

Vote confirms Algeria as Arab Spring exception: analysts **by Jean-Marc Mojon**

ALGIERS, May 12, 2012 (AFP) - The Arab Spring's wind of change fell dead on an Algerian regime that derives its strength from two brutal conflicts and prior experience of Islamism, analysts said Saturday.

The results of Algeria's first polls since the wave of uprisings born in neighbouring Tunisia started sweeping the Arab world bucked the regional trend and preserved the status quo. "What stands out in this election is this Algerian exception that doesn't fit in with the perceptions and speculations fed by the revolutions that have affected the Arab world," the private opposition paper *Liberte* wrote Saturday.

While moderate Islamists in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt recorded major electoral gains on the back of the Arab Spring, Algeria's legal Islamist parties lost ground in Thursday's legislative polls. "In fact the Arab Spring did have an impact on the election... but maybe not in the way the world was expecting," political analyst Nourredine Hakiki told AFP.

"In Egypt, in Libya, there was change but then there was regression and disorder... In Algeria, voters were looking for security, stability," he said.

After multi-partyism was introduced in 1989, the radical Islamic Salvation Front swept to victory in the first round of legislative elections two years later.

But the army stepped in to halt the vote and launched a crackdown, sparking a civil war with extremist Islamist groups -- Al-Qaeda's North African branch is the emanation of one of them -- that lasted 10 years and left 200,000 dead.

"Algeria has had Islamism, nobody here can forget that period... It's a chapter that this generation does not want to reopen," Hakiki said.

Protests broke out in January 2011 when the Tunisian revolution was still young but President Abdelaziz Bouteflika responded by promising change, initiating a reform programme and dishing out pay rises.

Algeria's Islamist parties for their part were already in power in a governing coalition led by Bouteflika's former single party which gave them some of the most lucrative portfolios. The main Islamist party, the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), is the Algerian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, which swept to electoral triumphs in Egypt and Tunisia. An eleventh-hour move to quit the parliamentary coalition and form a new electoral platform failed to restore its legitimacy as an alternative.

"Islamists here have made a big mistake. Because it has been part of every recent government, people in Algeria don't trust the MSP," said Zouheir Hamedi, a political analyst based in Qatar. "The Muslim Brothers in Egypt obtained a good score because they experienced prison for more than 30 years. Here the Islamists don't embody change," he said.

Several observers predicted Saturday that the MSP would remain part of the governing coalition, offering further evidence that the Islamist bloc has definitively been co-opted by the regime. Bouteflika's National Liberation Front for its part continues to draw legitimacy from the more than seven years of bloody struggle against the French colonial power.

It has been ruling Algeria since independence and is seen by many Algerians, including some of its fiercest critics, as a guarantee of stability.

Antoine Basbous, head of the Paris-based Observatory of Arab countries, argued that the international community also appeared keen to preserve the stability of Algeria, which provides a fifth of Europe's gas.

"There are justified concerns over countries where the Arab Spring took place... I feel there is a willingness to protect this regime," he said. "There was a need for one hub of stability." Basbous cited overwhelmingly positive comments by the 500 foreign observers Bouteflika invited to monitor the polls and swift endorsements of the electoral process by foreign capitals despite widespread suspicion of fraud.

"Algeria is a key piece of the puzzle in the Sahel crisis," he said, in reference to the division of Mali and the rise of armed groups with links to Al-Qaeda in the wake of the Libyan regime's collapse. "Algeria was not going to be destabilised at a time when it is expected to play a role in its own zone of influence."

