

Algeria: A Grassroots Movement for Change or Elite Political Gamesmanship?

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(Farouk Batiche - Anadolu Agency)

What are the core issues behind the recent protests?

How are Algeria's complex political dynamics playing out with regards to the ongoing protests?

What is the significance of Algeria to the wider region?

What role do regional and international players have in the most recent developments?

What are the possible outcomes of the political situation leading up to and after the April presidential elections?

Introduction

Politics in Algeria is known for, if nothing else, its opacity. Since the end of the war of independence in 1962 the country has been governed by groups claiming to be the guardians of the legitimacy of the revolution. The latter emerged after a series of power struggles against their fellow comrades-in-arms. Subsequently, the historical legacy slowly diluted with more groups of shadowy, unelected power brokers taking over power nodes in the country. Known as “le pouvoir”, this cabal of ruling elites is composed of a constellation of high-ranking military officers, business oligarchs, political kingmakers, deep state apparatchiks, and media moguls. The country is currently governed by President Bouteflika's National Liberation Front (FLN). For his part, the President has rarely been seen in public since he suffered a stroke in 2013. In response to his intention to seek a fifth term, seen by many Algerians as an insult to their dignity, remarkably peaceful demonstrations have erupted across Algeria. This brief provides an analysis of the underlying issues and dynamics and seeks to answer questions related to the possibility of genuine change.

What are the core issues behind the protests?

The current wave of protests hitting Algeria are largely a confluence of social and political discontent resulting from a range of long-term structural issues, economic shifts and the rise of a new generation of young people who did not live through the bloody years of the 1990s, and who are arguably not as risk averse as their predecessors. In short, a critical mass of disaffection has been reached in the context of the currently unsustainable trajectory of the regime.

Under the leadership of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the Algerian regime was effectively able to buy peace via the wealth generated from oil and gas. Since the end of the civil war in 2000, the government has effectively been able to maintain stability by way of a combination of repression, controlled openings of political space and a strategic deployment of public funds.

Since a downturn in oil prices from approximately \$100 USD per barrel in 2014 to around \$50 recorded this year and its national budget and currency reserves having almost halved since 2014, the government can no longer rely on its strategy of buying peace. The legitimacy of the power elite grounded by their statuses as war veterans from the independence war is also no longer sufficient in securing the population's trust, 70% of whom are under the age of 30, and who are no longer dissuaded from using the medium of protests to express their frustrations.

High inflation rates and unemployment which affects over 30% of the population have contributed to the social decay of the country. The depraved level of violence witnessed during the civil war in the 1990's following Algeria's democratisation attempts to pave the way for a multi-party system are memories that no longer dictate the steps of the new generation. Algerians born after 2000, will not be deterred by the rhetoric adopted by the State and the

military that protests, orchestrated by foreign elements, threaten the country's stability and peace which will lead to a repeat of the civil war.

The promise of reforms and the repression and subsequent descent into violence with some of the states of the Arab Spring was enough to deter Algerians from carrying on with protests in 2011. However the lack of concrete reforms, aside from constitutional amendments in 2016, are words largely perceived as empty promises after numerous repetitions and no longer a viable concession in place of Bouteflika's resignation demanded by the people.

Hospitalised in Geneva for over a week, Bouteflika's words were transmitted via national broadcast acknowledging the protests and offering his resignation in early elections if he wins next month's as well as new coalition and constitution reforms.



(Farouk Batiche - Anadolu Agency)

Why now?

The upcoming presidential election has been the main catalyst for the timing of the manifestation of the current wave of genuine popular discontent. The current mobilisation reflects a feeling that enough is enough, and that it is time for the President and his inner circle to *dégager* from the political scene. The Algerian people, well aware of the dangers of political division did not participate in the so-called Arab spring, opting instead to put their trust in Bouteflika and the government to enact the changes they had promised for so many years. Since the 2014 presidential elections, nothing has changed and a confluence of factors have led to the current outbreak of protests in the country.

While initially making basic political demands, the initial refusal of the governing authorities to take the demands of the demonstrations seriously resulted in increasing public displays of anger and frustration, significantly expanding the scope of the protests. Furthermore, a leaked recording of a conversation between Bouteflika's original campaign manager and former Prime Minister, Abdelmalek Sellal, and Ali Haddad, the chairman of Forum of Business Leaders (FCE) hinting that the security forces would not go easy on the demonstrators, exacerbated and already frustrated public sentiment, sending even more people into the streets.

One factor that has been neglected by analysts and commentators is the potential influence of an opposition TV station operating out of London. Launched in 2013, Al-Magharibia TV broadcasts in Arabic, French and now Berber, which is significant due to the fact that various Berber groups occupy important positions in “le pouvoir”, in the military, bureaucracy and the business community.

Originally discredited by its opponents as being nothing more than an 'Islamist' outlet, the station has increased its legitimacy among all facets of the Algerian opposition. Host Djamaledine Benchenouf, in particular, has demonstrated the open character of the channel in their coverage of the current wave of protests, in which invited guests and the general public are given a platform to voice various points of opposition to the regime. Broadcasting daily and pulling no punches in its coverage and editorial stance, the channel is said to be watched even by regime insiders to get an idea of the feeling amongst the opposition, thereby demonstrating the channel's reach. Another factor to consider is the power [social media](#) and its role in giving a voice to several renowned political exiles and a wide range of respectable NGOs both inside and outside of Algeria.

Political Dynamics

The role of current regime insiders and outsiders within the circles of the governing elite must be carefully considered in order to better understand the dynamics currently at play in Algeria. Political manoeuvring in the country is best understood through the framework of the system itself.

The system in Algeria, maintained by a governing elite known popularly as "*le pouvoir*", is best understood as an interconnected pyramid of power, in which the interests of the military (including the security and intelligence services) are intertwined with those of the FLN leadership and members of the oligarchical economic elite. Within this system, the [military remains the predominant locus of power](#), regardless of mostly cosmetic constitutional reforms and the existence of a tightly managed political pluralism.

A number of measures have been taken over the years to give the appearance of change and political pluralism, which has allowed the ruling elite to maintain their grip. This includes the deployment of a combination of patronage and oppression meant to fragment the political opposition, and a targeted economic liberalisation scheme, allowing for the creation and expansion of patronage networks via oligarchs close to the regime.

In this regard, there are a number of actions from key players acting within an intertwined constellation of political, economic and military elites that give an indication as to the direction Algeria may take as the current political crisis surrounding Bouteflika and the ongoing protests continue to play out.

The Inner Circle

There are a number of figures close to Bouteflika who should be taken note of, including the President's brother Said Bouteflika, head of the army and Deputy Minister of Defence Ahmed Gaid Salah, Athmane Tartag, Major General of the DSS (secret services), and a cabal of oligarchs led by [Kouninef family](#). Reda Kouninef, known as the '[prince of the oligarchs](#)', is said to have the ear of Said Bouteflika and is widely believed to have been the instigator behind [an offensive against Issad Rebrab](#), Algeria's richest businessman and long-time associate of the former DRS chief General Mohamed "Toufik" Medienne.



One of the more prominent businessmen in Bouteflika's inner circle is Ali Haddad, president of a leading economic institution, the Forum for the Heads of Enterprises (Forum des Chefs d'Entreprises or FCE). Under Haddad, the FCE became more deeply involved in political affairs and is [known to have influenced policymaking and reshape the economic landscape](#) under the tenure of Bouteflika. Haddad recently came under public scrutiny for his appearance in the above-mentioned leaked recording. The fact that the recording was leaked to the public should be seen as an indication of political manoeuvring – either from within the inner circle or from rival centres of power – that is taking shape as the crisis over Bouteflika's presidency plays out.

As for the President's brother and chief advisor, Said Bouteflika, he has been considered over the years as one of the most influential men of "*le pouvoir*", and is widely believed to be the [real power behind his ailing brother](#).

Army Chief of Staff Gaid Salah represents Bouteflika's main link to the military, and has so far remained loyal to the President and his inner circle, having indicated that [the army was ready to step in](#) to ensure stability in the country. However, decisive intervention may not be as straightforward as it seems as [generational divisions within the army](#) itself may put a check on Salah's decision making.

A recent [editorial](#) in the Algerian Army's magazine, El Djeich, hinted that the army supported the protesters. In a rather cryptic language, the article used keywords such as "common destiny" with the Algerian people, the "unity of their shared vision of the future," and hailed the country's youth as "no less patriotic than the youth of yesterday." This editorial is not to be underestimated in trying to decipher the army's posture and their expected moves in the ongoing crisis. The significance of this lies in the fact that it demonstrates the extent to which intertwined networks have been developed over the years by Bouteflika and his inner circle, and how under the present circumstance, those bonds may or may not hold.

The Return of the DRS?

One figure that may prove to be particularly central to the future direction of Algerian politics is the shadowy former head of the Algerian intelligence, the DRS (Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité), General Mohamed "Toufik" Medienne, popular known as *rabb al-Jaza'ir* (God of Algeria). [Side-lined](#) by Bouteflika in 2015, his networks, and therefore his power, remain intact. The fact that the DRS was disbanded in 2015 under Bouteflika should not be taken to mean that its top figures, particularly Gen. Toufik, simply receded into the background. In fact, there have been musings and rumours that the former spy chief [may be attempting to engineer](#) a possible post-Bouteflika political outcome.

Figures known to be connected to Gen. Toufik have recently emerged onto the political scene give further credence to this possibility. Louisa Hanoune, head of the Trotskyite Workers Party, who was recently [prevented from joining the demonstrations](#) by protestors, has withdrawn from the presidential race and denounced the process itself.

Similarly, Said Saadi, founder of the nominally oppositional party RCD (Rally for Culture and Democracy) and known associate of General 'Toufik', has recently made public statements in support of the demonstrations and has called for [elections to be postponed](#) and Bouteflika to step down.

Most important in this regard is 64 year old former army General Ali Ghediri. Widely known to be a [close associate of Gen. Toufik](#), Ghediri's political activities have drawn the ire of Army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah. Widely considered to be the most significant challenger to Bouteflika's hold on the presidency, there have been reports that he is [preparing to withdraw from the presidential race](#) prior to a decision by the Constitutional Council regarding Bouteflika. He joined the protests but was expelled by the demonstrators.

A co-opted Opposition?

A [recent gathering of \(nominally\) opposition parties](#) at the headquarters of *Talaie El Hurriyet*, led by former Prime Minister and Chairman of the FLN, Ali Benflis, under the framework of the '[Coordination Committee for Liberties and Democratic Transition](#)', in which it was agreed that the Constitutional Council should be advised to reject the candidacy of Bouteflika, is an indication of further political manoeuvring on the part of figures variously associated with different camps within the ruling elite. Karim Tabou, former secretary-general of the FFS, stormed out of the meeting stating that he felt that the [opposition was not registering the monumental events taking place in the streets](#). Tabou is not necessarily one of the biggest opposition figures, particularly ever since he left FFS, however, his departure can be seen as a warning sign because, given his known stance on regime change, it is an indication that the 'Coordination Committee' is in fact largely co-opted by the regime.

Additional indications of the extent of political manoeuvring is the recent [statement by the l'Organisation Nationale des Moudjahdine \(ONM\)](#), a society made up of veterans of the war of independence, in support of the demonstrations and against *le pouvoir* and powerful "financial interests" in the country. While the position of the ONM is no doubt a blow to Bouteflika, it is arguably more important for the fact that it is an indication of wider change taking shape within the system itself, rather than a blanket support for the demands of the demonstrators.

What role do regional and international players have in the most recent developments?

While not to be considered as a 'client state', due to its strategic significance and long-cultivated relationships between the governing elite and foreign business and

governmental interests, there are regional and international factors to consider as it relates to the potential outcomes of the current political impasse.

France, as the former colonial power in Algeria, has significant stakes in the affairs of the country and maintains significant ties with the governing elite, who are largely made up of people who have maintained close ties to France in one way or another. Figures, such as former Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra – who has been pegged as a potential successor to Bouteflika – maintains close ties with France. At this point, the French authorities have maintained the line that the elections should proceed, however, if the risk of destabilisation increases, we may see France change course. In the final, France will act via their deep ties within "*le pouvoir*" to try to ensure stability and continuity in the political affairs of their former colony.

Algeria has maintained close security ties to the United States since the 9/11 attacks, becoming an important counter-terrorism partner in North Africa and the Sahel, and has since become an important regional trading partner for the US. There have been reports that a [series of secret meetings](#) took place at the US Embassy in Paris earlier in the year between American intelligence officials and Ali Ghediri, Abdelmalek Sellal, former Prime Minister under Bouteflika, and a number of other figures from the Democratic National Rally (RND), the party of the current Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahya.

There has been minimal reaction from Arab and regional governments, however, media coverage of the protests from al-Arabia and Sky News Arabia (representing Saudi Arabia and the UAE respectively), which have focused on Bouteflika as the core of the regime rather than the system as a whole, indicate that the Saudis and the Emiratis may wish to see Bouteflika replaced by a strong-man type figure, in line with their general foreign policy orientation towards the region.

Two recent [visits](#) (in December 2018 and February 2019) to the UAE by Army Chief Salah as part of "an opportunity to meet the Emirati brothers in order to examine all the ways and means to strengthen the bonds of friendship between the two peoples and consolidate relations of cooperation in all fields of common interest..." only adds to speculation in this regard. While speculative at this juncture, one possibility is that we could witness a regime transition of sorts. Algeria, generally insulated from regional politics and historically aligned with the former Soviet Union and the Iranian-Syrian camp, may possibly be being shifted towards a more pro-Saudi, UAE and pro-Israel stance. Many of the governments in the region have gone through this transition, most notably Egypt from Nasser to Sadat, something Algeria may yet to experience.

What is the significance of Algeria to the wider region?

Algeria is the largest country in the continent and the Mediterranean basin, which gives it a strategic continental location in the Maghreb via its mass as well as population numbers. Algeria has the third largest conventional oil reserves in Africa, over [12.2 billion barrels](#) and the 10th biggest gas reserves, [4.5 trillion cubic metres](#), in the world.

Due to its newfound wealth, Algeria has been able to pay off nearly all of its foreign debt which currently stands at around 2% of GDP.

Algeria became the first weapon buyer in Africa with military spending exceeding US\$10 billion [in 2014](#) and is among the [world's top 10 weapon buyers](#). China and Turkey have been investing heavily in Algeria, taking over France's historical position as the largest investor in the country which was ranked 157th out of 190 countries in the [Doing Business 2019](#) report published by the World Bank, gaining nine places compared to the previous year.

As the protests continue to gain momentum, international observers will be keeping a careful eye on events in Algeria. The US has reinforced its support for the peaceful protest movement and France is closely watching the anti-government protests in its former colony but is of the position that Algerians should decide their future.

Both are close allies of Algeria, who has been a key participant in the so-called War against Terror and counterterrorism initiatives, and remains a strategic gas and oil provider for Europe and the US. Instability in the country could have far reaching consequences not for just the region but Europe in close proximity with fears instability could entail further waves of migration to the continent and antagonise the security situation. With Libya a failed state, another mirror of that in the region could severely alter the security standing and allow for the current presence of militant groups in North Africa and the Sahel to use the opportunity to resurge and operate.

The international alliance with France and the US is also countered by its standing in the continent as the main buyer of arms with Russia.

Stability in Algeria is key for Europe and North Africa – particularly France. It also represents somewhat of a 'Bellwether' for trends in the wider MENA region. For example, the war of independence against the French in the 1960s preceded a number of other anti-colonial uprisings across Africa. Moreover, the Algerian civil war in the 1990s bears certain key hallmarks of what would come of the so-called Arab Spring twenty years later in places, such as Syria.

The world, particularly the EU, the US and the wider MENA region should be careful not to underestimate the centrality of Algeria to regional stability.

What are the possible outcomes of the political situation leading up to and after the April presidential elections?

The opaqueness of the system makes predictions very difficult but there are various factors that can be expected. According to reports from Geneva, Bouteflika's health continues to deteriorate which has spurred on speculation that the 82 year old may likely die before elections on April 18th. There is also speculation that Bouteflika may have already died, with his close circle choosing to publicise the

information at a time that will not antagonise the current popular movement on the streets.

The current strategy seems to be to allow the protests, which have been largely peaceful, to continue running its course however it is likely the state's response to them will likely change if they spiral out of control. Attempts to discredit the protest movement, removed from ethical and political lines, have accredited its organised nature to that of foreign hands and warned of its inevitable descent into violence like in Syria, which has only antagonised people further.

Where the focus lies is Bouteflika's successor and whom the power clans will be choosing to fill his shoes, a feat that has proven unsuccessful so far. The concession made of early elections in a year's time where Bouteflika will not run is seen by observers as biding time for the power clans to select a figure, palatable to them and the people. Names have cropped up such as former foreign minister Ramtane Lamamra and former general, Ali Ghediri, who represent two of the safest bets for the clans in power.

There are two scenarios to be expected: if elections will take place or not. In the case of Bouteflika's demise, elections are likely to be postponed with time needed to find a successor while the head of the Council of the Nation temporarily occupies the position. This will likely diffuse protests now that a fifth term is off the cards but the people will be watching closely for the next move adopted by the army and the powerful clans.

If elections do go ahead and Bouteflika wins a majority then it is likely the protests against Bouteflika and the FLN will intensify. In the scenario he loses and an opposition candidate like Ghediri is successful, then it will be questioned whether this was the power clans' plan B the whole time.

A retired Algerian colonel said [speaking to TRT World](#), "Even if Bouteflika's clique are ripped out, the next ruler has to win the favour of 'le pouvoir'... there will be no change. The only changes will appease the demands of the protestors. The real power will remain."



(Bechir Ramzy - Anadolu Agency)