

The Role of Elections in Shaping Algerian National Consciousness (1948–1954)

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Submission Date	Acceptance Date	Publication Date
19/05/2026	30/05/2026	10/06/2026

Abstract:

All those who witnessed the event agreed that the Ain Defla uprising was organized by activists of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD). They had previously instructed their supporters to disrupt the electoral process, which the French administration attempted to manipulate through electoral fraud in order to preserve colonial rule. Their aim was to expose France's policy of extending the lifespan of colonialism. The activists also ordered the burning of ballot boxes if the French authorities refused to permit free and fair elections. This period was characterized by an atmosphere of caution and repression, as party meetings were banned, newspapers were confiscated, and the number of arrests increased under the pretext of protecting French sovereignty.

Key words : Electoral, the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD) ,the French administration, electoral process.

Introduction:

The leaders of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD) were determined to confront the electoral fraud that the French administration sought to impose on the Algerian people during the 1948 legislative elections.

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Consequently, the party instructed its activists to burn ballot boxes if the French authorities opposed the organization of free and fair elections. This period was marked by an atmosphere of caution and repression, as all party meetings were banned, newspapers were confiscated, and the number of arrests increased under the pretext of undermining French sovereignty. Within this tense political climate, representatives of the MTLN in the region employed every peaceful means possible to thwart the electoral fraud orchestrated by the French administration.

1- The Course of the 1947 Legislative Elections

Following the promulgation of the law approved by the French Parliament on September 20, 1947¹, where the French administration supervised the organization of elections for the Algerian Assembly. These elections witnessed widespread electoral fraud, driven by fears that a particular political movement might secure an overwhelming majority.² Before that, the liberal Governor-General of Algeria, Châtaigneau, had been dismissed and replaced by the socialist Edmond Naegelen.³

The period of Governor-General Naegelen was marked by electoral manipulation, where elections were systematically rigged in favour of administration-backed candidates who did not belong to any of the national political parties.⁴

He states in this regard: “There was no real option in our three Algerian departments between free elections and revolutionary elections; rather, it was a choice between elections dominated by the Messalists and elections controlled by the General Government, and we preferred the second option”⁵

An agreement was reached between Naegelen and the French government on several points, which included suppressing Algerian nationalist activists and preventing them

from using their political slogans during the legislative election campaign. It also aimed to obstruct the implementation of the provisions set out in the law of September 20, 1947, which were intended to guarantee Algerians certain rights established under the fundamental statute. As a final point of this agreement, the French administration committed itself not to support independent candidates, left-wing figures, or even socialist Muslim Algerians.⁶

Accordingly, its main mission was to contain and restrict the nationalists, to violate the law, and to obstruct its implementation, in an attack on electoral freedom. This included arbitrary measures aimed at preventing both nationalist movements and even communists from winning seats in the second electoral college of the Assembly.⁷

National meetings were banned, and the newspaper *Al-Maghrib Al-Arabi*, which was close to the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties, was subjected to restrictions and suppression. In addition, arrests of activists intensified, along with widespread searches and abductions.⁸

Upon taking office, he implemented a policy of repression through various means and methods, aiming to eliminate the Algerian national movement, marginalize it, and remove it from the political scene. He also sought to isolate the people from it, as well as to undermine its unity and that of the Algerian nation. His threats had already begun before his arrival in Algeria, while he was still in Paris on February 25, 1948, which indicates the existence of a premeditated plan of repression that was ready to be executed⁹

.He began by obstructing the elections that were mandated by the special statute, in order to fulfill his commitments to the colons, foremost among them “Aubry,” who stated: “The Algerian Assembly is now forbidden to any nationalist deputy. No executive provision of the Algerian statute will ever see the

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light of day, and no liberal figure from the French left, including the Socialists, will be given any opportunity”¹⁰

Naegelen exerted every possible effort to implement his project, issuing orders to the French administration to harass independent candidates, as well as those supporting the Muslim Union. In reality, however, many of these figures were close to the French authorities, who had relied on them in advancing their colonial political agenda.¹¹ He also issued threats, declaring: “I will crush every separatist movement and firmly confront anyone who dares to provoke unrest and disorder in order to impose their will and opinions”¹²

Here, he was referring to representatives of the Algerian national movement. He also declared: “I will use all my strength to undermine every attempt made by the separatists. With firm determination, I will not only seek to resolve immediate problems, but also to weaken the influence, position, and power of the separatists. I will work tirelessly in the service of France’s interests”.¹³

These statements demonstrate that the conflict between the French colonial authorities and the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD) had reached its peak. The elections for the Algerian Assembly revealed Naegelen’s true intentions and political stance. An atmosphere of fear overshadowed the electoral campaign, while the political scene witnessed widespread violence and unjustified repression carried out by the French colonial administration in order to intimidate and terrorize nationalist activists.¹⁴

2- Attempt by Algerians to Expose Electoral Fraud in the Legislative Elections

The legislative elections took place between 4 and 11 April 1948 under difficult conditions, reflecting a context of disorder, abuses, arrests, and repression against candidates and

activists who had already been targeted and imprisoned even before the elections.¹⁵

These events indicate that France did not respect its own commitments or the democratic principles it had repeatedly claimed to uphold when opening the electoral campaign to candidates. Instead, it escalated pressure against Algerians who had entered the elections within a legal framework, revealing a strong capacity for manipulating electoral results.¹⁶

Therefore, the leaders of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD) were determined to confront the electoral fraud that the French administration sought to impose on the Algerian people through the 1948 legislative elections. Accordingly, the party issued instructions to burn ballot boxes in the event that the French authorities obstructed the holding of free and fair elections. This period was characterized by an atmosphere of caution, as all party meetings were banned, newspapers were confiscated, and the number of arrests increased under the pretext of undermining French sovereignty. Within this tense climate, representatives of the MTLD in the region employed all peaceful means to thwart the electoral fraud pursued by the French administration.

As these events unfolded, the authorities' intentions regarding the elections were exposed, surveillance over polling stations was intensified, and support was directed toward pro-government candidates. Police forces were also significantly reinforced, particularly in areas with a strong presence of nationalist supporters. This constituted clear evidence of an attempt to obstruct the elections and ensure their outcome favored the French colonial administration. Systematic electoral manipulation was carried out under Naegelen, who had become notorious for electoral fraud and for arresting candidates prior to election day.¹⁷

Algerian nationalist newspapers played a major role in exposing this policy. Notably, an article published in issue 6 of

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Al-Manar stated: “You have the right to vote, and I have the right to dispose of your vote”¹⁸

In response, participation in the elections was agreed upon as a reaction to the lack of trust in the electoral process. A French newspaper correspondent, in an investigative report, noted that 20 local inhabitants stated that French officials had voted on their behalf, meaning they did not even need to go to the polling stations or leave their homes.¹⁹

Before the date of the elections, Mustapha Ferroukhi, Qassoum Melouj, and Mohamed Boulouha were active in holding meetings in Ain El Mahdi in Baba Idriss and Ain El Merra in Ouafri. During this period, 114 families from the Djamaa Ouled El Cheikh region, 75 families from Douar Hraouat, and 20 families from Douar Matmata were made aware of the situation, as clandestine political organization began to take shape.

On Thursday, 5 April 1948, Hadj Abdelkader Ain Belaâta was appointed as an election observer by Messaoud Ben Aïssa, the head of the Khemis Miliana office, which was located opposite the old mosque. On that day, all activists gathered, during which Mustapha Ferroukhi, the party candidate, delivered a speech warning about the electoral fraud that the French administration was expected to carry out on election day. Messaoud Ben Aïssa then proceeded to distribute accreditation permits for monitoring the voting process across the various tribes and municipalities under the jurisdiction of the Khemis Miliana office. Hadj Abdelkader Belaâta, Zouatni Mansour, and Baghdad Ali were appointed to go to the Ouled El Cheikh tribe. They arrived on Saturday evening and spent the night at the house of Belkacem Ben Mira, where detailed planning and discussion took place to obstruct the electoral fraud.²⁰

This led the activists of the Djemaâ Ouled El Cheikh tribe, under the leadership of Qassoum Melouj, Moussa Tayebi,

Madboua Abdelkader, Zarif Moussa, and Mohamed Boulouha, to organize the inhabitants of the neighboring tribes of Djemaâ Ouled El Cheikh into special cells aimed at raising awareness among citizens about the electoral fraud and manipulation expected to be carried out by the French administration on election day. As a result, two groups were formed:

1. Group One:

Led by Qassoum Melouj, Ben Mira Majen, Abdelkader Mebdoua, Messaoud Ben Aïssa, Zouatni Mansour, Zarif Moussa, Abdelkader Khadaoui, and Hadj Ben Belkacem, this group carried out an attack on the election office, seized the ballot box, and took it away to a distant location.

2. Group Two:

Composed of Zimam Mohamed Belsikri, Nessissa Abdelkader, and Toubri Nat Issa Ben Ahmed, this group witnessed Issa Ben Ahmed slapping the local leader in public. This act was intended to provoke the caïds, accompanied by a public declaration: “You are traitors to the nation and agents of the occupier, serving its interests”.²¹

The situation then escalated into clashes involving physical confrontation and stone-throwing.

On election day in April 1948, the municipality of Thénia El Had assigned Fatouche Ben Yamina to transport three ballot boxes to polling stations in Taghzout (Matmata), Ouzra in the Hraouat tribe, and Djemaâ Ouled El Cheikh. He was accompanied by three French gendarmes. At each station, one of the ballot boxes was delivered and set in place for voting. When they arrived at the Djemaâ Ouled El Cheikh polling station at around 8 a.m., voting began in a tense and suspicious atmosphere, marked by anger and unusual activity, suggesting that something was about to happen.²² The French administration proceeded to rig the elections.²³ by pre-filling ballot boxes with votes in favor of its administrative candidates. It also used excessive force to pressure voters. The vote-

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counting process was conducted behind closed doors, without the drafting of official minutes, and a large number of nationalist candidates were arrested.

When the administrative officials, including the caïd and his assistants (the shenabtia), placed the voting records on the table, Mustapha Melouj and Moussa Taybi stepped forward and declared: “We will not proceed with the elections unless you open the ballot box so that we can verify that it is free from your manipulations of our votes in favor of your candidates.” The administrative official immediately responded: “The ballot box cannot be opened under any circumstances, regardless of your justifications or demands.” As a result, a strategic decision was taken to boycott the elections on the grounds that the ballot box was already filled with votes in favor of the French administration’s candidates.²⁴

Naegelen consequently worked to eliminate the “separatists” within the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD), as the nationalists who were allowed to use political symbols were linked to the MTLD. These claims were confirmed by a European speaker who stated: “It is absurd to grant electoral rights to Muslims. We used force to thwart the Blum–Viollette project in 1936, and we convinced the government that we could do the same today, but the matter requires strong men in the position of Governor-General who know how to ensure that our rights are respected and force is applied”.²⁵

The gendarmes, police, and armed guards assigned to security duties confronted the local population, who refused to vote for the “Yes–Yes” list and instead supported the nationalist candidates. This later allowed the administration to adjust and improve the situation in its favor by influencing the vote count, and Governor-General Naegelen subsequently received

congratulations from the French President regarding these results.²⁶

This led the inhabitants of the region to declare rebellion and civil disobedience against the French authorities. They attacked the election officials with sticks, and the situation escalated into violent clashes. During this time, both Melouj and Taybi managed to forcibly seize the ballot box. Gendarmes then intervened to protect the election staff, which further worsened the situation. The population turned against the gendarmes, and clashes continued with sticks and stones. A jeep vehicle had its windows smashed, and the gendarmes, along with administrative personnel, fled toward the town of Thénia El Had. Meanwhile, Qassoum Melouj and his group moved with the ballot box toward the Taghlissia faction, to the house of one of its members.²⁷

When they arrived with the ballot box at Qassoum Melouj's house, they prepared it to be transported on an animal. It was then handed over to Belaâlta Abdelkader, Zouatni Mansour, and Baghdad Ali, who took it to the party headquarters in Khemis Miliana. There, it was opened in the presence of several honest foreign journalists so that they could witness firsthand both the rigged elections and the reality of the fraud, in order for the news to spread in newspapers and expose France's lies and plans.

The astonishment of those present was great when they found the box filled with votes in favor of the French administration's candidates, without a single vote for Ferroukhi Mustapha or Mzaana. Fatouche Ben Yamina recounts the incident, saying that when Qassoum Melouj shouted at the top of his voice: "Enough, enough of the rule of the caïds; we are tired of the colonizer and its leadership"²⁸, the situation escalated. The inhabitants then rushed toward the ballot box, led by Zimam Mohamed Belsikri, who struck it with his stick and knocked it to the ground. Others followed, including Aissa Ben Mohamed

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Toubri Nat, who slapped the local leader in front of those present. Verbal confrontations then erupted, further intensifying the clashes. The population believed that these events had taken place throughout the entire country and that they had achieved victory over the French administration.

On 9 April 1948, the French police arrested the three individuals and the court sentenced them to one year in prison. They were imprisoned in the Chlef prison. Most of the participants in the uprising were young men who hoped that the revolt would spread to all tribes and regions. This indeed occurred in the Hraouat tribe, which showed solidarity with the inhabitants of Djemaâ Ouled El Cheikh and participated in breaking the ballot boxes. All those who witnessed the events agreed that the Ain Taghzout uprising, whose events took place in a location known as Oued El Tawil (currently the northwestern area of the municipality of Tarek Ibn Ziyad), was planned by activists of the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties (MTLD). They had issued prior instructions to obstruct the electoral process, which the French administration sought to manipulate in order to expose its policy of extending the lifespan of colonial rule. Sunday, 8 April 1948, was the day of the legislative elections in Ain Taghzout, in the presence of Caïd Bouzid, the French official Dominique, and tribal elders. The caïd and Dominique represented the French authorities, while the party was represented by Himoud, Mehrad Ahmed, Des Ziane, and Mohamed Jazar Ben Yahia on the Algerian side. Before the start of the voting process, the party representatives requested that the ballot box be opened to ensure the integrity of the elections, but this was refused. In response, Himoud, together with Mehrad Ahmed and Des Ziane, seized the ballot box and fled with it toward the Tamamara forest (located east of Oued El Tawil). After the box was broken, envelopes were found inside. The others engaged in stone-throwing and clashes with sticks. After fleeing on foot to his

residence in Bordj Emir Abdelkader, the French official Dominique prepared a detailed report on the incident.²⁹

The French authorities responded to this incident by deploying a military unit that carried out search operations and arrested many inhabitants of the region. With the assistance of tribal elders, gendarmerie elements, and special forces (the Slikan), 85 citizens were arrested and imprisoned in Thénia El Had, Serkadji, and Chlef prisons. In addition, financial fines were imposed on them. Two months later, another election was organized at a place called Bir Ben Abou, where voters—numbering around 40 citizens, were forced to participate under coercion. The French administration also imposed fines on anyone who allegedly mistreated animals by striking or scratching their necks, or by carrying excessive loads on their backs.³⁰

3- Response of the French administration

As usual, under the supervision of the caïd, his assistants, and a French gendarmerie unit, the French administration launched a search for the activists who had planned the uprising and arrested several of them on the first day. Among those arrested were Zouari Belkacem Ben Ahmed, Saâdoun Netani Ben El-Tounsi, and Melouj Ben Aïssa Ben Ali. This action was considered inevitable by the French authorities, as remaining passive would have undermined its authority and weakened its colonial prestige.

The administration then established a force stationed at the caïd's headquarters (which later became the current seat of the Djemaâ Ouled El Cheikh municipality). The caïd subsequently sent his assistants to the Taghlissa faction to summon its men to his office for interrogation by the gendarmerie regarding the events. However, this request was rejected, which led the caïd

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and his associates to consider it an act of general disobedience. They returned unsuccessfully to Thénia El Had. This failure prompted the French administration to prepare a military unit. Meanwhile, Fatouche Ben Yamina, an employee at the Thénia El Had municipality, along with El-Hachemi Ben Lakhdar, informed the inhabitants of the French preparations against the village in order to prevent a massacre, an outcome that indeed occurred, as when the forces arrived, they found only women and children.³¹

Army, gendarmerie, and police forces then imposed heavy pressure on the population, and a state of siege was declared. Regarding these events, Hadj Belkacem Qari stated that on the third day, 11 April 1948, a French gendarmerie unit moved toward the Taghlissa faction and succeeded in arresting Melouj Qassoum and Taybi Moussa. At that moment, the local elder Kadouri Kadour called upon the population to assist them against the gendarmerie. Consequently, the inhabitants mobilized and surrounded the gendarmes, demanding the release of the two detainees.³²

Despite French resistance, the gendarmes felt threatened as the crowd became increasingly enraged and armed with firearms. They eventually released the detainees and fled toward Thénia El Had. This retreat caused widespread joy among the population, and some began to speak openly of preparing resistance against the French authorities, agreeing that they should rise up collectively against France.

The French authorities responded harshly on 13 April 1948, when a large French force arrived and surrounded the Djemaâ Ouled El Cheikh tribe, prohibiting entry to and exit from the area for an entire month. This allowed the French army to arrest a large number of inhabitants.³³

However, Qassoum Melouj and Taybi Moussa took refuge in the mountains, remaining in hiding there. After 15 days, they surrendered themselves, fearing French reprisals against the

local population, reportedly following instructions from Mustapha Ferroukhi. Afterwards, Taghlissa became a meeting point for nationalists such as Ahmed Bougara, Mehssas, Boumaâza, and Souidani Boujemaa, while Mustapha Ferrouchi held meetings in Melouj's house. From that day onward, the population lived under abnormal conditions due to the imposed siege. A military force composed of soldiers known as the Slikan intervened, carrying out searches among the population, forcibly entering homes and destroying furniture and doors. Through these actions, they attempted to intimidate the inhabitants and spread fear and panic among them.

Conclusion:

These events resulted in the pursuit of many activists, who were imprisoned on charges of rebellion, disturbing public order, insulting the caïd, and attacking gendarmes and tribal elders. After the trial of both Qassoum Melouj and Moussa Taybi, the court sentenced them to 18 months in prison. After their release, they resumed clandestine activism in organizing the tribe. By 1952, they were under constant surveillance by the French authorities, which attempted on several occasions to arrest them but failed. Following the outbreak of the Liberation Revolution on 1 November 1954, Qassoum Melouj and his comrades became part of the first group of mujahideen in the third region of Wilaya IV.

This incident, along with its consequences for the local population, confirms the development of clandestine political activity to a level of maturity and coordination between the active elements of both tribes. It also reflects the emergence of early national consciousness and revolutionary struggle prior to the outbreak of the November 1, 1954 Revolution.

Footnotes:

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