



Q&A: Algeria's presidential election

By BBC News

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Algerians re-elected President Abdelaziz Bouteflika after a campaign that was seen as both relatively peaceful and lively.

Q: What is at stake?

Incumbent President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was re-elected for a second term. At the last election in April 1999, his six rivals pulled out on the eve of polling day alleging fraud.

His campaign was fought on claims that his policy of national reconciliation has led to a reduction in political violence. His hardline opponents want a tougher line on Islamists.

Some 100,000 Algerians are thought to have died in clashes involving Islamists and the military between 1992 and 2000.

Violence erupted after the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won over 47% of the vote in the first round of parliamentary elections in December 1991 and seemed certain to gain an absolute majority in the second round.

But on 4 January 1992, the National People's Assembly was dissolved. A five-member military Higher State Council took over and on 4 March a state of emergency was declared.

The level of violence has decreased sharply since early 2000, with armed attacks confined mainly to remote rural areas.

Q: Will voting be fair?

Observers will be watching to see if the election is free and fair. The role of the army will also be under scrutiny.

President Bouteflika has invited international organisations to send monitors. This is seen as yielding to pressure from Washington.

US Secretary Colin Powell called for transparent elections when he visited Algiers in December 2003.

Q: Who can stand?

Candidates must submit either evidence of support by 600 elected officials, or 75,000 signatures from at least 25 of Algeria's 48 provinces. The number of signatures from each province must be at least 1,500.

The president is elected for a five-year term, renewable once. A second round is held if no candidate obtains a simple majority in the first round.

Q: Who is running?

The Constitutional Council has approved six candidates:

- Ali Benflis: National Liberation Front (FLN) leader
- Abdelaziz Bouteflika: Incumbent president
- Saad Abdallah Djaballah: National Reform Movement (MRN) leader
- Louisa Hanoune: Workers' Party (PT) leader
- Said Sadi: Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) leader
- Ali Fawzi Rabaine: Ahd 54 party leader

It rejected three: Ahmed Taleb Ibrahimi, Sid Ahmed Ghozali and Moussa Touati.

Q: How was the campaign?

The press agrees that the election campaign (18 March to 5 April) has been lively with large attendance at rallies. No opinion polls have been published - but unofficial polls have put incumbent President Bouteflika in fourth place.

Some incidents, mostly minor, have been reported. These included attacks on candidates' local election offices, burglary, the tearing up of posters and threats. Some rallies have been disrupted.

Q: What is the role of the media?

The president's rivals have criticised his grip on the state-owned media. Three candidates - Ali Benflis, Said Sadi and Abdallah Djaballah - boycotted an Algerian TV discussion programme, saying its format was biased.

President Bouteflika has insisted the broadcast media are "for the state". And he has accused the independent press of being both one-sided and "in the pay of foreign masters".

Independent papers have attacked the president but without showing outright support for other candidates.

The main evening news on national TV has given equal air time to each candidate. A report on a candidate's latest rally is followed by a two-minute excerpt from their rally speech.

National radio and TV have allowed election broadcasts in the Berber language.

TV stations run by Algerians abroad, such as Berber TV (Paris) or K-News (London) have screened special programmes. K-News, run by Abdelmoumene Khalifa, a

businessman and former backer of Bouteflika, has provided a platform for Bouteflika's rivals.

Q: What is the Anti-Fraud Front?

This opposition group has accused the president of using state funds to start his campaign ahead of the official launch.

It has called for a new government to supervise the poll. Failing that, it has urged the army to monitor the government, which it suspects of bias towards the incumbent.

Three candidates - former premier Mouloud Hamrouche, former premier Ahmed Benbitour and retired Gen Rachid Benyelles - have withdrawn from the race claiming unfairness. Several opposition groups have called for a boycott.

Q: What about the army?

Experts agree that the army seems to be staying out of politics and that contrary to expectations it is not backing President Bouteflika.

Army chief Gen Mohamed Lamari has said the military will not interfere - and that it will accept an Islamist president if he respects the constitution.

But he has also said that the army "will not be neutral where the future of Algeria is involved".

Q: What are the main issues?

President Bouteflika claims progress towards political stability and a sound economy, though the opposition says this is too little.

Debt restructuring, trade liberalisation, public sector reform, a curb on wages and inflation, and a favourable world oil and gas price have helped.

GDP was up 6.8% in 2003, inflation was 2.8% while currency reserves reached \$32.4bn. Foreign debt fell from \$28.3bn to \$22bn.

But investors are still put off by a lack of a serious financial sector reform and lingering security concerns. And unemployment is still the biggest challenge, at 23.3% in 2003.

BBC Monitoring, based in Caversham in southern England, selects and translates information from radio, television, press, news agencies and the Internet from 150 countries in more than 70 languages.