

# The 50th anniversary of Algerian independence is an opportunity to take stock of the country's recent past and the actions of its government

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Algeria recently celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> year as an independent state. As part of EUROPP's coverage of the European neighbourhood, [Natalya Vince](#) assesses the current regime's track record and questions whether the celebrations still hold any relevance for Algerians in 2012.



Commemorating half a century of independence was always going to be more problematic for the Algerian state than the 2004 celebrations marking the fiftieth anniversary of the outbreak of the War of Liberation. November 1, 1954 – when a series of coordinated bomb attacks, assassinations and acts of sabotage were carried out across Algeria by the newly-formed National Liberation Front (FLN) with the aim of ending more than a century of French rule – remains fairly consensual shorthand for idealistic courage and patriotism in contemporary Algeria.

The circumstances of independence, officially declared on July 5, 1962, are far more controversial. The FLN splintered into its rival factions and the summer months were overshadowed by political and armed conflict. By autumn, the faction of army generals won out over the provisional government, installing Ahmed Ben Bella as the first president of Algeria. Ben Bella in turn fell prey to a coup led by his former ally Houari Boumediene on June 19, 1965. Current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika was Boumediene's foreign minister and close collaborator. July 5, 1962 thus has multiple meanings within Algeria, alternately symbolising the liberation of the Algerian people from colonial domination, the confiscation of the fruits of independence by a self-serving politico-military elite, or, perhaps increasingly for younger generations, not meaning much at all.

Unsurprisingly, official festivities in Algeria this July have sought to avoid engaging with the detail of this contested past. Whilst Algiers hosted a cultural extravaganza of music, dance, theatre and poetry celebrating 'the heroes of destiny', a slick campaign of infomercials targeted world media. This included sixteen pages of politically charged advertising bought by the Algerian state in French newspaper *Le Monde*'s July 4 edition. Leading with an interview with Bouteflika, the special supplement listed at length the achievements of his presidency: the return of civil peace after the bloody decade of Islamist terrorism in the 1990s, reform of the economic system and the investment of petrol wealth in major infrastructure projects such as motorways, the metro, tramway and Algiers's newly rebuilt Houari Boumediene international airport. The contentious 'memory wars' between France and Algeria which have emerged in the past decade, notably surrounding issues of torture and violence, were conspicuously marginalised. Instead, the supplement insisted on a new forward-looking era. At the same time, its cost-inducing length, triumphant tone and prominent opening image of smiling war veteran Bouteflika, was a not-so-subtle riposte to any suggestion of colonial nostalgia or postcolonial dependency.

The Algerian independent press was less than convinced by these glorious presentations to foreign audiences. *El Watan* ironically commented that 'Algeria is no longer a country, it's Disneyland'. The French-language daily had organised its own three-day conference, bringing together academics and political actors from Algeria, France and the United States to debate the question 'Fifty years after independence: what destiny for what Algeria?' Taking place in a cinema next to *maqam al-shahid*, the imposing monument to the martyrs of the War of Liberation which dominates the Algiers skyline, participants in the *El Watan* conference critiqued the shortcomings and missed opportunities of independent Algeria in terms of democratic legitimacy, human rights and socio-economic progress and equality.

In its July 5 edition, Arabic-language *Echorouk* opted for a front page photo of a woman rummaging for food in a dustbin, the headline ominously evoking the potential impact of the fall in petrol prices on the Algerian

population and demanding that government ministers accept pay cuts. Popular cartoonist Ali Dilem provocatively marked the occasion with a sketch of lines of boats of Algerian illegal immigrants ('harraga') making their way across the Mediterranean towards France. The caption read 'There will definitely be a procession for the fiftieth anniversary of independence'. Alongside the official parades in Algiers on July 5 there were also small opposition demonstrations of the unemployed, human rights activists and the families of men who 'disappeared' during the terrorist violence and counter repression of the 1990s. A few days later, thousands of *gardes communaux*, civilians recruited as auxiliaries to the army to combat terrorism in the 1990s, took to the streets, demanding that their status be defined and their rights recognised. For all of these demonstrators, the fiftieth anniversary presented the opportunity to contest the actions of the Algerian state in the present and recent past.

Beyond the international and national media, official festivities in the capital, academic debate and activist activity, the general attitude of the Algerian population was one of fairly benign indifference, notably amongst younger generations. In the town of Bordj-Bou-Argeridj, 200 kilometres east of Algiers, a July 5 stroll revealed few signs of activity. At midday, some anniversary banners were only just being put up on state buildings. The streets were largely devoid of the flags, national colours and patriotic graffiti which covered businesses, homes and any spare wall when nationalist fervour gripped Algeria during the 2010 World Cup. Instead, walls, historical monuments and traffic lights bore layers of ripped posters and fading photos of the dozens of local candidates in the May 2012 legislative elections, which had given the FLN party a huge national victory on an official turnout of 43%.

Shops were open for business as usual, having closed early a few days previously as televisions were carried into the street to watch the Euro 2012 final between Spain and Italy. The previous evening, a red, white and green fireworks display at the local stadium had brought residents onto their balconies. Mamy, an Algerian emigrant in her 70s who had spent her working life in a French factory, began to chant 'Tahya Djazair' – long live Algeria – the chant that had echoed through the towns and villages of Algeria in July 1962. Her grandchildren, nephews and nieces smilingly joined in. Clenched fist still waving in the air, Mamy started to chant 'Tahya Bouteflika'. Hichem, a 22-year-old student, laughed: 'But with all that money spent on celebrations, he could have built a hospital.'

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*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics.*

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