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Algeria's Political Crisis: An Ongoing Vicious Cycle

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Brief Analysis

Algeria's divided political system has limited time to make critical reforms.

Almost two years ago, Algeria witnessed the most popular, peaceful, and determined protest movement in its recent history. Millions of Algerians from all backgrounds took to the streets to protest the announcement of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term, and their perseverance forced Bouteflika to [resign](#) on April 2, 2019 when the military establishment [abandoned](#) him. Today, this protest movement is known as the Hirak.

Yet as the Hirak is about to celebrate its second anniversary on February 22, Algerians' hopeful aspirations have melted into a gloomy reality characterized by the same old authoritarian status-quo. Though protestors were successful in calling for Bouteflika's resignation, his removal from power was not the ultimate goal of Algerians' democratic aspirations. They had hoped the change in power would lead to the dismantling of the Algerian political system that has characterized the country since its early years of independence.

When comparing these goals to Algeria's present reality, the Hirak can be said to have suffered a bitter end. Algeria's military leadership has firmly rejected any further concessions and disregarded all calls for a much-needed transition period. Instead, the political establishment mobilized propaganda and repression campaigns to force presidential elections on December 12, 2019, [resulting](#) in the presidency of former Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune.

During these two years, Algeria has not found its way to political stability. Instead the state is trapped in a vicious cycle in which political actors repeatedly postpone desperately needed economic and political reforms, further angering Hirak members. Now, as Algeria struggles economically and politically with the Covid-19 pandemic, it has entered a potentially chaotic crisis of multiple dimensions. The political establishment's reluctance

to change and the limitations of the Hirak have brought Algeria into an unsustainable state of near-catastrophe, likely to come to a head in the coming year.

The Political Establishment's "Unstable Equilibrium"

Algeria's two decades under Bouteflika's rule saw him as a "consensus man" for the political system's different poles. His fourth and fifth bids for the presidency were both essentially accepted as temporary solutions to the long-standing tensions between the various factions of Algeria's political elite. As such, Bouteflika's resignation helped unveil the deep fractures within the Algerian establishment. The political elite accepted Bouteflika's resignation only as a last resort to save that establishment as the streets filled with protests, and the elites continued to lack the framework for an agreement between the different influential political actors involved on how to proceed in a post-Bouteflika regime.

The power dynamics were further destabilized with the death of the former Army Chief of Staff Gaid Salah in December 2019—with whom Tebboune is rumored to have connections. In the past year, Salah's networks of power have appeared to slowly subside after the dismissal and detention of former head of the General Directorate of Internal Security (DGSI), Wassini Bouazza, in April 2020. In contrast, the old networks of Mohamed Mediene, known as Toufik—who served as Algeria's spymaster from 1990 until his dismissal in 2015—appear to be regaining their strength. Toufik himself was recently acquitted and released by the Blida's military court in the famous case from 2019, with the charge of "conspiracy against the authority of 'state and army.'"

Given these fluctuating power centers, the Algerian political system as a whole has remained unable to revive its old "unstable equilibrium," which defined the Bouteflika years. While some consider Tebboune's election representative of the end of the internal power struggles, many influential political groups see Tebboune as a "temporary stabilizing factor."

Consequently, many of Algeria's recent political developments, including the constitutional referendum held in November 2020, have essentially been efforts to gain time rather than comprehensive solutions to Algeria's myriad political crises. The political establishment has not been focused on needed reforms because of its preoccupation with resolving its own internal issues, especially within its military institutions.

On this basis, even as Tebboune continues to promise radical political and economic changes, such as engaging the Hirak's young people and diversifying the economy, it is debatable if he has the capacity to achieve them in the midst of the establishment's current internal turmoil. At this point, Tebboune stands as a president who can "rule" but not necessarily "govern," given that the approval of the military leadership is necessary for most of his strategic decisions. In that sense, the system's narrative and strategy are unlikely to change unless the establishment can attain a new equilibrium.

The Hirak's Dreams and Limitations

When the Hirak first began, millions of citizens engaged in what seemed at the time to be the perfect opportunity for change. Algerians had pressured a complex system of fifty-eight years into several significant concessions, including Bouteflika's resignation and historic trials of influential members of the Algerian elite. Sadly, protesters celebrated their strength and unity too early, mistaking their temporary agreement for permanent social and political harmony. Today, the Hirak movement is divided and powerless.

The Hirak's failure stems, in part, from the fact that it was a victim of its own narratives and misunderstandings about Algeria's system and society. Indeed, weekly protests represented a candid opportunity for Algerians to

discover their country and its diversity, but the Hirak's political and social actors who adopted radical positions failed to provide a viable political alternative to the system they sought to overthrow. As much as absolutist rhetoric was needed during the first few weeks of the movement, such language soon became toxic, populist, and counterproductive—especially after December's elections.

In addition, it is safe to say that the Hirak has become irreversibly fragmented. The movement now consists of groups that no longer share the same sociopolitical motives or aspirations. The most notable divide is that between the neo-reformist camp, made up of the liberal, nationalist [Jil Jadid](#) party and the Islamist [MSP](#), in addition to civil society coalitions like the [Al-Massar al-jadid](#), and the politically radical camp, composed of traditional opposition parties such as the socialist [FFS](#), the secularist [RCD](#) and returning Islamist circles from the 1990s.

As a result of these internal weaknesses, the Hirak has failed even to establish a detailed agenda for what the movement seeks to achieve. At this point, any dialogue within the Hirak, while certainly necessary to its potential success, is overdue and unlikely to build consensus unless the country faces an existential threat that pushes the system, including Hirak actors, to engage collectively. Otherwise, Algeria's Hirak will remain divided, precluding the chances of immediate, thorough change in the Algerian system.

Algeria's Political and Economic Impediments

The system's current status-quo and the Hirak's divisions are inevitable outcomes in any country that goes through a deep transformation like that of the February 22 Revolt. Algeria is no exception among numerous Arab states still struggling with the aftermath of earlier popular uprisings. Nonetheless, Algeria is now facing the most complicated political and economic crisis since independence in 1962. While many political and social actors could rightfully argue that the country is slowly changing, Algeria does not have the luxury of time.

On the political level, and despite the continuous promises of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Algeria is still the site of political repression and injustice. Over the past year, several political figures, civil society members, activists and journalists have been unjustly [arrested and sentenced](#) for exercising their political and civil rights. Even if these arrests were not all directly ordered by the establishment—as many are purely the result of outdated legal frameworks, social tensions, or local authorities' coercive measures—they sharply contradict the president's promises. Furthermore, Tebboune's recent [medical issues](#) after contracting Covid-19 and subsequent prolonged absence in Germany, stretching into its fourth month after a brief visit to Algeria in December, are not promising for a country that needs a strong and present leader who can initiate the needed reforms.

Moreover, Algeria is also struggling with an increasingly challenging economic situation that complicates any chance for political development. As the government continues to disregard the major impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on the national economy, the parliament has recently passed the 2021 budget bill, in which lawmakers anticipated a record [14 percent deficit](#). This is further complicated by the last year's sustained dip in oil prices and Algeria's almost complete dependence on oil and gas revenues from its state-owned company Sonatrach—representing 60 percent of the state's total budget.

Most projections, including those from the [IMF](#), contain warning signs that Algeria faces an increasingly turbulent economy and growing socioeconomic grievances. At the same time, as the Algerian Dinar [continues to lose its value](#) against the Euro, imported necessities are sure to become more expensive. It is still early to assess the pandemic's full impact on Algeria's financial and economic situation, but the citizenry, especially in rural and disadvantaged areas, is already feeling a deterioration in living conditions.

The Path Forward

Algeria has been living a unique experience since the outbreak of the Hirak. The protest movement, even if it has not achieved all of its primary goals, has initiated a genuine social and political revolutionary process that may require several years to run its course. Yet that time may not be available given the country's serious political and economic challenges. This situation has been further complicated by the fact that the international community has largely disregarded Algeria since 2019 despite its unprecedented movement, favoring the status-quo over uncertain paths of change. Though there are valid reasons for this dynamic, the window may be closing for Algeria's international partners to re-engage with its political situation in order to secure the stability of the region.

While Algerians, both on official and popular levels, are likely to reject all attempts to interfere in their internal affairs, the international community could arrange the necessary environment for the internal dialogue that has come to a standstill. In that regard, even if Algeria's international partners cannot and should not attempt to force authorities into specific policies, they could assist with the ongoing political challenges by providing economic incentives in exchange for the required political reforms.

Accordingly, the international community can help the Hirak with its organizational process by encouraging more political and civil freedoms. In that context, though Algeria may not be considered a priority for the Biden-Harris administration, there is nevertheless an enhanced potential for the United States to reinvigorate a collective effort towards a transition period using its newly reinforced relations with European governments.

Looking forward, the upcoming legislative elections in Algeria may serve as a good start for a genuine democratization process. With the initiation of such a process, yet to be scheduled, Algeria could hopefully enact necessary reforms before its exchange reserves are depleted. In the end, it may be too soon and unsafe to call for radical and instant changes, but it is never too late to work on gradual and mutually beneficial reforms for both the system and the opposition. ❖



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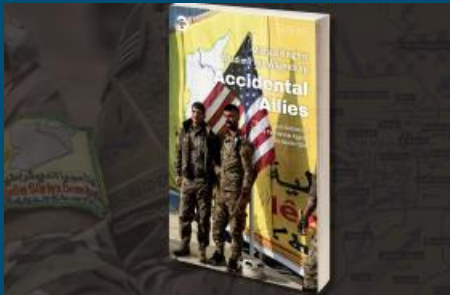


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