

BOOK REVIEW

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Algeria modern: from opacity to complexity, edited by Luis Martinez and Rasmus Alenius Boserup, London, Hurst & Company, 2016, xiv + 166 pp., £45 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-84904-587-2

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Algeria Modern includes outstanding essays by Rasmus Alenius Boserup and Ed McAllister, and with the latter also translating half of the book's chapters into English. The introduction and subtitle to these essays, however, is as odd the book's title. 'From opacity to complexity' presents Algeria as 'an ordinary and unremarkable political order comparable to that of other countries suffering from similar constraints and challenges', including the Brussels bureaucracy of the EU.¹ It has supposedly become a plain old non-democracy like so many others after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's apparent shake-up of the military command and retirement of General Mohamed Mediene, a.k.a. Toufik, in September 2015, marking the end of an intelligence organisation he had commanded since 1990, the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (DRS). The DRS was subsequently renamed the Direction des Services de Sécurité (DSS) in June 2016.

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But the regime remains as opaque as ever. It is far from clear that President Bouteflika is physically able to exercise any official functions backstage, and his successor is not yet known as of this writing (October 2017). Toufik's long-time assistant, Athmane Tartag, was put in charge of the military intelligence apparatus, but it is not clear whether his loyalties are to the president, to his former commander, to some third party running things behind the scenes at the presidency who may have appointed him, or to all three at once. The DSS still runs the Algerian equivalents of the CIA and FBI, and likewise houses the critical *Direction des Points Sensibles* (PS) – which was translated in an online article as the Strategic Spots Directorate – 'an agency monitoring institutions, political parties, trade union, and ministries by assigned agents' (Meddi 2017). *Plus ça change...* It has even been suggested that the prolonged drama between the fall of 2013 – when Bouteflika returned from a Paris hospital – and September 2015 – when Toufik was retired – was stage managed to make it look as though the DRS was no longer running Algeria (Hachemaoui 2015).

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Defending his case for Algeria becoming normal and ordinary, Luis Martinez, in his chapter, 'Interest groups in a non-democratic regime,' claims that 'the Algerian regime can be analyzed as a collection of organized interest groups that influence public institutions and the government' (14). His examples are institutional abstractions:

the army's general staff; the DRS; the military police (General Directorate of National Security – DGSN), the party of liberation, and formerly the only party, the FLN; the current ruling party, the RND (National Rally for Democracy); the

association of war veterans; the FAP (Algerian Business Forum); the state-run UGTA (General Union of Algerian Workers); and, finally, the state-run oil company, Sonatrach. (15)

45 Algerian interest group politics simply concerns competition ‘for influence over leadership of the state ... [in the context of] a shared understanding and vision for Algeria ... in the face of any threat to the endurance and stability of the regime’ (15). Who the leaders of the interest groups might be, however, remains a mystery. These groups are also supposed to ‘have clients in the “deep state,”’ examples of which are ‘ninety-two new universities ... created
50 over the past two decades ... [that have] successfully pacified the contentious inclinations of a highly educated unemployed youth’ (16–17). Nowhere in this essay is there any mention of Andrea Liverani’s book, which critically analyzes interest groups in Algeria’s civil society (Liverani 2008); Martinez just claims that the civil society ‘seems ready’ for a transition to representative government, to be engineered by a direct intervention of the military to ‘change the rules of
55 the game’ (18).²

The author meanwhile asserts, without any evidence (ignoring, for example, the Arab Barometer surveys), that only some 4 or 5 million out of Algeria’s population of 37 million still support the regime (14). Perhaps these were the beneficiaries of the apparent increase in the budget of the war veterans that he noted,
60 from \$900 million in 2000 to \$2.3 billion in 2013 (16).³ Although he was accessing data as late as December 2015 for his essay, he does not mention, much less analyze, the political implications of the collapse in Algeria’s oil and gas revenues after 2014. Nor, for that matter, does Samia Boucetta, whose chapter, ‘Identity and hydrocarbons in Algeria,’ tries to explain why Algeria cannot break out of its dependence on these revenues and of state control of Sonatrach. She mentions
65 an earlier failed effort to privatise a small part of Sonatrach in a time of need but does not envision the possibilities of new reforms to render the industry more internationally competitive in these times of even greater need.

Boserup, in his chapter, ‘Contention and Order,’ presents the alternative to interest group politics, which is the articulation of interests by means of contentious street riots and other repertoires being practiced in the Bouteflika era
70 (1999-). These mostly non-violent mass demonstrations, tire burnings, road blockages, and the like – and that call forth police interventions – have erupted ever more frequently, to the tune of some thirty to forty every day across Algeria’s many villages, towns, urban neighbourhoods, and cities.⁴ Most of them do not make the newspapers but the local press did pick up an
75 annual average of some six to nine hundred from 2012 to 2016.⁵ Boserup argues that they are carefully calculated to articulate specific local interests. Almost half of those reported in the press are demands for local housing, as the pace of major government efforts cannot keep up with the demand compounded by, among other factors, the million and half Algerians displaced by war during the 1990s. These forms of interest articulation reflect the excessive centralisation under Bouteflika that has sapped more conventional political
80 structures, such as – among those monitored by the DSS – the legislative branch, trade unions, political parties, and interest groups. Boserup advances

the further hypothesis, already independently suggested by Robert Parks, that the stylised repertoire, focused on local politics, absorbed the heat generated elsewhere in the Arab Spring by demands for regime change (Parks 2013). The political parties were indeed so discredited and at odds with one another that 'protesters massively demobilized' (56) just as Tunisians were massing against President Ben Ali in January 2011. Boserup further argues that the demonstrations against shale gas exploration and other evidence of government neglect of its Saharan populations simply reflect the southerners' 'new self-esteem' and integration, and are not a threat to national unity. Contentious politics in Algeria, is 'an important tool for popular political participation' (55) and is 'system-preserving' (58), at least so far and as long as the government continues to respond reasonably to these new forms of interest articulation. But Boserup also stresses the need of the system 'to maintain the patronage networks built on the redistribution of oil and gas rents' (60).

Complementing this analysis is a fascinating look into the social memories of Algeria's younger generation by Ed McAllister, in his chapter, 'Youth, social justice and cynicism in Bab el-Oued,' based on his year of fieldwork in the famed Algiers low-income quarter. Imbued with their parents' memories of nation-building in the 1970s, today's youth are turned off by politics of any sort, much less regime change, living for the moment and thriving on 'creative production of new living alternatives to the existing order' (76), supplementing Boserup's repertoires of survival. Political ideologies have no appeal. Pervasive cynicism may also help to explain how moderate Islamist parties could be so easily fragmented and rendered impotent, a process carefully documented in Djallil Lounnas' chapter, 'The moderate Islamist parties,' which focuses on the Bouteflika era. He tends, however, to exaggerate the radicalism of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) in its day (1989–1992), making no mention either of its late moderate leader, Abdelkader Hachani, or of efforts by Ahmed Taleb-Ibrahimi to establish a moderate Islamist party in the 1990s. Lounnas notes that the Arab Spring encouraged one of the parties to leave the government coalition and join the opposition but also that one of its long serving ministers, Amar Ghoul, stayed in government and promptly founded another party in support of Bouteflika (88).

Anouar Boukhars' excellent chapter, 'In the eye of the storm: Algeria's south and its Sahelian borders,' also complements Boserup's by pointing to the 'awakening' of better educated tribesmen waving Algerian flags despite tensions between Tuaregs and Arabs (114–116). Abdennour Benantar, in his chapter, 'The state and the dilemma of security policy,' raises the paradox of this policy: non-military intervention in countries outside its borders assumes that these countries can really keep themselves secure, but '[h]ow can one conceive of institutional cooperation with states that are unable to control their own territories and borders, such as Libya and Mali?' (103). And Boukhars, like Boserup, wonders whether the central government's management of dissent will survive 'the dramatic slide of oil prices [that] will make it difficult for Algeria to keep its spending promises in the south' (126).

125 One possibility, not discussed in this book, might be for Directorate of *Points Sensibles* to stage competitive presidential elections between two safe candidates, e.g. the incumbent prime minister and another serviceable technocrat, making Martinez's dream come true. The campaign could be an occasion for outing dead wood, so as to economise on patronage networks as in neighbouring Morocco. Staging 'free and fair' elections, however, will not necessarily clarify the mysteries of Algerian politics.

130 Notes

1. See the books edited by Dabène, Geisser, and Massardier (2008), and Camau and Massardier (2009), that are referenced in footnote 6 on page 2, which question the distinction, resting on 'limited pluralism', between contemporary democratic and authoritarian regimes.
- 135 2. Martinez backs up his assertion that political parties and commentators have called upon the army to order a political transition by quoting a wish expressed by *El Watan* in 2014, referenced in footnote 15 on page 130: 'Long suppressed energies amongst the high-ranking officers of the army must be liberated in the service of the nation, bringing their skills and experience to bear on the promotion of a democratic transition.'
- 140 3. The average annual increase of 7.5% did not keep up with inflation averaging about 9%, however. Total government expenditures increased at a much higher rate of 13.8% during this period, from \$7.4 to \$40.1 billion, or, in constant dollars, at 4.7%, according to the World Development Indicators of the World Bank (reviewer's calculations).
- 145 4. Boserup reports 112,878 interventions and 13,000 arrests in 2010, citing local press reports (47). Reversing these numbers, 13,000 riots eliciting police intervention in 2010 would tally with other numbers reported by Robert Parks of 9000 in 2009 and 10,910 disturbances in 2011 (Parks 2013). Parks reports 14,000 of these 'protestas' in 2015 (Parks 2016).
- 150 5. See the page 'Emeutes en Algérie' on anthropologist Alain Bertho's website, cited by Boserup in footnote 14 on page 136: <https://berthoalain.com/emeutes-en-algerie/>

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