

Turbulent Chronicle of Resistance to Political Change in Algeria

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By mid-day on Wednesday, 5 January 2011, news had reached the offices of newspapers in Algiers of major riots by youth in Oran, the country's second largest city. Subsequently, over the course of six days, all the towns in the north as well as several towns in the south experienced clashes in the streets between youth groups, often comprised of several hundred people, and reinforced security forces. Public buildings were vandalized, shops and private warehouses looted, street furniture burned. The damages were estimated at nearly a billion euros. The government crackdown left two dead and dozens injured, and more than five hundred young people were arrested across the country. This spontaneous movement of marginalized, unemployed youth had no clear demands nor spokespeople. It was not strong enough to attract other categories of young people, such as high school and college students, but it did suffice to create a new political situation in Algeria. Indeed, the situation changed so profoundly that President Ben Ali made a thundering fall on 14 January 2011 and the Egyptian revolution had gotten under way by 25 January. But what was the Algerian context before this historic turning point in January 2011? That of an exacerbated political impasse. Two years earlier, in January 2008, several months of deliberation resulted in a default agreement between the current president and the Algerian army, represented by the head of security forces, General Toufik. President Bouteflika was eligible for a third presidential term in the spring of 2009. The matter did not obtain unanimity at first. Nor did the name of a successor to Bouteflika. In any case, in order to take up a third term, the President would have to

change the constitutional limit of two presidential terms for a single candidate. In spring 2008, the campaign for a constitutional revision and a third presidential term had obtained no positive results. The rupture with society was profound. The president was obliged to resort to a simple parliamentary vote to achieve his ends. The turnout in the presidential election of 9 April 2009 was less than 30% according to various sources on the ground. Popular disaffection for politics had never been greater. When the "urban insurrection" of January 2011 took place, popular riots had already been on the rise in Algeria for several years. In 2010, news agencies chronicled some 1400 conflicts and riots leading to or involving citizen rallies, attacks on administrative offices, major roads cut to traffic and confrontations with the security forces. Contested social housing distribution, broken promises by the local authorities to build roads, stabilize the electrical grid or build natural gas supply networks – the sparks triggering unrest multiplied over the months. Workers' strikes, with civil servants in the lead, were the other major front of the "Algerian social guerrillas." In the face of the gradually rising waters, the fragile cohesion of the Algerian government was deeply damaged. By the end of the summer of 2009, the Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS) – i.e. military security – decided to personally conduct an operation to reform the country's economy. This was the beginning of major corruption cases that mainly involved the presidential sphere. Abdelaziz Bouteflika made the mistake of allowing his ambition of family succession to be glimpsed by floating the trial balloon of a political party led by his "younger" brother, Said. This is not traditional approach in the Algerian regime's internal affairs. The powerful Minister of Energy and Mines, Chakib Khelil, in office since December 1999, was caught in the Sonatrach storm. The top management of the oil company, the largest

African company, was removed, and placed in custody. The Minister resigned from his post, but the tens of millions of euros in bribes mentioned in the press in the Sonatrach affair and the scandal of the East-West Motorway construction shocked public opinion. The break is growing, the political impasse consolidating a little more.

Budgetary Room for Manoeuvre

The spark produced by Mohamed Bouazizi, the Tunisian wildfire and the Arab revolution met with glowing embers in Algeria. But the fire did not take. The main reason is the amount of "liquid" thrown on the fire. By the third day of the riots, the Algerian government had decided to lend a strictly social content to the anger of youth. Its first reaction was to exclude any political content in the events, even before the political issue arose upon Ben Ali's flight from Tunis and the occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo. The first response to the movement of uprisings was therefore within the budgetary sphere. The equivalent of two to three billion dollars were mobilized in the first quarter 2011 to support the price of oil and sugar, improve interest rates for access to housing and finance the creation of micro-enterprises for those under 35. The government's fire-fighting measures also included not collecting taxes on a large part of wholesale and retail distribution activities. The obligation of using cheques for all transactions exceeding 500,000 dinars (5,000 euros) was dropped. Unable to provide immediate jobs for young people (unemployment is at 23% in the under 29 age group), the Algerian authorities abandoned plans to reduce the informal economy. Street vendors conquered new shopping streets in city centres. The line of defence of the Algerian authorities is not based solely on "political corruption" via the massive purchase of social peace. It also relies on society's fresh memory of the chaos of civil war. Algerians are not willing to do just anything to overthrow President Bouteflika and the political system. They are afraid of disunity. This is the most widely shared conviction among the Algerian decision-makers. They feel this gives them additional flexibility in the face of rising popular protest. The greatest flexibility however, is afforded by the 160 billion dollars in foreign reserves registered by the Bank of Algeria in the first quarter of 2011. In the same period, the Central Bank of Tunisia had 4 billion dollars.

The Algerian Spring Is a Social Spring

The strategic choice of the Algerian authorities not to make political concessions in the first month following the youth revolt of January 2011 cost them socially even more. The message was quickly perceived by all classes of society holding any leverage over the state. The government rewarded the players' capacity to do harm, to struggle: protesters, highway robbers, rioters. Organized professional associations would take action in their turn as well. Larger and larger strikes paralyzed public service, slowing the country down. Doctors, court officials, paramedics, finance staff, the Communal Guards (tens of thousands of security auxiliaries recruited to protect villages from Islamist groups) – everyone wanted to occupy the public space. The government was obliged to give in to one after the other. The protest movement then extended into the public economic sector, with tangible gains for the most combative groups. The Arab Spring is a social spring in Algeria.

The "Minimalist" Response Soon Insufficient

Three factors were to compel President Bouteflika, in the face of the shock wave after the January riots, not to limit himself to his strictly budgetary first line of defence. The first was that social protest had intensified and threatened to take a turn towards insurgency at any moment. Six Algerians committed suicide via self-immolation during the month of January alone. The tension was extreme. The second factor was that political demand was weak in the street but strong in public opinion, marking the limits of social measures by the State. A National Coordination for Democracy and Change (NCCD) was born and called people to march, despite the fact that this was still banned, every Saturday in Algiers. Social movements moved beyond their corporatist framework in major student strikes in which the demand for the regime to step down rang out during rallies and marches. The third factor was most certainly the winds of the Arab revolution, gaining ground with the fall of Hosni Mubarak on 11 February 2011. The Libyan revolution was underway by the end of February and the discomfort of Algerian officials was evident in their rare interventions. The Council of Ministers of 3 February 2011, the first after the riots of 4 to 9 January, anticipated the situation and made

its first concession: the state of emergency in force since February 1992 was lifted. At this point, President Bouteflika also promised to broaden citizen participation in public life and to reopen the television and radio – strictly governmental – to democratic expression. The Algerian government would weather the storm for two and half months with only these two, very poorly kept promises. The new line of defence became clear: not to make political concessions under pressure, gain time, not yield anything of significance. After the social response that put the country into movement in search of wage adjustments that had become officially possible, the minimalist policy response very quickly ran out of breath.

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President Bouteflika sent messages to Algerian opinion through his foreign visitors. Former French Prime Minister Jean-Pierre Raffarin announced after a visit to Algiers on 21 February that the Algerian president intended to engage in “deep and comprehensive political reforms.” It was only on 15 April, on the 12th anniversary of his election as head of state, that Abdelaziz Bouteflika spoke directly to the nation. The deliberations within the regime on the nature, extent and timing of reforms that were to be undertaken had been long. In the end, the President had decided on an “in-depth” revision of the constitution to re-balance the powers and expand political practice. He wished to involve the opposition in the constitutional proposals. He announced a series of revisions of laws (i.e. electoral, political party and information laws) to enhance freedoms and proposed making the parliamentary elections of spring 2012 a new beginning in the country’s democratic experience, begun in 1988-89 with the end of the single party. President Bouteflika’s political reform agenda respected all election dates. This means that he intends to serve out his third term in full, until April 2014. The numerous proponents of dissolving parliament and adopting a constituent assembly as in

Tunisia were disappointed. Although giving the impression of retreating, the Algerian regime did so in only very small steps. The factors prompting it to undertake self-reform were gaining ground... starting with the winds of freedom in the Arab world.

Algeria Threatens to Remain the Only “Autocracy”

The announcement by King Mohamed VI of Morocco of constitutional reform moving towards strengthening the power of the Prime Minister and Parliament resounded like a thunderclap in Algiers. For many years, the Algerian regime had been claiming to be the most open in the region. The revolutionary changes in Tunisia and Egypt and those underway in Libya abruptly discredited this posture. But the commitment to undertake key political reforms in Morocco, the country that had most observed the Algerian regime, removed the last argument in favour of the status quo in Algiers. The only static political power in all of North Africa became that of President Bouteflika. All the more so since his regime failed in its attempt to follow an old dogma of Algerian revolutionary diplomacy and not take part in the political processes of neighbouring countries. At the flight of President Ben Ali and the major gatherings in Tahrir Square, Algiers chose silence. In Tunisia, public opinion has come to classify the Algerian attitude as “hostile” and Tunisian opinion-makers refer to their revolution as “hemmed in at both international borders,” putting Qaddafi’s antipathy on the same level as Bouteflika’s awkward silence. The Arab revolution surprised Algiers at the height of an isolationist trend. Between the end of 2008 and January 2011, Algiers undertook a closing of the economy by tightening conditions for foreign investment in the country (December 2008), then the government entered into open conflict with the largest foreign investor, Egypt’s Orascom, followed by the chaotic consequences of Algeria-Egypt qualifying matches to the World Cup, freezing relations between the two countries (November 2009). Tension with Morocco had also become very strong again after the Sahrawi uprising of Laayoune (November 2010). The partnership with France had been experiencing difficulty for a long time (2009) and Algeria was considering amending its Association Agreement with the European Union (2010). The regime, linked to the slow biological rhythm of an ill, weakened president, sur-

vived the eruption of unrest among the Arab masses and clung to its doctrine, unadapted to the times, of neutrality in “the internal affairs of neighbouring countries.” This position, already wholly inadequate in view of the high connectivity of opinions in the era of Facebook and Al Jazeera, became politically disastrous after Libya’s loss of control. President Bouteflika’s refusal to condemn the massacre of peaceful demonstrators by the Gaddafi regime with the use of heavy weapons has led him, over the course of events, to be implicitly designated by the National Transition Council (CNT) in Benghazi as the Libyan dictator’s main regional support. In wishing to spare his Libyan friend, President Bouteflika simply reinforced the image of a man and a regime committed to the old Arab order, that of potentates who can dispose of their people in all liberty. US Vice President Joe Biden publicly reported, in the first week of the bombing of Libya by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), that Ahmed Ouyahia, the Prime Minister of Algeria, had assured him over the telephone that his country supported Security Council Resolution 1973, establishing the no-fly zone. That same week, the Algerian Minister of Foreign Affairs in Algiers, together with his Russian counterpart Lavrov, called for “the end of NATO bombing.” Algerian “neutrality” is finally rightly perceived by Arab opinion as a refusal to support the movement of the people in Tunisia – and Egypt and Libya, as well as Yemen and Syria – to free themselves of the yoke of the former autocratic Arab order. This attitude has aggravated current isolation. Algeria, the leading economic power in North Africa in GDP and fiscal surpluses, has in fact become a background political player on the stage of major changes taking place along its borders. On her visit to the region in early April, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton bypassed Algiers on her visits to Tunis and Rabat.

The Pace of Change Uncertain

The Algerian government has embarked on a “political reform” agenda that excludes the most important electoral event, the presidential elections. President Bouteflika is thus expected to remain in power until the end of his third presidential term in April 2014. The fragility of the Algerian situation arises there-

from. The “self-reform” conducted has been weak and is losing legitimacy. The Algerian president has responded slowly and in small successive steps to the dual pressure of internal and external events.

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He does not appear as a facilitator ensuring a “controlled re-opening” of Algerian politics. His role is, however, essential, as the impetus behind the government can come from no one but him. The form of government in Algeria has historically not been collegial, but rather Bonapartist. Crises such as the one arising after the electoral victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (*Front Islamique du Salut*, FIS) in 1992 have made governance fall back into an artificial collegial mode. The weight of the army then becomes predominant again. But the natural tendency of the regime is to hide behind a guardian figure in order to ensure the system’s coherence. This figure was more or less strongly embodied by Houari Boumedienne (1965-1978) or by Chadli Bendjedid (1979-1992), who were more or less challenged by other factions of the socially dominant bloc. Abdelaziz Bouteflika has not reconstituted the total pre-eminence of a Bonapartist rule but he has significantly reduced the direct influence of the army on political decisions. His ability to win a third term despite his shaky health shows, conversely, the army’s inability to provide an alternative clan to hold the office of President of the Republic. President Bouteflika has adopted a political agenda where everything can, in theory, change: the constitution, electoral law, public life, the composition of parliament... except him. Will the Arab Revolution and the Algerian Social Spring manage to change this? This will depend on the evolution of the Arab movement in general and the Algerian movement in particular. The success of democratic transition in Tunisia as well as the depth of constitutional reforms and their effectiveness in Morocco are key parameters, just as well as the ability of social movements in Algeria to keep the spirit of protest alive long enough to link up with a steady rise of the demand for political change.