

# How Protests are Shaping Algeria's Presidential Elections

by [Zine Labidine Ghebouli \(/experts/zine-labidine-ghebouli\)](/experts/zine-labidine-ghebouli)

Feb 27, 2019

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-stshkl-alahtjajat-alantkhabat-alryasyt-aljzayryt\)](/ar/policy-analysis/kyf-stshkl-alahtjajat-alantkhabat-alryasyt-aljzayryt)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Zine Labidine Ghebouli \(/experts/zine-labidine-ghebouli\)](/experts/zine-labidine-ghebouli)

Zine Labidine Ghebouli is an Algerian student at the American University of Beirut. He is engaged on political, security, and socioeconomic issues in the MENA region with a focus on Algerian affairs.



Brief Analysis

On February 10th, the Algerian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika formally **announced** ([https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/presidentielle-2019-message-de-candidature-de-m-abdelaziz-bouteflika-texte-integral\\_mg\\_5c6033bce4b0eec79b24621f](https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/entry/presidentielle-2019-message-de-candidature-de-m-abdelaziz-bouteflika-texte-integral_mg_5c6033bce4b0eec79b24621f)) that he would be seeking reelection as head of the state in the upcoming presidential elections set to take place on April 18th. President Bouteflika has been ruling the country since 1999, despite increasing concerns over his health after suffering a stroke in 2013 that has drastically limited his public appearances. On the one hand, his candidacy announcement was an unsurprising development for his supporters and inner circle given the months-long campaign for Bouteflika to run again, especially from the parties that make up Algeria's **presidential alliance** (<https://arabic.cnn.com/middle-east/article/2019/02/02/algeria-bouteflika-nomination-elections>). On the other hand, Bouteflika's candidacy has been widely rejected by the opposition, concerned that a fifth term is too much or even an existential threat to the Algerian state.

Either way, Bouteflika's candidacy announcement represents a major event in the Algerian political scene, which has until recently suffered from stagnation and ambiguity fueled by rumors preceding this announcement that the upcoming presidential elections would be postponed. Now, the persistence of the political system in advocating for a fifth term of Bouteflika and the increasing rejection of his candidacy from wider parties of Algerian society have pushed regular Algerians to the streets, suggesting that real political change may be on the horizon.

## Bouteflika, the 'Consensus' Candidate

To grasp the crux of the current protests, it is important to understand the conditions under which Bouteflika originally came to power, and how his decades-long presidency has since shaped Algerian politics. Since his arrival to power in 1999 in the midst of severe political turmoil and civil war, Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been often viewed as a man of political consensus. In his first term, he managed to maintain a balance between Algeria's different power brokers—the military, the presidency, the Islamists, the business community and political parties. This ability also allowed him to gain relatively broad support from Algerian society—especially as the civil war that took the lives of approximately 200,000 people officially came to an end under his tenure.

As a result, Bouteflika was originally known to many non-politicized Algerians as the man who brought peace back to their devastated country and who spearheaded a process of mass reconstruction and rehabilitation. It is safe to say

that Bouteflika's first term in office did not spark much controversy, as the man then represented an almost "providential" figure, a savior for Algeria.

While Bouteflika began to face opposition when his intention to remain in power became clear at the end of his first term, said opposition remained considerably weak until 2008 when he sought to amend the constitution in order to permit a run for a third term in 2009. This surprising move constituted, for many, an outrageous violation of constitutional standards, yet his career has continued into a fourth five-year term. Though many prominent political figures of the opposition rejected this constitutional amendment, the lack of serious mobilization and political consciousness within the Algerian society, in addition to the Bouteflika's relatively good health condition at the time, led to the weak popular response of this amendment.

Furthermore, a wider spectrum of Algerians have considered Bouteflika unfit for office after his stroke in 2013. Thus, his highly controversial fourth term sparked criticism from both the formal opposition and various Algerian civil actors—including activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and even large sections of non-politicized Algerians.

It is in spite of this growing opposition to Bouteflika's rule that he has decided to run for office yet again. While Bouteflika's decision to run for a fourth term after his stroke surprised many Algerians and stirred up much controversy, his bid for a fifth term is even more shocking and perplexing. The president today is practically absent from Algeria's political scene, and Algerians do not want to be represented by an absent figure. Not only the opposition, but large numbers of Algerians who had not expected his candidacy have been pushed into action, especially in light of the president's degrading health condition.

However, Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term has made one thing clear: the current Algerian political system has been unable to propose an alternative for the presidency or even renew its elite. The fact that the presidential alliance has been pushing for a fifth term for many months demonstrates that Bouteflika is the only viable option for the regime to safeguard whatever is left of the political consensus that initially allowed Bouteflika to step into power.

### **A Divided, Unorganized, Irrelevant Opposition**

The Algerian opposition, formally represented by several political parties and independent opponents, had taken a radical stance against the potential of a fifth term for Bouteflika even before the official announcement. Nevertheless, they have been unable to find common ground that would allow these disparate parties to form a united front against the current political system.

Throughout Bouteflika's fourth term, characterized by his rare public appearances, the opposition has been unsuccessful to come forward with a clear roadmap for the future, despite holding a few meetings that attempted to gather its various parties to take part in inter-party discussions. The Algerian opposition has remained divided along ideological lines—a division that is further exacerbated with its disagreement over how to handle the upcoming presidential elections.

While some opposition parties—such as the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), and the relatively new Jil Jadid (New Generation) party—plan to boycott the upcoming elections, other parties and independent figures—such as the Islamist Movement of Society for Peace party—decided to participate. This division of the opposition's views on April's elections has weakened all efforts to designate a common candidate for the elections and has fragmented whatever is left of this formal opposition.

Although Ali Ghediri, the opposition figure, has announced his intention to run, it is unlikely that he will be able to gather support as a new figure of 'consensus leadership'. Ghediri does not enjoy support within the military institution— as demonstrated by army head Gaid Salah's recent statement castigating the candidate. If the political elites were to offer an alternative candidate, it would likely be a more accepted figure such as Ali Benflis, former

head of government, or Ramtane Lamamra, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and current advisor of the president.

This fragility and disaccord has led to the incapacity of either formal party or well-known individual opposition figures to provide any alternative to the system it rejects. For Algerian constituents, these parties and figures are seen as practicing a sort of “fake opposition” that is disconnected from the population and is, therefore unable to mobilize the masses. Of course, this inability to act is due in large to the opposition’s lack of a clear strategy or program to offer to an already dissatisfied population. Moreover, formal opposition leaders have lost the trust of much of the Algerian population, further eroding their ability to serve as a viable alternative in power.

Even in light of Algeria’s current political movement, the opposition has sustained its divided and unorganized status making it an irrelevant factor in the Algerian political scene. This reality significantly erodes the role it should be playing in any possible transition away from a fifth term for Bouteflika.

### **Protests: the New “Old” Strategy**

Between the dissatisfaction of Algerians with the fifth term of Bouteflika and the inability of the opposition to mobilize the outraged segments of the population, Algerians seem to be opting for popular protests independent of formal opposition leadership as a new strategy. On February 22nd, for the first time in decades, huge numbers of Algerians went into the streets to express their frustration with the current political situation and reject Bouteflika’s candidacy for a fifth term. With thousands of protestors across multiple cities of the country, Algerians have shown that they can no longer afford continuing the silence of earlier years.

Taking into consideration the fact that Algerian streets have not seen such a political movement in a long time, these protests represent a major moment in the modern political history of Algeria. While there have been a number of protests in Algeria in recent years, those earlier protests were highly localized. Furthermore, the political repression of these past protests has left protests weak and ineffective.

What we are seeing today is very different; the protests are calling for a political change rather than tackling local issues. Remarkably, recent protests against Bouteflika are huge, simultaneous, and geographically diverse. In that sense, the streets are back as a political tool.

However, in addition to Algerians’ momentary feelings of happiness and pride on the mass movements reflected on social media, a number of theoretical and practical observations may be drawn out of these protests.

First, these massive protests mark an important transformation in Algerian society and the political scene; they prove that a fifth term of Bouteflika is so controversial that people are willing to publicly demonstrate their rejection instead of maintaining the “passive” status that has characterized earlier elections.

Second, these protests do not have any formal political cover or known source. Rather, they are the product of the impact of social media, which has been able to mobilize those who felt excluded by the system and left out by the opposition.

Third, Algerians have been able to convert their verbal and psychological dissatisfaction with the political situation into actions on the ground while also maintaining a peaceful framework.

Last but not least, these Algerians have brought back street protests—until recently a tool under the control of the political system—as a lively tool of expression. After being totally ignored for decades since the riots of October 1988, the streets today constitute one of the most important factors in impacting the whole country simultaneously.

### **Potential Outcomes**

The situation in Algeria is quickly developing into major political turmoil as the pressure increases on the political

system. The rejection of the fifth term has turned into a popular demand uniting many Algerians from different ideologies and spectrums.

However, the outcome of these protests and their ability to result in a significant shift of power depend on two important factors. First, the ability of the protesting masses to maintain this strong wave of organized demonstrations in clear pattern and through practical political frameworks is key to actual political change. Second, a shift of power is largely conditional upon whether Algeria's military corpus will unreservedly support Bouteflika in face of these masses or take a neutral position, effectively strengthening the protests, or even adopt a pro-change position through a soft coup.

In the end, it is clear that the "Bouteflika regime" is struggling to remain in power. This recent popular rejection is the result of a long-hidden outrage that has finally become vivid and explicit. No one can fully predict how this political movement will end given the number of key factors that remain unknown. Still, there is one important lesson that can already be taken from the protests: the Algerian system is dealing with a new generation who did not live through the civil war and has been ruled by one man for almost twenty years, and they are rejecting the status quo.

This generation can break down previous political barriers without hesitation, as it feels it has nothing to fear. With the calls for further protests and other forms of political action including civil disobedience, the political situation could develop rapidly and may even become uncontrollable due to potential divisions within the state's institutions. For those in power, challenging this popular outrage will only lead to a dangerous escalation that no one can afford.



## RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

### [Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

[\(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology\)](/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



## Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism\)](/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

## Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)