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# Algeria, One Year into the Hirak: Successes and Setbacks

by [Zine Labidine Ghebouli](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### [Zine Labidine Ghebouli](#)

Zine Labidine Ghebouli is an Algerian student at the American University of Beirut. He is engaged on political, security, and socioeconomic issues in the MENA region with a focus on Algerian affairs.



### Brief Analysis

One year ago, Algeria witnessed the beginning of the largest and most peaceful popular protests since its independence in 1962. Since then, Algerians have filled the streets every Tuesday and Friday to express their rejection of the state's political system and demand radical change. In the past year, Algeria has changed more than it had during the previous 57 years. These protests brought down former long-ruling president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika in April, and have led to an unprecedented fracture of the political system, yet the likely developments in 2020 suggest a concerning future for the state as a whole.

In December, Algeria's highly contested presidential election brought former Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune to power. Yet many have rejected the elections as an inadequate response to their demands, and Algerians are still in the streets as they continue to reject the system and its election's results. In fact, December's elections have deepened the country's legitimacy crisis and have not managed to provide a much-needed political stability to Algeria.

Now, Algeria is stuck between a regime that is attempting to regain its legitimacy at any cost and a population determined to regain its country in a peaceful and civilized manner. But with an increasingly hostile situation in both Libya and the Sahel, and in light of grim economic prospects, Algeria cannot afford another long year of political tensions. Understanding and forecasting the challenging context of Algerian politics for the upcoming year requires a careful analysis of today's realities, both within the system and the "Hirak" protest movement.

### The System at a Crossroads

In September, former army chief of staff and strongman of the Algerian system Ahmed Gaid Salah **demande**d that elections take place before the end of 2019. Gaid represented the voice of the military junta, which saw presidential elections as the only solution to the country's political paralysis. But this system used **repressive measures**, including jailing activists and limiting freedom of speech and press to impose its electoral agenda. The elections, held December 12, attracted approximately **40 percent** of Algerians who are legally able to vote. Tebboune received

the trust and confidence of about 20 percent of registered voters. The majority of Algerians boycotted the election while organizing massive protests.

The Algerian system's focus on elections tactic has led to a weak president whose popular legitimacy is almost non-existent. The political crisis has not been solved; continued weekly protests prove that these elections were a failure for democracy.

Adding to the turmoil, Ahmed Gaid Salah passed away unexpectedly a few days after the inauguration of the new president—an extremely important event for Algerian politics. Gaid Salah was, in a way or another, the de-facto ruler of Algeria after Bouteflika's resignation. His sudden death suggested to many that Tebboune might now have a broader range of political maneuvering available to him and attempt, consequently, to listen more seriously to the demands of the people, fulfilling a promise of his presidential campaign. On the one hand, Tebboune formed a government within a few days and reportedly encouraged the release of 76 political prisoners. However, Tebboune has so far fallen short on delivering to the people what he promised, as basic freedoms and liberties are still restricted.

The first month of Tebboune's presidency suggests that the system is looking at how to regain legitimacy and is attempting to limit “radical” and “unwanted” change through a series of superficial and controlled reforms. A key aspect of this is changing the 2016 constitution. Tebboune has already established a committee of seventeen constitutional experts to do so. In tandem, Tebboune has had several meetings with prominent political figures “respected” by the Hirak including former heads of government, Benbitour and Hamrouche in addition to former Minister Taleb Ibrahim, which appears to be an attempt to put an end to the protest movement.

Thus, the system's priorities seem to be fixed at silencing the movement and amending the constitution rather than serious dialogue with the key social and political actors of the protest movement. Tebboune's time as president is best seen as an “unofficial” transition phase. Once the system has decided that this transition period is over, Tebboune may resign, triggering early presidential elections. In all cases, and regardless of how Tebboune's term may end, the system has effectively put itself and the country, at a fatal crossroads by imposing elections. Now, the future outcome of the state depends largely on the protest movement and its ability to provide a sustainable alternative.

### **The Hirak: Alive and Powerful but Politically Limited**

The Hirak is one of the longest, most resilient and most peaceful political movement in both Algeria and the broader region's recent history. Despite expectations otherwise, it has proven itself capable of maintaining its strength and unity. However, as the system's political maneuvering continues and as the contested, yet imposed, elections complicate Algerian politics, the Hirak is now facing its most challenging period since last February. Its principle concerns now are its lack of future vision, along with emerging spatial and ideological differences and a lingering inability to evolve into a political force.

This is not to discount what the Algerian protest movement has already accomplished: it forced Bouteflika to resign, dismantled an entire clan of the system, and exerted tremendous pressure on the military junta. Yet the movement in its current shape is limiting itself to being a tool to exert pressure on extant political systems rather than a political alternative that could effectively provide a pragmatic and realistic roadmap for peaceful and democratic change. The massive protests have undeniably fallen short on producing its own political vision, allowing the de-facto ruling military junta to renew its civilian façade through elections

These political limitations of the Hirak are widely seen as resulting from the system's blatant repression and restriction of individual and collective freedoms and liberties. Yet another factor is the differences emerging within the Hirak itself. Algerians agree on the need to change the system but disagree on what form that change should

take. Protesters know what they do not want (the continuity of dictatorship) and what they do want (a just and free state) but how to achieve this is another matter entirely.

These nascent political divisions are further complicated by the fact that Algeria is a large country that is ethnically and ideologically diverse. Regional differences not reflected in the capital have started to emerge especially as numbers of protesters in internal and rural areas started to decrease. Additionally, the future vision and the “social model” for the new Algeria are also different between regions that have a long history of autonomous political activism, such as the Kabylie region and other regions that were, historically speaking, less engaged against the ruling system. While some regions would opt for “cooperation” with the system under certain conditions out of fear from a potential “vacuum of power,” other regions hold a radical position at all costs. It is also clear that the political class, immersed in ideological and historical disagreements, is paralyzed and cannot lead the Hirak towards a non-partisan and consensus-based political platform for a meaningful change.

In light of these internal challenges facing the Hirak, it seems that protesters have not yet been able to recognize that the street’s failure to adopt a clear political will was one of the principle reasons for the collapse of the 2011 Arab Spring.

### **Identifying the Path Forward: Slow and Difficult Process of Potential Change**

Between the system’s continued resistance to dramatic change and the Hirak’s inability to shape new political will, Algeria appears stuck at a crossroads. What happens next is of vital importance, not just for Algeria but for the entire North African region.

After twenty years of Bouteflika’s rule, with an unfavorable economic situation and outdated political frameworks, a set of incremental changes are already in process, especially regarding the constitution and upcoming legislative elections.

Here there are several points of agreement; both the system and the people are intent on amending Bouteflika’s constitution of 2016. And in light of Tebboune’s recently established constitutional committee, it seems that Algeria will witness a public referendum on the new constitution before mid-2020. Moreover, constitutional amendments would also mean that other laws, including electoral and associations’ ones, will be revised. Certainly, the president’s prerogatives will be significantly reduced, and the opposition’s role will also be constitutionally consolidated. Additionally, the three pillars of the Algerian identity, being Islam, Arabism and Berberism (Amazighite), will be reaffirmed.

This process will provide important insight into the Hirak’s ability to attain constitutional concessions from the system, especially the role of the Parliament, and guarantees of basic freedoms and liberties. So far, it seems unlikely that any constitutional amendment will touch upon the military’s de-facto political powers.

It is also becoming clearer that Algeria will also witness legislative and municipal elections within a few months as soon as the new constitution is approved by a referendum. Currently, the majority 606 members of Algeria’s bicameral parliament belongs to the The National Liberation Front (FLN) and Democratic National Rally (RND) parties that have previously endorsed Bouteflika’s rule. Therefore, with an anticipated increased role of parliament within the new constitution, the expected legislative elections will set the road for Algeria’s near future vision. With upcoming elections, Algeria will likely witness a new wave of ideological and tense political divisions, putting further pressures on intra-Hirak dialogue. Furthermore, new parties— particularly conservative ones—are expected to emerge ahead of elections, significantly changing the political scene.

Unless the system approves certain desperately needed appeasement measures to protect basic freedoms such as unconditionally releasing all political prisoners, liberating the press from all restrictions and protecting freedom of assembly and partisan political actions, and if the Hirak is not actively engaged in the constitutional consultations

and is unwilling for any self-organization, it is improbable that these upcoming significant changes will appease protesters. In that case, Tebboune may see his term ending much sooner than the system thought.

Algerians have decided to divorce the system. The two are already separated, but both must agree on the terms of divorce, a greater responsibility on the Hirak's side to engender them. This process must be done quickly, efficiently, and peacefully to avoid turning Algeria into another example of a failed state.

Much of this process also depends on whether the Hirak to prefers remain a political tool that "responds" to system's maneuvering or whether it can emerge as a political force and eventually represent an alternative. If the Hirak is ready to assume real political responsibilities, an intra-movement dialogue is of the utmost urgency. Time is running out—both as the state moves forward with its own set of reforms and with the worsening of the country's economic crisis.

February 22 marked the beginning of a political and peaceful "war of attrition" between a 57-year-old system and an awakening of the people. Unless an agreement with mutual concessions is promptly reached, the price of this war could be the collapse of the Algerian state once the foreign exchange reserves are depleted. ❖



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