Brief Analysis

Next week, Algeria will hold its first elections in decades where the former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika will not be a candidate. While new elections had been previously announced earlier on July 4, the constitutional council decided to postpone them due to a lack of registered candidates. Even so, Algerians continue to come out to the streets to protest against the government holding elections while some of the most prominent politicians remain in power—such as former prime minister Noureddine Bedoui and the president Abdelkader Bensalah—as these individuals are considered to be “Bouteflika’s right hand men.” Meanwhile, the military establishment rejects any solution to the crisis beyond the presidential elections themselves, meaning that the elections themselves must serve as the principal avenue for any future change in Algeria.

Even within Algeria’s nascent and evolving post-Bouteflika political scene, there exists a multitude of clashing ideological and political backgrounds and experiences that political parties have adopted as their reference point for how to move forward in the upcoming elections. One school of thought believes that the best path forward is to follow that of countries that underwent similar transitions with a radical separation from the former regime (this sentiment is expressed by the well-known Algerian populist slogan, “they all go”).

Another group believes that political change should be implemented gradually with efforts based in reality, ensuring that the transition is quick-paced yet organized so as not to worsen the side effects of the process. According to this group, the technocratic elements of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s regime must remain in the state apparatus for the sake of Algeria’s sovereignty, even as the rest of the regime is radically changed. For these Algerians, one of the most important indicators of this change is the dissolution of what is mockingly referred to as the “National Election Rigging Agency,” a nickname given to the security and administrative agencies that continuously intervene in the country’s political process, supervising the rigging of elections, spreading corruption, and molding presidents without input from the popular will.

The reality is that although the ongoing protest movement in Algeria has succeeded in achieving some political
gains, the old political regime still stands and continues to enjoy both total power and the support of the military establishment. While protesters led Algeria to this point, it is the interaction of these two elite forces that will determine the course of the country in the near future.

Moreover, while protesters succeeded in forcing President Bouteflika to step down, they have been unable to press for profound change in the Algerian governmental structure. Even with the weakening of the executive office and the possibility of the presidency remaining vacant, the structure of power in Algeria remains unchanged. Any change to the structure will depend primarily upon the continued strength of the protests and the desire of the dominant forces in the country to meet the protesters’ demands.

The Algerian government remains a minority-led government. Power is shared to varying degrees between the army, the National Liberation Front (FLN), businessmen, and the intelligence services. The presidential vacuum that occurred after Bouteflika stepped down is the only real change to the regime’s makeup as of late. Ultimately, the constitutional path toward presidential elections offers a glimmer of hope for Algerians who hope to elect a president who will work towards real political reform. But given the survival of the old regime’s deep state, elections will not be enough to achieve this goal.

In light of this reality, some argue that elections are merely a way to maintain the status quo based on the fraud that plagued the electoral process in the past, while some political parties and personalities oppose the elections simply because they are not ready for the race. Even so, a considerable number of Algerians believe that the best path forward in the democratic transition is to return to legitimacy by electing a president who has the power to carry out deep reforms within the Algerian political system, which currently suffers from uncertainty, political deadlock, lack of transparency, widespread corruption, and weak oversight mechanisms.

According to this school of thought, the presidential elections should be held as soon as possible because they are the only way to evaluate the integrity of the political change. The free will of voters, expressed through transparent voting procedures, is the foundation of the democratic process so feared by totalitarian regimes. Here, the debate about the feasibility of elections shifts to a debate on the conditions for holding them, guarantees of integrity, and the nature of the political climate surrounding them. This discussion has culminated in the establishment of the Independent National Electoral Authority, which will oversee the election process away from the influence of the government and the administrative apparatus.

Presidential elections are a big step toward change, but they are only the beginning. The popular movement is calling for more reforms in several areas, including freedom of expression, independent media, and the judicial system in order to clear the way for real political discourse about ideas and platforms. Protesters are also calling for the adoption of a new constitution that enshrines separation of powers and strengthens the role of the opposition in political life.

However, this movement must be sure to organize itself within the framework of recognized political action. Occupying the streets without efforts to further organize does not constitute political participation. Nor can the protests continue indefinitely in light of the looming security and economic risks in Algeria. At some point, Algeria’s popular protest movement must be prepared to either gain power through elections or act as opposition within the political process if it does not gain the majority vote. This transition from the streets to the parliament will be a major challenge, the first of its kind in Algeria’s history. Since the days of independence, there has been no real political competition between the ruling party and the opposition. Algeria’s traditional parties and organizations have all been engaged in symbiotic relationships with the old regime and its deep state, and essentially only served as political ‘décor’ designed for foreign consumption.

Given all these challenges, the elections are not a magic wand that can be waved to bring about change in the
country. However, in the absence of a clearly elected president, the alternative would be to allow uncertainty and the army's continued interference in the political process to continue to increase, which could entirely destroy Algeria's path to democracy. The protest movement's participation in monitoring and organizing elections may contribute significantly to preventing fraud, and could block the administrative apparatus from influencing election outcomes in contravention of the law and popular will. With transparency and a bit of luck, Algeria's elections will provide an unprecedented opportunity to build confidence in the country while at the same time paving the way to a stronger democracy for the Algerian people.

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