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The Politics of Algeria

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Introduction

Algeria stands as one of the most compelling political stories in Africa, with a past marked by colonization, revolution, and the ongoing evolution of its political institutions. As the largest country in Africa by land area and a central figure in North African geopolitics, the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria has journeyed through tumultuous periods that have shaped the character of its state and society. Understanding Algerian politics requires grappling with complex histories, enduring power structures, and the notable resilience of its people.

At its core, Algeria's political system is a fascinating blend of formal democratic institutions and informal power dynamics, notably characterized by the lingering shadow of the military and long-standing ruling elite. The country's journey from Ottoman regency to French colony, then through a bitter war of liberation, has left indelible marks on its political DNA. The aftermath of these formative struggles has seen Algeria oscillate between promises of political openness and periods of acute repression, which have fundamentally shaped its contemporary statecraft.

Since gaining independence in 1962, Algeria has witnessed repeated attempts at political reform, some of which have led to significant transformations while others have only further entrenched the status quo. The establishment of a semi-presidential system with elected parliaments and periodic elections signals aspirations toward democratic governance. Yet, beneath the façade of pluralism lies the pervasive influence of Algeria's military establishment and the ruling National Liberation Front, whose dominance has often precluded meaningful democratic change.

Societal demands for greater representation, freedoms, and accountability have surged at key junctures in modern Algerian history. The violent civil conflict of the 1990s, the long rule and eventual ouster of President Bouteflika in 2019, and the recent mass mobilizations of the Hirak protest movement all attest to the intensity of public engagement and the persistent aspiration for political renewal. These episodes demonstrate both the fragility and the potential adaptability of Algeria's political order.

Algerian politics cannot be fully understood without examining the social, economic, and regional contexts that interact with the country's unique power dynamics. Reliance on hydrocarbon revenues, the ongoing challenge of economic diversification, corruption, and the constraints on civil liberties continue to influence the character and future of Algerian governance. No less significant is the enduring role of civil society, which, despite facing periodic repression, has continuously pressed for reform and greater space in public life.

This book, *The Politics of Algeria: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Algeria*, serves as a comprehensive introduction and resource for understanding the structures, actors, and dynamics that shape Algeria's political reality today. By tracing historical trajectories, analyzing the institutional framework of the state, and scrutinizing contemporary challenges and debates, it aims to provide readers with a nuanced perspective on one of the most pivotal states in the Maghreb and the wider African continent.

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CHAPTER ONE: Algeria: Land of Contrasts

Algeria, officially the People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, is a geographical giant in North Africa, holding the title of the largest country on the African continent and the tenth largest in the world by total area. Its vast expanse, stretching over 2.38 million square kilometers, creates a landscape of incredible diversity, from a Mediterranean coastline in the north to the sweeping sands of the Sahara Desert in the south. This immense territory, however, tells only part of the story, as the distribution of its population and economic activity is heavily concentrated in the fertile northern strip.

The country shares its borders with a collection of North and West African nations: Tunisia and Libya to the east, Niger, Mali, and Mauritania to the south, and Morocco and Western Sahara to the west. To the north lies the Mediterranean Sea, a vital connection to Europe and a defining feature of Algeria's climate and historical interactions. This strategic location has for centuries placed Algeria at a crossroads of cultures and civilizations.

Delving into Algeria's geography reveals two principal zones. The northern area, often referred to as the Tell, is a region of mountains, valleys, and plateaus nestled between the Mediterranean and the Sahara. This is where the majority of Algerians reside, drawn to the more favorable climate and fertile land. The Tell Atlas mountains, running parallel to the coast, play a crucial role in this, trapping moisture from the Mediterranean and creating a stark contrast with the arid south.

South of the Saharan Atlas mountain range lies the vast and formidable Sahara Desert, covering over 80% of the country. This is no mere sea of sand; the Algerian Sahara is a region of surprising variety, including immense areas of sand dunes, known as *ergs*, and rocky plateaus. Life here is challenging, with extreme temperatures and scarce water resources.

The climate of Algeria is as varied as its topography. The narrow coastal strip enjoys a Mediterranean climate with mild, wet winters and hot, dry summers. As you move inland, the climate becomes more transitional, semi-arid in the high plateaus, with greater temperature variations. The Sahara, of course, is defined by its arid desert climate, with scorching summers and cooler nights, especially in winter. The *Chilli* or *Sirocco*, a hot, dry wind from the desert, can sweep across the country, bringing dust and dramatic temperature increases, a reminder of the desert's proximity and power.

Algeria's population, estimated to be over 46 million in 2024, is heavily concentrated in the northern coastal areas. Around 91% of Algerians live on just 12% of the country's landmass. This demographic reality is a crucial factor in Algerian politics,

shaping everything from resource allocation to political representation. The vast, sparsely populated south presents a different set of challenges and opportunities compared to the more densely inhabited north.

The majority of Algeria's population identifies as Arab, though most are of Amazigh (Berber) descent who have been Arabized over centuries of cultural and linguistic exchange. The Amazigh people, the indigenous inhabitants of North Africa, form a significant minority, with distinct cultural and linguistic traditions. Major Amazigh groups include the Kabyle, Shawia, M'zabites, and Tuareg, each with their own historical regions and dialects. While Arabic and Tamazight (the official Amazigh language) are the official languages, French remains widely used in government, education, and business, a legacy of the colonial era.

Sunni Islam is the dominant religion, practiced by the vast majority of the population. While there are small communities of other religious groups, including Ibadis, Christians, and a tiny Jewish population, Algeria is overwhelmingly a Muslim country. This shared religious identity plays a significant role in shaping social norms and political discourse.

Algeria's major cities are predominantly located along the Mediterranean coast or in the fertile northern interior. Algiers, the capital and largest city, is a bustling metropolis on the coast, serving as the country's political, economic, and cultural center. Oran, in the northwest, is another vital port city and an important industrial and commercial hub. Other significant cities in the north include Constantine, known for its dramatic setting and numerous bridges, and Blida, surrounded by orchards and gardens. These urban centers are where much of the country's economic activity and political life is concentrated.

Understanding the interplay between Algeria's diverse geography and its demographic patterns is essential for grasping the complexities of its political system. The historical development of the country, from ancient civilizations to colonial rule and independence, is deeply intertwined with the land and the people who inhabit it. The concentration of the population in the north, the vastness of the Sahara, and the distinct identities of the various ethnic groups all contribute to the unique political landscape of Algeria.

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