

Algerians' darkening outlook on economy and democracy predates recent anti-austerity protests

Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 140 | Thomas Isbell

Summary

Six years after protests swept Northern Africa in the Arab Spring, Algeria entered 2017 with unrest in the streets. Like many other petro-economies, Algeria relies heavily on high state spending and subsidies. But in recent years, plummeting oil and gas prices have hit the country's economy hard. Algeria generates about 95% of its export earnings from oil, and faced with dwindling revenues and reserves, the government has been tasked with reducing state spending by 9% in 2016 and another 14% at the beginning of this year (Falconer, 2017; Stratfor, 2017; Wrey, 2017). With the passing of a 2017 austerity policy that included cuts in state spending and subsidies and increases in value-added, income, property, and tobacco taxes, some protests turned violent, leading to arrests as shops and bank offices were looted (Falconer, 2017). As Carboni, Kishi, and Raleigh (2017) note, the number of recent protest events has already surpassed those of 2011, "raising concerns that local grievances may give rise again to wider collective actions," with implications beyond Algeria, as Stratfor (2017) remarks: "Because Algerian stability is important to overall North African security, the protests bear watching."

In comparison to Tunisia and Egypt, Algeria saw fairly weak support for the Arab Spring in 2011, and no regime change took place. But with an aging regime and an economic downturn, might Algeria return for a spring of change?

Afrobarometer survey findings in Algeria suggest that popular discontent is not merely a response to the most recent austerity moves but has been building for some time. Data collected in May-June 2015 show that Algerians were considerably more negative in their assessments of the country's economic situation and their government's performance than in 2013. Findings also raise questions about Algerians' perceptions of elections as a solution to their problems: Most saw political party leaders as self-serving, few perceived the political opposition as a viable alternative, and few considered elections an adequate mechanism for replacing non-performing leaders and ensuring that the interests of the people are reflected.

Afrobarometer survey

Afrobarometer is a pan-African, non-partisan research network that conducts public attitude surveys on democracy, governance, economic conditions, and related issues across Africa. Six survey rounds were completed between 1999 and 2015. Afrobarometer conducts face-to-face interviews in the language of the respondent's choice with nationally representative samples.

For its Round 6 survey in Algeria, the Afrobarometer team interviewed 1,200 adult Algerians in May and June 2015. A sample of this size yields country-level results with a margin of sampling error of +/-3% at a 95% confidence level. One previous Afrobarometer survey was conducted in Algeria in 2013.

Key findings

- Between 2013 and 2015, Algerians' outlook darkened considerably, with a fourfold increase – from 10% to 42% – in the proportion of respondents who said the country was headed in “the wrong direction.”
- Similarly, citizens were far more likely than in 2013 to say that their country's economic conditions were bad (34%, vs. 14% in 2013), that economic conditions had gotten worse during the previous year (32% vs. 8%), and that the economy would deteriorate within 12 months' time (29% vs. 1%).
- Men, younger respondents, and poorer citizens were especially likely to be critical in their assessments of economic conditions.
- Almost two-thirds (63%) of Algerians said the government was doing a poor job of managing the economy, a 25-percentage-point increase from 2013. Assessments of government performance on other economic issues were also strongly negative, though slightly improved since 2013.
- Economic discontent was matched by negative perceptions of political leaders and the quality of elections. Majorities said leaders work to advance their own ambitions rather than the public interest (56%) and rarely listen to their constituents' views. Only about two in 10 respondents said that votes in elections are always counted fairly (16%) and that elections work well to ensure that MPs reflect voters' views (24%) and to enable voters to remove underperforming leaders (20%).

Negative economic assessments

Algerians' assessments of their country's and their personal economic situation became significantly more negative between 2013 and 2015 (Figure 1). While a plurality (49%) of citizens still saw the country as headed in “the right direction,” the proportion who saw it as headed in “the wrong direction” quadrupled, from 10% to 42%. Similarly, citizens were far more likely to say that their national economic conditions were “fairly bad” or “very bad” (34%, vs. 14% in 2013), that economic conditions had gotten “worse” or “much worse” during the previous year (32% vs. 8%), and that the economy would get worse within 12 months' time (29% vs. 1%).

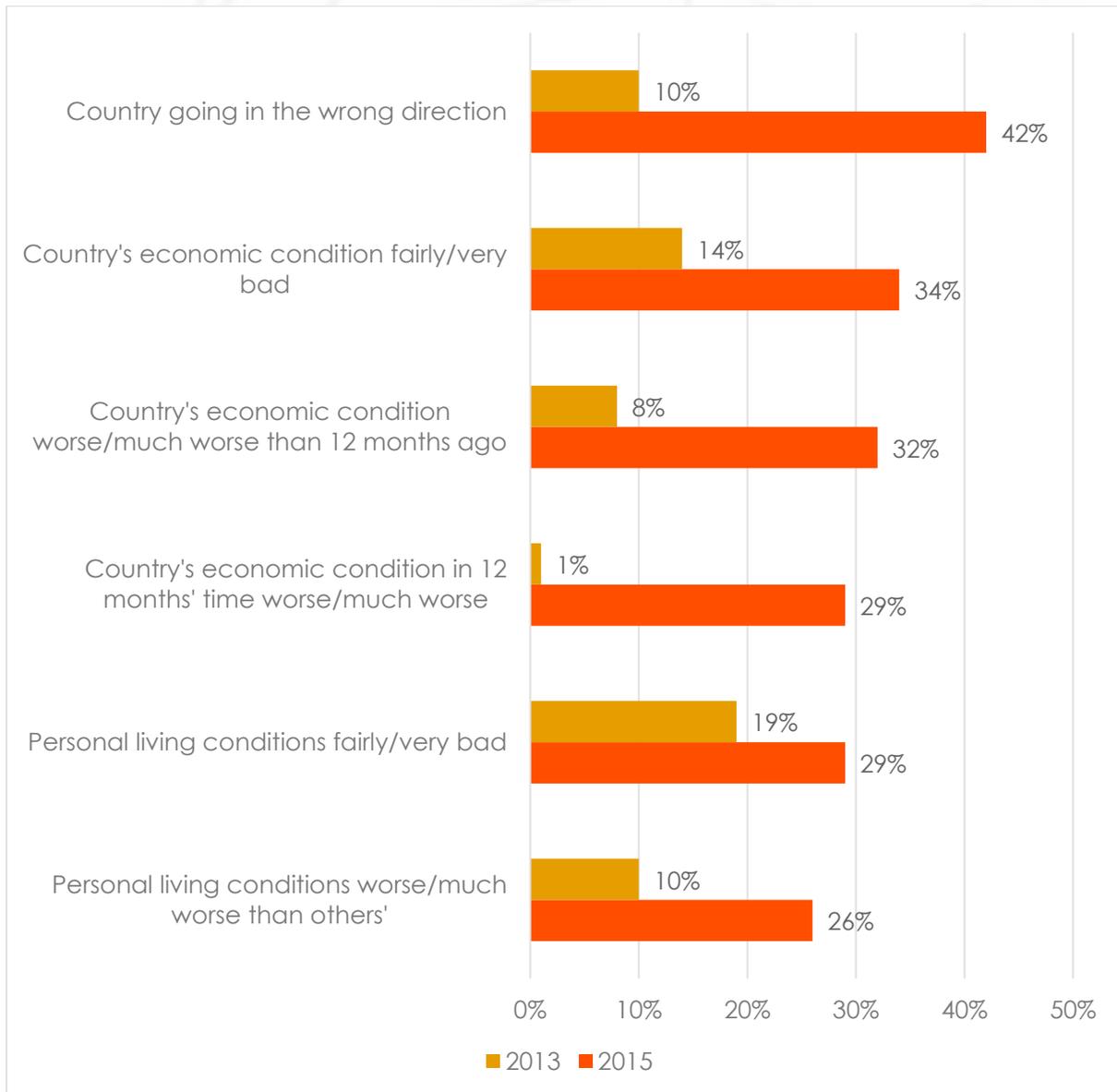
Moreover, when asked about their personal living conditions, more Algerians described them as “fairly bad” or “very bad” (29%, up from 19% in 2013) and as “worse” or “much worse” than those of other Algerians (26%, up from 10%).

Thus, while negative assessments were not in the majority, they were far more frequent than just two years earlier.

Looking at the half of the population who said the country was going in the right direction (49% in 2015, down from 72% in 2013), we see a number of especially dramatic changes from two years earlier (Figure 2). The proportion of men who agreed with the country's direction dropped by 27 percentage points to 43% – significantly lower than women's level of agreement (56%). Similarly, approval of the country's direction dropped by 27 percentage points among rural residents (51%), almost eliminating their difference from urban residents (48%).

Agreement with the country's overall direction declined especially strongly among 18- to 29-year-olds (from 70% to 42%), making them significantly less positive than their elders. Approval remained far lower among poor respondents (21% of those with moderate or high lived poverty) even after a sharp drop among their wealthier counterparts (from 74% to 55% of those with no or low lived poverty).

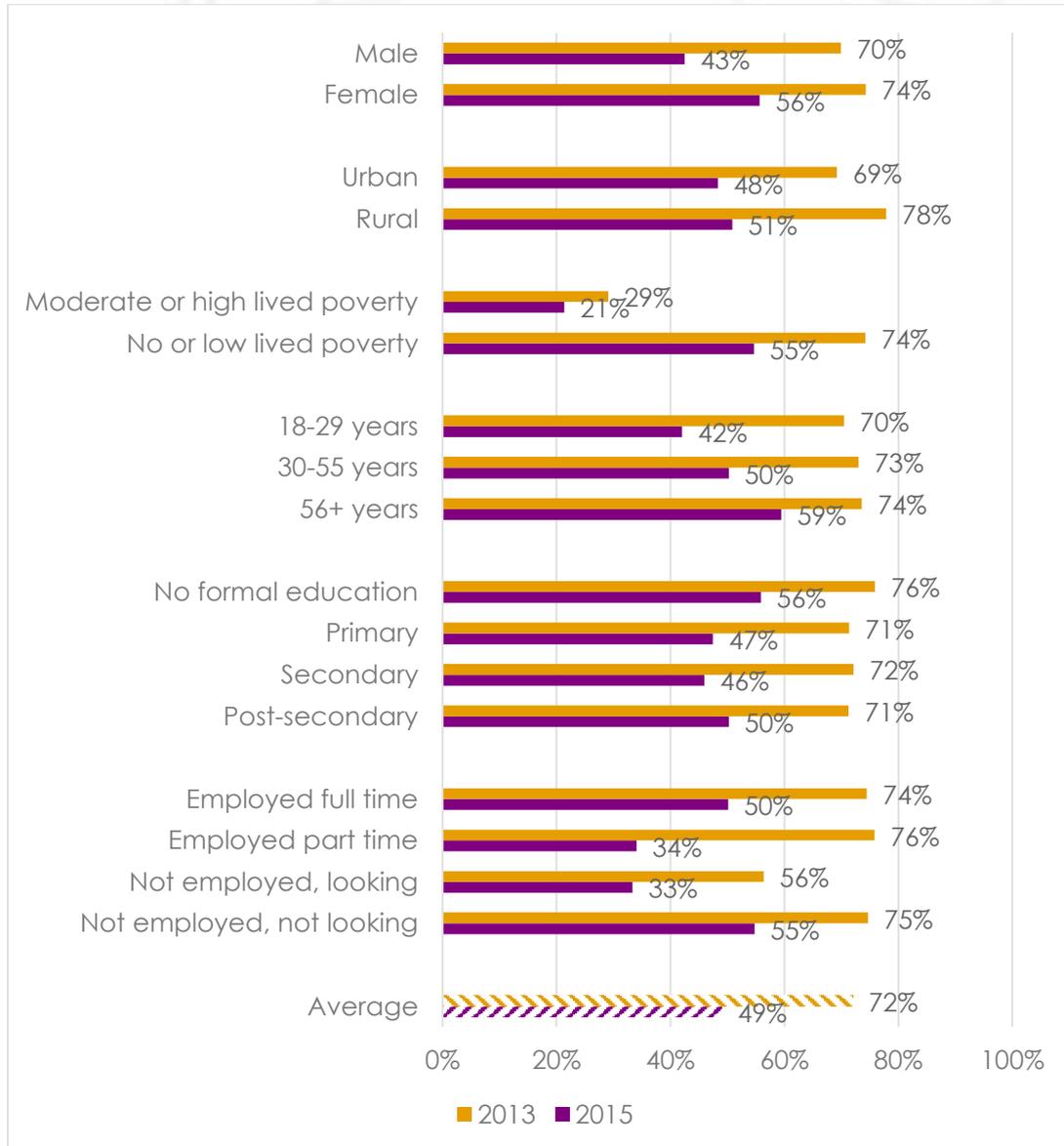
Figure 1: More negative economic assessments | Algeria | 2013-2015



Respondents were asked:

- Some people might think the country is going in the wrong direction. Others may feel it is going in the right direction. So let me ask YOU about the overall direction of the country: Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction?
- In general, how would you describe the present economic condition of this country?
- Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?
- Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?
- In general, how would you describe your own present living conditions?
- In general, how do you rate your living conditions compared to those of other Algerians?

Figure 2: Declining approval of the country's overall direction
 | by socio-demographic factors | Algeria | 2013-2015

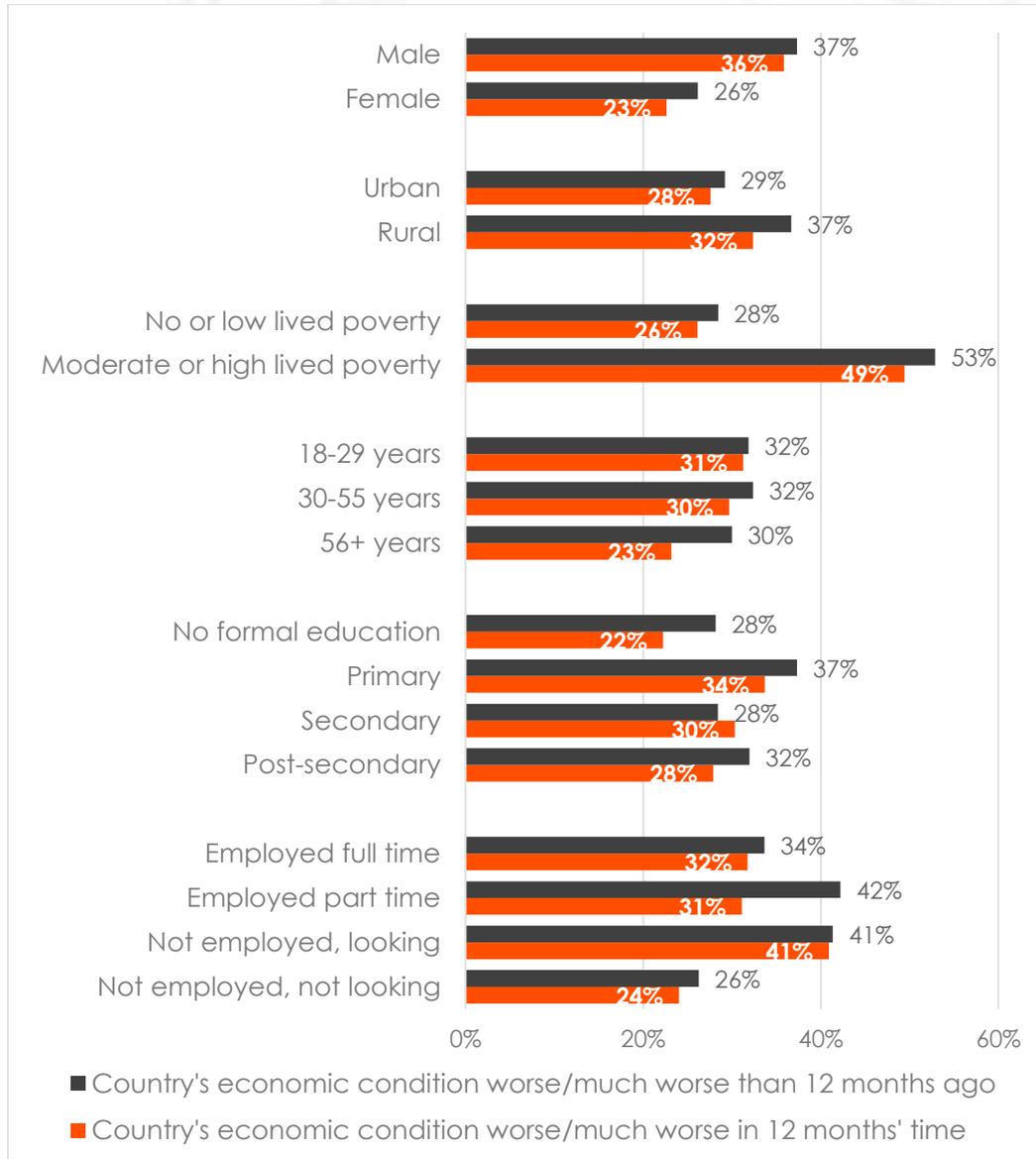


Respondents were asked: *Would you say that the country is going in the wrong direction or going in the right direction? (% who said "the right direction")*

Evaluations of how Algeria's economy had developed during the previous year and expectations of how it would develop over the next 12 months were generally less negative among women than among men (Figure 3). Likewise, urban residents were somewhat less pessimistic than rural respondents.

Poor Algerians (those with moderate or high lived poverty) were almost twice as likely as their wealthier counterparts to say that economic conditions were "worse" or "much worse" than a year earlier and that they would be worse/much worse 12 months later. Interestingly, older Algerians (aged 56 or more) were less pessimistic about the economic future than younger respondents.

Figure 3: Negative assessments, expectations of country's economic condition
 | by socio-demographic factors | Algeria | 2015



Respondents were asked:

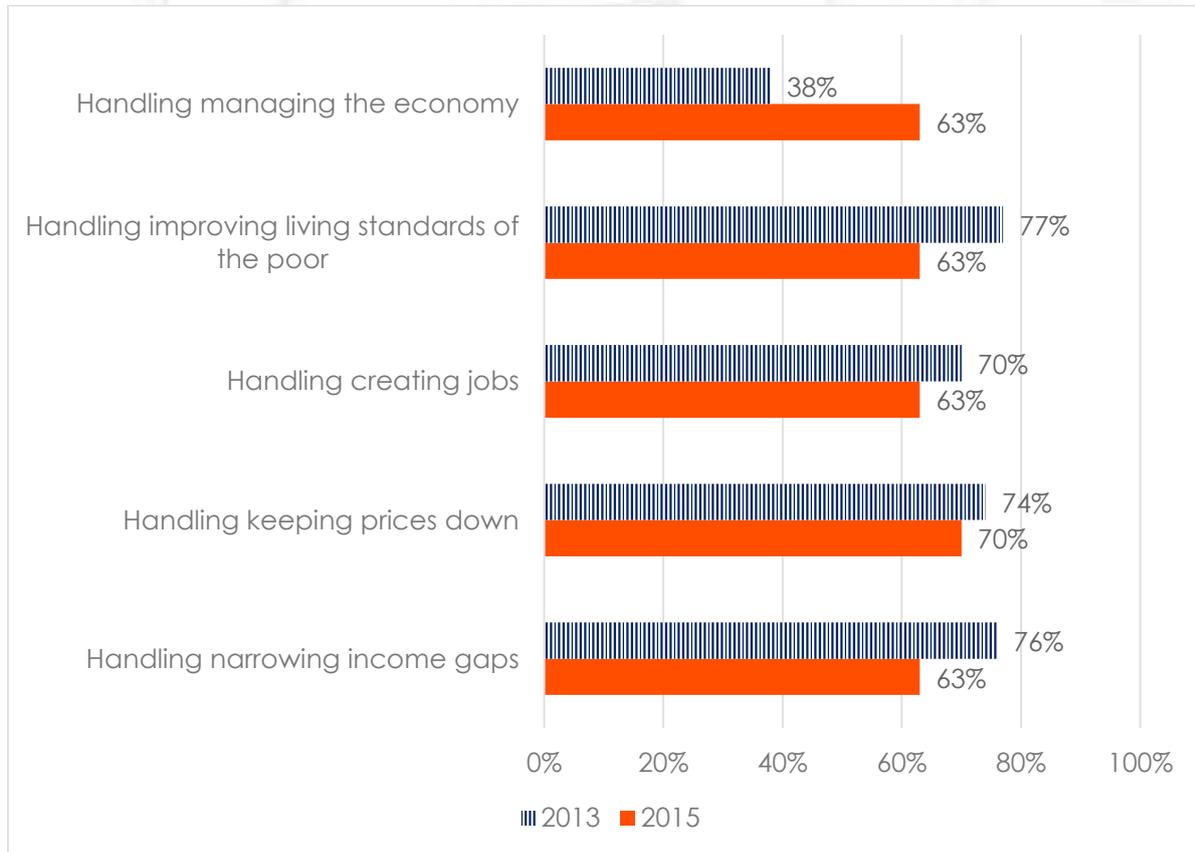
- Looking back, how do you rate economic conditions in this country compared to 12 months ago?
- Looking ahead, do you expect economic conditions in this country to be better or worse in 12 months' time?

Government management of the economy

Algerians' assessments of the government's overall management of the economy grew more negative between 2013 and 2015: The proportion of citizens who described it as "fairly" or "very" bad increased from 38% to 63%. On a range of other economic issues, the government's performance ratings improved somewhat but were still strongly negative (Figure 4). About two-thirds of citizens said the government was performing fairly/very badly on improving the living standards of the poor (63%, down from 77% in 2013), creating jobs

(63%, down from 70%), keeping prices down (70%, down from 74%), and narrowing income gaps (63%, down from 76%).

Figure 4: Poor government performance on economic issues | Algeria | 2013-2015



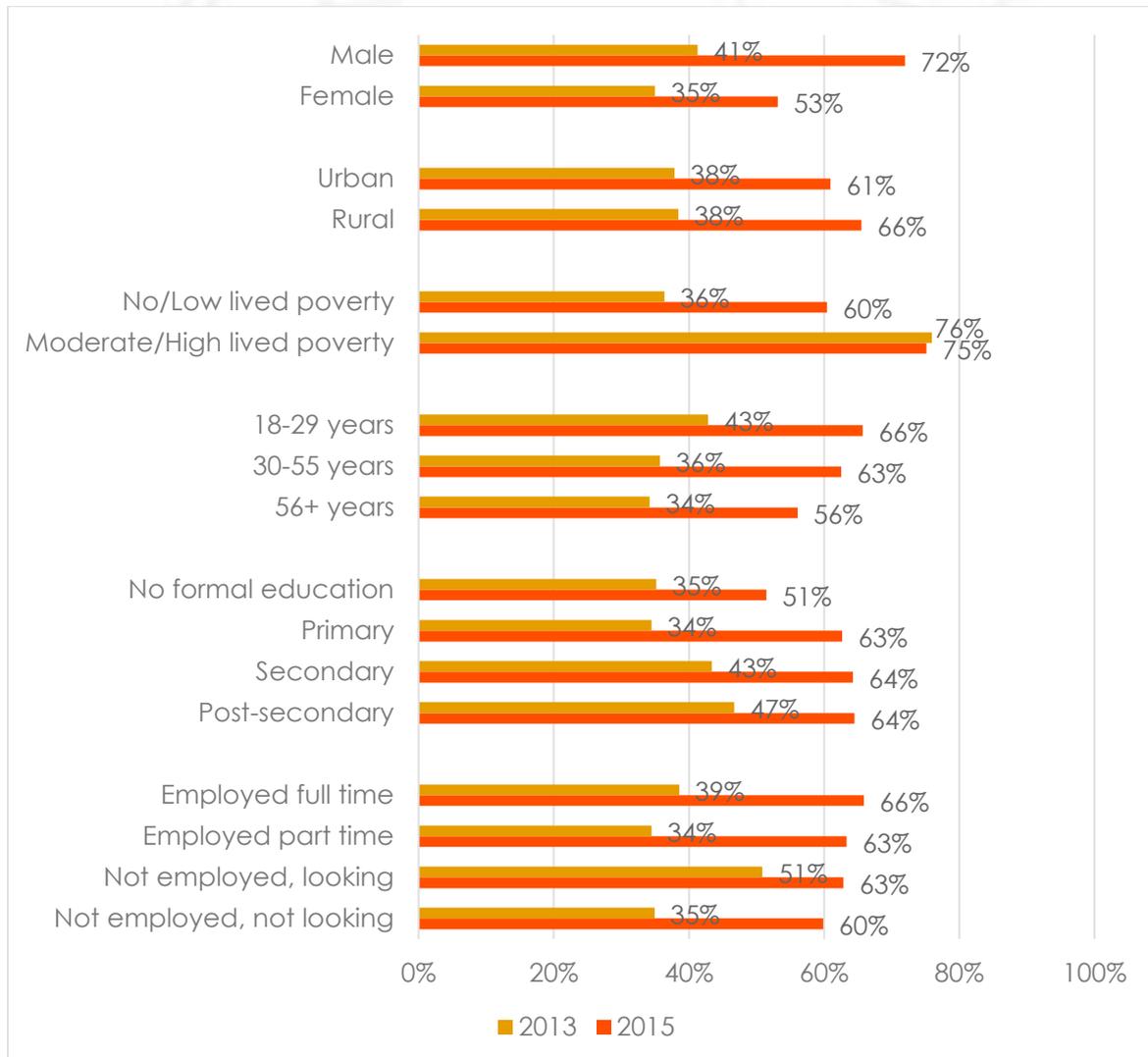
Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the economy? Improving the living standards of the poor? Creating jobs? Keeping prices down? Narrowing gaps between rich and poor? (% who said "fairly badly" or "very badly")

Looking at the increase in negative performance evaluations regarding the management of the economy, considerable differences appear across socio-demographic groups (Figure 5). Negative assessments increased especially strongly among men, from 41% in 2013 to 72% in 2015, compared to an increase from 35% to 53% among women. Negative evaluations increased by comparable amounts among urban and rural residents, from less than four in 10 in 2013 to more than six in 10 in 2015.

While negative evaluations among poorer respondents (i.e. experiencing moderate or high lived poverty) remained unchanged, negative evaluations among better-off Algerians (i.e. with low or no lived poverty) became much more frequent (from 36% in 2013 to 60% "fairly bad" or "very bad" in 2015), suggesting that the economic downturn is not only felt by those at the lower end of the economic spectrum.

Across age groups, negative evaluations rose at similar rates. Looking at education levels, negative evaluations increased most strongly among Algerians with primary schooling only (63%, up from 34% in 2013).

Figure 5: Government managing the economy badly | by socio-demographic factors | Algeria | 2013-2015



Respondents were asked: How well or badly would you say the current government is handling the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Managing the economy? (% who said "fairly badly" or "very badly")

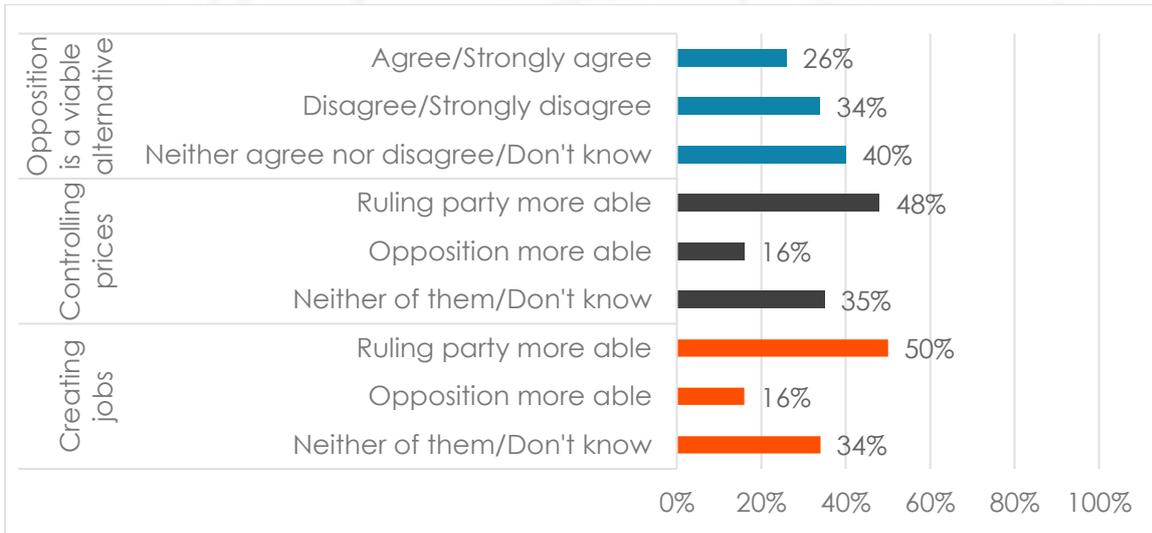
Discontent and democracy

Amid growing popular discontent regarding their governments handling of the economy, few Algerians saw a viable alternative in the opposition parties, and political leaders were widely perceived as serving themselves rather than the people.

Is the opposition a viable alternative?

Despite negative assessments of the government's economic management, only one in four Algerians (26%) saw the political opposition as a viable alternative to the ruling party, while 34% disagreed and 26% were undecided or didn't know (Figure 6). Only one in six (16%) said opposition parties would do a better job than the ruling party at controlling prices and creating jobs. About one in three said neither the government nor the opposition would be better or they didn't know.

Figure 6: Perceptions of the political opposition | Algeria | 2015

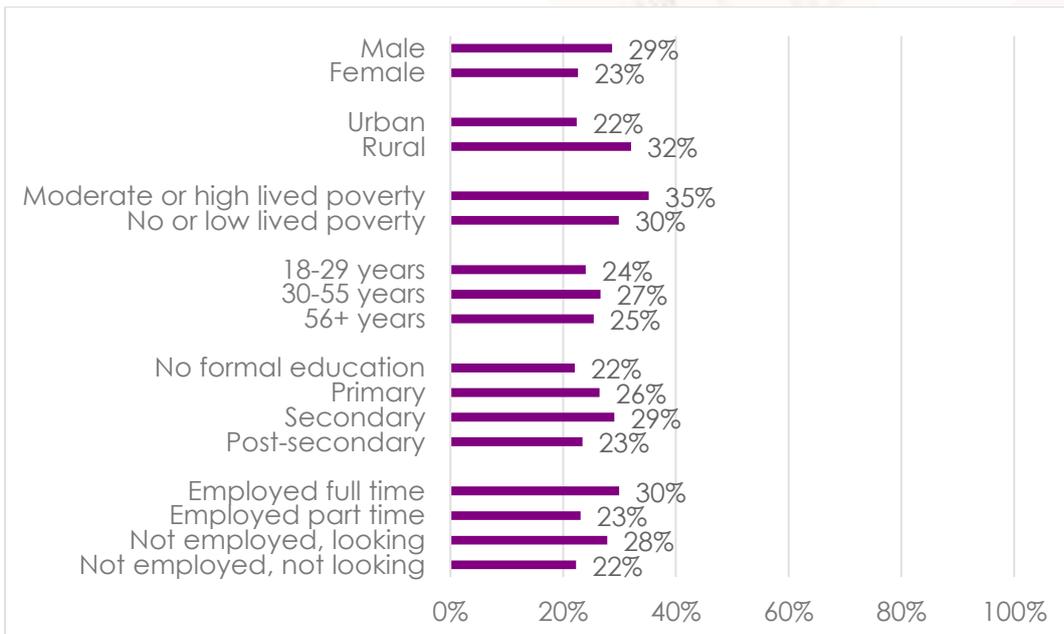


Respondents were asked:

- Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The political opposition in Algeria presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country.
- Looking at the ruling and opposition political parties in this country, which would you say is most able to address each of the following matters, or haven't you heard enough to say: Controlling prices? Creating jobs?

Men (29%), rural residents (32%), and poorer citizens (i.e. those with moderate or high lived poverty) (35%) were somewhat more likely to see the opposition as a viable alternative than were women (23%), urban residents (22%), and better-off respondents (30%) (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Opposition as a viable alternative | by socio-demographic factors | Algeria | 2015



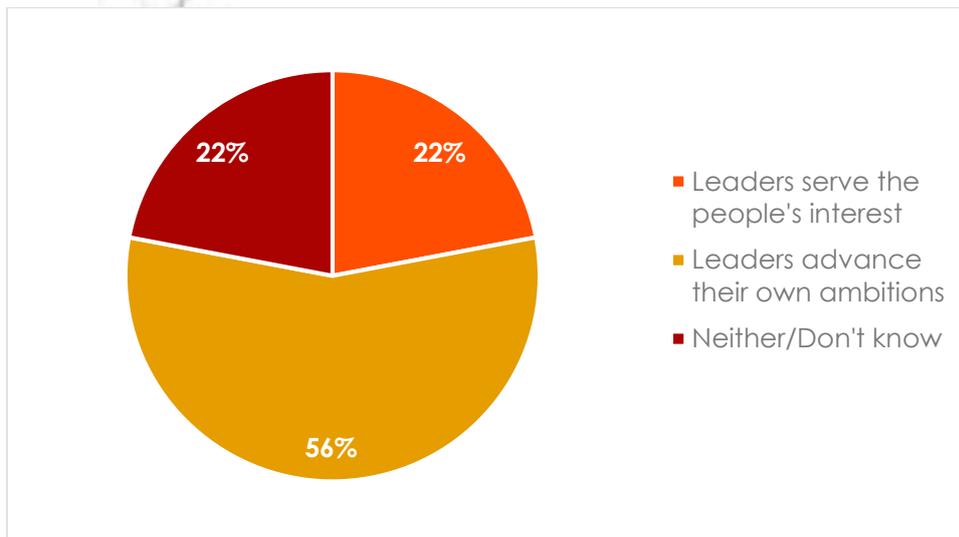
Respondents were asked: Please tell me whether you agree or disagree with the following statement: The political opposition in Algeria presents a viable alternative vision and plan for the country. (% who said they "agree" or "strongly agree")

Perceptions of political leaders

A majority (56%) of Algerians said in 2015 that leaders of political parties are more interested in advancing their own ambitions than in serving the people's interest. Only two in 10 (22%) saw leaders primarily serving the people (Figure 8).

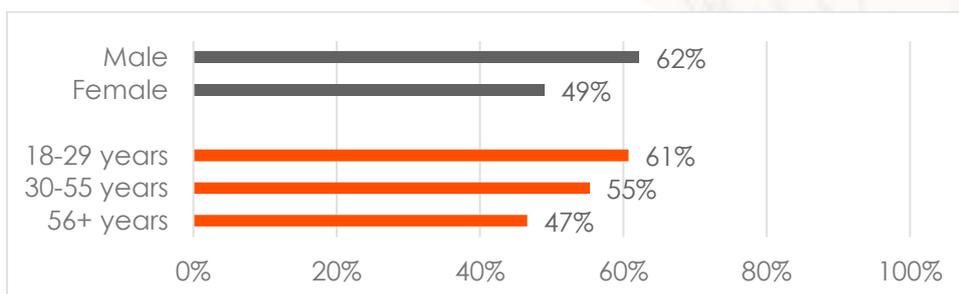
This negative view of leaders was especially strong among men (62%, compared to 49% of women) and younger respondents (61% of 18- to 29-year-olds, vs. 55% and 47%, respectively, of middle-aged and older citizens) (Figure 9). There was no clear pattern of differences by urban-rural residence, lived poverty, educational attainment, or employment status.

Figure 8: Whom do political leaders serve? | Algeria | 2015



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the leaders of political parties in this country are more concerned with serving the interests of the people, or more concerned with advancing their own political ambitions, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who said they "agree" or "strongly agree")

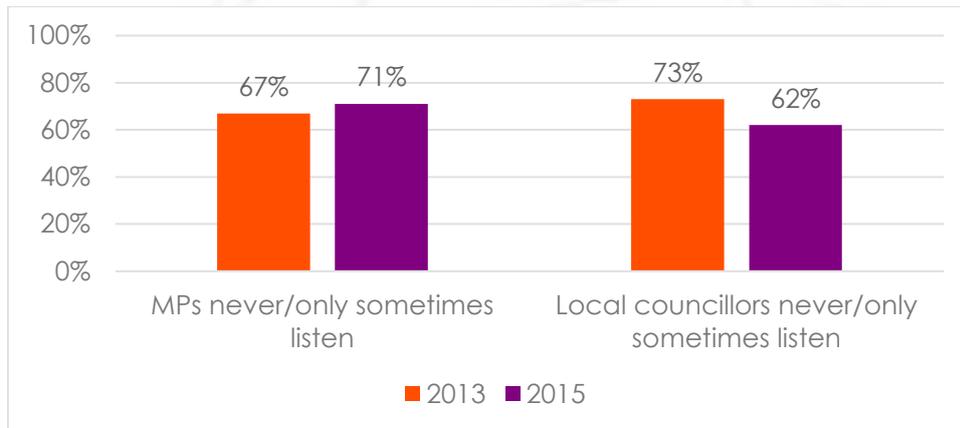
Figure 9: Leaders serve their own interests rather than the people's | by socio-demographic factors | Algeria | 2015



Respondents were asked: Do you think that the leaders of political parties in this country are more concerned with serving the interests of the people, or more concerned with advancing their own political ambitions, or haven't you heard enough to say? (% who said they "agree" or "strongly agree" that leaders serve their own ambitions)

Strong majorities were also critical of elected representatives for not listening to their constituents (Figure 10). Seven in 10 respondents (71%) said members of Parliament (MPs) "never" or "only sometimes" do their best to listen to what citizens have to say, a slight increase from 2013 (67%). Six in 10 (62%) said the same about local government councillors, an improvement from 2013 (73%).

Figure 10: Responsiveness of elected representatives | Algeria | 2013-2015

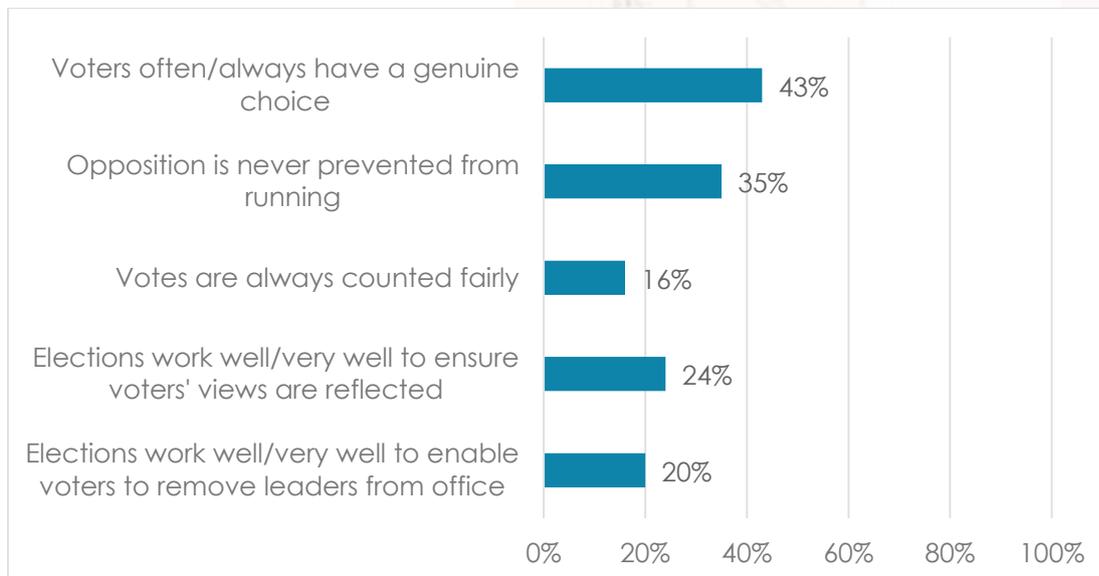


Respondents were asked: How much of the time do you think the following try their best to listen to what people like you have to say: Members of Parliament? Local government councillors?

Perceptions of elections

Such negative views of political leaders are echoed in largely negative assessments of the quality and effectiveness of elections in Algeria (Figure 11). Only four in 10 respondents (43%) said voters are “often” or “always” offered a genuine choice during elections; only one in three (35%) said the opposition is “never” prevented from running; and a mere one in six (16%) said votes are “always” counted fairly. Only about two in 10 said elections work “well” or “very well” to ensure that MPs reflect voters’ views (24%) and to enable voters to remove underperforming leaders (20%).

Figure 11: Quality and effectiveness of elections | Algeria | 2015



Respondents were asked:

- In your opinion, how often do the following things occur in this country's elections: Voters are offered a genuine choice in the elections? Opposition candidates are prevented from running for office? Votes are counted fairly?
- Think about how elections work in practice in this country. How well do elections: Ensure that members of Parliament reflect the views of voters? Enable voters to remove from office leaders who do not do what the people want?

Conclusion

While 2017 started with a bang for Algeria, public-attitude data suggest that discontent had been building for some time. Two years before thousands took to the streets to protest public spending cuts and tax increases, Algerians were growing increasingly critical of their country's economic conditions and overall direction. At the same time, citizens' negative perceptions of their political leaders and of the quality of their elections raise the question of whether some Algerians will look to a "second spring" for answers or seek out non-democratic alternatives in hopes of ensuring economic well-being.

To further explore this data, please visit Afrobarometer's online data analysis facility at www.afrobarometer.org/online-data-analysis.

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Afrobarometer is produced collaboratively by social scientists from more than 30 African countries. Coordination is provided by the Center for Democratic Development (CDD) in Ghana, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation (IJR) in South Africa, the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) at the University of Nairobi in Kenya, and the Institute for Empirical Research in Political Economy (IREEP) in Benin. Michigan State University (MSU) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) provide technical support to the network.

Core support for Afrobarometer Rounds 5 and 6 has been provided by the UK's Department for International Development (DFID), the Mo Ibrahim Foundation, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the World Bank.

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Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 140 | 21 April 2017