁴⁸

There was also concern that the coup allowed the return to power of more nationalist figures than those of the Chadli era – a political development that was seen as adversely affecting French vested interests in Algeria. The French government did not call for a formal integration of the FIS in the government but suggested that a political personality capable of engineering a synthesis between the Islamist and secular nationalist traditions be propelled to the forefront of Algerian politics.⁴⁹ However, the legacy of colonialism made French intervention difficult and potentially counter-productive.

When French president François Mitterrand suggested that the coup was ‘abnormal’ he was immediately ‘slapped on the wrist by the Algerian government which told him to mind his own business – which he then did.’⁵⁰ France had supported reform of a type that would not risk the ‘*sacro-sainte unité des forces armées*’.⁵¹ In the first official statement after the first round of elections in December 1991, a spokesman of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs had proclaimed that “whatever the choice of the Algerian people” relations between Algeria and France “should be maintained” and even “deepened”.⁵²

President Mitterrand’s public reaction to the 1992 coup was a master class in obfuscation. He recognized that the coup was ‘at the least abnormal’; on the other hand, ‘with the demission of the President there has been what one could call a constitutional vacuum, and the Algerian authorities had to improvise a response’, and it was not up to him as a Frenchman to ‘judge what is happening in Algeria’ and what exit was best for the country.⁵³ After this initial reaction, which provoked furious reactions in the Algerian leadership, Mitterrand limited himself to issuing messages of ‘friendship’ to Algeria and the government.⁵⁴ A week after the coup, the Algerian government withdrew its ambassador to France in reaction to the (extremely mild) criticisms coming from Paris, and to the visit of a French diplomat whose message the Algerian regime viewed as a French-Iranian conspiracy (see below).

Quite apart from the question of political will, critics also accused Western governments of having misunderstood the problem of authoritarianism and arbitrary rule in the Algerian context. It was assumed that these problems were rooted in the FLN’s formal political monopoly, when the issue at stake was the far more pervasive hegemony of the military.⁵⁵ One Frenchman involved at the time argued that Paris had failed to understand the nature of the reform process: ‘The French elite do not understand the Algerian reality...the true nature of the system’ in part because it retained ‘an admiration for the successes of these ‘Third World Gaullists’.

Domestically, the French government was under sharp attack for its failure to criticize the army’s repression of the October 1988 riots. Reluctance to criticize the sovereign government of a former colony was often mentioned as the main reason for this, and was reinforced by the fact that many of the political figures in the French socialist government had been supporters of the FLN in its struggle for Algerian

48 Marion Georges: *Le mutisme craintif de Paris*, Le Monde, 09.01.1992.

49 Camille Bonora-Waisman: *France and the Algerian Conflict: Issues in Democracy and Political Stability, 1988-1995*, Ashgate, 2000.

50 Ulla Holm: *Algeria: France’s Untenable Engagement*, in: *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 3, No. 2, Autumn 1998, pp. 104-114.

51 Alain Chenal: *La France rattrapée par le drame algérien*, *Politique Etrangère*, Vol.60, Nr.2, March 1995, pp.415-425.

52 *Paris souhaite maintenir et “approfondir” ses relations avec Alger*, Le Monde, 01.01.1992.

53 François Mitterrand responding to the press at the European Council in Luxemburg on January 14, 1992, quoted in: Chenal (1995), op. cit.

54 Chenal (1995), op cit, pp. 415-425.

55 Hugh Roberts: *Demilitarizing Algeria*, Carnegie Paper No. 86, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2007.

independence. Several petitions signed by French and Algerian intellectuals called on the French government to voice stronger criticism towards the Algerian government.⁵⁶

One expert sustains that French security forces were directly behind the Algerian army's intervention to halt a democratic transition that headed towards FIS rule; with the officers responsible having been 'France's protégés, ...[a] clique of former officers of the French army who rallied to the ALN at a late stage in the war'.⁵⁷ Arms and tank sales from Southern Europe had directly enhanced the military's position and capacity.

After the January 1992 coup, official reactions from France not only largely abstained from criticism but even cautiously endorsed Chadli's demission and the interruption of the electoral process. The official reaction to the coup from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs expressed "preoccupation" over the events in Algeria, reaffirming its "solidarity" with the Algerian people, and qualifying Chadli Benjedid's resignation as an event which was "important and heavy in consequences". Foreign Minister Dumas would say only that he hoped Algeria could 'rediscover a climate of compromise'.⁵⁸

In contrast, Bernard Kouchner, then state secretary for humanitarian affairs, rather bluntly said that "*coups d'état* are not good...they always turn against us." A few months later Kouchner again provoked diplomatic tensions with the Algerian Ministry of Foreign Affairs when, in an interview with *Jeune Afrique*, he announced his intention to visit Algerian detention camps in the Sahara in which Islamist militants had been held for several months. Criticism of the coup from the opposition was also more pronounced. Alain Juppé, secretary general of the RPR, expressed the hope that "this regime of emergency will be accompanied by economic and political reforms which allow, when the moment has come, the Algerian people to express itself with [the necessary] knowledge", adding that France "could not do otherwise" than end its development cooperation with Algeria "if human rights were violated." Gérard Longuet, president of the Republican party, stated that the FLN had "completely failed in its mission", but that the FIS was "not an inevitable element in Algeria." Valérie Giscard d'Estaing, president of the UDF, said in a TV interview that the interruption of the electoral process was "antidemocratic" and "dangerous"; "It is a mistake to interrupt an ongoing electoral consultation because the results are not convenient for you", he added, and called on the French government to adopt an attitude of "vigilance" vis-à-vis the further evolution of the situation in Algeria and to judge the new regime according to its "respect for democratic rules and human rights". Most outspoken against the interruption of the electoral process was Jean-Marie Le Pen, head of the *Front National*, who called the new Algerian regime a "camarilla of dictatorial military" which had "just, in a very cynical way, ridiculed the Algerian people's will to give itself a democratic authority." He emphasised the possible repercussions in Europe's large immigrant community, and suggested a pact with the FIS to repatriate Algerian migrants.⁵⁹

The call for a reconsideration of national and European aid policies towards Algeria was voiced by several politicians across the board as a possible reaction to the coup, but was not put into practice. The French government agreed to a new set of financial accords, albeit not offering such generous increases as

⁵⁶ Steven Greenhouse: *French Government Is Criticized For Mailing to Condemn Algeria*, New York Times, 18.10.1988

⁵⁷ Roberts (2003), op. cit., p.308.

⁵⁸ Interview accordée par M. Roland Dumas, Ministre des Affaires Etrangères, au « *Figaro* », French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 17.02.1992.

⁵⁹ L'interruption du processus électoral en Algérie est observée avec bienveillance en France, Le Monde, 14.01.1992; En France, le gouvernement reste prudent, l'opposition est partagée, Le Monde, 15.01.1992; Jacques de Barrin: *Algérie: démocratisation et relance économique: M. Merbah, ancien premier ministre, reproche au Pouvoir de faire cavalier seul*, Le Monde, 09.05.1992.

previously. Despite a certain frostiness in relations with the new regime, the French government declined to put in question existing aid cooperation or energy contracts.⁶⁰

Several French politicians even suggested that punitive conditionality should be applied if Algeria *respected* democratic process: before the second round of elections, RPR president Jacques Chirac and Charles Pasqua, head of the RPR parliamentary group, argued that aid should be suspended to Algeria if the Islamists came to power. Pasqua argued that it was this that would imply a refusal of human rights. Chirac said that if the FIS came to power, “France and Europe must, of course, respect the Algerian decision”, but that they “must not be hesitant (...) to review completely our cooperation policy with Algeria.” Jacques Delors, president of the European Commission, neither supported nor opposed such a possibility.⁶¹

Several other European governments (Italy, Germany) also increased bilateral aid levels to Algeria after 1990.⁶² A document issued by the twelve members of the **European Communities** (EC) regarding the situation in Algeria emphasized the EC’s will to cooperate with the Algerian authorities in their economic recovery, at the same time asking the Algerian regime to practice “respect for human rights, tolerance and pluralism”.⁶³

Reactions to the coup from **Spain** were also ambivalent, clearly showing more signs of relief over being spared an Islamist-run neighbour than concerns over democratic procedures. The Spanish government expressed regret over the demission of President Chadli, to whom it ascribed an important “reformist role”, but abstained from insisting on respect for the electoral process, instead expressing its faith in the ‘good sense of Algerians to continue the reform process’.⁶⁴ Francisco Fernández Ordoñez, Minister of Foreign Affairs, did qualify the cancellation of the electoral process in Algeria as a “coup d’état”, but at the same time advocated reinforced dialogue and cooperation with the new Algerian regime. In an appearance before the Spanish congress, he affirmed that the European posture was to wait and see how things developed: “The version I get from Ghazali is that this is an instrumental coup d’état to allow a viable democracy, not a chaos.” However, he confirmed that Spain and France had (successfully) opposed other European countries’ attempts to suspend EC aid to Algiers. This was despite the minister having held meetings with the FIS “at the highest level”, that he insisted had given him ‘reassurances’ regarding the future of economic relations in the case of a FIS ascent to power.⁶⁵ On an earlier occasion, the Minister said that the coup had diverted ‘a certain bad outcome’.⁶⁶ The Spanish Foreign Minister also pushed for EU member states, largely submerged in efforts to assist transition in Europe’s East, to pay more attention to its “Southern flank”, including in financial terms, to overcome the current crisis in Algeria.⁶⁷

Two weeks after the coup, Ali Harun, an envoy from the newly established ruling High State Council, was sent to Europe to speak to leaders in various European capitals to give explanations and lobby for understanding for the interruption of the electoral process. In Spain, he met with Fernández Ordoñez and

60 Melanie Morisse-Schilbach: *L’Europe et la question algérienne*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1999, p.62.

61 *Reactions en France FACE au succes du FIS en Algérie: Mr. Pasqua souhaite une révision de la politique de coopération*, Le Monde, 07.01.1992. *L’interruption du processus électoral en Algérie est observée avec bienveillance en France*, Le Monde, 14.01.1992; *En France, le gouvernement reste prudent, l’opposition est partagée*, Le Monde, 15.01.1992; *Jacques de Barrin: Algérie: démocratisation et relance économique: M. Merbah, ancien premier ministre, reproche au Pouvoir de faire cavalier seul*, Le Monde, 09.05.1992; *Appel de M. Chirac à la “vigilance”*, Le Monde, 10.01.1992.

62 Morisse-Schilbach, (1999), op cit, p.52.

63 *El golpe en el país maghrebí evitó un “mal seguro”*, según Fernández Ordoñez, El País, 18.02.1992

64 *España destaca el papel reformador de Chadli Benyedid*, El País, 13.01.1992.

65 *Fernández Ordoñez califica de “golpe de Estado” la toma de poder por una junta en Argelia*, El País, 29.01.1992.

66 *El golpe en el país maghrebí evitó un “mal seguro”*, según Fernández Ordoñez, El País, 18.02.1992.

67 *Fernández Ordoñez insta a la CE a que preste ayuda urgente a Argelia*, El País, 23.01.1992.

Prime Minister Felipe González. On his visit the envoy sought to win European acceptance of the coup by comparing the Algerian situation in January 1992 to the situation in Germany in 1933 when the Hitler's NSDAP was on the verge of coming to power, portraying the military coup as a courageous act of resistance. His Spanish interlocutors advocated a resuming of the democratic process, and asked for human rights and pluralism to be respected, but without referring to the second round of elections or specifying that the coup should be reversed.⁶⁸

The **United States** was not strongly engaged in Algeria at this juncture. Washington expressed concern and hope for a quick return to democracy. On 13 February a State Department spokeswoman issued a statement asking for a dialogue among all the parties and a return to democratic elections, while at the same time implying that the establishment of a High Security Council in Algeria conformed with the constitution. With regard to the latter, protests by the Algerian opposition and diplomatic circles in Washington led the State Department a day later to "modify" its previous statement by saying they had "decided not to get involved in the constitutional debate." After the coup, State Department officials also declared their intention to remain aloof from the new Algerian regime, while noting the silence from Southern European states such as France, Spain and Italy in reaction to the coup.⁶⁹ In a 2000 interview, Ronald Neumann, US Ambassador to Algeria from 1994 to 1997, admitted that, 'We had scarcely awoken to Algeria in the period 1988-1992 ... And this period of transition out of the single-party dictatorship ... which was a tremendously vital period for Algeria, was one that we, no doubt unfortunately, did not notice.'⁷⁰ The US still considered Algeria, in fact the entire Maghreb, as a French preserve.⁷¹

Among **Arab governments**, only Sudan (run by a military junta largely made up of Islamic fundamentalists) and Libya sided with the FIS. Other Arab governments in North Africa, such as Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia, feeling threatened by the rise of Islamist forces on their own soil, had reason for relief when the Algerian military circumvented an FIS government. In Egypt, Hosni Mubarak explicitly appealed to the international community to respect Algeria's sovereignty and not to interfere in the country's internal affairs. The Egyptian Minister of the Interior Abdel Jalim Musa expressed his concern regarding the situation in Algeria and noted that the military would not tolerate any action that may alter the stability of the country. Hassan II of Morocco said: "The Algerian people are a responsible and grown-up people, and I am convinced that, independently of the election results, the Algerian government will respect the agreements Algeria has subscribed to with its allies and partners."⁷²

b) The Gulf War

The **Gulf crisis** erupted during the Algerian elections and temporarily had a strong emotional impact on the Algerian population, as political competition momentarily focused on foreign policy issues. Both Islamists and secular parties advocated strong pro-Iraqi positions, and two parties (FIS and MDA) called on the government to dispatch volunteers to defend Iraq when the US started sending troops to Saudi Arabia in August 1990. The demands of the opposition contrasted with the more cautious position of the Benjedid government, which criticized the American intervention in the crisis and scale of hostilities against Iraq, but refrained from inflammatory rhetoric and sought a mediated solution by rallying

68 *Un emisario de Argel pedirá hoy comprensión a González*, El País, 28.02.1992; *El régimen argelino compara el FIS con los nazis*, El País, 29.02.1992.

69 *La crise algérienne: nuances américaines et menace iranienne*, Le Monde, 16.01.1992.

70 Roger Kaplan: *Washington-Algiers: "Our aim has been first and foremost stability of the Maghreb"*, Interview with Ronald Neumann in: *African Geopolitics*, 06.09.2000

71 Azzedine Layachi: *Algerian Crisis, Western Choices*, in: *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol.1 No 3, September 1994, p.62.

72 *España destaca el papel reformador de Chadli Benyedid*, El País, 13.01.1992.

international support in the Middle East and in France. When Benjedid's diplomatic efforts failed and hostilities commenced in Iraq, the FIS was able to lead protests and channel inflamed passions in its favour.⁷³

The UN war against Iraq in 1991 forced the FIS, in order to stay popular with its constituency, to end its tacit alliance with Chadli and Hamrouche, who were pressed by the French government not to object to the Iraq invasion. This in turn fed into France's decision to back the army's intervention against the strike in June 1991, "which overthrew Hamrouche and decapitated the FIS well before the later coup against Chadli and the canceling of the legislative elections".⁷⁴ At the time of the army's cancellation of the 1991 elections, the war in Iraq further increased polarization in Algeria, as the Algerian government's neutrality was at odds with Algerian public opinion which strongly opposed the war.

c) *The 'Iran factor'*

Iran was a factor that influenced events in Algeria at several levels. The experience of the Iranian revolution, Iran's international diplomatic isolation and frequent Western clashes with the Iranian regime during the 1980s, including the much publicized 1989 Rushdie *fatwa*, increased European fears of Islamic rule and a possible Iranian model taking root in the immediate European neighbourhood. This fear, while judged unfounded by many observers, was reinforced by some FIS members' assertions that Iran was indeed their political 'model'.⁷⁵

In early 1992 Algeria withdrew its ambassador from Iran and expelled the Iranian envoy to Algiers, in reaction to Tehran's support of the FIS. Criticisms of the Algerian regime in the Iranian official press during the week after the coup, which warned the Algerian regime not to "abuse the people's power" by disrespecting an Islamist victory in the elections, had led the new Algerian leadership to demand a "clear and public" repudiation of these criticisms by the Iranian government. A visa ban was issued for Iranian citizens, including diplomats. A number of indications seemed to confirm that the FIS had multiplied its contacts with the Iranian government, although FIS officials vehemently denied a report in *The Independent* which had reported that Iran had given the party \$3 million in financing.⁷⁶

Finally, a French attempt to bring Iran into the negotiations for a pacted solution provided the final prompt for the Algerian regime to take drastic steps against Iran and expel the Iranian Ambassador from Algeria. The French government brought Iran into the picture arguing that the *mullahs* could cool the FIS' ardour. Reportedly France hoped that the Iranians would be able to win from the FIS guarantees that French interests would be protected in the event of the Islamists winning power.⁷⁷ Rumours spread of contacts between the Iranian and French secret services. In some Algerian papers FIS was referred to as standing for the axis 'France, Iran, Sudan'.⁷⁸ In short, French efforts to involve Iran in Algerian politics to exert influence on the FIS in the aftermath of the 1991/92 legislative elections contributed to the Algerian military's rejection of a pacted solution.

d) *Lack of support for civil society and opposition forces*

⁷³ Robert Mortimer: *Islam and Multiparty Politics in Algeria*, in: Middle East Journal, Vol. 45 No. 4, autumn 1991, p. 586-587.

⁷⁴ Roberts (2003), op.cit., p. 314.

⁷⁵ Youssef M. Ibrahim: *Algeria arrests a Senior Islamic Leader*, New York Times, 23.01.1992.

⁷⁶ Ibid

⁷⁷ *D'Europe ne sont ignorées des plus hautes autorités de l'Etat*, Humanité, 03.07.1992.

⁷⁸ Bonora-Waisman (2000), op cit., p.50.

If Western governments were reluctant to criticize the Algerian military it comes as no surprise that they were even more reluctant to fund **democracy projects** proactively. There was no formal evidence of the secular opposition receiving funds from Western governments. There was little external support at this stage to build civil society organizations – donors would lament that there were few such autonomous organizations to back anyway, as a potential means of bridging the Islamist-secular divide. The international community did little proactively to assist in the formation of the type of inclusive and robust civil and political society normally seen as a prerequisite to smooth transition. None of the type of logistical support provided in eastern European revolutions, for example, was offered in Algeria. Some analysts indeed lamented the absence of any attempt by Western powers to forge alliances with the potential advocates of democratic change within civil society.⁷⁹

In contrast, the FIS reportedly received substantial funds from Islamist networks in other countries, to counter leftist groups. Although the precise amounts and actors cannot be formally identified, “it is clear that *zakat* (charity) funds and logistical support made their way to Algerian Islamists from Iran, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia”.⁸⁰ The Algerian government accused European countries and the US of allowing Algerian supporters of the FIS to transfer funds and arms through their territories.

e) Weak international mediation efforts

Some analysts accuse the international community of having failed to understand the over-riding need for political reconciliation as a prior step towards democratic transition. The EC did little to seek to engage with army moderates to win these over to a pacted solution. French emissaries, however, did engage and negotiate with the FIS’ leadership, but ultimately the French attempt to convince the Algerian military leadership to consider a pacted solution failed (and led to a diplomatic crisis, as it was perceived as a French-Iranian conspiracy against the Algerian regime).

Far from seeking to mitigate polarization, some external policies stoked the growing divisions within the Algerian polity. One critic argues that the West sought to undermine ‘modernist nationalism’ and simply saw an initial stirring up of political competition as useful for that.⁸¹ France initially backed the emergence of the FIS. The FIS did not emerge as a spontaneous reaction to FLN misrule, but reportedly as a deliberate ploy by the Chadli regime, backed by Mitterrand’s France, to use the Islamists to channel popular disaffection in a way that would undermine Chadli’s nationalist critics in the FLN. France was made responsible for ‘spring[ing] a pluralist constitution upon a society entirely unprepared for this transition as a pretext for legalizing the Islamists as the essential preliminary to instrumentalizing them against the nationalists in the FLN. It was only when the FIS escaped Chadli’s control in 1991 that the army intervened to slap it down and Paris adopted secularist rhetoric to justify its support for the resort to repression.’⁸²

f) Support to consolidate the new regime

Much debate in the aftermath of the coup was dominated by debates over a prospective IMF package. With foreign debt estimated at \$26 billion, it seemed that the regime desperately needed a new debt rescheduling agreement to stabilize the economy and leave sufficient resources to fund social programs. In the event, the international community enthusiastically offered an IMF support package, only for the

⁷⁹ Pierre and Quandt 1992

⁸⁰ M. Akacem (2004), op cit, p. 163-164.

⁸¹ Roberts (2003), op. cit, pp. 305-315

⁸² Ibid

Algerian government to refuse the offer. This deprived the regime of new credits amounting to an estimated \$1.6bn.⁸³ Instead of formally rescheduling its debt, the Ghazali government eventually decided to sell several oil fields to foreign companies to fill the holes in its budget.⁸⁴ Expansionary monetary and fiscal policies were adopted and prices and trade were returned to administrative control. But by 1994, Algeria was again on the edge of financial disaster, facing another balance of payments crisis. This time, in April 1994, Algeria did agree to a comprehensive structural adjustment programme as a precondition to rescheduling approximately two-thirds of its foreign debt.⁸⁵

The lack of political pressure on the Algerian regime to revive the democratic process continued after 1992, reducing the prospect of the coup being only a temporary interruption in the process of democratization. After 1991, France continued to be especially reluctant to press coercively and concerned to retain stability, rather than leaning on the army to reopen the process of democratic transition. Algerian migration to Europe was by then growing fast and almost exclusively to France, with the latter hosting nearly four million immigrants of Algerian descent in the mid-1990s. Terrorist attacks in the mid-1990s by Algerian Islamists had been aimed primarily at France and French citizens. France was uniquely susceptible to charges of neo-colonialism in Algeria and remained the state whose intervention was most likely to provoke counter-productive reaction. French policy-makers continued to judge that France would be the state most at risk from any instability engendered by a renewed and conflictive process of political liberalization. During the turbulent years of the early 1990s, other EU states heeded Paris' strictures against any form of coercive pressure against the Algerian government. CFSP statements were diluted at Paris' insistence that there be no more than a vague expression of 'hope' that democratization be able to proceed, while unequivocal support be given to official efforts firmly to suppress terrorism.⁸⁶

French authorities kept the EU – and its potentially more pro-democracy northern states – at arm's length from any political intervention; François Mitterrand stated at the end of the Extraordinary Meeting of the Council of Europe of 27 October 1993: '...I do not think that the current drama in Algeria is in the domain of the European Union. As far as that is concerned, France is acting as she must in respect of this neighboring country.'⁸⁷

Algeria was soon offered a fourfold increase in EU aid.⁸⁸ Indeed, Algeria was one of the biggest gainers, in both proportionate and absolute terms, in the distribution of European aid during the early 1990s. In the immediate aftermath of the interruption of the democratic process, the EP sanctioned increases in EC aid to Algeria within the very same vote that suspended the allocation of aid to Morocco and Syria. However, during the FIS-led strikes in mid-1991, the governments of the EC adopted a plan to extend \$125 million in emergency aid to Algeria to buy food and other essentials. Additionally, World Bank loans to Algeria between 1990 and 1995 were to more than double the US\$1.4 billion extended in the period 1985- 89.⁸⁹

European conditionality at this stage was economic, not political, relating to structural economic reforms. After the elections, European governments' unequivocally pressured the Algerian government through the

83 Marion Georges: *Algérie: les négociations avec 240 banques à Paris – L'avenir du régime est lié à la signature d'un accord sur la dette*, Le Monde, 22.02.1992.

84 Jacques de Barrin: *Algérie: démocratisation et relance économique: M. Merbah, ancien premier ministre, reproche au Pouvoir de faire cavalier seul*, Le Monde, 09.05.1992.

85 Kada Akacem: *Economic Reforms in Algeria: An Overview and Assessment*, in: The Journal of North African Studies, Vol.9, No.2, Summer 2004, pp. 115-125.

86 Youngs (2001), op. cit, p. 100.

87 Daguzan, 2002, p. 5

88 Youngs, (2001), op. cit, p. 95.

89 <http://www.country-data.com>

IMF and its conditionalities, to implement economic, not political, liberalization. One expert sustains that at this pivotal political moment, the EU's primary goal was the narrowly self-interested one of getting the Algerian government to accept the rescheduling of Algeria's debt – and hence the obligation to undertake a structural adjustment programme dictated by the IMF.⁹⁰

As violence flared after 1992 and the regime adopted increasingly repressive measures against Islamists, the EU's silence was perceived by many in Algeria as complicit. CFSP statements did not urge the regime to include Islamists in dialogue. Europe merely welcomed the faintest of moves in this direction once these had already occurred.

The US did not adopt a more balanced approach until the mid-1990s when it started holding meetings with FIS representatives in Europe and called for reconciliation between the FIS and the Algerian government as a tentative first step in moving back towards some degree of political reform. Even then, this shift in approach was not unreservedly backed by France.⁹¹ European governments both refrained from critical diplomacy and themselves desisted from formalized contact with the FIS.⁹² The EU made no effort to secure a removal of the ban on the FIS engaging in political activity. No firm pressure was exerted even on issues of good governance and increasingly rampant FLN corruption.⁹³

IV. Conclusion

The failure of Algeria's transition in 1991-1992 derived from powerful domestic variables, a series of international factors, and the way in which domestic and external factors interacted with one another in symbiotic fashion.

The range of **domestic** factors presented here suffice to demonstrate that while Algeria appeared to stand on the brink of democratic breakthrough in 1991, it did so with many factors still militating against such a possibility. If IMF structural reforms had unleashed a period of change, these were not harnessed specifically for genuine democratization. On balance, long-term structural variables militated against far-reaching political change, in particular the preponderance of the hydrocarbon sector in the national economy and the continued legitimacy of the Algerian military amongst a significant proportion of the population. These were compounded by a range of short-term factors that acted more specifically close to the moment of potential transition: no broad constituency of strong support for democracy had emerged; democracy's broad ideational appeal was circumscribed; a 'secular versus Islamist' polarization undermined agreement on the 'rules of the game', cutting across support for democratization; divisions grew between secular opposition parties; and a lack of engagement with the FIS in turn was reflected in and related to the weak legitimacy of reform.

In terms of **external** variables, even if the international community did argue in favour of democratic transition, it is not clear how influential this was in taking Algeria to the foothills of transition. While some believe that enhanced international pressure could have had a serious impact, others argue that such pressure simply led the 'proud' Algerian political elite to become more determined to demonstrate autonomy by resisting democracy. It remains unclear whether the international community's nominal backing for democracy increased or undermined the legitimacy of Chadli's reforms. Some critics assert that Western pro-democracy rhetoric lowered the esteem of the Algerian government in the eyes of the

⁹⁰ Roberts (2002), op. cit, pp. 106-134.

⁹¹ M. Akacem (2004), op cit, p. 116.

⁹² Spencer 1996

⁹³ Youngs,(2001), op. cit, p. 96.

people and that ‘authoritarianism [was] more permissible than ... identification with Western powers.’⁹⁴ Both the Gulf war and Iranian ‘meddling’ further tipped the scales against democracy. The Algerian government’s relatively neutral, reconciliatory stance towards the 1990-91 Iraq war which initially gave Benjedid the air of a ‘major Arab statesman’ ended up conflated in the eyes of many Algerians with a broader pro-Western agenda, damaging the latter’s credibility.

France sought to keep transition on track, but in a controlled fashion that would produce the ‘right result’. It was widely judged in Algeria that democratic transition was a stage-managed means of helping the regime survive, with manufactured Western-backed legitimacy. It is generally acknowledged that this drove more people into the clutches of the FIS, despite the latter’s ambiguity towards democratic values. Because some FIS representatives were critical of democratic norms, Western governments were able to claim that their coup in fact safeguarded the prospect of democratization.⁹⁵ For some critics, ambivalent policies and lack of political will to support genuine democratization was compounded by external actors simply misunderstanding the nature of the ‘reform’ process in the years leading up to the 1991 elections.

Crucially, the above account demonstrates how there was strong **interaction** and mutual conditioning of domestic and international positions. International concern intensified as the FIS’s support base expanded; this in turn further reinforced domestic support for the FIS by those who associated ‘democracy’ with Western ‘anti-Islam.’ France reacted to the regime’s tactics; the regime reacted in turn to the change in the international community’s concerns about the FIS. Increasing polarization within Algeria made the international community more nervous about intervening or cutting aid; this reluctance in turn informed the military’s drift towards hard-line confrontation, which increasingly closed off any possible ‘mediation space’ for external actors to work in.

Situating this case study within the context of the broader project, it might be said that Algeria represents one of the most over-determined cases of failed transition. Despite the existence of some variables pulling the country towards reform, most explanatory factors pushed in the opposite direction. In this case, the notion of ‘zooming out’ from an initial focus on domestic variables is useful. The above account demonstrates how there was in fact a complex mutual conditioning in play between domestic and international variables. But were international factors really crucial in accounting for the failure of transition? Our account shows that the military-led regime was certainly conscious of international reactions. But it is difficult to ascertain in this case whether transition would have failed *even if* external variables were pushing more unequivocally in democracy’s favour. As we have shown, there were certainly a wide range of domestic variables impeding reform that might well have sufficed on their own as ‘spoilers’; amongst these, the uncertainty over the FIS’s own commitment to democracy and the country’s rapid spiral into civil war still stand as the most evocative lessons from the Algerian case. Perhaps we might at most be able to conclude that the regime might have felt more obliged to return to some degree of reformist path in the mid-term period *after* the 1991 coup had international pressure during this period been greater.

⁹⁴ Entelis (2004), op.cit, p. 213.

⁹⁵ Roger Diwan, Fareed Mohamedi: *Paris, Washington, Algiers*, in: Middle East Report, Vol. 25., No. 1, January-February 1995, p. 25-27.