

Algeria in 2020: A Weakened Power Facing a Multidimensional Crisis

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Politically weakened, economically failing and socially in turmoil, Algeria has not been spared the COVID 19 pandemic. This crisis has accentuated the flaws and vulnerabilities of a country already shaken by the political unrest caused by the emergence of HIRAK on the political scene and the slump in oil prices, threatening its economic and political balance, greatly dependent on hydrocarbon income.

The Emergence of HIRAK and the Rupture between the Regime and the People

In February 2019, the Algerian people massively protested against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's candidacy in the upcoming elections, promoted by the clans supporting him despite his deteriorating state of health and his incapacity to take on a fifth term. Perceived as yet another expression of contempt against the Algerian people, this ludicrous electoral scene angered the Algerians. The popular movement Al HIRAK, succeeded in deposing the immovable President Bouteflika, obliging him not only to withdraw from the presidential elections slated for April 2019, but also to step down from the presidency on 2 April. This resignation, forced by the Army Command Staff headed by Ahmed Gaïd Salah, who had until then been a faithful ally to the presidency, did not, however, manage to stop the popular movement, which continued its pressure in the streets with determination, civic behaviour and pacifism in an attempt to achieve significant changes in the country's governance.

Under pressure from the protests, the internal balances of "power", that opaque conglomerate of political figures, private entrepreneurs and generals, broke apart. This is the first of HIRAK's victories: compelling the "power" to reveal itself and bring to light its rivalries, the weight of the army and the predation of the clans (Aït-Hamadouche and Dris, 2019).

During the first 10 months of the crisis, from February to December 2019, the army, which had never ceased to be at the centre of power, took control again, presenting itself as the guarantor of the State's continuity and an institutional solution. Ahmed Gaïd Salah followed the roadmap laid out in Article 102 of the Constitution, which called for an interim presidency to be assumed by the President of the Council of the Nation, Abdelkader Bensalah, while awaiting new presidential elections at first slated for July 2019 and finally postponed until December.

Nonetheless, the roadmap imposed by the army did not live up to the protester's demands. The Chief of Staff of the armed forces then monopolized "face to face" communication with HIRAK for months, while ensuring the loyalty of the top military hierarchy. The army had to fight on two battlefronts: internally, they needed to neutralize the Bouteflika clan and also ensure that the networks of the former Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS, dismantled by the president in 2015) did not take the opportunity to return to power. Accused of conspiring against the State, the former head of the DRS, Toufik Mediène (who was considered for a time the "God of Algeria", or "*Rab al-Djazair*"), was arrested, along with Rashid Tartag, head of the new information structure, and the president's brother, Saïd Bouteflika.¹ Many other arrests would follow, decimating the Bouteflika clan, in particular a good many of entrepreneurs, among

¹These three high officials were sentenced by the Military Court of Blida to 15 years of prison in September 2019. See: www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/09/25/algerie-said-bouteflika-ex-homme-de-l-ombre-du-regime-condamne-a-quinze-ans-de-prison_6012953_3212.html

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them Ali Haddad, former president of the Forum des Chefs d'Entreprise (Forum of CEOs, or FCE), or Issad Rebrab, President of the Cévital Group, accused of having used the networks of corruption existing at the highest State level. On the other front, the army turned to old, time-tried tactics to neutralize the social movements: a broad spectrum of measures ranging from co-optation to repression.

The unsurprising victory of the army's candidate, Abdelmajid Tebboune, in the presidential elections of December 2019, with massive abstention undermining his legitimacy from the start of his term, as well as the death of the Chief of Staff of the National Army, Ahmed Gaïd Salah,² allowed the army to "exit front stage" without having their weight in the Algerian political system called into question. These cosmetic changes have not, however, fooled Hirak, and protest slogans in January and February 2020 called for the emergence of a civilian, non-military State in Algeria.

Political Impasse: Breakdown of Parties and the Difficult Emergence of New Organized Political Forces

Two parallel dynamics with no points of convergence have thus marked the Algerian political scene since Bouteflika was forced to resign. On the one hand, there is the Algerian regime, in its death-throes, which is searching for solutions allowing it to perpetuate the system without changing the main foundations, but with increasingly limited ideological, political and economic resources. Only its security resources are still available, ready to be deployed at any time. On the

other hand, there is Hirak, whose success can be measured by the transformation process of Algerian civil society, which has found in it the space of expression and cohesion necessary for the sectoral and generational reconciliation of a segmented society (Thieux, 2018). In fact, the movement is part of a long history of dissidence and opposition to the established order (Vermeren, 2019).³ The *silmijya* ("pacific") slogan has been the protesters' leitmotiv from the start in order to prevent any trend towards violent confrontation. Past experiences have also allowed activists to more skilfully avoid the traps or manoeuvres deployed by the regime to attempt to weaken dissent. The experience of the Arouch citizens' movement in the context of the Black Spring in 2001 and the State's capacity to co-opt its elites that year raised fears of the emergence of any leadership that would be led to represent Hirak. (Tilmatine, 2019).

The absence of credible political forces renders the issue of the political crisis even more difficult. Official parties such as the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the Democratic National Rally (RND) are at an advanced state of decomposition, with part of their leadership behind bars (the RND's Ouyahia, and the FLN's two former general secretaries). Other parties that have oscillated between opposition and co-optation, such as the moderate Islamists, likewise lack a political power base. Opposition parties such as the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) have been weakened by strong internal divisions and the emergence of coordination platforms has always been a very laborious process, even if there is no doubt that Hirak has contributed to new dynamics of coordination, such as the creation of the Pact of the Democratic Alternative (PAD).⁴

The COVID 19 Crisis: A Test for Both the Authorities and Hirak

With the cancellation of the 57th march, the weekly rhythm of Hirak protests was not interrupted by

² General Gaïd Salah was replaced by General Said Chengriha. See: www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/12/25/algerie-qui-est-said-chengriha-le-successeur-d-ahmed-gaid-salah-au-poste-de-chef-d-etat-major_6024045_3212.html

³ Hirak has been joined by many associations and public figures, who rallied in previous decades on specific issues or in opposition to the political system: civil society organizations such as Rassemblement Actions Jeunesse (Youth Action Rally or RAJ), the League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH), SOS Disparus, independent labour unions, associations such as the one against shale gas; the national committee for the defence of the rights of the unemployed (CNDDC), human rights activists, bloggers and independent journalists, and intellectuals.

⁴ Numerous initiatives emerged as of 2011 aiming to structure a co-ordinated opposition party response, such as the Coordination Nationale pour le Changement et la Démocratie (CNCD) and as of 2014, the Mazafran 1 and 2 dialogue processes. These experiences did not succeed in overcoming such profound divisions as those concerning the boycott of the 2017 legislative elections.

pressure from the authorities, but at the appeal of respected figures in the movement⁵ who invoked everyone's responsibility in fighting against this new scourge afflicting Algerian society. This decision was not free of controversy, since the regime has also taken advantage to close the public space that had been won by the protesters, using the confinement measures to step up repression against the movement.⁶ The arbitrary nature of selective repression is ongoing, and skilfully measured by the authorities to neutralize elements considered the most dangerous to the continuity of power. Hirk's lack of structure, moreover, is not unrelated to this absence of an environment conducive to the availability of meeting places where they could reach a consensus and establish a roadmap.⁷

The health crisis also threatens to aggravate an economic situation severely hit by falling oil prices and political instability

In addition to heightening the regime's authoritarian reflexes, the health crisis also threatens to aggravate an economic situation severely hit by falling oil prices and political instability. Recall that hydrocarbon exports account for 97% of Algeria's revenue. All economic indicators are in the red: foreign exchange reserves have dissipated, going below the \$60 billion mark;⁸ the Revenue Regulation Fund (Fonds de Régulation des Recettes- FRR) has been exhausted since 2018. In counting on the barrel at \$50,⁹ the Financial Act for the 2020 fiscal year passed in December 2019 nonetheless

anticipated a budget deficit of 1,533 billion Dinars (7.2% of the GDP), which the 50% fall in oil prices since the start of 2020¹⁰ will aggravate. In a report published in April 2020, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) heralded a deep recession for Algeria, with a down turn in growth of 5.2%, a budgetary deficit equivalent to 20% of the GDP and a current account deficit on the order of -18.3% of the GDP.¹¹ The Algerian economy is suffering from structural deficits exaggerated by the in-depth reforms to free itself of its extreme dependence on hydrocarbons and to diversify the economy. Political instability, a business climate marked by opacity and lack of competitiveness as well as an unstable legal and regulatory framework are not a favourable environment. The lack of legitimacy and trust weighing down government action will not be conducive to the adoption of structural reforms that can rise to these economic challenges. In addition to the inertia and incapacity to reform the existing model in depth, there is also the State's lack of transparency.¹²

For Algerians already angry at the political system, the economic deterioration and health crisis could accentuate their disaffection with a system accused of having squandered the State's resources, embezzled by mafia clans to the detriment of social and health infrastructures. Even before the Hirk protests, resident doctors had already been denouncing the deterioration of the health system as well as their professional situation for decades.¹³ Algeria is facing a multidimensional crisis, the political, economic and social challenges are major and recourse to the authoritarian system's old methods such as repression will not be able to contain the dynamics of dissent, which will certainly

⁵ Calls to stay home were made by figures as respected by the movement as Said Salhi (of the League for the Defence of Human Rights - LADDH) or the journalist Hafid Derradji, the leader of the Democratic and Social Union (UDS) Karim Tabbou, and activist Mustapha Bouchachi.

⁶ Over the course of the first quarter of 2020, arrests of Hirk activists, such as the journalist Khaled Drareni, have multiplied and heavy sentences have been imposed on such political prisoners as Karim Tabbou, leader of the Democratic and Social Union (UDS), or Abdelwahab Fersaoui (president of Rassemblement Action Jeunesse). See: (www.amnestyalgerie.org/2020/02/18/algerie-une-mobilisation-exceptionnelle/)

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⁸ In 2014, the amount was \$177 billion. Decrease in the balance of payments through capital flight.

⁹ See: (www.financialafrik.com/2020/03/17/petrole-lalgerie-obligee-de-revoir-sa-loi-de-finance/)

¹⁰ Brent Crude, the European oil of reference, at the time of the health crisis (first quarter of 2020) was at approximately 20 dollars.

¹¹ IMF, World Economic Outlook Reports: (www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO)

¹² Algeria ranks 112th out of 117 for budgetary transparency. See *Maghreb Emergent*: (<https://maghrebemergent.info/lalgerie-est-112eme-sur-117-pays-au-classement-de-la-transparence-budgetaire-obi-2019/>)

¹³ An independent association of resident doctors (the Autonomous Collective of Algerian Medical Residents - CAMRA) was established in 2007 to denounce the precarious work conditions in the health sector.

resume once the health crisis has been controlled. The regime's fragility due to its lack of legitimacy is a constraint to the adoption of urgent structural measures to diversify the Algerian economy, in search of development alternatives to a rentier economy that is no longer viable on the medium and long terms. The authorities are not the only ones facing challenges. The popular movement embodied by Hirak is threatened, on the one hand, by the government's return to authoritarianism, always tempted to exercise repression, and on the other, by internal divisions on the strategy to follow.

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