

Algeria's Next Succession: Preparing for a Post-Bouteflika World

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Although Algerians are lukewarm to the prospect of a managed succession, they are even less willing to believe that true multiparty democracy could flourish in the current environment.

This is not a particularly happy time in Algerian politics. In the past two decades, the Algerian public has faced two realities: a civil war that threatened to shatter the state from its core and then relative calm under President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The president, now in his late 70s, has ruled the nation since 1999. Following the Arab Spring in 2010, Bouteflika promised reforms to the Algerian political system that have yet to fully materialize. Global oil prices have plummeted, and Algeria has had to balance its budget by introducing austerity measures. And now, the burden of unpopular economic policies and Bouteflika's lingering health problems has led many to fear the return of political uncertainty.

The next few years may test Algeria's political health, but there are signs that the nation can weather a period of uncertainty. Most telling is that, where decades ago, Algerians demanded democracy, they now hope for continuity. In pursuit of this, the Algerian polity may tolerate pseudo-democratic theatrics -- as with Bouteflika's unprecedented re-election to his fourth term -- as it spells certainty and stability.

THE END OF RENTIER POLITICS

Algeria's current situation thus threatens to erode two central pillars of its normalcy: Bouteflika and oil profits that have subsidized life for ordinary Algerians. The government's recent moves within the economy, presidency, and army can be understood as an attempt to preserve these tenets of the Algerian social contract despite the significant challenges it faces in doing so.

First, knowing that Algerian subsidy programs are unsustainable due to falling oil prices, the government is raising taxes and prices on fuel, electricity, automobiles, medicine, telecommunications, and transport gradually, hoping to

soften the economic blow to average Algerians. Moreover, core subsidies like housing, education, and defense funding will remain untouched.

Second, the government is approaching Bouteflika's succession with an eye to continuity, and hopes to mitigate the risk of conflict around the appointment of Algeria's next leader. Few have faith that Bouteflika's health will hold until Algerian elections that are scheduled for 2019. Bouteflika has been in and out of hospitals since 2005, including a major hospitalization in France in 2013, and things carried on as usual despite his absence. It stands to reason that the president's coterie is already preparing a successor from within the regime as a placeholder for when the president can no longer remain in power. Every detail of this succession will likely be managed from within.

Critically, a third pillar of state legitimacy -- national security -- has not wavered despite current troubles. Algeria's powerful military-intelligence services are still central in maintaining the country's security. Algeria's murky high politics make it difficult to determine the exact relationship between the executive and the military, but recent trials and punishments against generals for corruption are steps toward improving the perception of military accountability and the perception of the civil state's strength. These recent changes signal to the public that both centers of national power are invested in a managed civilian transition of power.

Notably absent in this managed change of hands will be a credible attempt to allow Algerians to participate in the process. In some countries, that might be cause for outrage. But Algerians, politically fatigued, are putting democracy on the backburner.

It is easy to see why Algerians may not be clamoring for drastic political change. They remember Algeria's political unrest of the 1990s, after the military cancelled an Islamist electoral victory, giving way to an armed insurgency that killed hundreds of thousands. And in more recent times, many saw echoes of Algeria's past within the Arab Spring's aftermath: Libya's ongoing civil war has no end in sight. Tunisia, with its triumphs and Nobel Peace Prize-worthy efforts at birthing a democracy, has experienced unprecedented violence. In Syria, the stalled revolution has cost thousands their lives and has encouraged the spread of the Islamic State (also called ISIS). Democracy may seem a worthwhile endeavor intellectually, but stability seems a safer bet.

Of course, austerity could change that calculation. If the financial measures fail to land as softly as planned, Algerians may indeed take to the streets. But if they do so, it will not be for a pie-in-the-sky objective: not for free and fair elections, greater decentralization, nor greater parliamentary power. It will be for their livelihoods.

In other words, although Algerian opposition parties warn of a repeat of the unrest seen throughout the 1990s and have called for democratic reforms, observers are skeptical. More likely is a continuation of the current system, in which opposition political parties are considered part of the theatrics: superficially challenging the deep state while being seen as largely co-opted. Meanwhile, the front these parties have formed -- a coalition of Islamists, Berberists, Trotskyite parties, and regime defectors -- offers few if any viable alternatives to Algeria's political status quo, as they lack internal ideological alignment and have contradictory political goals.

That few viable alternatives to the establishment exist undoubtedly contributes to Algeria's wider political disillusionment. But for many, it also underscores the notion that political jockeying, democratization efforts, and reform movements are distractions from the more important need to address social and economic grievances. The idea that citizens prefer survival, stability, and comfort above democracy is not new, but the concept is still a hard one for U.S. sensibilities to stomach. And within Bouteflika's Algeria, the widespread sense is "*mwalfa kheir men talfa*," a rhyme in Algerian Arabic that more or less means "better the devil you know." Algerian society is lukewarm to the prospect of a managed succession, and is even less willing to believe that true multi-party democracy could flourish instead. The risks are far too high, and the rewards too unlikely.

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