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## Algerian protests against the *pouvoir*. Cracks in the “deep state”?

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*The Algerian people massively took to the streets for a fourth consecutive Friday on March 15th 2019, protesting against the elite, despite President Bouteflika's maneuver four days earlier, in which he sought to appease the demonstrators by withdrawing his initial candidacy for a fifth term and postponed sine die the elections scheduled for the 18th of April. The protesters, most of them young and coming from all backgrounds, appear determined, while, at the same time, cracks are visible given the multiplication of defections within the ruling party and the business elites. However, it is of note that the Algerian system, a complex civilian-military-business nexus, would not readily give up its power and profits, and, most importantly, the army's domination within the system is not easily challenged.*

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Algeria has been shaken since February 22nd by its largest massive nationwide protests in over thirty years.<sup>1</sup> The spark was lit by the decision of the ailing 82-year-old President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to run for a fifth term at the presidential elections, scheduled for April 18th 2019. The Algerian people, outraged due to being ruled by a President out of sight ever since his stroke during 2013 and raising questions on who is really ruling the country, took to the streets in all 48 wilayas (provinces), claiming for the withdrawal of Bouteflika and his circle. Indicatively, an iconic photo of the February 22nd protests depicting Algerian protesters within a picture frame was reminiscent of the frame with Bouteflika's photo which was usually placed in lieu of his physical presence during government rallies. At the same time, the slogan "only one frame: Algerian people" has echoed, ironically, the Oujda clan's – part of which has been at Bouteflika's side during the independence war - slogan "the only hero, people".<sup>2</sup>

Bouteflika's move on March 11th to appease the protesters' movement by renouncing his candidacy for a fifth term while also postponing sine die the presidential elections angered people even further since it implied a de facto and election-less extension of his fourth term, one that was also unconstitutional. Moreover, naming Noureddine Bedoui as the new Prime Minister and Ramtane Lamamra as the Vice-Prime Minister – both Bouteflika loyalists – has been perceived rather as a move to give a sense of change and to gain time than one for real change. Thus, the March 15th protests continued and intensified, sending a clear and resounding message to the country's elites: the Algerians are determined, unified and are claiming, for the first time, for the system to change.<sup>3</sup>

The Algerian people's dynamics are evident, as well as the fact that the elites did not anticipate these developments. Bouteflika's statement in May 2012 during his last public appearance, "my generation has passed its time", proved prophetic since young people mainly constitute the driving force behind the protests.<sup>4</sup> What is more, the majority of the Algerian population is under 30 years old. Furthermore, the young people who mostly suffer from unemployment, corruption and inequality have finally broken away from the past and the taboo of public expression of discontent since their majority did not experience neither the independence struggle (1954-1962), nor the violence of the civil war (1991-2002). So far, peace and stability have been prioritized over frustration and public protest by the Algerians who were deeply traumatized and haunted by the bloody experience and memory of the "Black Decade" (the Algerian civil war) during the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> This partially explains the insistence on non-violent means on behalf of the protesters, as well as the police's relative reluctance from using repressive violence hitherto.<sup>6</sup>

The system's former ability to protect itself against popular unrest has faded, mainly due to the worsened economic conditions following the 2014 drop of oil prices. While Bouteflika's circle managed to withstand the Arab revolts of 2011 and the 2014 global oil crisis by providing a sense of security against the jihadist threat, offering political concessions and increasing salaries and social benefits, the current socioeconomic situation do not allow for such moves. The Algerian economy, oil and gas-dependent, has not been diversified and has thus remained susceptible to the crisis. Additionally, Bouteflika, in office since 1999, had failed to enhance socioeconomic conditions when the oil and gas revenues were high, opting instead for serving the elite's interests. The consequences of these policies are currently visible and have led to the wide popular grievance.<sup>7</sup>

In light of the ongoing massive protests and recent developments, questions are raised whether the Algerian ruling power is seriously undermined, considering the defections, or if it is developing mechanisms in order to buy time – as for instance with the creation of the national dialogue mechanism, under Presidential control, for the transition - and eventually manage to preserve its interests. In order to address this question one should take into consideration the complexities of the ruling power, which constitutes in fact a complicated civilian-military and business nexus, and its particular ability to react and adapt quickly, and conceal its authoritarianism with a democratic façade in order to ensure the continuity of its rule.

On one hand, cracks within the ruling party have been visible following the multiplication of resignations from National Liberation Front (FLN) members of parliament in order to join the protest

movement, whilst prominent figures of the ruling elite also broke away. The National Organization of Moudjahidines, veterans of the independence struggle and loyal to Bouteflika for two decades, shifted in favour of the protesters. Moreover, ex-Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia expressed his sympathy to the protesters, while 72 FLN high dignitaries openly support the popular protests.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the decision itself regarding Bouteflika's fifth term candidacy brought to light the disagreement of the various factions of the system over an alternative to the ailing President.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the key-actor in Algeria is certainly the military, the People's National Army (PNA), which still rules most of the country. Regardless of the extent of its rule, which according to some analysts is shared among civilian and military elite networks, the military's power remains vast while it still enjoys great legitimacy and trust among the Algerian people. According to the Arab Barometer of 2017, contrary to the parliamentarians and the political parties who are viewed as the least trustworthy political institutions (at 17 and 14%, respectively), the army (at 75%) alongside the police (at 60%) still enjoy most of the trust among Algerians.<sup>10</sup> That could be largely explained by the fact that the army is credited with the struggle against French colonialism and the ending of the bloody civil war that resulted in the loss of 200,000 people and more than 8,000 with whereabouts unknown during the 1990s.

In this regard, a real political change in Algeria should actually imply change regarding the army's domination within the political system. The Algerian army's stance has been so far difficult to predict, considering that is a rather opaque institution. Although General Ahmed Gaid Salah, the head of PNA, was initially against Algerian protesters and warned them by pointing to Syria's and Libya's bloody outcomes, he now appears to be distancing himself from Bouteflika by declaring that "the army and the people are sharing the same vision for Algeria's future". This inflexion raises questions regarding the army's stance vis-à-vis the ailing President, whilst confirming the fact that the army is flexible and can act independently in order to preserve its domination and rule.<sup>11</sup>

Last but not least, the absence of a serious political alternative to Bouteflika, who has been so far tolerated by all of the system's networks, appears as a crucial challenge. The Algerian opposition, fragmented, marginalized and unwilling to build a popular front against the regime, has failed hitherto to represent the Algerians' interests and to offer a viable political alternative leaving thus the *pouvoir* without political adversary and presenting itself as the sole path for change and stability.<sup>12</sup>

As the protests persist and the transitional period is ongoing, it is of crucial importance how the people's movement and the army will proceed. Whether it is about a real or a pseudo-transition, the quick developments and the system's opacity render it too soon to assess. Yet, considering that Bouteflika's fourth term expires de facto on April 28th despite his announced extension, it remains to be seen the way with which the political situation will unfold.

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