Bawader, 9th April 2019

Algeria: Inventing New Political Rules

→ Rachid Tlemçani

Protesters calling for the departure of the entire Algerian regime in Algiers, 5 April 2019. © Mohamed Messara/EPA-EFE
Over the past weeks, the 22 February Movement or hirak has brought to Algeria the fresh air of a revolutionary dawn. It has managed to put aside the classical identity and religious-based divisions of Algerian society, just as it has managed to unite the members of the Algerian diaspora on Sundays (particularly in Paris), who are usually reluctant to demonstrate for fear of reprisal. This movement has three main features: it is national, non-corporatist and non-violent. The oligarchy has been shocked by the sheer size of the protests, which is still getting larger, and is searching for fallback options that “challenge” the structures of the praetorian power consolidated since independence.

As with protests in other Arab countries, in Algeria too, social media platforms have also played a major role in mobilizing the young and not so young. Thus, localized demonstrations and group protests have been replaced by a global non-partisan movement, despite its primarily political character. This movement is demanding radical and peaceful change and remains outside the control of Algeria’s governing elite.

Today’s protests are also far removed from Islamist fear-mongering brandished by the political leadership and the media with the blessing of some experts of political Islam. Indeed, Islamist slogans are absent. Does this mean there is a “new generation”, as understood by Mannheim? In other words, are we witnessing the birth of a community of shared experience with a common destiny, free from the ideological influence of the national narrative? Born during the violent decade of the 1990s, and growing up with the IT revolution, young people are learning to “do politics” in a different way. They are about to demolish the political elites and the traditional channels of political expression. A new chapter of Algeria’s history is about to begin.

A new national narrative based on individual dignity

Another significant fact about this mobilization has been the call for a citizenship based on the dignity of the individual and national pride, two levers which have set the Algerian movement in motion. For Algerians, the announcement that Bouteflika, a bedridden president, unseen and unheard, would present himself for
a fifth term in office, was the last straw. It is perceived as a deep humiliation for Algerians and a serious attack on national pride. Since 2013, the 82-year-old Bouteflika, confined to a wheelchair, has been physically and mentally unfit to run the country. A group run by his brother Saïd has taken care of the country’s affairs in defiance of the Constitution.

Furthermore, the current movement clearly marks the arrival of the Algerian citizens on a public stage so far been monopolized by the deep State and all its branches. It is worth remembering that demonstrations have been banned de jure in Algiers since 2001 and are de facto banned in all other cities. Any attempt at collective protest has immediately been stifled by the powerful and omnipresent security forces. Yet on 28 February 2019, then-Prime Minister Ahmad Ouyahia’s thinly veiled threat to turn Algeria into another Syria has not discouraged people from taking to the streets.

The 22 February Movement is the voice of Algeria’s jubilant youth, which accounts for over 70% of the population. These demonstrations mark a historical turning point for this young generation and a break from power-grabbing, and is, in many ways, similar to what Algerian independence in 1962 was for the older generation: a sign of the onset of liberation at the end of a protracted armed struggle that put an end to 130 years of colonial rule. The national anthem is sung, and the national flag has reappeared, held high, worn around the neck, on the shoulders, hanging from balconies and car bonnets. In this human sea, the Palestinian flag appears, echoing another form of oppression.

This mobilization has two salient characteristics: overcoming the political/ideological divisions and distancing itself from the official national narrative. These reveal specific negative traits of the apparatus of the Algerian state. The latter has made national liberation an imperative point of political reference, as if the political history of Algeria had come to a halt in 1962. The 22 February Movement expresses a wish to take part in history and to fill the de facto political vacuum that has characterized the country since the early stages of state building.

A strong state without political rules
In October 1988 the legitimacy and credibility of the security forces were completely shattered during the rioting which led to the deaths of over 300 young demonstrators. Yet in the 1990s the fight against terrorism gave the state’s security apparatus the opportunity to rebuild its public image and put together a legitimating mechanism that was strengthened by the attacks of 11 September 2001. This mechanism allowed the political police under the authority of the DRS (Département du Renseignement and Sécurité) to promote itself as a state within a state and to play a decisive role in managing the country’s affairs.

Today, Algeria has 220,000 well-equipped and highly-trained police forces, and one of the highest police per capita ratios in the world. The security forces can still stifle demonstrations of human rights’ activists and independent trade unions without a shot being fired. According to the 2018 Global Fire Power report, Algeria has 520,000 military active personnel and 272,350 reservists, including 220,000 gendarmes. The security apparatus is run by 400 military generals. In spite of its dissolution in 2016, the DRS continues its clandestine activities with impunity, illegally tapping phones and other telecommunications services. Police surveillance and control of social media constitute one of the immediate threats to the 22 February Movement.

Under Bouteflika, the military and security budget continued to grow unaffected by the drastic drop in oil revenues since 2014, and accounts for over a third of the national budget. Also, in the period between 2014 and 2018, Algeria ranked fifth worldwide for arms imports. While the new military equipment has allowed to upgrade and professionalize the security forces, it has not been matched by a renewal of military doctrine. The citizen remains absent in the new political configuration at the heart of the security forces.

An under-institutionalized power

Despite its force, the power circle is somewhat limited, and its structures are shaped by relations of loyalty. This is the state as a “social space” (Bourdieu), where actors compete in order to seize power, and where the stakes are related to the grabbing of security and energy revenues in addition to their symbolic value. In Algeria, these actors belong to the military and security hierarchy, the presidential
clan, and the corps of high-ranking civil servants but also to political parties, the general trade union (UGTA), the media and “captains of industry”. These interest groups manage to clinch transient and short-term alliances, giving them time enough to rake in their part in the income at stake.

Among the big conglomerates, CEVITAL, ETRHB, GIMMO, KOUGC, the CEVITAL group is run by Issad Rabrab, a former accountant in the 1970s. According to Forbes magazine, his fortune amounts to US$3.2 billion. Several of the group’s big projects are now blocked due to bad relations with the Bouteflika clan. Ali Hadad, a civil engineer, heads the ETRHB group. In 1988 he launched a construction company which prospered and rapidly became the first in Algeria. He is also president of the business leaders’ organization, Forum des chefs d’entreprises (FCE), and an influential actor inside the presidential clan. Contrary to Rabrab, Hadad is very close to Saïd Bouteflika. Under pressure from the 22 February Movement, he resigned from the FCE. Today Algeria’s political system is composed of a network of around 35 groups and families. The demonstrators’ key slogan, ‘Système, dégage!’ is, therefore, pregnant with political meaning.

Political power is located in groups with changing and short-term interests that consider themselves above the law. For example, in 2012, the list of those entitled to a diplomatic passport was extended to include all members of political and military circles and their family members. They can, therefore, travel without a visa in the Schengen area as well as to other countries with which Algeria has signed a bilateral convention. By contrast, the ordinary Algerian citizen has serious difficulty when trying to travel. Centres of occult power form in the machinery of the state, inhibit its administrative effectiveness and discredit its sovereign functions. Power becomes a coalition of actors and groups, a sort of “cartel” (Bozarslan), as soon as real power is not institutionalized. Yet in spite of this monopolization of state machinery, the Algerian government has proved unable to consolidate state structures in a way that would guarantee a minimum of legitimacy to the power-holders.

The “deep political reform” (2012-2016) promised by Bouteflika translated in further shrinking public space. The “legislative revolution” introduced confusing and contradictory measures whose application is left to the discretion of the administrator, who is himself co-opted by unwritten rules and nominated by a
presidential decree. A series of restrictive laws on political parties, NGOs, information, and electoral law, were then enacted to avert a possible Arab Spring happening in Algeria. The multiparty parliament rubber-stamped these laws -- as it did the previous ones -- on freedom of the press, political parties, NGOs and constitutional amendments. The little space of freedom left is greatly eroded in the name of security, with oil income allowing the political elite to buy social peace.

Because its coercive power is built on a fragile institutional base, the Algerian state is at the verge of collapse at any moment. This is more so since the actual political system is the outcome of a succession of shows of strength, from the outbreak of the armed struggle in 1954, to the military putsches and the riots of October 1988 up to Bouteflika’s electoral coups.

**Permanent power-grabbing amidst opaque and random rules**

Power-grabbing, be it military, constitutional, economic, Islamist, security or electoral, is not just a preferred instrument to access power, it is also the foundation of the Algerian political game. Each coup creates an unstable situation characterized by conflicting elements that are all vying for a position in the new political configuration. All coups are allowed, from military putsches to the October 1988 riots, Bouteflika’s electoral coups to the postponing of the April 2019 elections, or the appeal made on 29 March by Gaïd Salah to apply Article 102 of the Constitution calling for Bouteflika’s resignation. With continued street protests, Bouteflika announced his resignation on 2 April.

Three observations can be made based on the current situation. **First**, Algerian actors in power share the same “political rules”. In a similar fashion to the military or Islamist groups, Bouteflika has an authoritarian, top-down vision of social change. **Second**, these rules remain vague and arbitrary. Despite thirty years of regular multiparty elections, they remain opaque and difficult to understand. Business partners often complain about the lack of transparency in their business, which they accommodate by overbilling and retro-commissioning practices. **Third**, these mechanisms keep the state in a “pre-political” stage, marked by the lack of
transparency and democracy and by the militarization of politics. Taken altogether, these observations explain the concern of demonstrators to overcome ideological divisions perceived as artificial.

Given the emancipation of demonstrators from the official national narrative which makes the present regime the actual successor of the struggle for liberation, Algerians now seem to renew their relation with this history which, so to speak, came to a halt at the moment when the state grasped its independence but kept the colonial structures.

**The heir of the colonial state**

In the wake of independence, the colonial apparatus, which was perceived as repressive and exploitative, was not destroyed. Instead it was reactivated, forming the de facto legal matrix of the Algerian state apparatus. The first important measure introduced by the independent Algerian state was to decree the renewal of the colonial legal system, except where it ran counter to national sovereignty.

At the time, the goal of the leadership was to take the place of the colonialists, as emphasized by Frantz Fanon. In the wake of independence, the spontaneous movement of workers’ self-management (*autogestion*) made – in vain – several attempts to question the state building for the benefit of nation-building. Instead of promoting this young self-management movement to restart productive plants abandoned by the colonialists, the political elite put in place a cumbersome bureaucracy to contain it and gave the administrator of this self-management excessive powers.

The notorious decrees of March 1963 setting up self-management in agriculture rapidly became an “ideological rallying call” (Tlemçani). Any challenge to the basis of the military-police order leads to exclusion, if not the actual elimination of the challengers. The aim of these decrees was to put an end to the spontaneous movement and prevent it from spreading to other sectors of the national economy.

In small, progressive steps matching the pace of oil revenues, the military-political mechanism consolidated its vision of the state. “Sow oil to build the state” is the
motto that rallies the elites under a single party or under a multiparty system. A gigantic infrastructure was installed in the 1970s to support industrialization and the deregulation of foreign trade under Chadli Bendjedid (1979-1992). This contributed to the consolidation of the deep state.

Inventing a new national narrative, defining new political rules

After almost two months since the start of demonstrations throughout Algeria, the strategy of those in power remains unchanged and confirms Houari Boumédiène’s maxim (...) when he called for the establishment of a “strong state that survives events and men”, and which rests on the networks - old and new - of the political police.

Those in power intend to stay in charge. Its track record is summed up in the presidential elections previously planned for 18 April and their postponement and the resignation of Bouteflika. While the parliamentary nomination of Abdelkader Bensalah, president of the Algerian Senate, as Algeria’s interim president for 90 days is an application of the Constitution, it does not respond to the main call of the protesters as he is widely seen as very close to power circles.

The state is, therefore, investing key material and human resources to block, exploit or divert the message of the Algerian population, “Système, dégage!”. The political police use agents on social media to curb the mobilization of civil society. This supposes that a candidate in the innermost circle of the state is awaiting a consensus within the closed club of decision-makers.

Admittedly, even with Bouteflika’s resignation, the first stage of the 22 February Movement is not yet over. But we can already safely affirm that the 22 February Movement has initiated a process of modernization and citizenship.

“The imported state” (Badie) implemented after independence has demonstrated its inaptness in Algeria. Despite the massive electoral fraud, nepotism and blatant corruption, Algerian political power still benefited from the false legitimacy of the ballot box and the approval of the international community. In Europe and the
West, the questioning the modes of political representation lies at the heart of political issues. In Algeria what is needed is a strong intellectual effort to formulate different models of representation and political participation.
About the author

Rachid Tlemçani
University Professor, Algiers.

About Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is the leading independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality and social justice.

- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

arab-reform.net  contact@arab-reform.net

© 2018 by the Arab Reform Initiative. To view a copy of this licence, click here