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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Northey, J 2017, 'Associations and Democracy in Algeria' *Democratization*, vol 24, no. 2, pp. 209-225

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2016.1144590>

DOI 10.1080/13510347.2016.1144590

ISSN 1351-0347

ESSN 1743-890X

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Democratization on 08 Mar 2016, available

online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13510347.2016.1144590>

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Associations and Democracy in Algeria

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What role does associational activism play in political life in the Middle East and North Africa? Have associations been largely co-opted, thus reinforcing authoritarian governance? Or are they part of drawn out democratization processes, emerging over the last two decades, exploding during the Arab Spring? Divergences in responses to these questions have been striking. From initial optimism about the potential of associations to contribute to democratization, much recent literature has been increasingly pessimistic, framing associations as part of the problem of failed political transformations. Algeria, in particular, despite minimal donor funding, has seen a surge in associations over the last twenty years. Yet these 93,000 new associations have come under scrutiny. Building on extensive field-work, this article explores Algerian associations at grass-roots level, after the decade of violence in the 1990s. It analyses how associations challenged the state during the Arab Spring, how they question historical state narratives and challenge government policies. Despite political and structural obstacles, it is found that Algerian civic associations do not inhibit democratic society, indeed they enable it, not necessarily as transformative actors, but as meaningful democratic agents pushing for reform.

Keywords: civil society; associations; democratization; Algeria; civic engagement

Introduction

For centuries we have debated the role of associational life in politics, in the quality of democracy and in democratization processes.¹ In the last two decades there has been an increasing focus on associations in political life in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly since the Arab revolutions of 2011.² Despite minimal donor funding, and a decade of violent conflict, Algeria in particular has seen a surge in the numbers of registered associations, with 93,000 associations now officially recorded by the

Ministry of Interior.³ At the time of the Arab uprisings of 2011, the Algerian government had registered more than double the associations than its nearest competitor, Morocco, for which figures were estimated to be around 35,000.⁴ Figures from Ministries, NGO monitoring programmes and academic research also show significant increases in the numbers of registered associations across the Middle East and North African region as a whole.⁵

Yet what does this associative phenomenon mean for political life in North Africa? In Algeria, and to a lesser extent across the Arab world, it initially led to great optimism in the academic literature. In the early 1990s, many scholars felt that associations were part of a growing civil society and as such could contribute to democratization.⁶ This perception continued, even with the turmoil of the violent conflict throughout the 1990s which was consuming the Algerian state.

By the turn of the century however, with the absence of any significant political transformation in Algeria and across the region, the role of these new associative actors became highly contested. Scholars increasingly questioned the assumption that civil society actors in the Arab world were capable of contributing to democratization, as hypothesized in the 1990s.⁷ For some, it was worse: the growth of associations even supported the conservation of an authoritarian order.⁸ For others, associations were categorized as too weak⁹ or too divided¹⁰ to enact any real change. More recently, Cavatorta and Durac have argued that in the absence of political parties, associations do form a framework in which politics happens. The authors challenge the categorization of Arab civil society as simply a tool of the state.¹¹ They argue that while it might not be merely a tool of the state, nevertheless civil society cannot contribute to democratization, as it has to operate within the corrupt patronage networks of the

regimes in place.

In 2011, the role of Algerian associations in the uprisings at the time of the Arab revolutions was fairly limited. They were criticized within Algeria by state institutions and parliamentarians, as not having prevented trouble.¹² External actors, on the contrary, complained that they were not real actors capable of providing a coherent platform of opposition.¹³ In 2014, Butcher challenges both these critiques, describing how the protests of 2011, in the context of the Arab Spring, did in fact provide an opportunity for associations, with the creation, by opposition actors, of the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD). With this platform, civil society groups and political parties, from both Islamist and secular backgrounds, came together to peacefully challenge the government and demand political reform.¹⁴ She writes that the earlier “protests of the 1980s pushed the government to recognize mass civic associations (that is, civil society) that have eventually evolved into an associative sphere that increasingly challenges the government.” She suggests that the opening up of opportunity for associations in 1990, whilst it was not meant to lead to any meaningful liberalization, had in reality lead to an explosion in the numbers of actors, which could now “lead to more large scale democratic reforms.”¹⁵

Building on Butcher’s recent analysis of Algerian civil society, this article explores the role of associations at the micro level, based on an investigation into the work of over 200 Algerian associations between 2007 and 2013. Analysing their role in challenging government policy in the public sphere and in campaigning on questions of governance, it is argued that despite political and structural obstacles, Algerian civic associations do not inhibit democratic society, indeed they enable it in many complex, but evident ways. To demonstrate this, the article will firstly explore different theoretical arguments concerning the role of associations in democratization and

political change. It will explore the Algerian legal and political context for associations and the impact of conflict. It will then assess how associations reacted during the Arab uprisings in 2011. Finally, the article will analyse the role of Algerian associations in historical narratives, governance, trauma and reconciliation, using specific case studies, to explore alternative political roles associations play.

Civil society and associations in democratization

So what is civil society and how could it contribute to democratization processes? Ibrahim defines civil society as “the totality of self-initiating and self-regulating volitional social formations, peacefully pursuing a common interest, advocating a common cause, or expressing a common passion.”¹⁶ Registered associations would thus be one part of this civil society, alongside the press, trade unions, teachers, academia, intellectuals, artists and informal associations. Butcher points out that as civil society organizations seek state concessions, benefits, policy reform and accountability, for public not private ends, “political parties are not generally part of this definition of civil society.”¹⁷ The link between associations and political parties is nevertheless an important dimension, particularly in Algeria where new, mainly Islamist political parties have developed since the early 1990s. Democratization theorists have argued that associational life can be a way of promoting democratic socialization and increasing freedom in the political sphere, through local empowerment and popular participation in functioning organizations.¹⁸ Scholars have long debated whether there is a “functional role played by the associative sphere,” as a precondition of democracy.¹⁹ Alexis de Tocqueville’s findings about associations in America in the nineteenth century highlighted them as “schools for civic virtue” and a fundamental part of American democracy.²⁰ Proponents of Tocqueville’s thinking argue that through

associative engagement, citizens gain skills in political representation, public speaking, democratic governance.²¹ Cavatorta and Durac explain how civil society has been seen as good for democracy as “it promotes the interaction of people in a voluntary setting, where differences of opinion have to be taken into account.”²² In the same vein, they quote Putnam who argues that associational life also contributes to building social capital, as “civil society activism enhances the internal capacity of communities to generate social wellbeing.”²³

But what of civic associations in authoritarian contexts? What happens when associations function in legal systems and political environments which are not conducive to their development and free functioning? For some scholars, civil society in closed political systems is often more likely to ensure the durability of authoritarian regimes, rather than lead to a more open society.²⁴ Jamal argues that associations in authoritarian contexts are fundamentally different, and that the relationship between civic associations and democracy “is a circular and self-reinforcing relationship.”²⁵ There needs to be pre-existing political institutions, otherwise, she suggests, “ineffective democratic institutions promote levels of civic engagement, including social capital, supportive of non-democratic procedures.”²⁶ Associations supporting non-democratic regimes “enjoy rights and privileges not guaranteed to associations in opposition.”²⁷ Cavatorta and Durac argue that though a vibrant civil society can exist, authoritarian contexts create divisions amongst civil society actors which prevent them from challenging incumbent regimes.²⁸ Ciftci and Bernick point out that it is the type of behaviour or reasons for civic engagement, such as clientelism, which might, or might not, reinforce authoritarianism.²⁹

Other scholars, however, point to the capacity of civil society organizations to promote non-violent transitions. Referring to the role of Solidarnosc in Poland, and

theatres in Czechoslovakia, cultural institutions which facilitated peaceful transitions, it is argued that civil society actors can frame societal change as desirable and possible. Glenn writes that in Eastern Europe civil society was able to “engage in active construction of the messages,” and became “a framing strategy to mobilise support” for political change.³⁰

Abu Sada and Challand write of the ‘repolitization’ of associations in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa, following the Arab Spring. As the state has been losing its monopoly over public action in recent years, they write that new forms of contestation are occurring. In Palestine, the context Jamal explores in most detail, they argue that a new form of repolitization is now emerging through associational life. It was essentially excessive donor interventions in the 1990s, they suggest, which had depoliticized many associative actors there.³¹ This contrasts particularly with Algeria, where there have been very low levels of external donor funding, since the cancelling of elections in 1991 and the violence which ensued.

Schmitter suggests certain criteria which can be used to evaluate associations, as to whether they constitute civil society and are positive for democratic consolidation. He argues that there are four norms which make associations constitutive of civil society. (1) Organizations must be dually autonomous, from the state and private sector; (2) they must be capable of deliberating about collective action; (3) organizations must not seek to replace the state or private sector and finally, (4) they must agree to act in accordance with pre-agreed civil rules. Schmitter points out that, even if constituted, civil society itself is not a prerequisite for ending autocracy or for facilitating transitions to democracy. He writes that “rarely have actors in civil society alone brought about such a change in regime.”³²

Schmitter continues to explain how civil society consolidates democracy when (1) it stabilizes expectations in social groups and presents authorities with reliable information with which to govern; (2) it is civic and respectful of the democratic process (3) it provides channels for self-expression; (4) it governs the behaviour of its members for collective commitments; and (5) it provides reservoirs of potential resistance to arbitrary rule. In contrast, civil society can be negative for democracy, according to Schmitter, if it makes majority formation difficult, brings bias to political life, or is ethnically, linguistically or culturally divisive.³³ Schmitter refers mainly to established democracies or to transition processes. However these factors are still useful to explore for associations in themselves, in all political regimes, given that, as Schmitter suggests, civil society is a facilitating factor, rather than a direct causal factor for any democratic transition process.

The legal and political contexts vary greatly across the Arab world, as in the western sphere. Specific trajectories, legal systems, the nature of organizations, as well as the role of external donors, need to be explored. Algeria has undergone significant transformations, with legal reforms and significant growth of the associative sphere. As well as exploring these trajectories, it is useful to examine specific organizations in Algeria. How do these organizations perform in terms of Schmitter's criteria for associations as an effective civil society? Are they civic? Do they combine collective commitments and provide resistance to potential tyranny? Do they enable citizens to gain experience of political representation and democratic governance? Do they contribute to democratic practices, to policy analysis and opposition politics, even if they currently operate in a closed political system? Before exploring these questions, the following section will explore the backdrop for associations in Algeria. It will look at

the legal and political setting, as well as barriers to democratization, such as the impact of violence on associative engagement.

Civil Society in Algeria – Law, Politics and Conflict

The concept of civil society needs to be rooted in the historical experiences which shape the individual society to which it is applied. In Algeria, there is a long tradition of religious and local, community-based collective decision making and associational activism. During the colonial period, the French 1901 Law governed associations, some of which went on to form the underlying structures and actors of the independence struggle, and subsequently the Algerian state itself. Under the stress of rolling back the colonial state after 1962, however, nation building did not always permit the existence of autonomous organizations.³⁴ Ben Nefissa writes of how “the construction of modern states after independence was a period of rupture for associative life in Arab countries.”³⁵ In the Algerian case, Addi argues, the need to unify the nation after the war of independence, meant there was a “refusal to accept politics and conflict,” and a denial of plurality.³⁶ As such, the 1970s and 1980s were dominated by state controlled organizations with little freedom of association. Derras writes of how the state set up organizations to create unconditional support structures, as a means to frame, control and manage society.³⁷ This unsuccessful policy, along with declining socio-economic conditions, led to the riots in 1988. The riots resulted in an overhaul of the political system in the following two years, and in 1990 Algeria had a new constitution and reformed laws regarding associations and political parties.

However, this ambitious democratization project of the late 1980s also led to the civil conflict, with its tragic consequences. With the election of the Islamist party, the FIS, in the first free elections in 1991, the FLN – after dominating post-colonial politics

- suffered a massive defeat. This was at the hands of an Islamic opposition, who, having captured popular discontent, fought and won, proposing a theocratic state. As Driessen points out, the Islamist movement never ‘really articulated the precise institutional arrangements they intended to construct’ in Algeria. The party’s ‘lack of political precision extended to their characterization of democracy,’ which, they argued, led to ‘political idolatry’ and corruption.³⁸ Following this defeat of the FLN at the polls, a military coup was orchestrated, halting the electoral process, removing President Chadli and preventing the Islamist party from taking power. The succeeding bloody conflict between Islamist insurgents and the military regime resulted in the deaths of an estimated 200,000 Algerians. The coup, the conflict, and the resulting state of emergency, all contributed to a reversing of the democratization process that had been launched in 1989. Algeria returned to a seemingly unavoidable state of authoritarian control.

Yet despite the retracted democratization process, the reforms of the late 1980s, as well as the conflict itself, did inspire an increasingly dynamic associative movement.³⁹ In the 1990s, Algerian associations were described as an “impressive array of rights oriented groups,”⁴⁰ and others claimed that “the indisputable existence of an increasingly resolute civil society provides the potential for genuine democratization.”⁴¹ Zoubir further describes in 1999 how “the most vocal forces today are the domestic forces (political parties and autonomous associations) that can no longer tolerate the patterns of authoritarianism that dominated Algeria’s political life for decades.”⁴² Ben Nefissa also recognized that, with the 1990 law, the system of a simple declaration for registration was unique within the region. With this, she writes, associations became “one of the main modes of expression for Algerian society.”⁴³

The space for political parties also opened up. At the beginning of the initial democratization project, there were few parties to participate in a liberalized political sphere in 1990. The main organizations which did emerge were quickly seen as too radical.⁴⁴ Driessen describes the subsequent evolution of some of the more moderate Islamist political parties, which often drew support from successful religious associations. He writes of them that “what had begun as an ideological-religious movement had transformed itself into a political party whose aim was to win votes and govern in a democratic arena.”⁴⁵ Driessen’s detailed investigations highlight a democratic transition within the two main religious political parties in Algeria (the MSP and Islah), following the banning of the FIS party. However, he also shows the lack of political support sustained by either party. Despite the increasing religiosity in the population, Islamist political parties were not seen as a credible force in political life.⁴⁶ Nor had they proved their capacity to take on the main challenges facing Algerian society (housing, terrorism, diversification of the economy). Within the opposition, they developed a strong platform calling for political change,⁴⁷ but as political actors, even if they openly embraced democracy, they were not seen as able to contribute to real democratization.

One of the main challenges for Algerian associations (and political parties), from both secular and religious backgrounds, is still the post conflict environment in which they operate. During the political violence of the 1990s, hundreds of thousands lost their lives, but many more fled the country. The assassination of intellectuals, professors, doctors, journalists, activists, feminists, school teachers and entire villages created an environment in which simply holding a meeting was a political act of great courage. Lloyd describes the violent context in which many associations first developed. She writes how women’s associations, and individual women, were forced

to the forefront of fighting terrorism, as its victims, or through losing family members. All associations had to function through “subtle networking with scarce resources,” organising meetings “on an impromptu basis to take advantage of the presence of visitors.”⁴⁸ Resistance, she writes, was “implicit in the maintenance of everyday life.” Associations providing help for the traumatised, or support for children’s education, contained “broader ramifications,” Lloyd writes,⁴⁹ of a brave political protest, given the direct threat made by insurgents against victims, their families, teachers and schools.

Algeria has not recovered from this conflict. Associations are still deeply affected by the assassination or exile of their members. The insistence of associative actors in trying to deal with Algerians’ trauma,⁵⁰ despite the refusal of the state to fully engage in the process,⁵¹ makes their work politically sensitive. There are also divisions in Algerian civil society, between actors from different sides of the conflict. Cavatorta and Elanza point to “the problematic relationship between the secular and Islamist opposition,”⁵² but also acknowledge cases of co-operation.⁵³ They cite the example of Islamist and secular associations both challenging the state’s policy of reconciliation. All associations agree that preventing families from accessing the truth about those who disappeared during the 1990s, does not provide justice. In 2011, the secular and Islamist opposition came together again, under the umbrella of the CNCD platform, to challenge the government. It remains within the associative sector that difficult claims about reconciliation and Algeria’s political future are formulated.

Reform of Algerian political life would seem to require new actors and viable alternatives, given the failure of Islamist parties to gain the trust of a significant part of the population (similar to the Berber parties). The fear of a return to violence also means that radical “regime change,” is unlikely to gain any support from the population. Given the strong desire for democratic governance in Algeria,⁵⁴ it is thus useful to

explore further the increasing number of Algerian associations. In providing opportunities for interest representation, policy dialogue and democratic governance (factors identified by the civil society and democratization theorists as potential catalysts for change) associations, it is argued, can become meaningful democratic agents. Although operating in a closed political environment, with the barriers to political participation Jamal highlights, Algerian associations do not promote non-democratic practices, and rarely simply follow instructions from state institutions. Rather they enter processes of negotiation, not only to contribute to the different sector they engage in, but also to challenge the state. The following sections will explore examples of such processes in Algeria, looking at how associations do now engage in politics, overcome divisions and increase the capacity of communities to generate social wellbeing. The next section will focus firstly on the context of the “Arab Spring” in 2011.

Associations in Algeria and the “Arab Spring”

Between December 2010 and March 2011, Algeria experienced significant unrest, with demonstrations and self-immolations, in protest against chronic unemployment, lack of housing, increasing food prices, inflation and corruption. These protests happened in parallel with the similar movements in Tunisia and in Egypt. They were neither Islamist, nor organised along ethnic lines, even if they expressed frustration at the same issues as those of the Islamist and Berber demonstrations a decade earlier.⁵⁵ In this context, two events took place in which associations were of key importance. Firstly, a platform was created in early 2011 – the CNCD – which could be seen as presenting a potential challenge to the government. Secondly, a number of networks were established to challenge the new Law on Associations, promulgated that same year.⁵⁶

The National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD)

In the tense context of January 2011, a number of associations, as well as some political parties, met to create the “National Coordination for Change and Democracy” (CNCD). This movement was a platform for systemic political change, to mobilize and to organize marches to get their message across. The movement was made of up of active associations, including human rights organizations, such as the Algerian League of Human Rights (LADDH), as well as cultural organizations, student bodies, local associations, trade unions, political parties including the Islamist MSP, individual activists and intellectuals. Its members sought the reversal of the State of Emergency, which had been in place since 1992. They also argued for complete reform of the Algerian political system and for the removal, by the army, of the president.⁵⁷

The marches were repressed by a significant police presence, but were in fact not heavily attended and were relatively quickly dispersed by the security services. Some significant members of the CNCD, such as the leader of the Kabyle socialist party, resigned over the following months. They indicated their continued support for democratic change in Algeria, but questioned the utility of demonstrations in the current context. They referred to scissions in the CNCD, between apolitical civil society actors and the more partisan political parties.⁵⁸

While the demonstrations were quickly repressed, the movement itself was also fragmented. The CNCD did not appear to have a united plan, or loyal following. It proved a fairly weak coalition. It did not appear to have the support of ordinary Algerians, who desired change, but not at the potential cost of more human life. Instability in the region as a whole further reinforced Algerian fears, and strengthened, despite all the problems, the sense of a need for national solidarity.

However, the CNCD was unique in that it brought together activists from all sides of the Algerian political spectrum. It included Islamist parties, which had previously been ambiguous towards calls for democratization, alongside human rights and secular activists, calling for meaningful political reform and democracy. In response to the civil unrest and creation of the CNCD, the regime did attempt limited reforms. In February 2011, President Bouteflika lifted the 19 year State of Emergency laws which had been one of the key demands of the CNCD, and a main source of frustration for all those demanding the right to protest. Further reforms and subsidies reduced frustrations, but did little to tackle the deeper underlying causes of discontent. In the slightly calmer political environment that developed in the spring of 2011, the state began a process of political dialogue.

A wide national consultation process was launched in April 2011 to discuss reform, piloted by the *Conseil National Economique et Sociale* (CNES). It was described by an EU official in Algiers as, “by far one of the more progressive responses to the wave of discontent in the region.”⁵⁹ At local level too, consultation processes were carried out across the country but were received with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Some associations considered them to be “pointless,” that their opinions were unlikely to be considered. A member of one association qualified the state, in this consultation process, as “unable to communicate and therefore dialoguing only with itself.”⁶⁰ The lack of trust in the consultation process further exacerbated the problems of disconnection between state and people. The state’s immediate reaction, therefore, did not succeed in improving its strained relationship with civil society. As well as the consultation process, the state also promised, however, constitutional and legal reforms, together with new dialogue, with implications for the nature of governance in Algeria.

*The Associative Lobby and the new Law on Associations 2012*⁶¹

In September 2011, the Algerian state drew up a new Law on Associations. It also launched a consultation process. Many associations received the draft text and discussed it in informal networks.⁶² The preamble of the new law outlined the wish to facilitate, to simplify and to reduce the administrative burden on associations.⁶³ It proposed to give powers to local town halls to register associations, and to reduce the number of founding members required. However, the new law also significantly increased the potential controls by the executive. Many associations felt that the state could maintain a legitimized form of repression, through this new legal framework, which would require them all to resubmit their statutes.

Campaigns emerged across the country, led by associations and their networks,⁶⁴ targeting the media and MPs. The law was finally debated in Parliament in November 2011. The deputies criticized and rejected the law, arguing it was unconstitutional and went against the spirit of partnership with civil society.⁶⁵ It appeared that parliament had responded to the lobbying efforts of the associations. Yet, on the 14 December 2011, the law was sent back to parliament, passed as it stood, and subsequently adopted by the Council of the Nation. It was published in the Official Journal, on the 12 January 2012. Whilst this was a disappointment to the associations, they had nevertheless succeeded in initiating a campaign that led to the questioning of a law in Parliament. The campaign had also led many associations to realise the importance of cooperating within networks, of challenging the state, and of strengthening Algeria's democratic institutions, which had proved to be so weak.⁶⁶

Algerian Associations and everyday politics

In his work on civil society and the consolidation of democracy, Schmitter suggests that associations which steer their members towards collective commitments and democratic

governance, and provide pools of resistance to arbitrary government, can play a significant role in political life.⁶⁷ In closed political contexts, associations, particularly cultural ones, can also frame political messages, and the desirability of change, as Glenn shows, in the case of the transitions in Eastern Europe.⁶⁸ What associations do, their very nature, their relations with the state, and their internal functioning, thus matter, when assessing their role in promoting political reform.

The following cases represent typical associations from the two most significant sectors targeted by associational life: heritage protection and the social sector. Several studies have analyzed the sectoral distribution of the associations across Algeria.⁶⁹ In 2007, Omar Derras carried out extensive, nation-wide research into the associative phenomenon, selecting ‘active’ associations along a set of criteria. In his study of ‘active’ associations, Derras notes 43% in the social sector, followed by 28% in the cultural sector.⁷⁰ The 2012 Ministry of Interior data indicates that nationally, associations in the cultural and heritage sector represent 16%, and health associations 15% of registered associations - the largest two groups after professional trade unions.⁷¹ The following case studies will therefore focus on associations in the heritage and social sectors. They will explore how these organizations perform, in view of the democratization theorists’ criteria for associations as effective actors in civil society, capable of promoting democratic governance.

Heritage Associations – the case of Bel Horizon

Since the 1990s, the Algerian state has attributed a role to cultural associations in the protection of cultural heritage, through legal reforms and in response to demands by associations. The Algerian Law for the Protection of Cultural Heritage (Loi-98-04) identifies as national heritage all tangible and intangible artifacts, buildings, monuments

and traditions, upon and in Algerian soil, from pre-history to the current day. Article 4 of this law allows that such goods be managed by associations, under the prescriptions of the Law on Associations.

Within this framework, in 2001, the association “Bel Horizon” was created in Oran in the context of the celebrations commemorating 1100 years since the foundation of the city, one of the oldest in North Africa, by Andalousian merchants. The association was created by a group of activists, passionate about history, who wanted to restore the heritage of their city. From modest origins, the association now has fifty longstanding volunteers, twenty associate members and no paid, permanent staff making it one of the more successful and sustainable Algerian associations. The association has published books and renovated many of the historical sites. It has trained over 3,500 young people in the protection of natural sites, photography, film production, heritage and environmental governance. Initially functioning with limited funds, the association has more recently been successful in gaining small grants for specific projects.

A first objective of the association was to restore the sixteenth century Spanish Santa Cruz Fort in Oran. This project was significant, firstly, as renovating a Spanish vestige clearly diverged from the state’s priorities in terms of restoring historical monuments. Across Algeria, in line with the nation building project, authorities had sought to promote first and foremost Algeria’s Arab-Muslim heritage.⁷² Bel Horizon’s initial projects therefore conflicted with the state’s vision for what parts of history should be “remembered.” Secondly, the restoration involved the securitizing of a whole area of the city, the mountain up to the Fort, which had been off bounds during the 1990s, when insurgent groups inhabited this area. The returning of this space to the population was a highly symbolic moment, marking the end of violence. Through

negotiations with local people and the authorities, touching on colonial history and the recent conflict of the 1990s, Bel Horizon managed to both challenge and to cooperate with the state through its work in Santa Cruz.

From this Bel Horizon went on to organize regular cultural activities, music festivals, and an annual “Heritage Walk.” This walk takes the population, in its thousands, through the different historical areas of the city, to the Spanish Fort, publically reclaiming this space for Oran’s citizens. In 2011 this attracted over 20,000 people who marched from the central square up to the fort. This is an indication of the interest of the population in their cultural heritage, but also of the capacity of the association to understand and represent citizens. All the events are filmed and made available to the public on social media and the association’s website.⁷³

In pursuing their activities, relations with the authorities have not been straightforward. Defining heritage has national implications; it also questions local urbanization policies, as well as the authorities’ capacity to manage development and protect historical buildings. A number of conflicts have emerged, particularly concerning the status of colonial and Jewish buildings, and how best to preserve Oran’s heritage. Through dialogue with local political actors, the association has been able to influence decisions about urban policies and protect contested buildings.

In interviews, the president of the association, Kouider Metair, confirmed the priority of promoting the heritage of Algeria and criticized the lack of interest of the authorities in doing the same.⁷⁴ The president explained the ideological reasons for this state denial of local cultural narratives, across Algeria and particularly in Oran. The city has a distinct multicultural identity and its narrative of history has suffered, due to the unified, homogenous identity, which the Algerian state sought to impose since independence. This is a claim they make openly, and it is one echoed by many cultural

associations across Algeria. Such associations challenge, but also try to understand, the state's denial of certain narratives of history and seek to overcome these blockages through actively preserving the past.⁷⁵

Members of Bel Horizon and the Santé Sidi el Houari, another active cultural association in Oran, have also seen their leaders go on to be elected members of local government, at the Communal Council (APC) level. Through this transition, associative actors have been able to gain experience of local politics, as well as access to information and a better understanding of local government. Other associations interviewed across Algeria have also seen their leaders, previously inactive in political life, stand for election at local level.⁷⁶ The transition from civic to political activism, either in campaigns such as the CNCD or in the elected bodies is not unique to Bel Horizon.

Formal and informal networks exist, regrouping associations, such as those in the heritage sector across the country. Bel Horizon is a lead actor in these networks, encouraging other heritage associations to take ownership of historical narratives defining Algeria as a nation. The organization and its members clearly challenge state narratives, go on to roles in local government, and encourage young people to engage in a more constructive political debate. Electing leaders through the annual general assembly, the organization also enables its members to participate in democratic governance processes, and to work for public rather than private interests. Promoting more inclusive, open identities, Bel Horizon, alongside many other Algerian heritage associations, seeks recognition of the diversity of the country, through a constructive and inherently political goal of redefining the past. As such, in its objectives and its functioning, through its daily activities, the association promotes democratic

governance and education, for its members and the wider beneficiaries with whom they work.

Social Sector Associations – the case of the Boucebci Foundation

The Law on Associations allows social organizations to receive public grants and to acquire goods and property in order to implement their goals. Associations working on social issues, in contrast to heritage associations, are often created to deal with personal grievances, affecting a family or a community, for which the existing solutions are either inadequate or inexistent. They often exist to fill the gaps that the state's services are unable to fill, in caring for vulnerable sections of the population. The potential for conflict with the state, which sees its role from an all-encompassing perspective, is high.

Many social associations were born out of the conflict of the 1990s. The intense suffering of the population, the loss of state legitimacy and the common experience of injustice were behind many of the decisions to create associations. National organizations were created, both Islamic and secular, with the aim of caring for and seeking justice for families of the disappeared.⁷⁷ Foundations were created to commemorate the politicians, intellectuals and activists who were assassinated. Charitable associations were set up for the psychological care of orphans, and families of the victims. Such associations are important in their very existence, in that they commemorate and shape the narrative history of Algeria. They equally play a practical role in reconciliation, in a context where the state struggles to do so. The 2005 Reconciliation Charter ruled out many possibilities for truth as part of the reconciliation process in Algeria, and rendered it an offence to criticise the role of the army during the conflict. This opting for compensation rather than truth, is heavily challenged by many Algerian associations.⁷⁸

One such social association set up in the 1990s is the Boucebci Foundation in Algiers. The foundation commemorates the life and work of internationally renowned psychiatrist, Professor Mahfoud Boucebci, assassinated by Islamist insurgents in 1993. During his life time, Boucebci fought for the rights of those excluded from Algerian society: single mothers, drug addicts, abandoned children and detainees. As a founding member of the Algerian League of Human Rights in 1985, he fought for the respect of basic rights for all in society and for a secular democracy for Algeria. He was highly critical of the intolerant direction of Algerian society with the rise of Islamism and the rejection of vulnerable groups, but was also critical of the repressive nature of the Algerian regime. He was instrumental in the creation of a number of associations, working for family planning, caring for disabled children and those supporting adoptive families. His assassination was thus a direct attack on Algerian civil society, progressive thinking and freedom of association.

The foundation is still active today, seeking to continue his work. It has one permanent, paid member of staff, social development agency staff on secondment, and twelve psychologists who regularly volunteer. Its aim is to be a multidisciplinary social project, whose primary purpose is to support children who have been victims of violence.⁷⁹ The organization houses the library of Professor Boucebci and also provides practical training for its psychologists, who support over a thousand children annually. In partnership with the local authorities, with a small grant, the organization has launched a research initiative, to tackle violence in schools. Through this project they work with local authorities to improve teacher training and to contribute to the policy debate about how to reduce violence in the education system. They also provide support services, with their own staff being made available for the teachers from the selected schools.⁸⁰ The association has hundreds of members, in Algeria and abroad,

and is funded through membership fees, local donor funding and private sector donations.

Interviews with the voluntary and paid staff indicate the importance to them of the practical role of the association, for its legitimacy and success. Young staff members, working as psychologists with child victims of violence, highlight this role and their feelings about their work: “I feel free working in an association (...) here people give us their trust.”⁸¹ On personal reasons for working in such an organization, another staff member also pointed out how it assisted her own research into family therapy, but also gave meaning to her work.⁸²

The Boucebci Foundation, like many associations, provides a new sphere for people to defend their values, and to contribute to social projects, indirectly or directly targeting the trauma Algerians have suffered. Volunteers work with the local structures of Algerian society - town halls, education and health authorities - and appear to be trusted by the population, unlike the political parties discussed above. Internally, like Bel Horizon, the foundation organizes its annual general meeting, elects its leaders and provides a transparent system of governance and reporting about its funding.

Members of the association are critical of the urban policies and education system, particularly in the area of the capital city where they work, which saw thousands of families rehoused in high rise flats during the insecurity of the 1990s. To deal with this, the foundation engages with the local authorities to improve approaches to tackling violence and conflict in classrooms and homes.⁸³ Similar socially oriented organisations, supporting vulnerable families across Algeria, in particular those campaigning for those with disabilities, are also particularly vocal in their criticism of the state. Organizations such as the *Fédération algérienne des personnes handicapées* have become necessary consultees for all political reforms in the social sectors, but also

for legislation concerning associations.⁸⁴ Social associations have thus become part of the policy making process, and, whatever its limitations, associations have an input.

Such organizations create autonomous spaces in which people can act, exchange, contest and propose critical reflection and analysis. In the case of the Boucebcı Foundation, such discussions also cover an area in which the state has attempted to rule out open debate, through the restrictions of the Reconciliation Charter. Through their practical work with victims of violence, many associations such as this foundation are now able to challenge certain discourses of the authorities. They represent the population and provide forums for discussion,⁸⁵ channelling information, and contributing to political debate about social policy, welfare and reconciliation, in a challenging political context.

Conclusion

Democratization theorists have argued that associational life can promote democratic socialization and increase freedom in the political sphere, through local empowerment and popular participation in functioning organizations. Such claims have been refuted, however, in authoritarian contexts which are not conducive to the development and free functioning of an autonomous civil society. In such contexts, scholars argue, associations are often pushed towards non-democratic practices and are more likely to ensure the durability of authoritarian regimes, rather than lead to a more open society.

This article has challenged this assumption by exploring the work of a number of associations in contemporary Algeria, examining their democratic functioning, their capacity to represent citizens, and their ambitions to instigate political change. It has analysed associative movements such as the CNCD which brought together Islamists

and secular organisations under the same banner, demanding political reform during the Arab uprisings of 2011. This movement resulted in the lifting of the state of emergency, the launching of a new consultation process and the revising of the law on associations, hotly contested in civil society networks and in parliament. Seemingly apolitical associations, such as the thousands of heritage and social sector associations which exist across Algeria have also been discussed.

Heritage associations such as Bel Horizon have increasingly questioned state narratives of the past, challenging the very idea of the Algerian nation as purely Arab-Muslim, pushing for a more inclusive national identity and the protection of a much wider range of cultural heritage. Similarly, social sector organizations including the Boucebci Foundation, in dealing with trauma, have sought to contribute to national reconciliation and policy reform, in the education sector, but also in an area in which the state has attempted to rule out any debate, that of the 1990s conflict.

All the associations and networks discussed function through democratic systems of internal governance and are inclusive and tolerant. As such, this article confirms Butcher's analysis of Algerian civil society, that since the 1990 legal reforms, meaningful organizations have been able to develop on the ground. Associations in Algeria do challenge the government and are sometimes successful, for example in the lifting of the Emergency Laws or in the introduction of a 30 percent quota of women deputies in the national parliament. However, it is also argued that local associations do not necessarily need to directly oppose the government, to contribute to political reform. Grass roots associations reclaim the public sphere, as seen in the networks initiated in 2011, and also in their daily activities. At local level, the cases have shown how associative actors interact with elected officials, challenge policy decisions, gain experience of governance and even go on to elected roles in Town Councils.⁸⁶

Algerian associations have managed to build bridges in the post conflict period. The huge number of associations created since 1990 is still surprising, given the difficulties faced, simply in meeting.⁸⁷ They have been involved in rebuilding trust within communities, and in state structures. In regions where associations flourish, such as Oran, there has been greater public debate and interaction, on questions of local governance.⁸⁸ Autonomous spaces exist, despite fears of state interference, and there is recognition of the role associations play. This is not only in terms of dealing with trauma, but also in the opportunities they provide in a context of high unemployment and, as Volpi identified a decade earlier, the continued absence of “a meaningful political debate.”⁸⁹ Through these cases, the article has explored how associations interact with state structures and the population. Whilst associations may not be transformative agents in Algerian political life, they do form an opposition, questioning policies and creating new ways to mobilize. They also promote reconciliation, arguably a necessary precondition for any further meaningful political reform.

¹ From Ibn Khaldun in the 14th Century, to Alexis De Toqueville in 19th Century, to current debates since the 1990s.

² See Härdig, “Beyond the Arab Revolts.”

³ Over 93,000 associations were registered in 2012, Ministry of Interior figures: www.interieur.gov.dz/Dynamics/frmltem.aspx?html=1&s=29 for national associations and <http://www.interieur.gov.dz/Dynamics/frmltem.aspx?html=2&s=29> for local associations, last accessed 20/11/2015.

⁴ Figures vary significantly for Moroccan associations. Cavatorta and Durac cite figures between 30,000-80,000; ICNL indicated the figure as unknown in 2012. Personal interviews

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- with donor funded programme managers in Rabat (October 2011) indicated 35,000 but that it is “very difficult to have correct figures.”
- ⁵ Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization*.
- ⁶ Ibrahim, “The Troubled Triangle,” Zoubir, “The Stalled Democratisation of an Authoritarian Regime.”
- ⁷ Ben Nefissa, *Pouvoirs et associations*, Ibrahim, “The Troubled Triangle.”
- ⁸ Liverani, *Civil Society in Algeria*, Wiktorowicz, “Civil Society as Social Control.”
- ⁹ Roberts, “The Bouteflika Presidency.”
- ¹⁰ Cavatorta and Elananza, “Political opposition in Civil Society.”
- ¹¹ See Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization*, 27.
- ¹² ‘Les députés relèvent des ambigüités et des atteintes à la liberté d’association,’ Nabila Amir, *El Watan* Newspaper, 28/11/2011.
- ¹³ Bozzo and Luizard, *Les Société Civiles dans le Monde Musulman*.
- ¹⁴ Butcher, “Can oil-reliant countries democratize?”
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 723.
- ¹⁶ Ibrahim, “The Troubled Triangle,” 374.
- ¹⁷ Butcher, “Can oil-reliant countries democratize?”724.
- ¹⁸ See Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*, 4.
- ¹⁹ See Liverani, *Civil Society in Algeria*.
- ²⁰ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*.
- ²¹ Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*, 4, Kubba, “The Awakening of Civil Society,” Diamond, “Toward Democratic Consolidation.”
- ²² Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization*, 12.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 12.
- ²⁴ Wiktorowicz, “Civil Society as Social Control.” Langhor, “Too Much Civil Society, Too Little Politics.”

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- ²⁵ Jamal, *Barriers to Democracy*, 6.
- ²⁶ Ibid, 7.
- ²⁷ Ibid, 9.
- ²⁸ Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization*.
- ²⁹ Ciftci and Bernack, “Utilitarian and modern: clientelism, citizen empowerment, and civic engagement in the Arab world.”
- ³⁰ Glenn, *Framing Democracy* 21-23.
- ³¹ Abu Sada and Challand, *Le développement, une affaire d’ONG?*
- ³² Schmitter, *Some Propositions about Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy*, 6
- ³³ Ibid, 16.
- ³⁴ Filali-Ansary, “State, Society and Creed,” 309.
- ³⁵ Ben Nefissa, *Pouvoirs et associations*, 17.
- ³⁶ Addi, “Les obstacles à la formation de la société civile.”
- ³⁷ Derras, *Le phénomène associatif*, 21.
- ³⁸ Driessen, *Religion and Democratization*, 144.
- ³⁹ Salhi, *L’Algérie, Citoyenneté et Identité*
- ⁴⁰ Kazemi and Norton, quoted in Liverani, *Civil Society in Algeria*, 5.
- ⁴¹ Zoubir, quoted in Liverani, *Civil Society in Algeria*, 5.
- ⁴² Zoubir, “The Algerian Crisis in World Affairs,” 27.
- ⁴³ Ben Nefissa, *Pouvoirs et associations*.
- ⁴⁴ See Willis, “Containing Radicalism,” for how similar radicalization processes were manipulated by other North Africa regimes so as to maintain power.
- ⁴⁵ Driessen, “Religion and Democratization,” 159.
- ⁴⁶ The “Green Alliance” of Islamist political parties suffered heavy losses in the 2012 elections.
- ⁴⁷ In particular within the CNCND which will be explored in the following section.
- ⁴⁸ Lloyd, “Organising across borders,” 484.

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- ⁴⁹ Ibid, 484.
- ⁵⁰ Associations such as SOS disparus, the Algerian League of Human Rights and Djazairouna in particular.
- ⁵¹ The 2005 Reconciliation Charter focuses on compensation rather than truth for victims of the conflict and makes it an offence to criticise the Algerian army's role in it.
- ⁵² Cavatorta and Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization*, 5.
- ⁵³ Ibid, 33.
- ⁵⁴ 93% of Algerians think that democracy is the best form of government according to the World Values Survey as quoted in Driessen, *Religion and Democratization*.
- ⁵⁵ See Volpi, *Islam and Democracy*, 135.
- ⁵⁶ See Hårdig, "Beyond the Arab Revolts" for a discussion and typology of different civil society coalitions and movements in Egypt and Lebanon.
- ⁵⁷ See <http://www.jeunefrique.com/181370/politique/alg-rie-la-cncd-appelle-la-destitution-de-bouteflika/> last accessed 13/08/2015.
- ⁵⁸ See blog by Boumara (February 2011): <http://ffs1963.unblog.fr/2011/02/25/pourquoi-je-demissionne-de-la-coordination-nationale-pour-le-changement-et-la-democratie/> last accessed 07/11/1014.
- ⁵⁹ Interview with EU Delegation official, Algiers, 18 October 2011.
- ⁶⁰ Interview with members of Bel Horizon, Oran, 28 October 2011.
- ⁶¹ The *Law n°12-06 of 12 January 2012*, Official Journal of the Algerian Republic, n°2, 15 January 2012, 28.
- ⁶² Interviews with associations in the PCPA network meetings in Tipaza, 29/11/2011.
- ⁶³ Draft Law on Associations, September 2011, 3.
- ⁶⁴ <http://forumdesdemocrates.over-blog.com/article-la-mort-programmee-du-mouvement-associatif-96322992.html> last accessed 07/11/2014.

www.elwatan.com/actualite/les-deputes-relevant-des-ambiguites-et-des-atteintes-a-la-liberte-d-association-28-11-2011-148916_109.php last accessed 07/11/2014.

- ⁶⁶ Interview with the President of Association Nour, Oran, 24/10/2011.
- ⁶⁷ Schmitter, *Some Propositions about Civil Society and the Consolidation of Democracy*.
- ⁶⁸ Glenn, *Framing Democracy*.
- ⁶⁹ See Salhi *L'Algérie: Citoyenneté et Identité* and Derras, *Le phénomène Associatif*.
- ⁷⁰ Derras, *Le phénomène Associatif*, 34.
- ⁷¹ See www.interieur.gov.dz/Dynamics/frmItem.aspx?html=2&s=29 for the breakdown of national associations in Algeria, last accessed 13/08/2015.
- ⁷² See McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*.
- ⁷³ See <http://www.oran-belhorizon.com/> for the footage of the events.
- ⁷⁴ Quoted in the special ed. of Bel Horizon's bulletin "*10 ans au service du patrimoine*," 12, 14/04/2005 and in interviews with the author, 2011.
- ⁷⁵ Association APPAT in Tiaret, Association Santé Sidi El Houari in Oran, Association Castellum in Chleff and Association Archeologique of Tenes all reported this to be one of the motivations for the activism.
- ⁷⁶ Such as Mouloud Salhi of the Association Etoile Culturelle of Akbou in Kabylia, the association also created a guide to setting up a Communal Youth Council <http://pcpalgerie.org/?L-association-ECA-publie-le-guide> last accessed 13/08/2015.
- ⁷⁷ See Cavatorta and Elananza's discussion of *Djazairouna* and *SOS Disparus* in "Political Opposition in Civil Society."
- ⁷⁸ Djazairouna, SOS Disaprus and the Algerian Human Rights League in particular.
- ⁷⁹ Boucebcı Foundation Objectives, www.fmboucebcı.com last accessed 13/08/2015.
- ⁸⁰ Interview with the Boucebcı Foundation, Project leader Malika Ghebbi, 16/10/2011.
- ⁸¹ Interview with a psychologist in the FMB, Algiers, 16/10/2011.
- ⁸² Interview with a psychologist in the FMB, Algiers, 16/10/2011.

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- ⁸³ Interview with the Boucebcı Foundation, Project leader Malika Ghebby, 16/10/2011.
- ⁸⁴ Interview with the President of the FAPH, Attika El Mamri, 29/10/2011
- ⁸⁵ Such as <https://ajouadmemoire.wordpress.com/qui-sommes-nous-2/> collective for families of the victims of terrorism of the 1990s.
- ⁸⁶ As was seen in the two associations in Oran.
- ⁸⁷ See Lloyd, "Organising across Borders."
- ⁸⁸ Ibid.
- ⁸⁹ Volpi, *Islam and Democracy*, 135.

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