

ALGERIA

ISSUE

In Algeria, there is regular abuse of human rights, both by radical Islamist terrorists and by security forces in their campaign against terrorism.

BACKGROUND

Having gained legitimacy as a result of the first democratic elections in November 1995, President Zeroual has attempted, with the support of the military, to unite behind him Algeria's political forces including the moderate Islamists. His appointment of the first pluralist cabinet on January 5, 1996 marked a cautious overture to the Islamist movement. The President consulted all political parties before presenting in May 1996 his political plan which included a national conference (held in the summer of 1996), a constitutional referendum (held on November 28 and won by the President), and a legislative election (to be held in 1997).

Although the result of the referendum strengthened the position of President Zeroual vis-à-vis the military, he remains politically isolated. The referendum did not achieve the hoped-for political consensus, since the secular political parties did not support the strengthening of the President's powers and the recognized moderate Islamist parties opposed the banning of religious parties. Now that the referendum has passed, it remains to be seen how President Zeroual will use his new constitutional powers. His actions will be a determining factor in the political stability and security of Algeria, to which the human rights situation is closely linked.

In conjunction with the efforts of the regime to obtain the support of Algeria's political players, the fight against fundamentalist-inspired terrorism has been pursued. Fundamentalists had originally been convinced of the legitimacy of the armed struggle for Islamic rule by the government's own dismissal of the electoral process in January 1992, to keep the Front islamique du salut (FIS) from power. In 1996, however, regional and ideological divisions appeared within the Islamist movement, with some elements undertaking virtual banditry. The result has been daily violence and terrorism in all sectors of Algerian society. Unofficial estimates set the number of victims at 60 000.

This battle between the government and Islamists has led to numerous cases of human rights abuse. The assassination of journalists by Islamist groups and government censorship of the media ('reading committees' on publishers' premises screen newspaper content) make it difficult to obtain comprehensive coverage of the human rights situation in Algeria. As well, some murders of civilians, blamed on armed Islamist groups, may well be the work of criminal elements with very tenuous links to the Islamic movement. Local collusion between enforcement agencies and Islamist groups make it difficult to assign clear responsibility for human rights abuse.

Armed Islamists have targeted intellectuals, journalists ("Those who live by the pen shall