

Algeria: Between Radical Change and Superficial Reform

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Brief Analysis

Since February 22, Algeria has been witnessing what has been described as the largest political movement since its independence in 1962. Over the past four months, this popular movement has been able to force changes that most political analysts previously thought to be unachievable in a country such as Algeria.

Bouteflika's resignation after twenty years of ruling the country was indeed a major event in the modern political life of Algeria. However, the past few weeks have shown that his resignation was just the beginning of a series of unexpected political events, creating what has now turned out to be an even more complex political climate.

Although Algeria's protests are entering their fifth month, many expect that the country will still need time to find stability, either through elections, as is prescribed by the constitution, or consensus on a political transition period, as demanded by some social and political forces. This political ambiguity is the result of both stagnation on the side of the military and a lack of organization among the protesters. A clearer comprehension of both sides' motives will help clarify what to expect over the next few weeks in Algerian politics.

The System's Thirst for Urgent Elections

After the resignation of Bouteflika, the Algerian political system found itself rushed into a situation it could not control. For the military junta, the real power holder in Algeria, the departure of the former president has unmasked the ruling *boite noire* and put the military leadership in a direct line of confrontation with those in the streets. It is for this reason that the army's chief of staff, Ahmed Gaid Salah, has repeatedly called for presidential elections as soon as possible. The Algerian military junta rules behind the scenes and is therefore impatient to impose, as usual, its own civilian façade through the next elections.

For the military leadership, organizing elections is the only strategy that would potentially allow the old regime to reconsolidate power. In order to avoid potential changes outside of their control, the military leadership has passed a series of symbolic but substantive reforms. As a result, Algeria has witnessed a series of arrests targeting former high officials from both the military and civilian apparatuses on corruption and security-related charges over the past month, many of whom had been seen as symbols of the Bouteflika administration. The intention of the arrests was to appease Algeria's popular movement and obtain its trust as it dismantled the Bouteflika 'clan.' Yet several political and social actors have labeled the arrests as "political" and "arbitrary."

Protesters' lack of trust of the Algerian establishment has derailed this and other attempts to impose the system's roadmap onto transition in Algeria. Gaid Salah has also attempted to divide the popular movement along ideological and ethnic lines by evoking Berber identity and labeling the Berber flag a threat to national unity. Instead, the speech was widely regarded as racist and insulting to one of the major symbols of Algerian identity. Despite propaganda efforts, protesters remain unconvinced of the military junta's roadmap and fear that elections without prior systemic change would simply allow the old system to regenerate in a new form.

In response, the Algerian system has returned to its earlier repressive mechanisms; over the past few days, numerous activists and peaceful protesters have been put in provisional detention. Even during Bouteflika's rule, with all its restrictions on human rights and freedom of expression, Algerian authorities' current actions appear more arbitrary and authoritarian. Today, Algeria appears to be witnessing the regeneration of a military dictatorship.

Additionally, Algeria has witnessed a reshuffling of its security apparatus leadership as Interim President, Abdelkader Bensalah, dismissed four military regions' chiefs, the commander of the National Gendarmerie, and the director of the Cherchell military academy. For many observers, this move is considered highly controversial—bearing in mind Bensalah's constitutional term ended on July 9th. This reshuffling of military leadership in Algeria is meant to consolidate power within the hands of Gaid Salah and neutralize any potential opposition within the military leadership.

Protester Demands and the Pursuit of Consensus

In contrast, Algeria's popular movement is demanding a complete removal of the elites of the Bouteflika era from Algeria's political structure, since protesters view all those who served Bouteflika's agendas over the past twenty years as responsible for the current crisis. Though Bouteflika was certainly a significant component of the corrupt political system, he does not carry sole responsibility.

Many Algerians are confident that the political system as it currently exists is fundamentally corrupt and illegitimate — especially as the interim president's constitutional term ended on July 9th and is therefore unable to engage in any serious reforms. Political and social actors have responded by holding a number of meetings over the past few weeks, and two initiatives have dominated the conversation.

The first initiative took place on June 15 in the form of an inclusive civil society conference. Approximately forty different organizations, associations, and syndicates came together in order to discuss the political crisis, with the conference concluding that a transitional period of one year was required before the country headed to elections. During this transitional period, the conference established that a consensus figure or entity should lead the country while an independent body is established to organize future elections.

While the political platform that emerged out of this initiative is commendable, the body lacks recommendations regarding the practical measures that should be taken to ensure a peaceful and smooth transition of power. Moreover, after twenty years of Bouteflika dismantling community organizations, civil society needs more time to restructure itself in order to become a real alternative to traditional leadership. While the conference itself served as a noteworthy platform for dialogue during such sensitive times in Algeria, the current unorganized status of civil society made it harder for participants, who rarely used to work collectively, to reach consensus. Such a political crisis requires mutual trust between the different civil society actors; even though this conference is a good start, the structuration of the civil society will build bridges between its various actors, making the process of building trust easier.

The second initiative was a forum on July 6 focused on establishing the grounds for an inclusive dialogue between most political and social actors. Unlike the first initiative, the National Forum for Dialogue raised concerns due to its inclusion of former figures of the political system. Many activists have expressed their concern that the Forum could

break the national movement and rejuvenate the old system. While there was brief discussion of some fundamental issues, such as the release of political prisoners, the rhetoric seems to have mainly adopted the same tone as the Algerian interim head of state, Abdelkader Bensalah. Open dialogue was emphasized, but no clear or practical conditions for moving forward were advanced. It is unlikely that any form of dialogue will take place unless major concessions from the Algerian political system are made. Some of these conditions include the departure of the system's remaining symbols, lifting the different restrictions on media and civil society, the release of all political prisoners in addition to respecting Algerians' right to freedom of assembly.

Aside from these main initiatives, several calls and roadmaps have been presented over the past few months, but political and social actors still lack the tools to transform the popular movement into a structured entity. This lack of leadership and vision is leaving the popular movement without many options and has led to calls for civil disobedience as a last resort. While most protesters firmly understand the risks of a sustained transitional period, a form of peaceful radicalization of the movement is already taking place. For the protesters, the departure of the head of state and the government is becoming an essential condition for fair elections.

The Road Ahead

As this political impasse continues to loom over Algerian life, compounded by regional instability along the Algerian border, a peaceful and smooth transition of power is more important than ever. The success of this transition is, however, conditional upon two major factors: a more structured popular movement and the emergence of dialogue between the political system and the protesters.

It would be naïve to believe that the popular movement, in its current unorganized shape, would be able to serve as an alternative to the extant political leadership. Despite its capacity to mobilize and its willingness to push the system for more concessions, the movement remains unable to generate clear institutional structures. Any attempt to push the current political system into departure without an alternative in place would only result in a dangerous power vacuum. Some of its leaders have begun to understand the urgent need to organize the movement and consolidate the popular demands in a clear, and most importantly, pragmatic roadmap, but building an alternative requires providing the proper and logistical conditions for fruitful discussions to take place.

In addition to conversations within the popular movement itself, another round of dialogue between the rulers and protesters is bound to occur at a certain point. In his latest speech, Algerian interim head of state Bensalah has reiterated the system's commitment to open and inclusive dialogue, led by independent figures, that would lead to presidential elections as soon as possible. Yet protesters see the prospect of such a dialogue as conditional to the release of political prisoners and the departure of the remaining leadership from the Bouteflika era. Moreover, the military institution has repeatedly expressed its unwillingness to participate in any dialogue, hinting that the military junta is adopted a mechanism of "ruling behind the curtains." In order for any successful dialogue, the commitment of the military junta to remain politically neutral even behind the scenes is a necessity. However, an understanding of the Algerian military's historic involvement in political affairs suggests that the military leadership is unlikely to engage in a direct and official dialogue with the popular movement unless the latter reaches a solid level of organization and is able to provide an alternative. Only a real new balance of powers would push the military leadership into dialogue.

What to Expect:

As the country enters its fifth month of protests, it is clear that the transition to a new leadership is unavoidable. The outcome of this transition is still unclear, but three main scenarios are most likely.

If the protesters can learn to organize themselves, the popular movement will have both energy and a legitimate structure. In such a case, the political system will be forced to sit down and negotiate its departure terms at a certain

point. These terms will undoubtedly include the resignation of Algeria's old guard and a firm reform of the security apparatus to ensure the dismantling of the military junta and the constraining of the military institution to its constitutional duties. This is an optimistic scenario, but it is the most likely option for preventing the country from entering into authoritarian rule or violent escalation.

If protesters cannot organize effectively, it is likely that the military junta will be able to impose its presidential candidate and vision for Algerian politics. Though this scenario may grant a certain short-term stability, such a situation will prevent the economic, political, and social reforms that the country desperately needs from being implemented. Algeria will return to a fake stability that will end with a potentially violent uprising and overall chaos. Allowing the system to regenerate itself will only delay the implementation of highly needed reforms that will eventually extract a much higher cost.

If neither the popular movement nor the political system are able to reach their ultimate goal and consolidate power, Algeria will enter a constitutional void. A prolonged transition period without meaningful restructuring could ultimately result in a violent and chaotic insurgency. With the difficult situation in Libya and the Sahel, a constitutional void and weakened national security apparatus may grant armed groups relatively easy access to the country. Several foreign powers, especially the historical strategic ally of Russia, will also seek to protect and advance their interests. This will turn the country into a new competition field for international and regional powers.

Now is perhaps the most pivotal moment in the last fifty years of Algerian history; there is a golden opportunity for radical change but also the real risk of a sustained period of political chaos. The situation in Algeria should not only be concerning to the Algerian people but also to its neighboring countries and any international powers with significant interests in the region. There is an urgent need to agree on a consensus roadmap that satisfies the protesters' demands according to a realistic time frame. It is essential that the younger generation is given its opportunity to govern, but this must be accomplished in a way that would not compromise the longevity of the state's institutions. The challenges facing Algeria both internally and regionally require changing the system of governance rather than reforming and recycling its civilian façade. The military junta is inherently incapable of bringing peace and stability to Algeria in the long-term. ❖

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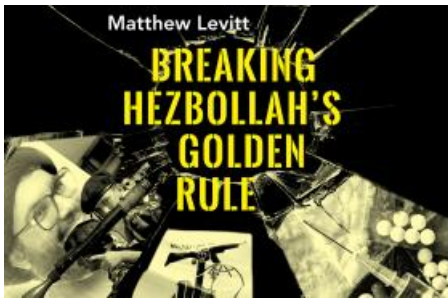
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