

Arab Reform BULLETIN

Algeria

Interview with Karim Tabbou, Secretary-General of the Socialist Forces Front

March 9, 2009

What is your view of the expected third term for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in the election scheduled for April?

Elections in Algeria are just a formality and everyone understands that the political game is completely closed. People realize that Abdelaziz Bouteflika is staying in power because of the decision-makers, not because of the Algerian people. In fact, since 1999—when Bouteflika was appointed, not elected—the regime has had a strong desire to keep him in power. In 2004, the political charade continued, and was used to tame the opposition forces and convince the outside world, especially foreign public opinion, that there is a political process. Unfortunately, the 2009 election is a continuation of the same game. The Algerian regime has reached a high level of political corruption and fraud. The will of the people does not figure into this equation.

Regarding the economy, the government does not apply international standards and laws in state affairs. Corruption is widespread in Algeria, and the same system of bribery and lies is applied to financial and economic affairs. We are seeing signs of the hour of reckoning. While the president acknowledges in front of voters the failure of his economic policies for the past ten years, another official in the ruling coalition speaks of the regime's achievements and reassures the average Algerian that during his third term, the president will seek to improve their conditions. This shows contradictions within the bodies supporting Bouteflika. Algeria has the resources and the capability to build a strong economic environment, but this cannot be achieved without a policy of transparency, democracy, and popular participation. I believe that a third term for this president—who was not elected in 1999 or 2004 and everyone knows will not be elected in 2009—will offer no change.

The Socialist Forces Front (FFS) party boycotted the 2002 legislative elections, the 2007 parliamentary elections, and now will boycott the presidential election. What have you lost or gained by staying out of elections?

By boycotting the elections, we delivered an important message to the Algerian people: we are boycotting this corrupt regime and refusing to take part in its political game. This increases our broader popularity and credibility. As for the losses, the FFS lost parliamentary representation it could have had in managing state affairs. However, in this context this is not a loss per se. In 2002 and 2007, we boycotted the parliamentary and legislative elections out of our conviction that we must choose between winning seats in the elections and winning the respect of the Algerian people. Even if we do not have representation in the official bodies, we do have credibility and trust. When it is possible to use real democratic tools for change perhaps then the party will reap from the trust and credibility it has sown among the Algerian people.

How can there be change if you refuse to enter the political game?

In some countries, coups are staged to bring about change, but we are against the politics of violence. Political change comes with the awareness of society, which could take months, a year, or decades. This is our starting point. To participate in the government brings a loss of credibility in Algeria. For instance, when Labor Party leader Louisa Hanoun was part of the opposition, people liked her audacity and style. It was the first time the Algerian people had seen a woman courageously talking about the ideas, feelings, and needs of the people. However, when she submitted to the regime and became part of its façade, she lost all credibility. The FFS is making what we call a sustainable investment in politics, wherein we expand our presence as a party and try to recruit the largest possible number of young people. When we decided to boycott the elections in 2004, everyone criticized us, but today we are no longer alone in boycotting the elections. The FFS believes that a regime change and return to democracy is the only solution that can emerge from this crisis.

How do you build support under current conditions?

We assert to the Algerian people that the FFS's experience is socialist, and that it is now obliged to modernize, be politically open, and to build alliances with other movements and genuine political forces. It is important to point out a deeper change; the FFS had believed itself to be the solution, but today we are certain that we are not the solution, but rather one part of the solution, which can be created through cooperation with other partners. These and other changes have helped the FFS gain greater credibility, become more objective in its rhetoric, and have a greater presence on the political scene.

Some criticize the FFS for lacking democratic practices. How do you respond?

This is only natural in a country completely devoid of democratic practices. There are contradictions, and the contradictions present in our society manifest themselves in the party. However, I agree that the party has to follow democratic practices. In the past, some parties, including our own, had reached the point that their politics had become mere slogans, but today people understand that politics is the application of these slogans. This is what compelled us to reevaluate and try to reform our party. Now all opinions are debated in the framework of the official bodies within the party, and all topics are discussed in the national council. The party holds internal elections and appointments are based on internal regulations and bylaws.

How can you draw young people to the party at a time of disillusionment with political life?

We promote awareness by building up trust with citizens, particularly youth, for example by refraining from taking part in the elections. We also encourage young people to participate politically by organizing foundational programs such as a political development school for youth, especially university students. The FFS is one of the few parties that encourage and enable youth to assume leadership roles within the party. For instance, I was appointed party secretary-general and was able to reach this level of political responsibility.

How would you compare youth activism in Algeria to that in other Arab countries?

In Algeria, the atmosphere is dominated by political repression. Under a police state and emergency law and with a lack of political space for discussion, dialogue, and voicing specific views, it is impossible to talk about political activism in the usual sense. Algerian youth believe that the elections are meaningless, and that they have no real

representation in the emiral bodies and institutions, which has led to a gradual decline in political participation. However, there are some yearn organized protests in the universities, villages, and cities. These protests are always ignored, though in most cases they are limited to addressing the economic and social situation. This scene is common to all the Arab countries, but perhaps to different degrees. For instance, in Egypt, there is a political protest movement led by the judges, lawyers, and others, and in Morocco, human rights activists and trade unionists are more organized. Meanwhile, the repressive police regimes such as those in Algeria, Tunisia, and Syria do not allow any political activity. In such regimes, the opposition parties try as much as possible to avoid actions that might lead to a greater clampdown, leaving them the social realm as their only field of activity.

Intissar Fakir conducted this interview; Paul Wulfsberg translated it from Arabic.