

Algeria: Taking Stock of Abdelmadjid Tebboune's First Term

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2024 is an important election year in Algeria. Five years after being elected on the promise of building a “new Algeria,” Abdelmadjid Tebboune has reached the moment of reckoning. Without explaining why, he decided to bring the election date forward to 7 September and launched an election campaign whose central theme is the “completion” of the new Algeria. But campaign promises and themes aside, President Tebboune's first term in office follows twenty years of rule by Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

This factor calls not only for an assessment of the last five years, but also for a look at what has changed since the previous period. This comparison is all the more interesting given that Abdelmadjid Tebboune's first term in office has been the Algerian government's response to the HIRAK, a popular protest movement that peacefully opposed Abdelaziz Bouteflika's 5th term in office, and then just as peacefully demanded the democratization of the Algerian political system. Five years on, has this response lived up to its stated aim of resilience? Has the political system succeeded in its self-reproduction after the shock of the political crisis of 2019?

Resilience Maintained

This first part of the response will address the elements that enabled the political system to indeed survive the crisis of 2019.

The Electoral Procedures Applied

Elections being an important source of legitimacy, the Head of State promised the early renewal of all elected bodies, and this after having followed in the footsteps of all his predecessors by revising the constitution. This does in fact meet the objective of resilience, since the explanatory memorandum clearly stated that amendments could not call into question the current balance of powers. Presidential prerogatives thus needed to be preserved, including the power to: legislate by ordinance; appoint the government; appoint one third of the Council of the Nation's members; appoint the First President of the Supreme Court; the President of the Council of State; the Secretary General of the Government; the Governor of the Bank of Algeria; the magistrates; the heads of the security agencies; the Walis; the senior members of the regulatory authorities, etc. Note, however, that this reform enjoyed little legitimacy among the people. Indeed, according to official statistics, only 23% of the population went to the polls, with 66% voting in favour and 33% against.¹

The renewal of elected bodies encountered the same problem. Held in June 2021, the legislative elections only garnered a turnout of 23% of the electorate. This high level of abstention was heightened by the record number of invalid ballots, which reduced the number of votes actually cast to 18% of the electorate. As for the local elections (departments and town councils), the actual turnout – after subtracting invalid ballots – amounted to 23% for the wilayas and 26% for the town councils.²

The elections also maintained the pre-existing configurations. In the National People's Assembly, the

¹ Algeria Press Service (APS), 12/11/2020.

² APS, 22/12/2021.

National Liberation Front (FLN) came first with 98 seats, followed by the Independents with 84 seats, the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) with 65 seats and the Democratic National Rally (RND) with 58 seats. There were no political changes in local institutions. At the municipal level, the FLN came in first, followed by the RND, the independent list, the El Moustakbel Front, the El Bina Movement and finally the MSP. In the elections for the wilaya assemblies, the same political forces came out on top.³ As a result, all the post-2019 elections have led to two observations: the rearrangement of the forces in power at the time the political crisis broke out, and the low level of popular support for the electoral process as a whole.⁴

The Rentier Economy Safeguarded

Much has been said about the centrality of the rentier extractive economy to the longevity of the Algerian political system. The post-2019 period will be no exception. Algeria is a gas country.⁵ It is the leading producer of natural gas in Africa and 10th in the world, with a market share in global natural gas production estimated at 2.4%.⁶ Natural gas being a regional market, Algeria exports natural gas to Europe via pipelines crossing the Mediterranean and in the form of liquid natural gas, the price of which has soared following the war in Ukraine and the destruction of Nordstream 1 and 2.

This increase has had a direct impact on revenues from Algerian hydrocarbon exports. Dividends from state-owned companies, in particular Sonatrach, have jumped to 2.6% of a GDP that increased by 4.1% in 2023, making it possible to cover 16.1 months of imports thanks to the rise in foreign exchange reserves.

Management of the political and health crises has mobilized financial resources, aimed in particular at social redistribution. Raising wages, establishing un-

employment benefits close to the guaranteed minimum wage, increasing civil service recruitment, maintaining generalized subsidies after considering targeting them are all decisions designed to appease the social front. But these policies come at a cost. The budget deficit widened to 5.2% of the GDP, while the non-hydrocarbon deficit reached 24.9% of the GDP, proving that non-hydrocarbon revenues did not offset the increase in expenditure. The increase in the public debt/GDP ratio has led the government to resort once again to unconventional financing (commonly known as printing money) to finance the deficit. Public debt peaked at 55.1% of GDP in 2021, while it remained at 49.2% in 2023, with an important factor being that it is almost entirely held on the domestic market.⁷

The priority given to the government monopoly of resources hampers any reform processes and produces situations that are more harmful than the state monopoly

This spiral is fuelled by attractive fossil energy prices and depends on sufficient new production to meet rising internal consumption. The latter, however, is a major challenge facing the gas industry. With an average annual increase of 8%, Algeria would no longer be able to export gas in the medium term. This would prove catastrophic for its rentier economy. Two solutions exist. The first is a long-term solution with inevitable political consequences. It involves structural reform of the country's economic framework to encourage diversification and put an end to its dependence on hydrocarbons. This first solution has been mentioned in speeches for

³ APS, 23/06/2021.

⁴ Dris-Aït Hamadouche, Louisa, "Algérie 2021 : un pouvoir renforcé et une autorité en crise." *L'Année du Maghreb*, 28 | 2022, p. 175-19

⁵ Sonatrach is a major player in gas markets. It supplies natural gas, liquid natural gas (LNG) and liquid petroleum gas (LPG) to Portugal, France, the United Kingdom, China and Slovenia. In 2022, Sonatrach was Italy's No. 1 supplier of natural gas and Spain's No. 2; and Turkey and Greece's No. 2 supplier of LNG.

⁶ APS, 02/03/2024; "Gaz naturel: l'Algérie parmi les 10 premiers producteurs mondiaux en 2022." www.algerie-eco.com/2023/08/31/gaz-naturel-lalgerie-parmi-les-10-premiers-producteurs-mondiaux-en-2022/.

⁷ World Bank Report, spring 2024, p. 7-8, <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099728005212488535/pdf/IDU11df7b2e8125b7140881b35f1c055e9067a97.pdf>.

decades, but very little has actually been done. The priority given to the government monopoly of resources hampers any reform processes and produces situations that are more harmful than the state monopoly, namely a predatory oligarchy that is corruptible and corrupting.⁸

The second solution is to mine unconventional hydrocarbons. Algeria is believed to have the third largest reserves in the world.⁹ It is credited with recoverable reserves of unconventional hydrocarbons of around 25,000 Gm³ of gas and 16 Gb of oil. These levels represent eight times those of Hassi R'mel for gas and 30% more than the Hassi Messaoud deposit for oil.¹⁰

... *And Renewed?*

For more than a decade, this option has been discussed¹¹ and then suspended. Hostile reactions to this policy have been expressed time and again, notably through grassroots, peaceful activism by the inhabitants of Ain Salah (in the southern wilaya) in 2015.¹² For weeks on end, they demonstrated, organized agoras and occupied public spaces to show and explain their opposition to shale gas production. Never completely abandoned, however, this option seems to be favoured once again. In May 2024, the Algerian government announced that gas production would be increased to 200 billion cubic metres over the next five years, compared to the current 137 billion cubic metres of natural gas per year. How is a 46% increase possible without recourse to unconventional hydrocarbons? It is interesting to note that this announcement coincides with the arrival of a number of US oil companies, whose know-how is indispensable in the shale industry. Talks began in February 2023 with the American giants

Chevron and OXY to exploit gas from the Ahnet, Gourara and Berkine fields, known for their potential in natural gas, but also in shale gas.¹³ In addition, in May 2024 a memorandum of understanding was signed with Exxon-mobile that is considered to be historic. The American company will focus its activities in the Ahnet and Gourara Basins with the aim of "further unlocking the development potential of Algeria's energy resources."¹⁴ Previously, a \$4 billion production sharing agreement had been signed with the American company Occidental and the two European companies TotalEnergies and ENI. This agreement concerns a production and development project that will produce one billion barrels of oil from the Berkine Basin (wilaya of Ouargla).¹⁵

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Along the same lines, Flowserve, one of the world's largest manufacturers of pumps, valves and seals, has increased its investment in Algeria. So, in addition to its main activity involving thousands of pumps, mechanical seals and valves, Flowserve has

⁸ The most blatant example is the FCE (Forum des chefs d'entreprise, i.e. Forum of Business Leaders), several of whose business leaders have been convicted and imprisoned since 2019.

⁹ https://wintershalldea.com/sites/default/files/media/files/220222_publ_fs_algerien_fr.pdf.

¹⁰ BOUSSENA, Sadek and LOCATELLI, Catherine, "Exploiter les hydrocarbures de schiste en Algérie: est-ce faisable? est-ce souhaitable?" HAL, Open Science, 2022, <https://hal.science/hal-03722555/document>.

¹¹ BOUGHRIET, Rachida, "L'Algérie explore 'avec succès' son gaz de schiste." 22/01/2015, www.actu-environnement.com/ae/news/algerie-gaz-schiste-sonatrach-23631.php4.

¹² OUALI, Hacem, "Le gaz de schiste enflamme le sud de l'Algérie." *Orient XXI*, 16/03/2015.

¹³ ACHERCHOUR, Mussa, "Ces énormes réserves de gaz de schiste qui tentent l'Algérie." *Révolution énergétique*, Feb. 2023, www.revolution-energetique.com/ces-enormes-reserves-de-gaz-de-schiste-qui-tentent-lalgerie/.

¹⁴ *Algérieéco*, 23/05/2024; 24/05/2024.

¹⁵ "Occidental signs \$4 billion production sharing agreement with Sonatrach and other companies." US Embassy in Algeria, 21 July 2022, <https://dz.usembassy.gov/occidental-signs-4-billion-production-sharing-agreement-with-sonatrach-and-other-companies/>.

decided to operate a Quick Response Centre (QRC), which provides repair services for pumps, mechanical seals, dry gas seals and valves for the oil and gas industry.¹⁶ According to the Chairman of the Algerian-American Business Council, the two conditions required by Algeria are: the transfer of know-how through both training and the production of certain parts needed for drilling, and the provision of other services relating to exploration.¹⁷ Environmental issues are apparently not a priority.

Signs of a Weakened Resilience

This second part is devoted to elements that show the flaws in a resilience that has been sustained but is weakening.

The Unusual Media Visibility of the Military Establishment

Since independence, the Algerian political system has been based on the complementarity of civil and military power, while applying the tacit rule that requires the former to be apparent and subservient to the latter, which remains invisible but real (Benchikh, 2021). During the political crisis of 2019, this configuration cracked, bringing to the fore the real power of the military establishment. The presidential election organized to put an end to this crisis should have restored the previous balance. This was not the case.

In recent years, military power has remained visible. Hardly a day goes by without the broadcast media and the Algeria Press Service (APS) reporting on the activities, movements or statements of the highest military authorities. Furthermore, the High Security Council (HCS) has increased the number of its regular and extraordinary meetings, on average once a month. Previously, this consultative body

only met occasionally, when required by major security events. There have also been a number of new developments, such as the presentation of the *El Djeïch* magazine's monthly editorials in the media, and the appearance and broadcasting of television and radio programmes produced and presented by the Ministry of Defence's communications unit dedicated exclusively to the People's National Army (ANP, i.e. the country's armed forces).

The political and media visibility of the military institution has had the corollary of a strong return to a security discourse, both internally and externally. At the internal level, there has been a sudden return to the rhetoric of the fight against terrorism, whereas since 2005, the official narrative had been one of praising the peace restored thanks to the policy of reconciliation. Then, in May 2021, the HCS announced that the Rachad movement and the Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylia (MAK) had been classified as terrorist organisations.¹⁸ Before that date, these movements had never been accused or prosecuted for the slightest violent act.¹⁹ The HCS then published a list of 16 people accused of supporting terrorism, ten of whom were said to be linked to Rachad.²⁰

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By becoming a public political player, the military institution has exposed itself to the media spotlight. More than 150 senior officers are reportedly incarcerated in the Blida military prison, including

¹⁶ "U.S. Company Flowserve Committed to Reinforcing its Presence in Algeria." U.S. Embassy in Algeria, 20 June 2023, <https://dz.usembassy.gov/u-s-company-flowserve-committed-to-reinforcing-its-presence-in-algeria/>.

¹⁷ "Exxon, Chevron et Oxy: les géants américains du pétrole arrivent en Algérie." *Algérie 360*, 22/01/2024, www.algerie360.com/exxon-chevron-et-oxy-les-geants-americains-du-petrole-arrivent-en-algerie/.

¹⁸ APS, 18/05/2021.

¹⁹ The Rachad movement is an Algerian organization opposed to the Islamist-oriented regime, founded in 2007 in Europe. Its best-known leaders are Mourad Dhina and Mohamed Larbi Zitout, exiled in Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The MAK (*Mouvement pour l'autodétermination de la Kabylie*) is an autonomist movement that has become independentist, most of whose leaders reside in France.

²⁰ www.interieur.gov.dz/images/pdf/arrete_5_Rajab_1443.pdf.

around fifty generals, regional chiefs and members of the security services, former heads of the national gendarmerie and national police, the former secretary general of the Ministry of Defence, the private secretary of the former chief of staff, and others. The most common charges are unlawful enrichment, misappropriation of public funds, corruption, and disclosure of information.²¹ These waves of arrests, which began as a campaign to “de-Gaidize” the military elites, have not stopped, subjecting the country’s key institutions to instability. For example, the Directorate General of Internal Security (DGSI) has seen four successive heads in the space of four years. The Directorate of Documentation and External Security (DDSE), for its part, has had five different directors over the same period.

The Problem of External Projection

At the external level, there are two significant developments, one usual and the other unprecedented. The first concerns the exacerbation of tensions with Morocco, culminating in the official severance of bilateral relations in August 2021. The list of grievances justifying Algeria’s decision goes back to the Sand War of 1963, includes the decolonization conflict in the Western Sahara, the 1994 crisis and the normalization of relations between Morocco and Israel, and reaches up to the latest, the wave of wildfires that ravaged several regions of the country, particularly Kabylia. The immediate consequence of these bilateral tensions was a significant increase in the defence budget (+76%), rising to 18.3 billion euros. Together, the two countries accounted for 82% of North African military spending in 2023 (SIPRI, 2023).

The second factor that exposes the military institution in an unprecedented way is the revision of the constitution explicitly authorizing the President of the Republic to deploy troops on foreign soil (Cherbi, 2021). Previously, the use of force was governed by the United Nations Charter, which governed the regional organizations of which Algeria is a member. Since 2020, this decision has been sub-

ject to the agreement of two-thirds (2/3) of each chamber of parliament.

Since 2020, the authorities have enacted new laws to restrict individual and collective public freedoms

During Abdelmadjid Tebboune’s first term in office, this new provision was never applied. There are two possible explanations for this. The first is of a political-strategic nature. This provision represents a major doctrinal turning point, insofar as Algeria’s (unwritten) doctrine regarding foreign policy is non-interference in internal affairs and respect for the sovereignty of states. Even when the country’s security was directly threatened (Libya, Mali), Algerian leaders rejected the solution of military projection. As a result, Algerian public opinion is not prepared to see its soldiers, the overwhelming majority of whom are young non-professional conscripts, fighting and dying on foreign soil.

The second explanation is technical and logistic in nature and concerns the ANP’s unpreparedness to carry out interposition or combat operations outside the country. It is not just a question of financial resources and the technical capacity to project forces, but above all of carrying out combat operations on foreign soil. Fighting with whom? Against whom? With what kind of objectives? This matter has been raised many times, in particular during the various phases of the conflicts in the Sahel since 2013, but Algerian leaders have never taken the plunge.

Repressive Legal Arsenal

Since 2020, the authorities have enacted new laws governing political parties, trade unions, information, associations and cinema, and revised the Penal Code to restrict individual and collective public

²¹ Synthesis based on: *El Watan*, 07/08/2023; *Algérie 360*, 13/07/2021; *Mondafrique*, 26/09/2023.

freedoms.²² The most emblematic example of these restrictions is article 87b of the new penal code. Intended to bolster the fight against terrorism, it redefines this concept as follows: “any act targeting state security, national unity and the stability and normal functioning of institutions via any action designed to: [...] carry out or incite, by any means whatsoever, gaining access to power or changing the system of governance by unconstitutional means; or undermine the integrity of the national territory, or incite others to do so, by any means whatsoever.”²³

This broad definition of terrorism has been denounced both nationally and internationally. Thus, during their visit to Algeria, the rapporteurs of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights demanded that the definition of terrorism be precise, comprehensible, non-retroactive and non-discriminatory.²⁴ They also insisted on the three conditions necessary to be able to label an act as terrorist, namely the use of lethal means, the intention of striking fear among the population and coercing the government and the pursuit of an ideological objective.²⁵

Since then, further amendments to the Penal Code have been introduced. In May 2024, a new law introduced penalties ranging from five years to life imprisonment for those who “disclose confidential information and documents relating to national security and/or the national economy through social networks or to foreign countries or any of their agents.” Users of social networks risk 10 years’ imprisonment and a heavy fine if they are guilty of “undertaking to demoralize the People’s National Army or other security bodies with the aim of harming national defence or security.” Moreover, “damaging the image of the security services or their affiliates in

writing, drawing or by any other means” can result in a one to three-year sentence and a fine. Sentences of two to five years’ imprisonment can be incurred by those who attempt to facilitate flight from the national territory. In the economic sphere, “obstructing investment” is punishable by five to seven years in prison...

The authorities are no longer producing a narrative that can mobilize a social base capable of providing the minimum level of legitimacy. This inability is therefore offset by the use of a security discourse and repression to guarantee maximum social control

Lawyers and human rights activists have pointed out that what these laws all have in common is the absence of a precise definition of the crimes referred to. A deliberate confusion allowing for unprecedented convictions. Activists and journalists have been sentenced to prison, and political parties and associations have been dissolved.²⁶ Popular demonstrations are once again banned, including in support of the Palestinian cause. Given the stability of the internal security situation, this repressive legal arsenal can only be explained as a preventive strategy. Is it not the fear of seeing a new wave of political protest re-emerge that motivates so many restrictions and bans?

²² International Federation of Journalists, “Algérie: une nouvelle loi liberticide sur l’information.” 24/04/2023 (www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/category/press-releases/article/algerie-le-parlement-et-le-senat-adoptent-un-projet-de-loi-sur-linformation); International Federation for Human Rights, “Algeria: Call for the release of detainees and the opening up of civic space.” 04/04/2024 (www.fidh.org/en/region/north-africa-middle-east/algeria/algeria-call-for-the-release-of-detainees-and-the-opening-up-of-civic); Amnesty international, Algeria 2023 (www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/north-africa/algeria/report-algeria/).

²³ MENA RIGHTS GROUP, “Le président algérien durcit par ordonnance la législation antiterroriste.” 28 June 2021, <https://menarights.org/en/articles/le-president-algerien-durcit-par-ordonnance-la-legislation-antiterroriste>.

²⁴ AIT, Amine, “L’ONU appelle l’Algérie à revoir sa définition du terrorisme.” *Algérie* 360, 31/12/2021, www.algerie360.com/lonu-appelle-lalgerie-a-revoir-sa-definition-du-terrorisme/.

²⁵ <https://spcommreports.ohchr.org/TMResultsBase/DownloadPublicCommunicationFile?gld=26905>.

²⁶ By way of illustration, we can cite the journalists Slimane Bouhafs, El Kadi Ihsen and Mustapha Benjamaa; political parties with historical roots, namely the Socialist Workers’ Party (PST) and the Movement for Social Democracy (MDS); and associations that have been active for decades, such as SOS Bab El Oued, Rassemblement Action Jeunesse (RAJ) and the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights.

Conclusion

The election of Abdelmadjid Tebboune has allowed the Algerian political system to manage the crisis triggered by Abdelaziz Bouteflika's intended candidacy for a 5th term in office. Ultimately, it has held its own and proven its resilience in the face of this umpteenth shock. However, this success comes at a price, revealing new weaknesses. The authorities are no longer producing a narrative that can mobilize a social base capable of providing the minimum level of legitimacy. This inability is therefore offset by the use of a security discourse and repression to guarantee maximum social control.

There is also the economic weapon. Since the Algerian economy relies on the income generated by the export of hydrocarbons, the government maintains a monopoly and control over these resources. Their widespread distribution is intended to compensate for lack of political freedoms within the framework of an old contract, whose weak point is that it escapes the control of those who use it.

The two pillars of the current resilience are therefore repression and distribution. The political authorities are wagering that the population's priority lies in its primary needs. Assuming that they are right, this wager will only be won if financial resources of a rentier nature continue to be available. A risky gamble.

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