

Algeria: What's Next for a Changing Country?

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Brief Analysis

Over the past month, Algeria has witnessed the largest protests in its modern history as millions contested the announced fifth term of current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. For many, this was a turning point, and in some ways this reaction was expected in light of the increasing socioeconomic problems and political deadlock of Algeria's current system. Others have viewed the protests as an alarming sign of radical change in a region that is already facing serious challenges, especially in terms of security. While either view may prove correct, much is riding on the ability of the current system to effectively shape a new political path, while protestors must avoid escalating the situation into an irreversible path toward instability.

A better understanding of the current situation in Algeria requires a careful analysis of the events that have taken place over the past few weeks, both within the government and on the street. These two factors can provide hints at what lies in store for Algeria's future and determine the path these protests may take.

In order to understand the impact of these protests, it is important to emphasize the massive numbers of protestors representing all segments of Algerian society. During the past month, even numerous organizations, syndicates, and personalities who had been solid supporters of Bouteflika's fifth term have joined the popular movement and called for change.

Nevertheless, the goals of the protests are somewhat nebulous, and the moment continues to lack leadership, despite criticism that this might weaken the movement. Calls for these protests still circulate primarily on social media. Despite many discussions about designating official representatives to formally negotiate with the Algerian political system, this suggestion has been widely rejected due to a fear that such a move would begin to fragment the movement along ideological and ethnic lines.

The most important advantage of this movement has been its ability to unite different elements of Algerian society. However, these groups do not share a unified vision of the country's future. Protestors agree on the necessity of change but lack clarity on its nature and mechanisms.

Consequently, the movement is still incapable of providing a clear roadmap for change that is feasible, pragmatic, and well structured to avoid a possible constitutional vacuum. The protests seem to be a powerful political tool, but are not a viable alternative to the current system in place.

BOUTEFLIKA'S CONCESSIONS: TOWARD GRADUAL CHANGE

Even so, Bouteflika's clan has found itself obliged to make certain important concessions, which in themselves appear to be leading toward a gradual political shift. In a letter addressed to the Algerian nation, Bouteflika has formally announced that he will not be seeking reelection in any future elections, with elections postponed to an indeterminate date—effectively cancelling them. However, the president also decided to establish an independent body responsible for organizing the upcoming elections—perhaps one of the largest concessions. For years, the Algerian opposition has been calling for independently organized elections outside of the state's institutions to put an end to what the opposition considers a vicious cycle of fraud.

Moreover, Bouteflika initiated a cabinet reshuffle, bringing the longstanding technocrat Nouredine Bedoui into the position of prime minister and Ramtane Lamamra as vice prime minister. Bouteflika also announced more radical political change through a National Conference. Even if Algerians viewed these announcements as a semi-victory, they are still unsure about the political future of their country. Thus, the statements have fueled protestors to continue their mobilization rather than pacifying them.

These new decisions of Bouteflika prove that popular pressure can eventually push the “intransigent” and “firm” Algerian political system toward unprecedented concessions. However, this same system suggests that the country's rulers are pursuing a policy of “gradual change”: even amid heightened pressure, they will not yield to all popular demands at once.

Despite Bouteflika's assurances, Algerians seem to reject his proposals as they have no trust in the political system's promises. Furthermore, the opposition dismissed Bouteflika's roadmap and called for the establishment of a “Presidential Committee” that would lead the country during the transition period. However, the opposition has neither the adequate political weight nor the needed social support to effectively implement its roadmap and suggestions. In this sense, the opposition is a victim of its own internal divisions and lack of organization and cannot assume leadership of Algeria at this point.

THE CRISIS OF POLITICAL AMBIGUITY

This movement has shed light on the fact that there is a new generation in Algeria that is courageous, creative, and rightfully provocative. However, the rise of this new generation also signals great challenges for Algeria. The country's youths have been marginalized for years and, consequently, lack the right tools for a successful transfer of leadership during such difficult times. Even if there is no doubt that Algerian youths will represent a major political force in the future, the current situation requires immediate solutions that the youth movement is still far from achieving.

Yet the Algerian political system and the formal opposition both seem incapable of leading the current protest movement, let alone a successful transition period. Over the past few weeks, Algerians have rejected the returning figures of the political system, even those who are now part of the opposition, and have contested any attempts by the opposition to use the movement for its own agenda. It seems none of these groups could regain popular faith and trust. Therefore, Algeria lacks a clear, structured alternative to dictate a way forward.

Moreover, this political deadlock is characterized by the inability of Algeria's current “elite” to provide a pragmatic roadmap forward. Demands for the departure of the current system are clear, but the incapacity of Algeria's elite to incorporate these demands into a feasible political scheme makes the transition period more ambiguous and difficult. Currently, Algeria's elite is reactive and influenced by the masses, in stark contrast to this group's natural historical role as an enlightening force.

MAPPING THE ROAD AHEAD

Regardless of what happens next, it is safe to say that Algeria has fundamentally changed. If there was any doubt, the army's recent adoption of discourse that is more supportive of change is a sign in and of itself that change is inevitable, especially in a country like Algeria. The most recent statements of army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah were the final proof that the army has given up on Bouteflika. Gaid Salah called for the application of Article 102 of the constitution, which allows the Constitutional Council to declare that Bouteflika is unfit for office and should therefore be removed. An understanding of how the Algerian political system functions suggests that such a move from the army came as a last resort, given the political deadlock and the means by which the decision to remove Bouteflika has been made.

Moreover, the fact that Bouteflika's traditional support base—political parties, the business community, and foreign powers—is slowly joining the popular movement proves that it is just a matter of time before he quits the political scene altogether. On the other hand, such a major political change in the largest country of the Middle East/North Africa region could be disastrous for regional stability and security. Therefore, in order to properly manage this political turmoil, one should pay particular attention to a few key potential events and changes.

First and foremost, there is certainly an urgent need for dialogue between the country's rulers and the movement to arrive at a real and solid reconciliation between Algerians. The fact that leadership of the country is passing from the old revolutionary generation (born before the 1954 revolution) to younger ones (born after independence in 1962) should not be a barrier to a quick and stable transition period, upon which Algeria's development and reforms depend.

If the country is able to successfully navigate this generational transition, the international community will find themselves dealing with new, young leaders in Algeria. This generation has a very different mindset than the one in place today; it is likely that the doors for international cooperation—long shuttered by Algeria's inwardly focused policies—will open in a country that is in desperate need of diversifying its economy.

Political change and attendant economic challenges mean that several major powers will attempt to expand their domination in North Africa through Algeria. Among these powers, China will compete for new investments and projects to help the country with its economic crisis. Russia, Algeria's historical ally, will attempt to ensure that its position as "strategic ally" is not threatened, and to prevent other powers from interfering in Algeria's internal affairs. However, this new era will likely be a golden opportunity for a variety of different powers to compete for long-term influence in Algeria, shifting outside influence in North Africa and the Mediterranean along the way.

On the other hand, political ambiguity during the next few weeks could lead to a potential escalation of the situation despite the protests' current peaceful nature. With the recent developments and the army's intervention in the political scene, the application of Article 102 leading to a vacancy in the office of the president seems to be a matter of time. Gaid Salah's statements suggest that the upcoming steps will be handled according to the constitution, which clearly states that new presidential elections must be held in less than six months. However, the option of a transition period remains a potential strategy to avoid any new political deadlock, especially given the numerous calls on social media rejecting Salah's suggestion and pledging to continue the protests until the departure of the whole system.

Regardless of Bouteflika's decision, his departure without a clear political framework or alternative leads to a potential institutional vacuum. In a country such as Algeria, and in the midst of a regional security crisis, an institutional vacuum means the collapse of the state and self-destruction of the country. Eventually, the lack of a plan for the post-Bouteflika era might result in another "failed state" scenario. The central issue today should not be the departure of Bouteflika, but how to ensure Algeria's stability once he leaves.

More broadly, the future of Algeria as a state and society depends largely on the ability of the different political and social powers to reach a consensus. The next period will likely bring about a highly polarized political and intellectual debate over fundamental national questions including Algerian identity, the political system, its economic model, and social issues.

It is almost certain that some radical groups will attempt to take advantage of this popular movement and call for a conservative social model, which may jeopardize the efforts for peaceful change. Yet if reforming voices prevail, Algeria could see reforms in the state's structure, reshaping of the country's institutions, and measures that push society toward new horizons. And given the current financial crisis, most if not all solutions to save the country's economy will be discussed and even adopted no matter how liberal these solutions might be.

Regardless of future changes, today's Algeria is not the same Algeria of last month. If properly managed, the country's major changes may provide a basis of stability in the North African region; poorly handled, they may fuel another conflict. And though Bouteflika's era is over, it is imperative that the system is given the appropriate time to change. Its immediate dismantling would lead to the automatic destruction of the Algerian state. This current period requires careful handling by both domestic and international actors. Escalation, though in nobody's interests, still remains a potential outcome. ❖

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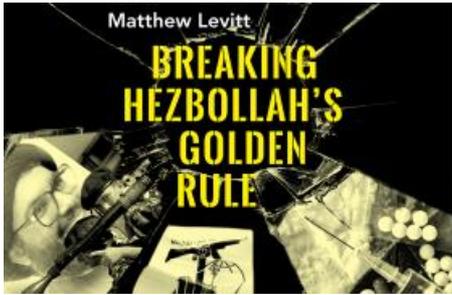
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