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The Path to a Second Republic in Algeria

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Brief Analysis

In the past several weeks, peaceful mass protests have spread through the streets of Algeria in response to the announcement that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika would run for a new term in the upcoming presidential elections. In an attempt to calm the Algerian street, Bouteflika was forced to make a statement last Monday declaring his intention to abandon his bid for a fifth term. According to the [statement](#), “There will be no fifth term, there was never any question of it for me. Given my state of health and age, my last duty towards the Algerian people was always contributing to the foundation of a new Republic.” The statement also postponed Algeria’s presidential elections scheduled for next April and announced a cabinet reshuffle, including the appointment of a new prime minister and several government ministers. Moreover, the National Conference was granted the necessary powers to implement a package of reforms that will form the new system.

Nevertheless, the scenes of protest continue in a manner reminiscent of the Arab Spring, when young people across a number of Arab countries also took to the streets to demand new economic and social prospects. These continuing demands are unquestionably linked to the current political problems Algeria is facing. Yet despite the similarities between both situations, the current protests in Algeria are different in a number of ways. In particular, the peaceful and decorous nature of the protests stands out along with the controlled response of security forces. Protesters have even raised banners bearing statements such as “the police and the people are brothers” and “Algeria is not Syria,” and have carried flowers in an effort to confirm the peacefulness of their demonstrations.

Meanwhile, authorities have sent a clear message that they are avoiding any escalation of the situation and are seriously considering implementing the promised reforms Bouteflika mentioned in his most recent letter. Furthermore, they have tried to keep things under control to help foster the environment necessary for that inevitable transition, the nature of which still sparks disagreements between the different parties. Will a simple political transition guaranteeing a successor to the current president be enough, or will elites begin a deeper transition that brings together the generation of the Algerian revolution and Algeria’s majority youth generation? These questions stand in contrast to the regime change of the Arab Spring, when transitions happened quickly,

chaos ruled, and certain groups—including the Islamist groups in Tunisia and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in Egypt—took advantage of the situation.

In fact, the current situation in Algeria is also reminiscent of a comparable moment in Algerian history. After October 1988, the country faced unstable economic and social conditions not dissimilar to what we are seeing today. Algiers was at the crossroads of an unavoidable transition from an absolute one-party system—the popularity of which was in decline across the globe—to a multi-party system that has now become the ideal sought-after model for countries following the fall of the communist bloc.

Underneath the surface of that political transformation was a heated debate concerning the different major options and directions the country could take. Whereas the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) party believed in revamping national policies while maintaining Algeria's social identity, the Francophone separatist movement sought to put an end to the FLN's revolutionary legitimacy and create a new governmental system based on Western values and a strict social modernization process in which the military and the establishment would play a big role.

During this period, those who claimed to be modern also quietly leveraged the rising trend in Islamic fundamentalism to settle their disputes with the FLN. Extremists helped take over the streets and win the first multi-party elections held in the country, but the resulting victory led Algeria into a dark decade where national political principles were undermined and security became the country's most serious concern—giving the military and the establishment a leading role in later Algerian politics.

Since President Bouteflika was initially elected twenty years ago, he has been on a mission to revive Algeria's nationalist period by modernizing political life and dismantling the centers of political and military power that had emerged during the post-nationalist period of 1992 to 2015. This period of development has brought Algeria into the threshold of a new era. Bouteflika's transitional period finally appears to be reaching its intended resolution, even if, in practice, it continued longer than planned.

Today, the country is witnessing a lively popular movement bringing up political issues after years of silence. Moreover, the ruling powers have come to realize that patchwork solutions to Algeria's economic and social issues are no longer enough to respond to the new generation's growing demands. Today, change is absolutely necessary to pave the path toward political openness and true plurality as the country builds a modern institutional structure that corresponds with the handover between the two generations.

However, no such transition can be free from the existing conflict arising from two strategic projects: On the one hand, a new national project wishes to resume implementing the roadmap abandoned in 1992 while bringing it in line with modern requirements. On the other hand, other groups are seeking to restore the gains they lost during Bouteflika's rule and relaunch a post-nationalist period that helps implement their ideological and economic agendas.

Even though the balance of power theoretically lies with the first project, the second is betting on being able to enlist the popular movement to its side when it sits down to discuss a new social contract that lays the foundations of the second republic. Many internal and external actors are fighting to obtain leverage over the popular movement, and the outcomes of the current protest movement will depend on who is able to do so. ❖



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