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Understanding Algeria's 2019 Revolutionary Movement

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On March 8, 2019, two weeks after the beginning of their peaceful mobilization, protesters marched across Algeria. Though the government once prohibited demonstrations in the center of Algiers in the name of the struggle against terrorism, the capital was now flooded with a mass of joyful citizens. Security forces were unable to suppress mass dissent with non-lethal methods, and the self-proclaimed pacifism (*silmiya*) of the protesters gave the regime no pretext for employing anti-riot units. On the boulevard Didouche Mourad, not far from the Government Palace, a line of policemen tried to hold back the crowd. After a moment, the protesters, men and women, started chanting an old nationalist song, *Min Djibalina* (“From our Mountains”), which Algerians learn in school. It glorifies the commitment of a “determined and resistant people” to free their nation. At the end of the song, a wave of protesters peacefully broke the line of policemen, and the crowd continued its march.

The Algerian *Hirak* (Movement) started on February 22 in opposition to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement of his intention to run for a fifth term. On every Friday after that date, millions of citizens demonstrated across the country. A new verb emerged: *vendredire* (from the French *vendredi*—Friday, plus *dire*—speaking), as this day of the week is now inextricably linked with this public expression of dissent. In response, the Algerian political order slowly began to crumble, and Bouteflika was eventually forced to resign on April 2. Yet the *Hirak* has not stopped, and Algerians continue to protest against “the System” (*nidham* or *Système*), which they say still has to be

uprooted. As in several other Arab countries, longstanding political and economic grievances contributed to this protest movement. But Algeria's latest has been remarkably cohesive and durable, even after the president was removed from office.

This Brief argues that the *Hirak* is a revolutionary movement that draws its political strength from its ability to connect the current situation to the Algerian war of liberation waged against the French (1954–62). The history of independent Algeria is presented as a succession of usurpations and betrayals. The movement deployed nationalist discourses inherited from the war of liberation, as well as more recent strategies of non-violent resistance, and portrayed the regime as a form of *internal* colonialism that had confiscated the country's independence and its public wealth—two inheritances from the earlier struggle.¹ By reviving the political sanctity that had been associated with the people during the anticolonial struggle, the *Hirak* unified disparate groups and framed the struggle as one between “the people” and “the System.” This revival of the populist legacy of the first Algerian revolution helps explain the continuation of the protests despite both the president's resignation and attempts by the military to engineer a rapid transition. But while this refusal to compromise in order to achieve genuine independence has allowed the movement to last for more than five months, it may also limit political possibilities in the future.

A Longstanding Crisis

As was the case with the Arab uprisings of 2010–11, Algeria's current revolution is not the product of a sudden collapse of the country's political equilibrium; rather, it had been brewing for years and grew out of persistent socioeconomic grievances and political discontent. After independence, two military coups, one in 1962 and the other in 1965, allowed the bureaucratic-military apparatus that had emerged during the war to appropriate power. The resulting authoritarian government implemented ambitious development policies under Houari Boumédiène (1965–78) before facing major economic and political difficulties in the 1980s,² as a result of which the feeling of an unfinished or, worse, confiscated revolution intensified among an increasingly disenfranchised population. As the regime was sometimes being portrayed as a “party of France” (*Hizb Fransa*), a popular uprising ensued in October 1988. After the liberalization of political competition, the Islamic Salvation Front won the first round of legislative elections in December 1991. In response, the military canceled the electoral process and seized power, leading to a long civil war (1992–99). The present revolutionary movement echoes this series of “confiscations.”

After the beginning of the revolution in neighboring Tunisia, an urban uprising started in Algeria in January 2011, and unrest swept across the country, from Oran in the west to Annaba in the east. Taking advantage of this situation, a National Coordination for Change and Democracy was founded on January 21 of that year, bringing together trade unions, associations, and political parties. Yet it failed to durably challenge the regime, owing to the fragmentation and discrediting of its component groups.³ The fear of another civil war, the financial resources provided by hydrocarbon rents,⁴ and the relative legitimacy of Bouteflika helped the regime navigate the crisis. Using mostly non-lethal policing tactics, the regime was able to neutralize the demand for change. Stability and the exercise of authority were nevertheless precarious, as myriad individuals and groups questioned the legitimacy of the ruling elite.⁵

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Since Bouteflika's first election in 1999, the regime has staged a process of democratization while in reality preserving the status quo. After 2011, proponents of this "reform" process emphasized the alleged successes of "democratic consolidation" in Algeria, while the presidency announced a series of reforms that did not challenge the prevailing political equilibrium. And despite the existence of numerous opposition movements from diverse ideological backgrounds, the ruling parties were able to win elections marked by significant declines in turnout,⁶ reflecting a proliferation of irrelevant parties, unclear or unrealistic political platforms, and corrupt figures. The electorate was increasingly being deprived of meaningful choices, and politicians from all sides were perceived by the public as both incompetent and contemptible.

Until 2013, the Algerian government was able, to some extent, to address its people's socioeconomic demands and contain domestic pressures by drawing on hydrocarbon rents. Yet its failure to plan for long-term development and diversify its sources of income contributed to a pervasive vulnerability. Following a rapid drop in hydrocarbon prices in 2013, the ability of the regime to mitigate the effects of socioeconomic inequalities decreased rapidly. With the first signs of budget scarcity and a government turn to austerity, the mismanagement of national wealth became impossible to ignore. The economic and political dimensions of the crisis merged in public denunciations of a corrupt oligarchy that had plundered the country's national wealth.

Algerians became deeply aware of the national emergency resulting from a mix of mismanagement and political irresponsibility. In the first decade of his presidency (1999-2009), Bouteflika was able to offer an alternative narrative to that of a confiscated independence by emphasizing the return of peace, unity, and steady growth. He even embodied an alternative to the structural injustice that characterized "the System." Nevertheless, this changed progressively after the end of his second term. In 2008, Bouteflika had constitutional limits to a third term removed through a parliamentary vote. But the beginning of that third term was tarnished by a series of corruption scandals involving some of his close allies, notably Minister of Energy and Mines Chakib Khelil and Minister of Transportation Amar Ghoul. The "East-West freeway" scandal, uncovered in 2010, remains to this day a synonym for the moral failure and greed of Bouteflika's associates.⁷ Finally, after the president had been rumored to be seriously ill for almost a decade, he suffered a stroke in April 2013. The ruling coalition nonetheless moved forward to promote his reelection to a fourth term, though he was by then unable to walk or speak.

Bouteflika was reelected in 2014 with 81 percent of the valid votes; the official participation rate was estimated to be just over 50 percent. Yet this electoral race also saw multiple expressions of growing discontent. The movement *Barakat* (Enough!) protested the prospect of a fourth mandate for Bouteflika, and his campaign team was repeatedly met by angry protesters and forced to cancel some rallies. Over the next five years, the illegitimacy of the political leadership along with the budget crisis resulted in persisting tensions. In 2017, the government's inability to propose a coherent economic strategy led to the sacking of two prime ministers in three months, followed by the return of the widely-hated Ahmed Ouyahia as chief of government. Ouyahia reacted to continuing protests by portraying the protesters as anarchists or immature children. Deprived of a credible figure to run the county, confronted with the consequences of shortsighted economic policies, and facing the pressure of a myriad of social movements, the ruling coalition responded with the redundant warning that chaos was at the door.

This security-based discourse—warning of a civil war like the one that raged in the 1990s—ceased to be effective, however, for various reasons, including demographics: The Algerian civil war ended almost twenty years ago, and approximately 54 percent of the population of Algeria is under the age of 30.⁸ While the so-called "Dark Decade" of the earlier civil war has constantly limited the political possibilities offered to generations of young Algerians,⁹ this period of extreme violence is a distant experience for many. Moreover, this past catastrophe has been replaced by the current *economic* catastrophe resulting from years of mismanagement. In early 2019, most economic indicators were negative: Unemployment (11.7%), inflation (4.2%), and the trade deficit (\$1.14 billion) were all on the rise.

More than the past exactions of Islamic guerrillas and military forces, Algerian youth suffer from concrete problems: a crumbling education system, a housing crisis, and a lack of leisure activities. For this majority of the population, the urgency is not to protect the country from another civil war (although this threat has shaped the pacifist nature of the protests), but to put an end to a system of government that they believe has endangered the country.

Revolution Rebooted

The movement that started on February 22 was the outcome of a longstanding crisis whose causes were in many ways similar to those affecting developments in other countries in 2010 and 2011. But one of the key

differences for the Algerian *Hirak* resides in the centrality of the past war of independence. As colonization and decolonization are fundamental in the country's political culture, they have largely shaped the current movement.

Since the crisis of the late 1980s, the regime has come to be perceived as an exogenous entity, a new form of tyranny resembling colonialism—and Bouteflika and his associates failed to change this state of affairs. Over the past decade, key members of the government have been associated with predatory endeavors that have impoverished the oil-rich nation. Former Minister of Energy and Mines Chakib Khelil, a close associate of Bouteflika's, is the most infamous of the figures associated with the plundering of the country's resources. Yet, despite his connection to a series of corruption scandals involving the Algerian state-owned hydrocarbon company Sonatrach, as well as its Italian and Canadian intermediaries, Khelil nevertheless traveled freely across the country and even delivered lectures at public events. Other key figures in Bouteflika's close-knit circle were mentioned in the Panama Papers,¹⁰ such as the head of the business owners' association, Ali Haddad, and former Minister of Industry Abdeslam Bouchouareb. In popular jokes, rap songs, and cartoons, the ruling coalition has been depicted as a clique of corrupt and incompetent individuals responsible for the ongoing suffering of the country's youth. In football stadiums, fans chanted, "You ate the country, you thieves!" ("*Klitou l-bled, ya seraqine*"). The president was nicknamed Boutesriqa, the "father-of-thieves."

This contentious political discourse was the continuation of a longstanding struggle for social justice. Since the Algerian state was born from a battle against colonial exploitation, its historical duty has been understood to include ensuring the redistribution of national wealth and the development of the country for the common good. And some of the country's signature policies in the decade following independence included an agrarian revolution and the nationalization of hydrocarbon resources. In Algeria, therefore, socioeconomic grievances are in essence political.

Over the past decade, those on the geographical, social, and economic margins of Algerian society (e.g., unemployed youth, activists from the South, employees of the informal economy, autonomous trade unions) have put sustained pressure on the regime. In order to express their discontent in the public space, they have developed a repertoire of contention, embracing riots, strikes, sit-ins, and occupations of public buildings. And in reaction to the violence of the police state and the contempt (*hogra*) it has exhibited toward them, these

protesters have increasingly coupled their discourses on redistribution and public services with other political messages, such as the defense of human rights, the rule of law, and equality among citizens.¹¹ Over time, they have weaponized an egalitarian narrative inherited from the war of independence. Displaying their patriotism—by, for example, chanting the national anthem or old nationalist songs—the Algerian protesters have positioned themselves as guardians of the nation in the face of a new form of *internal* colonialism allied with foreign interests (especially Western private companies).

In denouncing the "gang" (*isaba*) that has seized the state, current protesters have radicalized a decade-long wave of protests. The *Hirak* makes the connection between the social and the political apparent in the name of freeing the state that was inherited from decolonization. The privatization of public wealth that has been characteristic of Bouteflika's rule is portrayed as a breach in the postcolonial social contract. Even the state became a site of contention: Public servants were instrumental in the expression of dissent, notably those affiliated with the independent trade union The National Autonomous Union of Public Administration Workers (*Syndicat National Autonome des Personnels de l'Administration Publique*—SNAPAP). Since February 22, workers in universities, hospitals, and local government have repeatedly gone on strike to demand the fall of "the System."

At the same time, socioeconomic claims are still relevant. On April 8, protesters stormed the steel complex of El Hadjar, near Annaba, demanding jobs. Once a symbol of the state-centered program of industrialization, the giant complex has been plagued by mismanagement and partly privatized in favor of the multinational firm ArcelorMittal. These economic demands cannot be isolated from political demands: Reintroducing popular sovereignty would effectively "liberate" the state from those who are seen as having "confiscated" Algeria's first revolution. It would finally allow the Algerian state to fulfill the promise of social justice that is at the heart of the postcolonial social contract.

Overall, the *Hirak* has appropriated a nationalist narrative that revives the notion of political sanctity that has been historically associated with the Algerian people, portrayed as a key revolutionary actor. The dominant history has represented the war of independence as an achievement of the people as a whole, even though the insurrection was, in fact, initiated by a vanguard of revolutionaries in 1954. Similarly, social groups that have been at the forefront of the current mobilization (e.g., football fans, human rights activists, students) have systematically spoken in the name of the entire people.

On social media, thousands of Algerians have echoed this discourse, thereby contributing to a collective mass mobilization.

By successfully reviving the conception of the Algerian people as imbued with political sanctity, the *Hirak* has brought about a powerful yet consensual impulse for change. Organizations on the periphery of the regime have progressively supported popular demands, and historical nationalist figures (such as Zohra Drif-Bitad, Djamilia Bouhired, and Lakhdar Bouregaa) have joined the movement. Even core actors in the regime have praised the population for its “maturity.” The revitalization of this ideal of popular sanctity—inherited from the war of independence—has been essential in the unification of a deeply fragmented society. This has resulted in an apparently dichotomous political configuration, whereby “the people” are opposed to “the System.”

“The System”

In 2018, a group of football fans, Ouled el-Bahdja, released a song called “La Casa del Mouradia”¹² that described the routine of politics under Bouteflika: a succession of increasingly problematic mandates, the privatization of national wealth, and the despair of young people trapped in a life of scarcity and drug consumption. One year later, “La Casa del Mouradia” has become an iconic song of the *Hirak*. The song explains that “during the fourth mandate, the doll died, and things continued as usual.” Indeed, the president has long been portrayed as a living-dead figure used as a cover by a diverse ruling coalition.

When Algerians speak about the regime, they use unspecific terms such as “*Nidham*” (system) and “*Pouvoir*” (power). The presidency and the armed forces’ staff represent the main poles of power in this cartelized structure. Key elements in the regime include other influential state actors in the technocracy and security apparatuses, leaders of various parties (e.g., the National Liberation Front—FLN and the National Democratic Rally—RND) and trade unions historically linked to the state (e.g., General Union of Algerian Workers—UGTA), along with, outside the state, major crony capitalists linked to the main business association (Business Owners’ Forum—FCE). In addition, the periphery of the regime embraces semi-autonomous associations, parties, and Sufi brotherhoods (*zawiya*) that are major players in a nationwide system of patronage based on clientelist networks.¹³

The current mobilization, therefore, has never been merely about Bouteflika’s fate. Algerians denounced the

possibility of a fifth term as a fallacy of “the System” as a whole; they are demanding the end of this “System” while being fully aware of its cartelized and militarized nature. For this reason, neither the ousting of unpopular figures such as Ahmed Ouyahia nor the resignation of Bouteflika himself has satisfied the protesters. As a young man interviewed by Sky News Arabiya put it, “They must all be taken away!” (*Yetnahou ga’a*). This expansive understanding of the revolutionary movement explains the continuation of the protests since Bouteflika’s resignation on April 2. “The System” has been weakened by the defection of peripheral organizations and undermined by internal dissent. The presidency and its close allies have been sacrificed, but other core elements of the regime remain in control of state institutions.

The current situation, which places Chief of Staff of the Army Ahmed Gaïd Salah as the most powerful man in the country, echoes another legacy of the war of independence. This tension between civilian authorities and the military elite has been a constant feature of Algeria’s political history. It was a recurring source of anxiety under Bouteflika, and it has become a central issue in the current revolutionary movement. In the early days of the *Hirak*, protesters were eager to request the support of the army by evoking its mythical relationship with the people (“*Jeysh, sha’ab, khawa, khawa*”—“The army and the people are brothers”). This mythical union between the people and the armed forces is essential in most nationalist discourses, as both are heroized in the official history of the war of independence.

Yet this version of the nationalist struggle also competes with a more critical understanding of the conflict. A widespread counter-narrative sees the rise of the bureaucratic-military apparatus during the war as having come at the expense of civilian leaders—the original sin of the post-independence regime. The legitimacy of the army has also been undermined by the violence of the repression in 1988 and the bloody civil war of the 1990s. Thus, the consensual discourse characteristic of the beginning of the *Hirak*, which presented the army as an extension of the sanctified people, rapidly reached its limits after Bouteflika stepped down. As Gaïd Salah is now the obvious face of the regime, the rejection of military power became one of the main themes in the slogans heard during protests (“*Jamhouriya mashi cazerna*”—“A republic is not a barrack”; “*Dawla madaniya mashi askaria*”—“A civil state, not a military one”).

Historically the influence of the army has relied on the complicity of technocrats and politicians. In addition to Gaïd Salah, other figures who still hold key state positions include the interim head of state, Abdelkader Bensalah, and the head of the government, Noureddine

Bedoui. Tayeb Belaiz, the head of the Constitutional Council, resigned on April 16. Bensalah, Bedoui, and Belaiz have been repeatedly portrayed as the “three Bs” on signs and in the private press. This moniker stems from the war of independence, when the “three Bs” referred to key figures of the bureaucratic-military apparatus of the FLN—Lakhdar Bentobal, Krim Belkacem, and Abdelhafid Boussouf—who infamously ordered the assassination of political leader and revolutionary Abane Ramdane in 1957. The figure of Ramdane is highly significant, as he was an iconic nationalist leader who championed the supremacy of civilian authority over military actors. His face and name have appeared on many signs since the beginning of the movement in mid-February.

Nevertheless, while the tension between military and civilian authorities inherited from the war of independence is central to the current conflict, it should not be understood in Manichean or rigid terms. The army still enjoys a historical legitimacy that is rooted in the fight against the French as well as in its involvement in past development programs. Moreover, high-ranking officers are divided, and some retired senior officers, such as former head of the navy Rachid Benyelles, have supported the protesters against Gaïd Salah.

Attempts to Contain the Uprising

The unanimity engendered by independence-era discourse and the dichotomous understanding of the struggle as between “the people” and “the System” are what give the present movement its revolutionary nature. In a society that is deeply divided politically (54 parties competed in the 2017 legislative elections), the *Hirak* has revived the radical legacy of the first Algerian revolution.

Some regime figures and opposition politicians have promoted a reformist approach to the crisis. After Bouteflika’s resignation, the interim president, Bensalah, insisted on the need to follow a legalistic path that respects the constitution and preserves the continuity of the state. Chief of Staff Gaïd Salah has warned protesters against “unrealistic slogans” and emphasized the role of state institutions in the “management of the transition period.”

To derail the radical demands of the movement, the regime has reverted back to its security-based discourse. Major figures such as Bouteflika’s brother, Saïd, and two former heads of the intelligence services (Tewfik Mediène and Bachir Tartag) were arrested for “conspiracy against the authority of the state” and the army. Gaïd Salah also warned that foreign NGOs were promoting a subversive

agenda aimed at the destruction of the Algerian state and its key institutions (chiefly the armed forces). The General Directorate of National Security—the Algerian Police) released a surreal statement announcing the arrest of “foreigners” who, it said, were trying to radicalize young people by distributing drugs during the protests.

A narrative of this sort, denouncing the malicious actions of foreign elements charged with seeking to undermine the nation, is characteristic of a defensive nationalism inherited from colonization. In addition, the regime has tried to exploit fears of the potential influence of radical Islamists, after former leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front expressed their support for the peaceful movement and co-signed public statements demanding a democratic transition. Nevertheless, protesters have generally avoided the divisive religious discourse that contributed to the civil war in the 1990s.

The radicalism of the *Hirak* instead has been expressed in socioeconomic and moral terms. Widespread corruption has been instrumental in maintaining both the cohesion of the regime and its mechanisms of internal regulation¹⁴—and this issue brings together the confiscation of political power and the appropriation of national resources in a way that evokes memories of French colonization. A ubiquitous reality under Bouteflika, corruption also undergirds and reinforces unequal access to opportunities and resources, contributing to a sense of internal colonialism.

The first signs of collapsing support for the presidency from *within* the regime came when key economic figures were forbidden to leave the country; this occurred a few days before Bouteflika’s resignation. Since then, iconic crony capitalists such as Mahieddine Tahkout, Rhéda Kouninef, and Ali Haddad, the former head of the FCE, have been arrested. Ministers and high-level technocrats are being prosecuted for squandering public money. Moreover, Gaïd Salah has promised to reopen investigations into some of the most infamous scandals of the last twenty years (e.g., Khalifa, Sonatrach, Bouchi) in an attempt to appease the population. He has also appropriated the word *‘isaba* (gang) to denounce Bouteflika’s inner circle. As is often the case in authoritarian settings, anti-corruption prosecutions are weaponized to settle internal conflicts and to control institutional change.¹⁵ Such inquiries and declarations serve to orient and limit the scope of transitional justice and to neutralize the radical claims of the revolutionary movement. Yet, in the meantime, core members of the regime associated with corruption schemes and the embezzlement of public money, in both the technocracy and in the military, are still very much in place.

According to a widespread representation of Algeria's modern history, the protesters aim to liberate the country from the "gang" that took over "at gunpoint" after the war of independence.¹⁶ Their expansive understanding of the current revolutionary moment opposes the rapid reordering favored by prominent state actors, and this tension is especially obvious with regard to the question of future elections. Much as in the periods after 1988 and 2011, the core of the ruling coalition seeks to limit the extent of change by controlling the transition. After Bensalah's official designation as interim head of state, several million people took to the streets to *vendredire* on April 12, rejecting any process controlled by elements from the Algerian military and technocracy.

After Bouteflika's resignation, Bensalah announced a new presidential election scheduled for July 4, 2019. The disgraced ruling parties—FLN and RND—welcomed the announcement, and former prime minister Ouyahia did not rule out the possibility of running. Multiple voices in the opposition, especially on the left, announced their rejection of this new presidential election and called first for the election of a constituent assembly. The legalistic path has been depicted, in the critical private press and in demonstrations, as another attempt to confiscate the revolution. Tellingly, some of the most significant resistance to the constitutional process promoted by Gaïd Salah and Bensalah came from the state itself: Hundreds of judges and mayors announced their refusal to supervise the planned presidential election. Eventually, the July 4 presidential election was canceled by the constitutional council.

The constitutional path, then, has been derailed. The determination of the protesters to avoid another "legal" confiscation of their revolution has proven to be successful. Yet the revolution is far from being over. Despite the end of the interim period on July 10, Bensalah has, with the support of the armed forces, remained head of state.

Questions about the Future of the *Hirak*

The radical approach inherited from the war of independence may also suggest, however, a limitation for the future of the movement. Though the *Hirak's* unifying discourse allowed for the convergence of various social groups, it hides a diversity of conflicting interests. Such divides existed during the war of independence: for example, plebeian vs. bureaucratic elite, leftist vs. reformist, religious vs. secular, Arab vs. *Amazigh*/Berber).¹⁷ While a populist consensus was essential in waging an anti-colonial struggle against French colonialism, it broke

down and resulted in a multitude of conflicts after 1962. It also served the interests of the bureaucratic-military apparatus, which was the only force able to impose a fragile myth of unanimity on a large and divided polity.

Unsurprisingly, Ahmed Gaïd Salah has tried to exploit the fear of division by reviving the conflict between a historical understanding of Algerian nationalism based on Arabic and Islam and a divergent idea of national identity that integrates the Berber-speaking parts of the population. After warning against attempts to undermine the country's territorial integrity, he launched a crackdown against activists bearing the *Amazigh* flag in the middle of June. This attempt to sow discord was countered by the protesters, who reacted by massively exhibiting *Amazigh* colors in the streets of the country. While some activists were arrested, others chanted "*Kebayli, Arbi, khawa khawa. Makanch el-fitna ya khawana!*" ("Kabyles¹⁸ and Arabs are brothers. There is no discord, you traitors!"). Nevertheless, one should not overlook the lasting conflicts that still divide the Algerian polity in 2019: debates over, for example, the place of religion, uneven economic development and the ideal economic system, and the role of women. Even should the radical/populist approach to the revolution triumph, these conflicts will still have to be addressed.

This grassroots *Hirak* movement also seems to be an agentless mobilization organized primarily through social networks. The uprising of February 22 was largely the consequence of the failure of the country's political elites, both those in the regime and those in the opposition; in response, protesters have enacted a direct form of popular sovereignty that is free from the intermediaries that have usurped power since 1962. But the very character of the uprising poses a central question: If the *Hirak* is an anti-politician and anti-elite movement opposed to the delegation of power, how can it offer a coherent alternative to the regime? This movement has no official leadership, and political actors have been cautious about rallying around a central figure. As a result, opposition figures and organizations remain unable to propose a common platform.

Former (liberal) prime minister Ali Benflis and leader of the (Islam-conservative) Movement for the Society of Peace Abderazak Makri have published a road map, in conjunction with other parties and unions, demanding a collective direction of the transition. While accepting the central role of the military, during a national conference held on July 6 they demanded the resignation of Prime Minister Bedoui. Meanwhile, leftist movements such as the (Trotskyist) Socialist Workers' Party and the (Berberist) Socialist Forces Front are demanding

the end of the military state and the election of a constituent assembly that would open the way to a second republic. Former leaders of the Islamic Salvation Front (Kamel Guemazi, Mourad Dhina, Ali Djeddi) have also expressed their support for a national unity government and called for civil disobedience. Other figures, such as human right activists and lawyers Ali-Yahia Abdennour, Mustapha Bouchachi, and Zoubida Assoul, have emerged as powerful voices echoing the uncompromising rejection of “the System” and its affiliates. But, in a fragmented environment, none of these people can speak in the name of the movement or even have their voice heard in any lasting manner. This fuels the structural uncertainty resulting from the political crisis.¹⁹

Unlike the war of independence, the *Hirak* does not draw on a vanguard of activists organized in a common, unified structure. While its grassroots organization allows it to articulate a powerful discourse, which is at once consensual and dichotomous, it also comes with obvious strategic limitations. The mistrust resulting from the narrative of the confiscated revolution results in an absence of clear leadership, and this lack of leadership makes it almost impossible to oppose the regime with a concrete and positive agenda. As such, the *Hirak* is still a largely antagonistic political force, mostly defined by what it wants to destroy. Moreover, the conjunction of this antagonistic orientation and the lack of leadership means that the protesters are less likely to compromise with the ruling elites. Though it is possible that this might result in the complete success of the movement, it could also precipitate a lasting deadlock.

Concluding Remarks

The Algerian revolution that started on February 22 is still largely undetermined. Despite the cancellation of the new presidential election originally scheduled for July 4, unresolved tensions remain. Nationalist war hero Lakhdar Bouregaâ was arrested for “undermining the morale of the army” after criticizing Ahmed Gaïd Salah. Pro-regime media outlets immediately spread rumors that Bouregaâ was not the commander of the Wilaya IV (a military regional subdivision) during the war of independence, but rather stole his brother’s identity. In reaction, the portrait and name of the celebrated *moudjahid* (veteran) were ubiquitous during the mass protests organized on July 5, on the anniversary of the country’s independence.

Given the protesters’ determination to avoid another confiscation of their revolution, a settlement with regime elites along the lines of the Tunisian example is unlikely. Based on the political influence of the army, one might fear an outcome similar to that which transpired in Egypt. Yet the vast majority of the actors in Algeria, including the military, seem committed to avoiding mass violence. Moreover, the political fragmentation of the country should prevent a sequence of events similar to that which led to the rise and fall of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood between 2012 and 2013. In Algeria, the outcome will depend on the ability of local political elites to overcome their divisions, to regain the trust of the population, and to offer a coherent vision of governance to replace the current institutional order.

One thing is certain: The longer the current phase of political uncertainty lasts, the more appealing calls for a return to order will seem. Conversely, the ambitious task undertaken by Algerian protesters is colossal. A profound reconfiguration of the state and the political arena will be necessary if this movement is to deliver on its promise of genuine popular sovereignty. Should it succeed in leading to a second Republic, the Algerian *Hirak* will immediately face major trials: a situation of economic emergency, along with structural injustice inherited from decades of predatory behaviors and mismanagement. Thus, the government will face a budget crisis, even as popular pressure for social justice persists. Refashioning the country will call for a new political economy and new procedures for the redistribution of wealth. Vested interests will be threatened, and new reactionary coalitions will appear. A genuine revolution takes years to unfold, and Algeria is merely in the middle of another year one.

Endnotes

- 1 The idea of a confiscated independence is widespread in Algeria. See Ferhat Abbas, *L'indépendance confisquée* [The Confiscated Independence] (Paris: Flammarion, 1984).
- 2 Kay Adamson, *Algeria: A Study in Competing Ideologies* (London: Cassell, 1998).
- 3 Layla Baamara, "Mésaventures d'une coalition contestataire: Le cas de la Coordination Nationale pour le Changement et la Démocratie (CNCD) en Algérie," [Misadventures of an Opposition Coalition: The Case of the National Coordination for Change and Democracy] *Année du Maghreb* 8 (2012), 161–79.
- 4 Crude and gas account for 60 percent of the government's budget and 94 percent of the country's total exports.
- 5 Salim Chena, "L'Algérie dans le 'Printemps arabe' entre espoirs, initiatives et blocages," [Algeria in the 'Arab Spring': Between Hope, Initiatives, and Obstacles] *Confluences Méditerranée* 77 (2) (2011), 105–18; Louisa Dris-Ait Hamadouche, "L'Algérie face au 'printemps arabe': L'équilibre par la neutralisation des contestations," [Algeria and the 'Arab Spring': Equilibrium by the Neutralization of Protests] *Confluences Méditerranée* 81 (2012), 55–67.
- 6 Adlène Meddi, "Legislative Elections in Algeria: The Turnout Obsession," *Middle East Eye*, May 2, 2017.
- 7 MME & Agencies, "14 Jailed and Foreign Firms Fined \$390mn in Algeria's Scandal of the Century," *Middle East Eye*, May 8, 2015.
- 8 According to "La population Algérienne à 42,2 millions d'habitants au 1er Janvier 2018," [The Algerian Population Reached 42.2 Million Inhabitants on January 1, 2018] a study released by the National Office of Statistics in June 2018 (<http://www.aps.dz/algerie/75645-la-population-algerienne-a-42-2-millions-d-habitants-au-1er-janvier-2018>).
- 9 Thomas Serres, *L'Algérie face à la catastrophe suspendue: Gérer la crise, blâmer le peuple sous Bouteflika (1999–2014)* [The Suspended Catastrophe in Algeria: Managing Crisis, Blaming the People under Bouteflika] (Paris: Karthala-IRMC, 2019).
- 10 Moncef Wafi, "Paradis fiscal au Panama: 22 Algériens cités dans le scandale des «Panama papers»" [Fiscal Paradise in Panama: 22 Algerians Named in the Panama Papers Scandal] *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, May 11, 2016.
- 11 Naoual Belakhdar, "L'éveil du Sud ou quand la contestation vient de la marge: Une analyse du mouvement des chômeurs algériens," [The Awakening of the South or When Dissent Comes from the Margins: An Analysis of the Algerian Movement of the Unemployed] *Politique africaine* 137 (1) (2015), 27–48.
- 12 The title refers to the Spanish TV show *La Casa de Papel*. El Mouradia is the name of the presidential palace.
- 13 Mohammed Hachemaoui, *Clientélisme et patronnage dans l'Algérie contemporaine* [Clientelism and Patronage in Contemporary Algeria] (Paris: Karthala-Iremam, 2013).
- 14 William C. Byrd, "Contre-performances économiques et fragilité institutionnelle," [Economic Underperformance and Institutional Fragility] *Confluences Méditerranée* 45 (2003), 59–79.
- 15 Béatrice Hibou and Mohamed Tozy, "La lutte contre la corruption au Maroc: Vers une pluralisation des modes de gouvernement?" [The Struggle Against Corruption in Morocco: Toward a Diversification of Models of Government] *Droit et société* 72(2) (2009), 339–57; Jiangnan Zhu and Dong Zhang, "Weapons of the Powerful: Authoritarian Elite Competition and Politicized Anticorruption in China," *Comparative Political Studies* 50(9) (2017), 1186–1220.
- 16 As stated, for example, in the revolutionary song "Win Rana Rayhin" ("Where Are we Going"), released in March 2019.
- 17 See Omar Carlier, *Entre Nation et Jihad: Histoire sociale des radicalismes algériens* [Between Nation and Jihad: A Social History of Algerian Radicalisms] (Paris: Presses de Sciences Po, 1995), and James McDougall, *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 18 Most Berbers in Algeria are from the mountainous region of Kabylia, situated to the east of Algiers, which is also a stronghold of opposition political activism.
- 19 Michel Dobry, *Sociologie des crises politiques* [Sociology of Political Crises] (Paris: Presses de la Fondation nationale des sciences politiques, 1986).



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