

# Algeria: Two Years after the Hirak, Deadlock?

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Taking stock of the internal situation in Algeria is far from easy. And this is not for lack of information and data that can be used for analysis. What makes the Algerian situation so particular is its constant evolution, rendering it difficult to determine its final trajectory. Indeed, since 22 February 2019, Algeria has been experiencing political and social movements, which the process of institutional normalization undertaken as of the 12 December 2019 presidential elections has been struggling to contain. Neither the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced a pause of almost a year, nor the socio-economic crisis seem to have relegated political demands to the background. It is true that these demonstrations have decreased in intensity, due to the health situation and a certain resignation among part of the Algerian population, beset by doubts about the viability of weekly marches as a means of bringing about change. However, it is neither weariness nor demobilization that has stopped the marches, but the policy of repression punctuated by the questioning, arrest and imprisonment of hundreds of Hirak activists.

The voter turnout in the 2019 presidential elections and the referendum on the new constitution held on 1 November 2020, which was very modest for the former (39.88% compared to 51.07% in 2014) and extremely low for the latter (23%), indicates the limits of political engineering, whose focal point remains the institutional normalization to which the political authorities are clinging.

Over two and a half years after the outbreak of the popular revolt, the promises of a break with the old

regime are struggling to materialize. What are the reasons for this?

## **New Constitution and Elections, or How to Bypass the Transition Process**

Though declaring to side with the people, the army's high command had never planned on setting in motion a transition that would mean a negotiation process with the opposition and the Hirak activists. The position adopted was to not go beyond the bounds of the constitution and to complete the electoral process. Thus, after a first postponement on 4 July, the presidential elections were held on 12 December 2019. Five candidates stood: Ali Benflis, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, Abdelkader Bengrina, Abdelaziz Belaid and Azzedine Mihoubi. It was Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a former minister and Prime Minister in the Abdelaziz Bouteflika Administrations, who won the elections with 59% of the votes.

Once elected, Abdelmadjid Tebboune promised to complete the institutional normalization process by appointing a commission of experts to draft the new constitution. Comprised of constitutional jurists, the Laraba Commission, named after its chair, Professor Ahmed Laraba, was tasked with drawing up a new text to be submitted to a referendum. However, this commission did not have the latitude to propose major revisions that could challenge the imbalance between the three powers. In other words, there was no possibility of questioning the semi-presidential nature of the Algerian regime. Nor of limiting the powers of the President of the Republic by removing certain prerogatives such as: legislating by ordinance, the abolition of the presidentially appointed third of the upper house of Parliament, or the distribution of the power of ap-

pointment between the President and the head of government.

Adopted with 69% of the votes in favour and 13% against, this new constitution in fact reinforces the hyper-presidentialist nature of the Algerian regime by maintaining some of the President of the Republic's chief prerogatives. The reintroduction of the post of head of government, on condition that it be filled by a member of the opposition, does not call into question the President's pre-eminence over the executive. Thus conceived, the new constitution in no way breaks with the old order in the sense that token constitutionalism, which has formed the basis of all constitutional engineering since 1989, remains the rule.<sup>1</sup> A sort of double standard: one democratic, the other authoritarian.<sup>2</sup> In other words, the political power continues to reappropriate democratic tools to consolidate its authoritarian grip. It is in this spirit that President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has committed himself to dissolving the Parliament and organizing legislative elections for 12 June 2021, followed by local elections for the fourth quarter of 2021.

This process of institutional normalization is taking place in a context marked by a shrinking of the space for individual and collective freedoms. Arrests of Hirak activists have continued and increased, although President Abdelmadjid Tebboune decided to release dozens of prisoners of conscience in early January this year.

### The Hirak in the Middle of the Pandemic

Paradoxically, the wave of arrests grew in full COVID-19 pandemic, despite the fact that activists and significant figures within the Hirak protest movement had called for the temporary suspension of the marches to avoid the spread of the virus.<sup>3</sup> The political authorities took advantage of this health truce to arrest some of the main Hirak activists, including the journalist Khaled Drareni, in spite of criticism and

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condemnation by human rights associations and the European Parliament.<sup>4</sup> In so doing, the Algerian authorities hoped to stop the popular demonstrations. However, on 21 February 2021, the second anniversary of the popular uprising, tens of thousands of Algerians resumed their marches on Fridays, but also on Tuesdays for students. Admittedly, the number of demonstrators did not reach that of the first weeks of the uprising in 2019. Nevertheless, the resumption of these marches reflects a climate of mistrust towards a regime that is still unable to reconstitute a social base. Thus, by taking advantage of the pandemic to tighten the grip on the Hirak, the authorities were hoping to put an end to the demonstrations by relying at times on attrition and at others on a discourse of fear. Official discourse focused on criminalizing the Hirak, accusing it of being affiliated to Islamist and separatist terrorist organizations.

The fact that the Hirak is not structured raises questions, but also concerns among some Algerian citizens, disappointed by President Tebboune's management of the situation. Should the Hirak structure itself and move from a force of objection to a proactive force of proposal? This is the question that keeps popping up.

### Between Internal Divisions and Hostility from the Authorities: Structuring of the Hirak at Issue

In one of our previous studies, we raised the question of the representation of the Hirak in terms of the

<sup>1</sup> MEHDI, Rostane. "L'Algérie et sa constitution, l'impossible rendez-vous ?" *Maghreb-Machrek*, No. 244, p. 54, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 55.

<sup>3</sup> "Coronavirus : premier vendredi sans Hirak en Algérie." *Jeune Afrique*. 20 March 2020. [www.jeuneafrique.com/913761/politique/coronavirus-premier-vendredi-sans-hirak-en-algerie/](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/913761/politique/coronavirus-premier-vendredi-sans-hirak-en-algerie/)

<sup>4</sup> LAFRANCE, Camille. "Algérie : le parlement européen dénonce les atteintes aux droits de l'Homme." *Jeune Afrique*. 25 November 2020. [www.jeuneafrique.com/1080643/societe/algerie-le-parlement-europeen-denonce-les-atteintes-aux-droits-de-lhomme/](http://www.jeuneafrique.com/1080643/societe/algerie-le-parlement-europeen-denonce-les-atteintes-aux-droits-de-lhomme/)

face-off with political power.<sup>5</sup> Should the Hirak structure itself, passing the stage of movement of objection to become a pro-active force? More than two years after the beginning of the popular uprising, this question continues to crop up. If for some, the strength of the Hirak lies in the absence of a leadership that could cause it to splinter and thus weaken, others, on the other hand, consider that structuring is the only way to allow the Hirak to endure and force those in power in Algeria to accept negotiating a real transition.<sup>6</sup>

However, structuring the movement is proving to be one of the issues that divides many of its militants. Certainly, initiatives have arisen in the midst of the popular movement, especially in 2019, such as the conference of Civil Society Actors on 15 June 2019. This was followed by the Ain Benian meeting on 6 July the same year, which brought together opposition parties and civil society actors of conservative persuasion. Or the PAD (Pact for a Democratic Alternative) coalition, with progressive tendencies. However, no consensual platform has been found, even if attempts are occasionally made, such as the meeting in Kherrata on 8 May this year.<sup>7</sup> The Hirak advances without a leader. And sometimes moves backwards. There are two major reasons for this. The first is the internal tensions that undermine the Hirak actors. This is due not only to ideological and political divergences, but also to personal rivalries. Moreover, suspicions and accusations of rallying to the camp of power formulated by some against their fellow activists have become legion. The second is due to the obstacles raised by the government to any action aimed at letting the Hirak organize itself. Thus, the refusal to grant authorizations to meet, the closure of the public media to discordant voices, and the imprisonment of some of the well-known figures of the popular movement are all tangible signs of a refusal to allow the Hirak to structure itself.

In the wake of this political context, characterized by the dualism between the desire for change among a large majority of Algerians and the political power's

desire to perpetuate the regime, the socio-economic situation is showing signs of fragility. The health crisis and its immediate consequences have brutally raised the economic stakes alongside the pending political challenges. Over two years after the start of the popular uprising and over a year after the presidential election, where does Algeria stand on the socio-economic front?

### **The Economic and Social Situation: Structural Vulnerabilities and the Need for In-Depth Restructuring**

Let us begin with the constants, those that persist year after year despite the speeches affirming and announcing capital changes. First among these constants is the dependence of the Algerian economy on hydrocarbons. They represent 98% of exports, 60% of tax revenues and 19% of the GDP.

### **The health crisis and its immediate consequences have brutally raised the economic stakes alongside the pending political challenges**

However, falling oil prices reduced energy export revenues to USD 20.6 billion in 2020, plunging the current account deficit to 10.5% of the GDP in 2020. How did Algeria finance its budget deficit? Once again, it resorted to so-called "unconventional" financing, i.e., printing cash. It also tried to absorb the funds invested in the informal sector, estimated at 40% of GDP. As expected, this measure did not yield results.

The sharp drop in financial resources is due to the accumulation of three factors: the 2008 financial crisis, the consequences of which became apparent in 2014, the drop in national production con-

<sup>5</sup> DRIS-AIT-HAMADOUCHE, Louisa and DRIS, Cherif. "Le face à face Hirak-Pouvoir: la crise de représentation." In Thierry DESRUES and Éric GOBE (Eds.) *L'Année du Maghreb*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2019

<sup>6</sup> GHANEM, Ahmed. "Le Hirak, expérience d'une agora politique." *Orient XXI*. 15 April 2021. <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/algerie-le-hirak-experience-d-une-agora-politique,4669>

<sup>7</sup> MEDDI, Adlene. "Algérie: face-à-face tendu entre le pouvoir et le Hirak." *Le Point*. 10 May 2021. [www.lepoint.fr/afrique/algerie-face-a-face-tendu-entre-le-pouvoir-et-le-hirak-10-05-2021-2425772\\_3826.php](http://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/algerie-face-a-face-tendu-entre-le-pouvoir-et-le-hirak-10-05-2021-2425772_3826.php)

comitant with the rise in domestic demand,<sup>8</sup> and the COVID-19 pandemic. According to IMF forecasts, GDP growth fell to -6% in 2020. If the global economy recovers, it would rise to 2.9% in 2021 and stabilize at 2.8% in 2022.<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile, public debt was estimated at 53.1% for 2020, but is expected to rise to 63.3% in 2021 and 73.9% in 2022.<sup>10</sup>

What are the economic challenges ahead?<sup>11</sup> The Algerian economy needs profound restructuring to prepare the transition to a productive and job-creating economy. The unemployment rate is expected to reach 14.5% in 2021, and 14.9% in 2022.<sup>12</sup> Worse yet, the decline in purchasing power due to the devaluation of the dinar and unemployment has plunged whole sectors of society into insecurity. Hence the increase in social movements and strikes in 2021.<sup>13</sup>

The sectors likely to contribute to this transition are agriculture, which represents 12% of GDP and employs 9.7% of the active population,<sup>14</sup> but whose dependence on agricultural inputs remains a handicap. The tertiary sector is booming. It contributed to almost 46% of GDP in 2019 and employed 59.6% of the active population. But this sector suffers not only from the anachronistic nature of its financial sector and the monopoly of public banks, but also from the political climate.

However, the confusion that has reigned at the political level since 2019, the continued criminalization of the act of administration, and the nearly general-

ized campaigns of repression have created a noxious climate that repels productive investments requiring visibility, predictability and confidence. On the contrary, this period may, as in the 1990s, facilitate speculation and money laundering that will aggravate Algeria's socio-economic situation.

## The Algerian economy needs profound restructuring to prepare the transition to a productive and job-creating economy

Throughout these lines, we have tried to define the contours of a situation that follows the rhythm of a multiform dynamic whose trajectory remains to be determined. Faced with a Hirak that is fighting to become a force for change, the government in power persists in wishing to maintain a political system whose resilience was tested by the popular uprising of 22 February 2019. The political proposal outlined in 2019 seems to have shown its limits. The turnout for the Constitution referendum, the lowest Algeria has ever seen, as well as the clampdown on the Hirak are perfect illustrations of this. For the Hirak, as for the authorities, the impasse persists and the risks are increasing.

<sup>8</sup> Algeria is among the top five gas exporters in the world and ranks 16th in oil reserves and 11th in confirmed gas reserves. However, gas exports are expected to fall sharply from 45 billion cubic metres in 2020 to 26 billion cubic metres in 2025, mainly due to the steady rise in domestic consumption and the emergence of new suppliers.

<sup>9</sup> INTERNATIONAL MONETARY FUND (IMF). *World Economic Outlook Database*. April 2021. [www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/03/23/world-economic-outlook-april-2021](http://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2021/03/23/world-economic-outlook-april-2021)

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> BESSAHA, Abdelrahmi. "L'économie algérienne est en récession : Le report des réformes n'est pas une option." *El Watan*. 10 May 2021. [www.elwatan.com/pages-hebdo/sup-eco/leconomie-algerienne-est-en-recession-le-report-des-reformes-nest-pas-une-option-10-05-2021](http://www.elwatan.com/pages-hebdo/sup-eco/leconomie-algerienne-est-en-recession-le-report-des-reformes-nest-pas-une-option-10-05-2021)

<sup>12</sup> MEHENNI, Ouramdane. "Économie algérienne : Le FMI prévoit une croissance de 2,9% en 2021." *Algérie Eco*. 7 April 2021. [www.algerie-eco.com/2021/04/07/economie-algerienne-le-fmi-prevoit-une-croissance-de-29-en-2021/](http://www.algerie-eco.com/2021/04/07/economie-algerienne-le-fmi-prevoit-une-croissance-de-29-en-2021/)

<sup>13</sup> Education, health, postal services and even civil security (the fire brigade) are experiencing a major internal revolt. Strikes have been repressed and strikers sanctioned.

<sup>14</sup> World Bank, 2019