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# Algeria's Presidential Elections: Stopping a Democratic Transition?

→ Nouri Dris



Algerians march with a national flag as they join a protest in the streets of Algiers, Algeria, November 2019 © Mohamed Messara / EPA-EFE



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Since pluralism was introduced in Algeria in the February 1989 constitution, presidential elections have become a means of conferring legitimacy to the civilian façade of military authority. Historically, the army has held centre stage in the country's configuration of power, holding power explicitly until 1989, then indirectly after facing popular anger in October 1988, which led the armed forces to relinquish their “revolutionary legitimacy” and replace it with elections-sanctioned legitimacy. The conditions of this political openness, however, and the slide into violence in 1991, allowed authorities the opportunity to disable the capacity of elections to bring forth a democratic alternative. Elections were thus rendered periodic events designed to provide the veneer of democratic legitimacy to a supposedly civilian elected president – but who was always chosen in advance by the authorities under a rigged bureaucratic system. While this model didn't allow Liamine Zéroual to continue his term (1995-1999), Abdelaziz Bouteflika knew how to manipulate the system to the greatest extent, allowing him to stay in power for four full terms, regardless of his deteriorating health conditions, and to even try to devise loopholes for extending to a fifth term.<sup>1</sup>

The regime did not expect to pay a high cost for running this model. Nor did it understand that the resources needed to maintain the effectiveness of this system in the collective imaginary of the Algerian people were in fact dwindling, be they material resources (revenues from oil and gas used for generous social programmes and clientele networks) or symbolic (revolutionary legitimacy, Bouteflika's charisma). As such, the planned presidential election of 18 April 2019 – designed to renew the existing contract between the regime, its cronies, and its clientele networks - instead became the catalyst for a peaceful revolutionary movement to emerge. It was the moment when millions of Algerians took to the streets demanding radical change to the state's mode of operating, the production process, and the distribution of power in society.

As a result of the peaceful popular uprising, Algeria's top brass was forced to intervene to remove the president who was running again for office, and the elections were cancelled in a bid to contain the unprecedented and widespread anger. However, the authorities soon realized that Algerians were demanding something deeper: the cancellation of the de facto delegated power that the military had enjoyed since independence, to be replaced with a true electoral



process. In the wake of this realization, the authorities have been trying to neutralize the effectiveness of the popular uprising, going to great lengths to renew the civilian façade.

### Post-Bouteflika: Revealing the Real Authority behind the Curtains

The 22 February uprising came as a surprise to a regime that was accustomed to practicing power and politics without a *people*,<sup>2</sup> meaning without citizen participation in the political arena. Indeed, the regime believed that the conditions necessary for a protest movement to emerge were absent: freedom of assembly was blocked under the Emergency Law,<sup>3</sup> and demonstrations banned in the capital.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the regime maintained a tight grip over the media and party politics, through tools ranging from co-optation via distributing rents, to restrictions and control, through the Political Police (DRS). Focused on maintaining its clientele and bureaucratic networks, the regime was blind to the realities unfolding in Algerian society. Likewise, state officials, occupied with maintaining their seats and siphoning funds wherever possible, were busy converting Algeria into a “stealing and stolen state.”<sup>5</sup> This alienated the regime from its social roots. At the same time, all spaces that the regime could not control and monitor (social media, playgrounds, and marginalized neighbourhoods) turned into spaces for formulating a “citizenship against the state.”<sup>6</sup>

While the 22 February uprising helped the military to get rid of Bouteflika and his cronies, and to regain full control over power again, it also pushed those truly in charge<sup>7</sup> – the military leadership – out in the open after hiding behind the curtains since 1995. Since this exposure, the military has been trying to hide as fast as possible, as the constitution does not grant it any political mandate. Yet more important, the military wants to ensure the continuation of its historical mandate, which is closely associated with the interests of a broad range of networks of allies and clients spread across the bureaucracy and various social spaces.

With this in mind, the popular uprising is facing a new challenge harder than the challenge of removing Bouteflika from power. The new challenge is to wrestle this historical mandate away from the actual authority, the military command. While

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the latter is betting on “controlled” presidential elections to bring a figurehead from within the ranks of authority as soon as possible, the popular uprising is betting on obtaining more freedoms and guarantees allowing for real democratization.

### The Authority’s Calculations

The hard road for reproducing the civilian façade shows the extent of damage Bouteflika and the regime caused for the image of the state in general, and the regime’s image in particular. It is a crisis evident from how two dates for presidential elections were struck down, in 18 April and 4 July 2019. After two decades in power (1999-2019), serving Bouteflika and being loyal to him came to be seen as a disgrace.<sup>8</sup> Bouteflika depleted the resources of the regime, which today is facing mounting challenges in keeping its façade intact. And the longer delays to the presidential elections accrue, the more the uprising is depleting the resources of the authority and its clientele networks, on moral and political terms. The uprising is taking hold over the historical popular memory, wresting it away from the hands of the regime and its various groups. Moreover, there is the decreasing ability on the regime’s side to use its generous rent distribution, with the ever-decreasing state resources of foreign currency, and the decrease in external revenues.

In spite of this, the authority thinks that the situation is still under control, and that the only way to stop this bleeding is to rush towards presidential elections that will return nominal legitimacy to the political system, a system that the Commander in Chief Ahmed Qaed himself described as “a gang” and “an unconstitutional force.” This explains the regime’s insistence on presidential elections that are supposed to be held on 12 December- in spite of the resistance and refusal on the part of protestors - without even completing the procedural commitments it promised, including national dialogue and the organization of an inclusive forum under which all civil society and political actors would agree on the terms and conditions of the presidential elections.<sup>9</sup> Indeed the regime is betting on four factors in its favour: the constitution, the political parties, the bureaucratic system, and the ability to “purchase” votes with social spending.



# Instrumentalizing the Constitution

First, the military authority is hiding behind the constitution to hedge against the demands for a transitional period or a foundational assembly. Since the early days of the uprising, it has insisted on the discourse of a “constitutional solution,” as a pre-emptive strike against those demanding political solutions that will come equipped with dialogue and the making of a new social contract. But if this claim was effective during the first three months after removing Bouteflika,<sup>10</sup> after the 04 July 2019 it became a point of pressure against the authorities. Indeed, the failure to hold elections on 04 July places the military authority outside their constitutional margins of manoeuvre, even if it refuses to acknowledge this fact. The authorities know well that they are playing an undeclared transitional game, and the longer it takes, the more exposed they become and the higher the ceiling of popular demands for their removal will be. The authorities are as such trying to end this situation as soon as possible to block the legal path of those demanding a transitional period or a foundational assembly.

The authorities believe that, given the current constitution, the applicable elections law, and the structure of the bureaucracy, they will avoid any surprises in the elections, regardless of how big the procedural or cosmetic concessions must be to gain the trust of their adversaries. The bureaucratic networks of the authorities can give away legal concessions (even if these are of no value and are categorically refused by the forces of the uprising) in terms of the formation of the Supreme Committee for Elections. The media outlets, meanwhile, can cover up low turnout in the presidential elections, and the judiciary can endorse whatever results the authorities will declare, given that the regime didn't succumb to public demands for autonomy of the judiciary.<sup>11</sup>

# Weak Political Parties

Second, the absence of meaningful political parties is also seen as a point in the regime's favour. The demands for dissolving the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Democratic League (RND) were among the main demands of the demonstrators since day one. Algerians are keenly aware that these parties/agencies are tools in the hands of the military authority, used to corrupt



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the political field and make impossible any political surprise or real democratic alternative. As a means of offering token concessions, the authority detained some of the leaders of these parties, while nonetheless keeping and using the parties' help in various ways to navigate the uprising. To this point: while the regime coerced the FLN to stay silent and not present a candidate, or even to express interest in supporting a particular candidate, it pushed the RND to the front. The RND nominated its new secretary general, the ex-Minister of Culture Ezzedine Mayhoubi, to run against Abdulmejeed Tabboune, the independent candidate.

Over the last twenty years, the regime limited elections to its two main parties. Seats in local councils and the parliament were distributed among the two, and top officials from the two parties occupied the prime ministership during the years of Bouteflika. This was a deft move on the part of the regime, allowing it to avoid taking any responsibility for unpopular policies and decisions, with the claim that the cabinet formed by the party bore the responsibility. In this way, the authority uses its parties to pass unpopular bills through the parliament. The president, on the other hand, rises above party politics, interfering occasionally to strike down unpopular bills. He becomes the figure endowed with “achievements,” while parties are tagged with failures and failing policies.<sup>12</sup>

The way in which the military authority is pushing Abdulmejeed Tabboune as an independent candidate against Azzedine Mihoubi, the head of a notorious party, can be seen as part of this political game. It is a game played to push the traditional voting regime to vote for a non-partisan candidate, to stand in the way of having a president from a party (or a group of parties) who was part of the Bouteflika epoch, whom the current authority denounced as a “gangster.” They are, in fact, trying to run this presidential election on their traditional model, drawing on figures involved in these two parties and on the premise that key voting groups are still loyal to them. The military authority is under the belief that the pressure from the street will fade as soon as the new president is declared. They are counting on time to dissipate the momentum of the uprising.

## The Wide-Reaching Bureaucratic System

Third, the co-opted bureaucratic system is viewed by the regime as a pillar in



status quo maintenance. In a rentier state like Algeria, the bureaucratic system is an essential tool for structuring, surveilling, disciplining, and co-opting society. In the absence of a free market, and with the limited ability of civil society to exert itself independently and away from the state, the bureaucratic system becomes an inevitable channel between the state and society on one hand, and the individuals of the society on the other hand. All social transactions, be they vertical or horizontal, must pass through the labyrinth of bureaucracy. The bureaucratic apparatus is the first employer in Algeria (representing more than 70% of the workforce), and most voters who support the authority's parties come from the ranks of this bureaucracy. They participate in elections out of concern over their positions, or in the hope of getting promoted and becoming even closer to rent distributing circles. Given this, the task of the bureaucratic system is not only to orient the election process in favour of the authority, but also to increase the percentage of participation in order to reach the minimum required and thus avoid embarrassment.

If the elections are postponed, the economic crisis will hit the authority hard. In such a scenario, it might not be able to pay the wages of civil servants. The military will risk losing the leverage of an easily gained and broad group of voters, and might even risk having it turned to a source of annoyance, threatening the social stability.

## Lavish Spending to Buy Social Peace

Fourth, the authority is betting on a classic tactic: on the eve of each and every election, it resorts to lavish spending on social projects, with the hope of decreasing the number of frustrated and angry citizens and gaining new votes. This tactic is once again being utilized: the Finance Law for the coming year sees no new taxes or increases in the price of fuel and energy, despite the huge gap in the state's budget. Instead, the government will reactivate many developmental projects that have been suspended since 2014. And since July, the government has been distributing social housing.<sup>13</sup>

## Resources of the Protest Movement



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If the military authority had hoped that imposing elections would weaken the resolve of the protestors and lead to demobilization, they badly miscalculated: the number of demonstrators has in fact risen, and the movement has responded strongly since the announcement of the date of the elections. Whatever step the authority takes, the street turns further against it, especially as its efforts to return to the past become more and more explicit. On 01 November, the anniversary of the anti-colonial revolution, hundreds of thousands took to the streets in most major cities, to express their refusal of the elections under the current political, legal, and institutional conditions. This is a marker of the second life of the uprising, fuelled by the increasingly apparent hollowness of the regime's discourse.

The strong return of protesters to the streets since September, after a waning of mobilization over the summer, indicates a deep change in Algerian society not yet understood by the authority. The 22 February movement is not a light summer rain; it is in fact a storm, a huge second wave of the democratization process that was interrupted in the 1990s. Algerians are adamant in their wish for deep change in the modus operandi of the authority, through subjecting this authority to electoral penalization, and by imposing the principle of peaceful transition of power. The authority, for its part, thinks that replacing certain persons with others, either by detaining or punishing them, and broadening the mandate of the military police<sup>14</sup> to have strict and close control over the state institutions, will suffice. This shallow understanding of the popular uprising, and the pillars on which law-respecting modern states operate, pushed the authority to return to the same old mechanisms it has relied on since independence: manipulation, propaganda, and replacing individuals. However, relying on these methods under the condition of a peaceful uprising and digital revolution has only consolidated the ethical grounding of the movement. Indeed, the contradictions between the regime's discourse and its practices, which are becoming increasingly apparent, reveal its effort reproduce the status quo with the same people who were part of the Bouteflika reign. The popular uprising is feeding on these contradictions between discourse and practice. It also feeds on the archaic mechanisms that the regime still uses, especially the use of propaganda through both state and private TV.

The resignation/removal of Bouteflika, and the state's obvious efforts to repair its



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civilian façade by denouncing the Bouteflika regime and attributing the country's poor outcomes to it, are contradicted by efforts of the military authority to reinstall the same faces in the presidency. During a moment of extreme popular pressure, the authority described Bouteflika's circle as "gangsters" and an "unconstitutional power," hoping that this might help regain the trust of the people. Yet the authority managed to find nothing more than the same faces of the Bouteflika regime to run as candidate in an election refused by so many in Algeria.

The military promised "to walk hand in hand with the Algerian people in their quest for democratization." With this, it split Algerians from day one into those who support the presidential elections, and those who refuse it. The refusing group stayed in the streets, demonstrating, while the supporters returned home, hoping to see the promises of the authority fulfilled on the ground.

The way in which the dialogue was conducted, the establishment of an independent commission for supervising the elections, and the type of people heading it, as well as the way the judiciary dealt with some prisoners of consciousness and some figures from the political opposition, along with the types of figures running for elections, are all factors that discredited the discourse of authority and its promises. They exposed the absence of a real vision for democratization and breaking with the Bouteflika regime, at least at the level of individuals. The responses and discussions over social media, and the slogans brought forward during the Friday right after the announcement of the presidential candidates who made it through the vetting process, speak loads about the disappointment that had befallen even the traditional and disciplined voting blocks, or even those who became convinced that transparent elections can happen within the current conditions. This disappointment is apparent in the strong return of the movement and the re-mobilization of categories of people who had stopped protesting since the authority presented its election plans. The authority manipulated and used differences and disagreements between Algerians, around the nature of the regime they want, in order to save itself. It did not realize, however, that what unified Algerians against it was their agreement on what they do *not* want: a return to the status quo.

## Conclusion



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Algerians are today united against a military political regime that is reproducing its civilian façade regardless of the costs. A regime that used up all of its material and symbolic sources of legitimacy, and all its ethical reserve. And a regime that, in spite of all this, refuses to give any concessions. This regime's response to an unprecedented uprising in modern Algerian history was to instrumentalize the same faces as those of Bouteflika's reign. Yet, the insult that Bouteflika inflicted on Algerians transcends their disagreements and ideological, cultural, or political positions. This holds true to the extent that the regime could not recruit elites from outside its narrow circle of cronies used up already by the Bouteflika regime. They became unusable figures in this strong revolutionary context.

Even if the popular uprising manages to strike down and neutralize the card of violence, the authority's insistence on putting forth faces Algerians remember well as part of the insult of the Bouteflika regime might move the military authority to resort to coercion. In fact, the Commander in Chief and the interim president threatened that they will not tolerate those standing in the way of elections. Should Algerians take to the streets on the 12 December, anything can happen.

Nonetheless, the peaceful revolution that the military authority is up against is growing larger and stronger with each step taken towards the elections. Two weeks away from the presidential election, it does not seem that the movement is damaged by the campaigns or the authority's arrests<sup>15</sup> of those who stand in the way of the activities of the five candidates. The process of imposing the status quo by force has backfired and strengthened the uprising instead, which is witnessing increasing numbers each Friday. Though the authority is trying to proceed with the elections to push Algerians to return home., it looks like the protest movement is in no rush as long as it keeps its peaceful character, and as long as the authority stays away from cracking down hard on protesters. Carrying out the elections within the current context, for the uprising, will only increase the pressure against the authority, and will create more and more angry voices against it.

The protest movement is counting on making these elections a failure by boycotting and discrediting them, hoping that this will push the military to become the only partner in organizing democratization, while doing away with the Bouteflika-era familiar faces. Many Algerians believe that the traditional clientele



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networks are still capable of self-organizing with the ability to take over any initiative the military calls for to put the crisis behind them. Yet, the earlier election dates that were struck down neutralized many of these networks. The coming elections could be an opportunity for neutralizing the networks that remain. That might push the army command towards working with popular forces and figures that still enjoy the respect of Algerians, in order to develop a roadmap towards comprehensive democratization, as happened in the late 1980s, when the regime had to call for the help of the reformist cabinet to pull the country out of crisis.



## Endnotes

1. The constitution was amended more than once under Bouteflika in order to block competitors and maintain his hold on the presidency. In 2008, an article limiting the executive to two terms in office was abolished. In 2016, although the article was once again changed to reinstate the two-term cap, Bouteflika ran again for office with the understanding that the amendment would render his fifth term a new first term, allowing him another two turns in office.
2. Authorities prefer to use the term “People” instead of “society”. Populist ideology sees the People as a homogenous unified entity, on ideological, cultural and social grounds. The army, and only the army, can express its wishes and fulfil its – the People’s – dreams.
3. The Emergency Law was imposed in Algeria by Presidential Decree 92-44, dated 09 February 1992. It was removed by a decision from Bouteflika.
4. The government issued a decree banning demonstrations in the capital after the 14 June 2001 demonstration called for by the Al-Urush Movement, in the Qabail region. The regulation is still imposed until today. The capital province did not grant any permits for anyone to organize rallies in the capital.
5. Mohammed Hachemaoui, « Les infortunes du politique : Rapport de clientèle et de prédation entre Etat et société dans l’Algérie contemporaine ». In: Djillali Liabes: *La Quête de la rigueur*. Alger: La Casbah, 2006.
6. Sidi Boumedine Rachid, « Désordre ou "des ordres" urbains ? » *Naqd*, n° 1, printemps/été 2002. Pp. 27- 44.
7. Here we deploy the approach suggested by Hawari Udai on the duplicity of authority in Algeria: real authority in the hands of the Generals, and a “front” authority in the hands of civilians (cabinet, president, parliament, etc). The first is the source of authority, from which the second gets its power and legitimacy.
8. The uprising changed the ethical code of political practice. While before it was a privilege to serve Bouteflika and stay loyal to him, after 22 February it became a disgrace, documented by technology and disseminated via social media. Even the current Prime Minister did not dare to go on a field visit or give a statement in the media. Fearing the symbolic popular trial and scandal over social media, the traditional regime networks preferred to keep a low profile and hide from the political scene, waiting to see how events will unfold. The traditional groups that used to be the first to raise their voice and call upon the authority’s nominee to run for office, are staying put, preferring to keep their silence.
9. The interim president Abdulqadir Bin Saleh promised in a speech dated 03 July, to open a broad dialogue led by “independent patriotic figures” that will conclude with a national forum for agreeing on the terms and conditions for the presidential elections. In the same interview, he said that the state and the army will not be included in the said dialogue.
10. The Algerian constitution stipulates that presidential elections should be held within three months of declaring the presidential office empty. The military authority has resorted, after this time limit passed, to a legal opinion stating that Bin Saleh’s term should be extended until presidential elections are held. This argument is used to counter popular calls to form a transitional council, given the unconstitutionality of the current president and cabinet.
11. On the eve of declaring broad restructuring of the judiciary, the judges syndicate started a general strike, making claims for independence and the removal of the Minister of Justice, Zughmaty. However, once the two parties reached an agreement to raise the salaries of judges and to reconsider the restructuring, judges returned to work.
12. For example, Bouteflika interfered to strike down the oil and gas law proposed by his minister of energy, Chakib Khalil, in 2005. The same law was passed this time, but through an unpopular government, and in the name of the interim president who is also unpopular. The authority does not want to pass the law under the watch of an elected president, as this contradicts with its populist discourse.
13. Housing is a political resource of the Algerian regime, a key component in the social welfare structure of the state.



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14. The broadened mandate gives the military security forces the power to investigate economic crimes in public institutions. The amendments were passed on 4 November 2019.
15. As most of those who are arrested are released the same day, many Algerians think that the authority has no intention of widening the crackdown.



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## About the author



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Nouri Dris is a researcher and lecturer in sociology at the University of Lamine Dabbaghine (Setif / Algeria), a member of the Arab Council for Social Sciences (Beirut), and a researcher in the laboratory of contemporary Algerian society. He is interested in studying the transformations of Algerian society in particular and the impact of the rentier economy on the process of democratization in the Arab region in general. He wrote his doctoral thesis on: “Rentier practices, political clientelism, and the problematic of civil society in contemporary Algeria” (2016). He has published several articles, the most important of which are: “Political violence in contemporary Algeria: from populist ideology to Islamist utopia: analytical elements in non-secularized historical contexts” (Amran Issue No. 14/2015), “Civil society in contemporary Algeria: a political economy for an incomplete democratic transition experience” (Arab Politics, Issue 19, 2016). He has participated in several collective books, including “Violence and Politics in Contemporary Arab Societies. Sociological Approaches and Cases” (Arab Research Center, Beirut 2017), and the collective “**The Army and Politics in the Stages of Democratic Transition.**” (Arab Research Center, 2019. Doha.)

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