

# Protests in Southern Algeria: Causes and Repercussions

by [Ahmed Marwane \(/experts/ahmed-marwane\)](/experts/ahmed-marwane)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Ahmed Marwane \(/experts/ahmed-marwane\)](/experts/ahmed-marwane)

Ahmed Marwane is an Algerian journalist. He is a contributor to Fikra Forum.



## Brief Analysis

Protesters in the Algerian province of Ouargla took unprecedented action late last month and boycotted a concert on July 27 by holding communal evening prayers at the concert venue. The protesters hoisted placards condemning the marginalization, exclusion, and discrimination practiced against them for decades. These developed into calls for broader boycotts of arts events until the government reallocated the funds for these events to the development of southern Algeria. Before the larger public protests, demonstrators had attempted a variety of extreme methods to attract the attention of central authorities: sewing their mouths shut, cutting themselves with razor blades, and sometimes threatening suicide in the famous manner of Bouazizi. While pro-government voices have responded by harshly criticizing the demonstrations, the recent protests actually present an opportunity for the government to ameliorate the longstanding fiscal crisis of the South.

Those protests have raised many questions about the critical and complex economic and social conditions suffered by the inhabitants of southern Algeria. Although the province of Ouargla—approximately 800 km from the nation’s capital and nicknamed the “oil capital” by Algerians—contains the majority of the country’s oil wells and is the primary source of the resource for the country’s oil-driven economy, its population nevertheless suffers greatly from the absence of development opportunities, the prevalence of youth unemployment, and the inability to live decent lives with access to health, recreational, and educational services.

In response to these protests, Prime Minister [Ahmed Ouyahia \(https://www.maghrebvoices.com/a/Algeria-ouyahia-protests/450675.html\)](https://www.maghrebvoices.com/a/Algeria-ouyahia-protests/450675.html) described them as a “riot” that requires the imprisonment of the perpetrators. Likewise, the controversial journalist Hadda Hazem characterized the demonstrations as “dangerous behavior evocative of scenes of the 1990’s, when Islamists were blocking the streets under the pretext of praying.” Similarly, [Louisa Hanoune \(http://www.algeriatimes.net/algerianews43434.html\)](http://www.algeriatimes.net/algerianews43434.html), leader of the Trotskyite Worker’s Party, remarked that the protest is “emblematic of the dark practices that threaten the security of the country,” that were, in her words, “the gateway to a civil war that destroyed everything for a decade.”

Algerian authorities imposed a ban on organizing demonstrations in Algeria based on a 2001 decree issued four days after the Berber Arouch Citizens’ Movement organized a huge march from Tizi Ouzou west to the capital, resulting in heavy casualties and the death of two journalists. The [law \(https://www.ifex.org/algeria/2014/03/17/crackdown\\_as\\_election\\_nears/ar/\)](https://www.ifex.org/algeria/2014/03/17/crackdown_as_election_nears/ar/) stipulates that “any group seeking to organize a public meeting must obtain a license from the authorities eight days in advance, and the governor must

declare his approval or his rejection of the public meeting at least five days before it is to be held.”

The events of the Arab Spring in neighboring countries also had a direct effect on the government’s views of protests, as Algeria’s security situation deteriorated along Algeria’s vast borders with Libya and Tunisia and in the Sahel region. The beginning of the Northern Mali conflict pushed the Algerian army to impose a wide security cordon to protect the country’s borders. These increased security measures had a deep negative impact on commercial movement in the southern region. The security cordon limited both ‘official’ trade, such as the “bartering” practiced by many southern youths who lack work or opportunities to provide for themselves, and ‘unofficial’ trade, such as smuggling. This has exacerbated Algeria’s unemployment crisis in the past seven years, which according to the **Algerian League for Human Rights (<https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/north-africa/2017/02/21/--منظمة-حقوقية-رجع-الجزائريين-في-حالة-بطالة-وفقر.html>)** exceeds 30 percent among the youth.

Residents of southern Algeria also suffer from the lack of infrastructure, especially in terms of access to health care. Those in need of treatment must travel to the capital instead, at great cost and hardship. Doctors have been striking for months, refusing to work in southern regions due to the lack of means to work there. The Algerian League for Human Rights also notes in its report that “the Algerian government has drawn up a development plan for the southern regions for 2015 to 2019, which comprises the period of the fourth term of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika,” but that this plan is “merely ink on paper.” In reality, only 3 percent of development funds have been allocated to the actual task of development, whereas the remainder has been transferred to an “undeclared entity.”

Given the realities of life in southern Algeria, a general feeling of exclusion and marginalization gradually grew to the point of pushing the inhabitants of southern regions to protest their living conditions. These protests began years before, in 2011, with the rise of the “Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed,” which has branches in many provinces in southern Algeria, including Ouargla, Laghouat, and Béchar.

However, the collapse of oil prices in world markets suggests that conditions in the region will only worsen. Consequently, the government must employ careful handling in its engagement with the southern movement, as the country is entering into the presidential election process early next year. Growing anger may lead to a torpedoing of the election, especially with the increasing calls for President Bouteflika to run for a **fifth term** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/a-fifth-presidential-term-for-bouteflika>), an idea opposed by many.

Despite the government’s initial knee-jerk reaction against the protests, it actually has substantial opportunities to manage southern demands by pushing and developing its tourism sector. Southern Algeria has tremendous tourism opportunities, capable of creating a large number of jobs for unemployed youth. The development of tourism will propel another equally important and indeed complementary sector—the traditional industries sector. Southern Algeria’s rich heritage of traditional industries provides large earnings for the country’s economy and can greatly reduce the unemployment rate.

Likewise, the government must give increased attention to the agriculture sector in southern Algeria, which can provide a real alternative to oil. Many provinces have enormous agricultural capabilities, both in terms of dates and various fruits and vegetables. A good example is Oued Souf province, once an arid desert that has become a food basket for Algeria and even exports many agricultural products outside the country.

That being said, increased economic opportunities must also come with government attention to basic infrastructure. The government must also give attention to improving the infrastructure and health and social services in southern Algeria, in a way that guarantees the right of citizenship to its inhabitants.

While the whole of Algeria is currently facing a potential economic crisis, management of regional concerns, especially in the vital region of South Algeria, is a must in order to maintain stability in the country. While some may

see the protests as a destabilizing element, they are really a response to the true instigators of instability: poverty and stagnation. ❖

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