

Algeria's Election Is a Make-or-Break Moment

[Sarah Feuer](#)

December 10, 2019

The vote's outcome will not have much legitimacy in the eyes of the people, so Washington should focus on urging all parties to lay the groundwork for longer-term reforms aimed at breaking the political deadlock.

On December 12, nearly ten months after demonstrators across the country took to the streets in protest of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika running for a fifth term, Algeria will elect his successor. Calling itself "Hirak," the remarkably peaceful protest movement perceived Bouteflika's candidacy as a provocation, since he had scarcely appeared in public after suffering a stroke in 2013. And though he rescinded his candidacy in April, the Hirak began calling for more radical changes, including an end to the power structures that have ruled the country since its independence from France in 1962.

In response, army chief of staff Ahmed Gaid Salah stepped in to assert control over the political process, despite the parliament's selection of an interim president. In addition to arresting activists and putting some of his establishment rivals on trial, he pressed for an election to be held by year's end. The political situation has since devolved into a confrontation between the Hirak and the army. With no candidate representing the protestors, this week's vote will be a decisive test for the future of both sides.

KEY PLAYERS

For over half a century, Algeria's political system has been run by a complicated nexus of political and security institutions known as "Le Pouvoir," or "the powers that be." These actors keep each other in check while controlling the distribution of oil rents to the military and administrative elite—a paramount role in an economy where 95 percent of export earnings and 60 percent of budgetary revenues are tied to oil and gas. The country's opaque governance has made it difficult for outsiders to know who is in charge at any given time, and Algerians themselves have become wary of being manipulated by some unidentifiable puppet master.

Traditionally, a balance of power existed between the army chief of staff, the head of the security services, and the president, with the first two often handpicking candidates for the latter post based on perceived malleability. Bouteflika altered this balance by exercising more influence on civilian issues and pitting the chief of staff against leading figures in the security services, gradually sidelining the latter. By 2015, the president and army chief enjoyed unprecedented power.

The protests that brought down Bouteflika thus paved the way for Gaid Salah, who has served in the military for six decades and is one of the few members of the revolutionary generation still in power. Assuming an uncharacteristically visible role in the political sphere, he has seized the opportunity to arrest or otherwise sideline members of Bouteflika's clan (most notably his brother Said), a number of corrupt businessmen in Bouteflika's inner circle, and several security officials loyal to the former president.

The purge has made the seventy-nine-year-old Gaid Salah the most powerful man in the country, but the resulting exposure has not always worked in his favor. In September, when the Hirak was struggling to maintain its presence in the streets, he threatened to block the protestors' access to Algiers. The move only galvanized them, however, giving the weekly marches a new momentum. More than anyone else, Gaid Salah needs the election to produce a viable president so that he can reduce his exposure and return the army to its traditional, less visible role. Yet the military apparatus may seek to replace him now that the protestors have singled him out for condemnation.

Meanwhile, the candidates who will appear on the ballot are widely perceived as extensions of the system. Out of twenty-three applicants, only five were approved by the electoral authority:

- Abdelmadjid Tebboune (age 73), who previously served as prime minister, communication minister, and housing minister, has been seen as the army's favored candidate until recently—though he may just be a diversion to make someone else's victory seem like a surprise, and therefore more legitimate in the eyes of Algerians.
- Ali Benflis (75) served as prime minister from 2000 to 2003, then went on to oppose Bouteflika for fifteen years, running against him in the 2004 and 2014 elections. He later claimed that both votes were marred by fraud (though international monitors disagreed). As he is not more popular than the other candidates, his election could be presented as a "surprise."

- Azzedine Mihoubi (60) was minister of culture under Bouteflika, and could be supported by a significant portion of the system as a more neutral alternative to Tebboune or Benflis.
- Abdelkader Bengrina has served as minister of tourism and a parliamentarian representing a small Islamist party, El Bina. Although the army is unlikely to support an Islamist candidate, a win for Bengrina could also be used as a way to prove that the military did not manipulate the election, while playing on the resentment many still have from the civil war between the army and jihadist groups in the 1990s.
- Abdelaziz Belaid created El Mostakbal, a small party allied with the National Liberation Front, Algeria's dominant party for the past half century. His election would probably leave the presidency quite weak, fueling the idea that the army still controls the political process.

It is difficult to envision a scenario in which the Hirak would accept a victory by any of these candidates; indeed, protestors have urged their compatriots to boycott the election. In June, the leaderless movement brought together representatives of roughly seventy civil society organizations, each demanding a transitional period in which a nationally recognized figure or committee of approved individuals would facilitate dialogue with the political echelon aimed at producing a roadmap out of the impasse. Although the proposal went unheeded, the Hirak's self-organization, civic awareness, restraint, and openness have given many Algerians a newfound sense of pride and ownership over the political process. Previously, most citizens were seen as detached from politics, disgusted by years of perceived manipulation and neglect.

The magnitude and endurance of the Hirak suggest that a significant number of voters will heed its call for a boycott this week. Still, it is unclear whether turnout will be affected among people less committed to the movement.

SCENARIOS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Foreign journalists have been permitted to cover the election, but international observers will not be able to monitor the vote itself, reducing the transparency of the process. Consequently, any one of three scenarios could unfold.

First, the election could be marred by major obstruction such as interference by the Hirak or violence by the security apparatus. The army has made clear that preventing other citizens from voting is a redline, and while the security forces have largely allowed demonstrations to continue, they have also increased arrests and barred the Hirak from disrupting meetings related to the election. If a significant number of demonstrators try to block individuals from voting, the security response could be significant, provoking violence not seen thus far. Yet army leaders likely hope to avoid such escalation because it would endanger the country's stability and prevent them from normalizing the institutional situation.

Second, if turnout is very low, it would undercut the legitimacy of the new president, keep institutions paralyzed, and inject new energy into the Hirak. The army could try to compel the new president to present reforms, but such a move may lead some demonstrators to engage in more radical tactics. Even if the Hirak simply maintains its current level of mobilization, the sustained deadlock would make Gaid Salah's position more difficult.

Third, if turnout is low or medium and someone other than Tebboune wins, the army would have sufficient pretext to launch the next phase of the transition—namely, letting a (relatively) fresh face assume the burden of breaking the deadlock, enabling the military to step back. In theory, the new president could then leverage this position to act as an intermediary between the army and the street. Although such a role would inherently put tremendous pressure on the victor, it may represent the best chance of producing a peaceful outcome and opening a complicated, fragile, but workable path toward some reforms.

Given Algeria's anxiety about external interference, however, it would be self-defeating for outside powers to take steps or issue statements designed to bring about the third scenario. The country's colonial past renders statements by France in particular, and Western states in general, extremely sensitive. In fact, the Hirak's opponents would likely use any statement in support of the protestors to undermine the movement by labeling it a foreign plot. At the same time, Algerians would view any statement offering even timid support for the status quo as a sign of support for the army. Yet it is unrealistic to expect the international community to stay silent after such an important political event in a country so critical to North African stability.

Since no candidate can break the political deadlock just by being elected, the key issue is not so much the election itself as the process it will trigger. Washington should present a united front with the international community on the following imperatives: quietly urging Algeria's security apparatus to respect the people's right to protest; conveying to the Hirak that protests must remain peaceful; and urging whoever emerges from the vote in a position of authority to seriously address the movement's grievances and lay the groundwork for much-needed longer-term reforms in the economic and political realms. After all, even urgent, beneficial changes will be difficult to enact if their advocates are perceived as illegitimate.

Sarah Feuer is an associate fellow with The Washington Institute.