

Popular Unrest in Algeria: A Significant Challenge to Stability

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Brief Analysis

Embattled by popular protests for more than two months, the Algerian government -- in advance of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's historic July 12 White House visit -- faces the most significant challenge to its authority in nearly a decade. Defying a recent government ban on protest marches, the Berber-led opposition has called for another demonstration on July 5, Algerian Independence Day. Meanwhile, tensions between the regime and Algeria's angry populace show little sign of abating, increasing prospects for a violent summer of discontent.

Background

The April 18 death of a Berber teenager in police custody sparked the unrest. Demonstrations broke out in the predominantly Berber Kabyle region east of Algiers, and have since spread to Algiers, Annaba, Setif, and other cities. The last major protest held in Algiers on June 14 drew nearly one million protestors. The marches are among the largest since Algerian independence in 1962. Between 50 and 80 people are estimated to have been killed and 1,800 wounded since April.

These disturbances come at a time when security concerns -- particularly those related to terrorism -- have diminished. In recent years, the government has brought extremist violence by Islamists largely under control. Islamist splinter groups continue to launch sporadic attacks, but violence is significantly less than during the conflict's nadir in 1993-1994. Algeria's ethnic Berber minority -- 20 to 30 percent of the country's 30 million people -- has long opposed the central authority. Over the years, their demands have focused on questions of identity and culture. In particular, Berbers have sought legal recognition of their language, Tamazight. The last major episode of Berber unrest occurred in the spring of 1980, termed the "Berber Spring."

Beyond Berberist Demands

However, the current unrest is significantly different. Protestors' demands go well beyond narrowly defined issues of language and culture to the broader, deep-seated economic and political problems that reside at the heart of Algeria's decade-long crisis. Demonstrators insist on an end to government corruption, respect for human rights, and guarantees for civil liberties. They are also clamoring for a reprieve from severe socioeconomic ills -- in particular unemployment (30 percent) and chronic housing shortages. Widespread awareness that the government's considerable oil and gas windfalls have yet to trickle down to the Algerian populace exacerbates discontent.

Angry, Young Protestors

Second, the pool of protestors appears to have expanded beyond Berber activists to include Algeria's vast legions of "angry, young men." Just as Islamist opposition groups gave voice to longstanding popular grievances in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the Berbers seem to have tapped into a vein of discontent, indicating that the underlying problems that fed the crisis persist even as the Islamists' influence has subsided. Algeria's disproportionately young population -- 70 percent are under 30-years-old -- coupled with years of economic malaise has spawned a sizable cohort who harbor little, if any, hope for the future. Unemployment in the volatile 16-24 age group may reach 70

percent.

Furthermore, a gaping chasm separates Algeria's youthful population from the country's leadership. Most Algerians were not even born during the country's struggle for independence that is nevertheless still used by the government as a key plank to anchor its legitimacy. Nor do they relate easily to the opposition leadership, many of whom hail from this same older generation. Indeed, the leaders of the main Berber parties appear simply to be riding the wave of grassroots protests that originated in small Kabyle towns. This generational divide raises the specter of uncontrollable elements without allegiances to any particular group taking to the streets. The protestors' collective sense of despair is striking; among the slogans of the demonstrators is, "They [the security forces] cannot kill us. We are already dead."

The Government Response

The Algerian government's response to the unrest has not been effective. Gendarmes and police applied lethal force following the initial rioting in late April, causing several deaths and further stoking popular anger. Some Algerians accuse security forces of looting and exploiting the chaos to settle scores; others claim the government is fomenting violence to justify repressive measures. Rifts between the army and President Bouteflika reportedly have emerged, with army units refusing to heed the president's call to help quell popular unrest.

Meanwhile, Bouteflika's popular credibility is limited, and he is severely constrained by the clique of army generals who truly call the shots in Algeria. Popular hopes for change briefly rose when Bouteflika came to power in 1999, only to be dashed when the president failed to make real progress in resolving the crisis. Bouteflika's response to the current unrest reads like the well-worn playbook of many Middle Eastern leaders. He has called for a government commission of inquiry, withdrawn some gendarmes from Kabyle hot spots, announced a minor cabinet reshuffle, and publicly blamed the unrest on a foreign conspiracy.

Conclusions

Algeria's latest turmoil marks a potential turning point in the crisis in two key respects. First, the persistence of the rioting over two months suggests a staying power lacking in previous instances of popular unrest. Last summer, for example, protests over housing shortages and government corruption broke out in some cities, but quickly dissipated. The current protests do not appear to have lost momentum, but continue to attract more followers despite a government crackdown.

Second, the current violence is not tinged with Islamist overtones. Once a lightning rod for debate on Islam's role in the political arena, the Islamists, including the banned Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), at one time the most influential opposition force in Algeria, are largely absent from the demonstrations. Their absence has focused attention on the crisis's unresolved root issues. No longer infused with Islamist rhetoric, demands for political transparency and improved living conditions resonate with a broader segment of Algeria's population. Nor can the government distract attention from its problems or seek greater Western support by waving the green flag of an Islamist international conspiracy.

The current unrest in Algeria does not redefine the crisis. Rather, it reveals the conflict's true dimensions. With the terrorist threat significantly diminished, Algerians are taking to the streets to express their frustrations with declining living standards and a government estranged from its people. The protestors' demands challenge the very legitimacy of Algeria's military-backed regime and ultimately appear to call for nothing short of dismantling the system of government that has ruled Algeria since independence.

Implications for U.S. Policy

U.S. officials have expressed "deep concern" about recent events and reiterated the need for dialogue. But such

statements are mildly useful at best. The U.S. policy of low-key engagement with the Algerian leadership to encourage political and economic reform has not yielded appreciable results. Instead, the U.S. government -- with its admittedly limited leverage -- should quietly pressure the Algerian government to move forward with such reforms, since public rebukes often backfire.

The timing of President Bouteflika's upcoming July 12 White House meeting with President Bush is awkward; it will allow Algiers to portray the visit as an expression of U.S. support when precisely the opposite message should be sent. Although quiet diplomacy is optimal, President Bush should seize the opportunity to state publicly the need for broad-based reform in Algeria. Enhanced bilateral cooperation should be conditioned on the Algerian government making real progress toward political opening and an improvement in social conditions. In the past, Washington reluctantly supported the Algerian regime as the only realistic alternative to chaos or Islamic rule. Now that the Islamist threat has diminished, the time is at hand to push harder for reforms.

Mona Yacoubian, formerly with the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, is an independent consultant specializing in the Middle East and North Africa.

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