

Algeria's Succession Crisis: Plenty of Divisions, but No One Conquers

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Brief Analysis

In the years since the Arab Spring, Algeria has remained largely insulated from the rapidly-spreading unrest and turmoil affecting the MENA region. Yet dissatisfaction in Algeria is growing, and the country is increasingly facing a recipe for crisis. Depressed oil prices, the demands of a growing youth population, and the insecurity in neighboring countries like Libya and those of the Sahel all pose serious challenges to the Algerian government. And while the regime has shown a capacity to manage these crises in a controlled manner, the key issue for Algeria in the coming years will be the transition of power should President Bouteflika pass away or leave office unexpectedly.

As Bouteflika is the most visible member of the Algerian elite, the issue of succession is often misunderstood, even within the rest of the Arab world. Understanding the forces at play behind the regime that will affect succession politics requires an understanding of Algeria's governing system and the patterns that have shaped the Algerian political landscape. Algeria's complex political system has dispersed power centers and is not controlled by any single person or institution, as opposed to the more common autocratic model of several other Arab states.

Since independence, Algeria's political system has instead relied on two crucial dynamics to balance power. First, the bulk of the president's credibility has always derived from the collective memory of Algeria's War for Independence and his participation in it. Second, power-sharing between the "Tlemcen clan" of western Algeria and "The Eastern clan"—to which all major segments of the Algerian population belong—provide both with a permanent share of power within the governmental system. This system is often a balancing force within the government and opposition system, where ruling coalitions rotate among various parties over time. Since Algerian independence, power-sharing between the two clans has led to a wide array of political arrangements in which the principal elements of the two clans were guaranteed both official government positions and less quantifiable 'influence.'

These dynamics of power-sharing are just as clear in the Bouteflika period as in previous eras. The alliance between the president, who represents the Tlemcen clan, and the military chief of staff Gaïd Salah, who hails from the Eastern clan, has created a **pyramidal power structure**. (<https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/05/08/limiting-change-through-change-key-to-algerian-regime-s-longevity-pub-76237>) in which the interests of the military, the presidency, and members of the political elite are intertwined in decision making.

In the half-century since its inception, the dynamics of the Algerian system have locked the country into a mode of **permanent transition** (<http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/?fa=56946>). However, its governing rules no longer apply, since most veterans who fought against the French have died. Thus, a compromise based on the second metric of social cleavages will still not provide the legitimacy derived from participation in the fight for Algeria's independence. A president from the post-independence generation would lack the substantive legitimacy and credibility Bouteflika currently possesses. Furthermore, it is increasingly unclear who holds the power of veto over government action, including choosing the successor of the president. Thus, due to protracted disagreements, the search for consensus over the succession has turned into a "Cold War." This "Cold War" has led to political blackmail, governance stagnation, and quick shifts in policy-making, as a changing pool of influencers seek to control the choice of Bouteflika's successor.

Preparing for 2019

After suffering a stroke in 2013, President Bouteflika limited his public visibility, fueling domestic media speculation over his ability to serve out his mandate. Bouteflika described himself as "**politically tired**" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U--E4u1Z9gI>) and claimed that "my generation has had its day." However, he surprised observers when he went on to win a fourth term in 2014, casting his vote from a wheelchair.

Speculation is increasingly rife in the lead-up to the 2019 elections, including the suggestion of activating article 88 from the Algerian constitution. This article stipulates that "if it is impossible for the President of the Republic to exercise his duties due to a serious and chronic illness, the Constitutional Council unanimously proposes to the Parliament to disclose the reason for the impediment." The article also states that "The President of the National Assembly shall be entitled to assume the presidency of the acting State for a maximum of (45) days." However, in case "The President is still unable to continue his duties after (45) days, the Parliament shall announce the vacancy of President of the Republic."

Under these conditions, selecting a successor is paramount in ensuring a smooth and peaceful transition of power. Evidently, plans are in place to attempt a stable transition, but it is unclear whether the president's inner circle can prepare the ground for a stable fifth term that maintains the status quo until a consensual candidate emerges.

The Cold War over succession has escalated since the president's re-election in 2014. Rather than securing the stability needed in the post-Bouteflika period, this in-fighting has removed a number of potential candidates for the future Presidency while failing to provide alternatives. A series of dismissals inside the Algerian regime has led to major shifts in the political landscape, some orchestrated by Bouteflika himself. First, the president maneuvered to dismantle the infamous agency of Algerian Power, the DRS (Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité), by dismissing the veteran chief of the DRS Mohamed Mediene in 2015. Bouteflika then rebranded the DRS, replacing it with a new presidentially-controlled intelligence service, the DSS (Département de Surveillance et de Sécurité), as a final move to strengthen his grip on power. Mediene had been known as the "God of Algeria," and his removal allowed Bouteflika more scope to opt for a soft transition. Now, the DSS does not have the power of decision over Algeria's political destiny, including the choice of a successor.

However, other forces besides the president have also been involved in this succession battle. Special forces from the Algerian Navy boarded a ship sailing from Valencia and seized 701kgs of cocaine in the western Algerian port of Oran, and the list of involved suspects included a number public figures. Judges, prosecutors, and mayors, as well as the "**personal driver**" (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algeria-summer-scandal-abdelghani-hamel-sacked-abdelaziz-bouteflika-investigation-ship-cocaine-339586284>) of Abdelghani Hamel—the head of General direction for National Security (DGSN) and member of a very select inner circle within the Algerian political elites. Hamel denied the allegations and considered it as a personal attack from the military chief of staff Gaïd Salah. Indeed, subsequent pressure from Salah pushed Hamel, who is now finished politically, from his former position as

a potential candidate to succeed Bouteflika.

Abdelmadjid Tebboune, the former Prime Minister, is another victim of these power struggles; he was relieved of his duties only three months after his appointment as Prime Minister. Many considered Tebboune Gaïd Salah's man inside the regime and a potential candidate of the Eastern clan, and his dismissal weakened the military chief of staff's position to choose a candidate. Government sources mentioned communication issues between him and the president, but the understood reason of his departure emanated from his push to limit the power of certain oligarchs (<https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algerian-pm-sacked-after-less-three-months-office-1149163386>), including the head of the Business Leaders Forum (FCE) Ali Hadad, who belongs to the presidential faction. This was a red line for the president's inner circle.

In these power struggles, both clans have so far refrained from resorting to violence to solve disputes, but neither have they embarked on a serious process of reconciliation in order to ensure a stable transition. The “winner” of this cold war currently appears to be Gaïd Salah, but he still cannot influence the process of choosing a president without taking into account the Tlemcen clan, and the increasing acrimony between the two side's elites will make this only more difficult to reach a lasting compromise.

Given these machinations, it is no surprise that both clans continue to prefer Bouteflika, even aging and ailing, over facing the issue of succession during the next election. However, this ‘housekeeping’ is not making the adoption of a consensual candidate easier, as the conditions that established Bouteflika’s legitimacy are no longer present. The Algerian political establishment will ultimately have to find a new dynamic stable enough to replace the stability provided by participation in Algeria's fight for independence, or else face the country’s other challenges without the political stability that has so far characterized Algeria.

Ahmad Marwane

(<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/experts/view/ahmed-marwane>) responds:

When speaking of the succession dilemma in Algeria and its post-2019 arrangements, it is essential to understand the Algerian political system, which feeds and endures from a conflict and power struggle rooted in the Algerian revolution against French colonialism that lasted until 1962. Since declaring independence, handovers of power and the presidency have been based on the outcome of conflict between civilians and the military, which is always resolved by reaching a consensus shared by different centers of influence and interests. The struggle has never been based on tribal conflict between different geographic regions in the East and the West – for example, in the form of the Tlemcen group, which supports President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Unlike other regimes in the world, Algeria’s regime used to be supported by an alliance between the military institution—represented by the chiefs of staff and the *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (DRS)—and the presidency. When Bouteflika took office in 1999, he made efforts to reduce military influence by dismantling the intelligence apparatus.

But this in turn has led to the emergence of a new actor on the political scene. Interest groups and the business elite have accrued huge amounts of wealth during Bouteflika’s tenure as president, which has allowed them to intervene in political decisions in an unprecedented manner. For example, they were behind the dismissal of former Prime Minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune after just three months in office because he was “harassing businessmen.” They will continue to have an influence on the political scene.

Despite the diminishing role and influence of the military institution in determining the president, it is still perhaps the biggest factor. The presidential succession crisis cannot be solved without the approval of the army. While every

other state in the world has an army, in Algeria it is the army that has a state, as the Algerian army predates the Algerian state and was the one to build it in 1962.

Although the DRS was dissolved, this apparatus and its influence and impact in the so-called deep state cannot be ignored as the next phase of politics is shaped. There have been occasional calls for former intelligence director Mohammed Mediène to run in the next presidential election. It is also noteworthy that Mediène hails from the Amazigh region of Kabylia, an area that has a large influence on Algerian politics through the size of their financial and media influence, as well as their foreign ties, especially with France.

There are also external factors that will shape the post-Bouteflika landscape. The crisis will not be solved without taking into account the position of certain foreign powers, namely France and the United States. Although Algeria had been previously been under France's sway, French influence in the country has declined in favor of the United States, which seeks to protect its economic, political and geopolitical interests in the region. In particular, it is in America's interest to have a stable security partner in the Maghreb to combat terrorism, especially in the Sahel region and in Libya.

If Bouteflika decides not to run for a fifth term, the post-2019 political question will be subject to a consensus among all of the previously mentioned factions: the army, the presidency, the business elite, France, and the United States. The matter will inevitably end in a consensus that ensures that all key players are able to continue pursuing their interests and exerting influence. ❖

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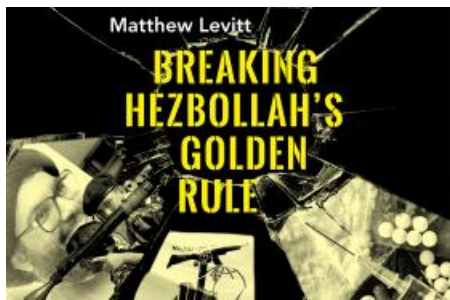
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