

Algeria's Long Buildup to Mass Protests

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Brief Analysis

The main drivers of the current crisis have been in play for many years, so Washington should focus on economic and security initiatives that can help Algeria regardless of which new leaders emerge.

The whirlwind of extraordinary events in Algeria appears to be accelerating. On April 5, authorities reportedly dismissed intelligence chief Bachir Tartag and transferred control of his directorate from the office of the president to the Defense Ministry—a potential sign that military leaders aim to seize control of key security organs and ward off power moves by other players. Meanwhile, protestors at ongoing mass demonstrations have added vice defense minister and army chief of staff Ahmed Gaid Salah to their long list of old-guard figures who should join [recently resigned \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/bouteflika-resigns-next-steps-in-uncharted-territory\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/bouteflika-resigns-next-steps-in-uncharted-territory) president Abdelaziz Bouteflika in departing the scene. And on April 9, both chambers of parliament reportedly formalized legislator Abdelkader Bensalah's role as interim president.

Despite popular objections to the latter move, the country's most powerful figures have generally conceded to demands from the leaderless protest movement that first took to the streets in February, while the protestors have not conceded anything in return. As the standoff continues, the U.S. government should continue urging nonviolence and looking ahead to the long term, recognizing the importance of finding an Algerian-led solution to problems that have been brewing for years, not months.

PUTTING THE PROTESTS IN CONTEXT

The rapidly escalating protest movement is taking place against a backdrop of gradual change. In 2011, the government launched constitutional reforms in response to demonstrations that erupted in Algeria and elsewhere in the region. Officially adopted in 2016, these reforms made significant headway on some issues, such as expanding the powers of parliament and setting presidential term limits. Yet they fell short of adequately empowering citizens.

For example, although a 2012 law mandated a quota for female representation on political party lists, Algeria's highly restrictive family code stayed in place, subordinating women's rights to men's in matters relating to marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. As for term limits, the prospect of a fifth round in office for the eighty-two-year-old Bouteflika wound up being the final spark that lit the current mass protest movement.

Algeria's acute economic challenges are another longstanding driver of unrest. The country has struggled to decrease its heavy reliance on hydrocarbons since independence. The founders of its postcolonial national identity and architects of its subsequent economic development believed that cheap energy would help build a powerful industrial sector and turn Algeria into a modern nation, free from dependence on outside resources. The state also built a legacy of excessive interventionism, using hydrocarbon revenues to fund generous benefits such as price subsidies and massive public-sector job creation.

Yet these policies failed to protect large segments of the population from social and economic vulnerability, provoking small-scale street protests throughout Bouteflika's presidency. Even communities in hydrocarbon-rich areas of the country have resisted attempts by national energy company Sonatrach and its international partners (including China and Russia) to exploit local shale gas reserves, claiming they never benefited from previously exploited oil reserves in these areas. Such events represent a shift in popular attitudes about what constitutes economic and social empowerment.

Another gradual change has been Algeria's improved social cohesion since Bouteflika first came to power. The recent protests have been notable for their dearth of mobilization based on Berber, Tuareg, or other subnational identities, thanks in part to the largely cooperative behavior of opposition political parties. Women have also been more prominent in the demonstrations, helping to sustain unity in a movement that still lacks a single leader. Some analysts credit Bouteflika for this development, citing his ability to promote a shared Algerian and Muslim identity. Others have noted the government's use of rhetoric about "external threats" (e.g., terrorist movements or Western interventionism) to prevent internal divisions. Whatever the case, Algerians have seemingly found ways to assert their voices collectively despite the government's stagnation.

THE MILITARY'S ROLE

Historically, the Algerian military has played a central role in politics ever since it formed a close alliance with the National Liberation Front during the revolution six decades ago. Its position has been periodically challenged, however. The state's steady professionalization of the army after the civil war ended in 2002 suggested a renegotiation of civil-military relations, as did Bouteflika's restructuring of powerful state intelligence services after 2015. In addition, despite their traditional unwillingness to engage in military affairs abroad or partner with Western nations on security affairs, civilian authorities began to push for even more such cooperation after al-Qaeda-linked terrorists attacked the In Amenas gas facility in 2013.

Today, the army clearly still views itself as the protector of Algeria and guarantor of the civilian government, even if that duty entails pressing the president to resign, as Gaid Salah reportedly did last week. Yet protestors are also forcefully asserting their own voice in choosing the country's leadership, with many of them rejecting Gaid Salah's proposed transition plan and even his continued presence in government.

These conflicting mandates have led some observers to suggest that an acceptable roadmap can only be advanced under leaders who satisfy both the people and the generals. The army has put forth several potential leaders, but protestors have dismissed each one as too representative of the old regime (Bensalah at least has the authority of law behind his temporary elevation, since the constitution mandates that the head of the upper house of parliament be named interim president in these transitional situations). They have also called for the removal of Constitutional Council chair Tayeb Belaiz and Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui (whose government lacks legitimacy because it

was appointed under Bouteflika).

The fact that no single personality has emerged to move the two sides beyond this impasse may be a function of Algeria's national identity, which is rooted in the notions of collective leadership and consensus. The 1954 revolution likewise lacked a single, undisputed leader, partly explaining the historical weakness of the presidency and the military's prominent political role. Such tendencies give weight to the protest movement's calls for appointing a neutral faction as a caretaker government until elections are organized.

IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POLICY

The narratives of national identity that have developed since the Algerian revolution continue to play a strong role in dictating current events. This identity rests on principles of noninterference in a state's internal affairs—the same grounds on which Algeria opposed military intervention in Libya in 2011 and frequently refused IMF assistance during the economic downturn of the 1980s. Coupled with the fact that past Western support for political pluralism helped unleash civil war, this resistance to foreign interference means that the United States and its European allies can wield only limited influence on Algeria's current crisis.

Instead, Washington should support Algerians in their search for national consensus on how to move beyond the Bouteflika era. U.S. policymakers should also praise Algerian authorities for the restraint they have shown toward protestors given the devastating consequences that forcible repression could cause. In addition, officials should remember that the Algerian army shares Washington's interest in maintaining a strong counterterrorism relationship; both partners should look for ways to maintain this cooperation even in the face of major institutional shifts.

Finally, policymakers should keep Algeria's long-term needs in mind. Whoever assumes leadership after Bouteflika will need to deal with an unsustainable economic situation, including widespread youth unemployment and high military spending that contributes to budget deficits. U.S. funding for education and health reform programs would be especially welcome in this context, potentially serving as the best avenues of engagement if wholesale change occurs.

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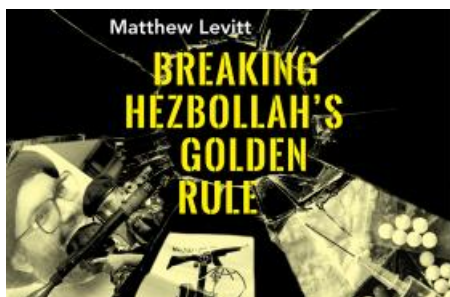
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