

ALGERIA'S AILING PRESIDENT TURNS 80: IS THERE A PLAN FOR SUCCESSION?

By Richard J. Pera

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French Prime Minister Manuel Valls and Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in Algeria. "Economic, human and security exchanges: the Franco-Algerian relationship is strong, historic and strategic," Google Translate. (Source: Manuel Valls Twitter account, April 10, 2016, <https://twitter.com/manuelvalls>.)

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By Sarah Graveline

With Kenya's August 8, 2017, elections just over 100 days away, both the ruling Jubilee party and opposition National Super Alliance (NASA) coalition have faced recent campaign setbacks. Jubilee was forced to reschedule its primary elections after canceling votes in 21 counties following [protests](#) over delays and missing election materials. NASA has risked losing momentum as coalition members grapple internally over which party's candidate should be at the top of the slate. These struggles point to the high-stakes nature of the election. With over 1,900 national and county positions on the ballot, the winning party will have a unique opportunity to shape Kenya's political future. [more...](#)



Kenya's Deputy President William Ruto addresses the United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants, in the Trusteeship Council Chamber of the United Nations, Monday, September 19, 2016. Ruto and President Uhuru Kenyatta, of the Jubilee party, are standing for reelection this August. (Source: AP Photo/Richard Drew.)

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The Institute for Defense Analyses is a non-profit corporation operating in the public interest.

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Over a Decade of Health Issues

President Bouteflika's health problems date back to 2005:

- In November 2005, during his second term in office, he underwent surgery at the Val-de-Grâce military hospital in Paris, reportedly to repair a [gastric ulcer](#). Bouteflika remained in France for a lengthy convalescence. In April 2006, he was [readmitted](#) to Val-de-Grâce. Secrecy surrounding the surgery and recovery fueled unsubstantiated rumors that the President had [stomach cancer](#).
- Former French Interior Minister Jean-Louis Debré met privately with the President at "al Mouradia"—the presidential palace in Algiers—in 2007. In his book *Ce que je ne pouvais pas dire (What I could not tell)*, published in 2016, Debré [described](#) Bouteflika's condition: "He is tired in his armchair, very breathless, his voice weak . . . a small microphone glued to his mouth makes it easier to hear what he says. He has a lot of difficulty expressing himself . . . speech slurred . . . exhausted after less than an hour together."
- In early 2013, during his third term, Bouteflika [reportedly suffered](#) a transient ischemic attack (TIA)—a mini stroke. After treatment at Val-de-Grâce, he [convalesced in Paris](#) for nearly four months. Lack of official reporting on his illness and convalescence was grist for the rumor mill, which concluded that Bouteflika was seriously ill and would not pursue a fourth term. In November 2014, following reelection, Bouteflika was admitted to a clinic in [Grenoble, France](#), for reasons not revealed publicly. In early 2016, Bouteflika reportedly traveled to a clinic near [Geneva, Switzerland](#), for unidentified treatment.
- In April 2016, French Prime Minister Manuel Valls met privately with Bouteflika and later tweeted a photo of the two at al Mouradia. The photo (see article head) showed the trim, 53-year-old Frenchmen juxtaposed with the 79-year-old Algerian leader, who was [described](#) as "sick . . . haggard looking . . . mouth half open." This photo shocked Algerians and led some to question Bouteflika's ability to govern.
- In February 2017, Bouteflika abruptly [canceled a meeting](#) with German Chancellor Angela Merkel, reportedly due to "acute bronchitis." This renewed the discussion about his health—and prompted the government to deny rumors of his death.

Who is Running the Country and How?

Algeria has long been ruled by an interconnected group of military, political, and business elites known as “Le Pouvoir” (The Power)—a small group of leaders who benefit politically and financially from the current system. Some observers believe that because of Bouteflika’s illnesses, an inner circle of Le Pouvoir members is carrying out executive functions. The terms “soft coup” and “coup-proofing” are used to describe this inner circle and its actions. At the center is the president’s brother, 59-year-old Said Bouteflika, who controls access to the president. Having never held elected office, Said Bouteflika has been accused of running the country “[by proxy](#).” Also part of the inner circle is 77-year-old General Ahmad Salah, Army chief of staff since 2004.

Bouteflika’s inner circle has a vested interest in maintaining the legitimacy of the regime. In the last few years, they have consolidated power by [marginalizing](#) some opponents and [placating](#) others. Le Pouvoir has not opposed these actions publicly. Bouteflika’s presence, even enfeebled, reflects continuity and stability; his passing would create uncertainties. Consequently, several security, legal, and economic decisions have been taken to maintain the status quo:

- Security sector reforms—In September 2015, [Bouteflika fired](#) General Mohammad Mediene, the chief of Algeria’s powerful Department of Intelligence and Security (known as the DRS), who had led the service for 25 years. Other generals, including the chiefs of counterterrorism, counterintelligence, and presidential security, were also sacked; one of these officers was jailed for suggesting Bouteflika resign. In February 2016, [Bouteflika dissolved](#) the DRS and resubordinated its functions inside the new Department of Surveillance and Security (the DSS). Unlike its predecessor, the DSS now reports directly to the president.
- Constitutional reforms—After his second term, Bouteflika orchestrated a constitutional amendment to rescind the law limiting the president to two terms. During Bouteflika’s third and fourth terms, the government has been sensitive to criticism that he has become “[president for life](#).” In February 2016, the regime reinstituted legal reforms to limit future presidents to two terms. Observers view these reforms as a “[cosmetic](#)” way to mollify critics.
- Economic pressures—Decreasing oil revenues since 2014 have forced the government to run [budget deficits and cut back on public sector subsidies](#). Budget cuts have resulted in widespread demonstrations, especially among Algerian youth ([70 percent](#) of Algerians are under 30, and youth unemployment is about [30 percent](#)). The government made a strategic decision to maintain subsidies in especially vulnerable sectors like housing and education. Though occasionally violent, protests have remained local and oriented on economic issues. The government has cracked down on [journalists](#), jailing television personalities. The regime has restricted social media, arresting people for [Facebook posts](#) that were critical of the state.

Plan for Transition?

Members of the inner circle probably have been engaged in succession planning for some time. Whether Bouteflika’s successor comes from the inner circle—his brother, for example—or from political party or business leaders outside the regime, the next president will need to maintain the delicate balance between the government and nation’s elites. As scholars have [pointed out](#), however, the final word about Bouteflika’s successor is likely to rest with the Army: “[If countries across the . . . world have armies, in Algeria, the army has a state.](#)”

Ultimately, Algerian citizens will also get a vote on their country’s future—if they choose to exercise it. Up to this point, most Algerians have accepted a strong president and a “[tight, merciless security mechanism](#)” as the price for order and stability. They do not want to repeat the civil war of 1991–2002, a national trauma that cost over 150,000 lives. This

desire for order and stability may mean the people are willing to accept another leader chosen by the nation's elites. If true, this suggests there will be no repeat of the widespread demonstrations of 2011. Nonetheless, Bouteflika's passing could be a watershed moment for Algeria — a moment in which either Le Pouvoir will assert itself once again or one in which a [popular movement](#) will arise to oppose it and bring about an alternative future for Algeria.

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Kenya's Deputy President William Ruto addresses the United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants, in the Trusteeship Council Chamber of the United Nations, Monday, September 19, 2016. Ruto and President Uhuru Kenyatta, of the Jubilee party, are standing for reelection this August. (Source: AP Photo/Richard Drew.)

Jubilee Primary Election Chaos

The Jubilee party is in a seemingly comfortable position ahead of August's polls. Led by Kenya's current president and deputy president, it benefits from the power of incumbency and draws support from Kenya's largest and third largest ethnic groups, the Kikuyu and Kalenjin.

As [Africa Watch](#) reported previously, the Jubilee Alliance was formed before the 2013 election as a marriage of convenience between Uhuru Kenyatta, son of Kenya's first President, and William Ruto, a former cabinet member in Mwai Kibaki's administration. Both were charged by the International Criminal Court with instigating violence following the 2007 elections, in which more than 1,100 Kenyans died. The charges were later dropped in the midst of [allegations](#) of witness intimidation.

The Jubilee Alliance unified as a single political party in [September 2016](#), thus formalizing the alliance between President Kenyatta and Deputy President Ruto. The party's strength, along with the impact of [devolution](#) of power to county governments beginning in 2013, has raised the stakes for primary elections in Jubilee strongholds. Because primary winners are expected to prevail in the general election, and thus gain more control over county government funding, competition over primaries has intensified this election season.

As a result, more voters turned out for the April 22 primaries than expected, leading to [widespread protests](#) when Jubilee staff did not have voting materials ready. In response, Jubilee canceled the April 22 elections and scrambled to reschedule the primaries before May 1, a [cutoff date](#) imposed by the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC).

NASA Infighting Delays Presidential Candidate Announcement

Compared with Jubilee, the NASA coalition is not nearly as organized. While it has long been [presumed](#) that Raila Odinga would be the coalition's nominee for president, infighting among the coalition's parties delayed NASA's formal decision. The coalition waited until April 27 to announce Odinga as its [nominee](#).

To counter Jubilee's incumbency advantage, NASA has sought to bring several opposition parties under one umbrella. On April 20, it announced that Chama cha Mashinani (CCM), under Bomet Governor Isaac Ruto, would [join](#) the coalition,

increasing NASA's key partnerships to five principal leaders and parties: Odinga (Orange Democratic Movement, or ODM), Kalonzo Musyoka (Wiper Democratic Movement), Musalia Mudavadi (Amani National Congress, or ANC), Moses Wetang'ula (Forum for the Restoration of Democracy, or Ford Kenya), and Ruto (CCM).

Even with this broad alliance, NASA faces an uphill battle to unseat Jubilee. By delaying the announcement of their nominees for president and deputy president, NASA was able to keep the coalition from falling apart, but it lost critical time to campaign. At the same time, [rumors](#) about possible defections from the coalition introduced doubt about its stability.

There are also concerns about Odinga's viability as a candidate. At 71, Odinga is a veteran opposition leader who has lost three national elections. In running a fourth campaign, he may follow in the path of his father, [Oginga Odinga](#), a career opposition leader who was a thorn in the side of both Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, but never attained the presidency. A February [poll](#) shows Odinga trailing Kenyatta by over 20 percent.

The IECB and the Countdown to August

Both the Jubilee and NASA campaigns have taken place amid broader concerns about the credibility of the August election. The IECB, which is tasked with organizing the August vote, has been beset by both technical and political challenges.

Given past allegations of vote tampering, the IECB plans to use a biometric voter identification system and an electronic system to tally and transmit votes. The procurement of these systems is well [behind schedule](#), and [allegations](#) of irregularities raise the specter of the 2013 "[chicken gate](#)" scandal, in which IECB officials accepted bribes from a UK company for procurement of ballot paper. The IECB will face a significant challenge to staff and equip polling stations before August.

The IECB also faces political challenges stemming from the 2013 elections, which Odinga claimed were fixed for Jubilee by the IECB, although the Supreme Court [ruled](#) otherwise. As the 2017 campaign season opened, Odinga [maintained](#) the IECB would again be biased toward Jubilee, and he led [protests](#) against the IECB in May 2016.

Tensions eased somewhat when the IECB chairman and commissioners resigned in [October 2016](#) and were replaced with commissioners picked by both Odinga's coalition and Jubilee. In December 2016, however, Jubilee legislators pushed a controversial [amendment](#) through parliament to provide backup manual voter identification, a move the opposition claimed would make vote rigging easier.

Mistrust in the IECB's neutrality, in combination with ongoing [disputes](#) over the electronic voting system and the late appointment of IECB commissioners, suggests there will continue to be doubt over IECB's handling of the polls.

Conclusion

Although there are reasons for concern before August's vote, Kenyans also have tools to ensure a credible, peaceful election. Even though the press may be [under pressure](#), Kenya boasts a free and raucous media that has aggressively reported on the campaign. Kenyan organizations like Ushahidi have developed novel techniques to monitor elections that have been used [worldwide](#).

Perhaps this is why Kenyans are feeling somewhat confident about the upcoming vote. Although a January [poll](#) showed 60 percent of Kenyans are concerned about the potential for elections violence, a recent [national poll](#) shows that 73 percent of Kenyans believe the August poll will be free and fair, and 89 percent say they will accept the results of the election, no matter the outcome. As these results suggest, even though there are reasons for concern, both Jubilee and NASA are preparing for a competitive vote in August.

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