



Bawader / Commentary, 11 December 2019

# Shouting for a New Algeria: Slogans as Foundations of a Political Project?

→ Nassim Balla



Algerians wave national flag and chant slogans as they march to protest a day ahead of the presidential elections, in Algeria, 11 December 2019. © EPA-EFE/MOHAMED MESSARA



On 22 February 2019, tens of thousands of Algerians took the streets to oppose President Bouteflika running for a fifth term. This unprecedented movement in Algeria, the Hirak, is in many respects particular: it is pacifist, rooted in popular neighbourhoods, and dominated by a young generation of activists. After years of the regime's disdain (*hougra*) of the marginalized, of youth, and of political opponents, a spontaneous and peaceful glimmer of hope suddenly emerged. During these protests, Algerian youth have shown incredible creativity in expressing their political demands despite having always been excluded from the formal political sphere and having themselves despised and rejected politics writ large. They have invented complex metaphorical slogans and songs to express their indignation and anger. These chants, however, are not entirely new: they have always existed in Algerian stadiums, where they were traditionally composed by young football fans, the “ultras,” and inspired from Algerian folklore and *chaabi* (popular) music.<sup>1</sup> In the last decade, though, these songs saw an important revival and began encompassing strong political messages deeply anchored in an assessment of the current context.

This paper seeks to analyze, deconstruct, and interpret three of these slogans and songs that were born among the ultras in Algerian stadiums and later adopted by all protesters as an alternative to classical political projects. These slogans reflect a long-lasting dissatisfaction with the status quo and are often deeply rooted in popular culture and anthems of the marginalized and forgotten in Algeria.

## From the stadium to the street: a revolution of the ultras

For years, speaking out against the Bouteflika regime was anything but obvious. Despite a noticeable ease for superficial criticism, many journalists, militants, and activists were unjustly silenced and repressed by the authorities when they exposed facts. However, inside the stadiums, where the young, the rebellious, and the discriminated against could meet, a degree of free space was possible to express collective rejection and opposition to the regime. Here, the ultras excelled in creating slogans and composing songs often very hostile to the regime; yet, thanks to the degree of solidarity among fans, stadiums provided a temporary



## Arab Reform Initiative

“safe zone” that the police forces rarely dared to enter, preferring to wait until the games ended to enact repression. The attacks by the security forces they faced after each game, in turn, developed a kind of routinized confrontation between authorities and supporters, which fans were always ready for. In general, though, the government did not consider the ultras – and their songs – a threat to their authority, and very little had been done to address the socio-economic difficulties faced by these marginalized communities where the use of violence and drugs is prevalent. Indeed, the authorities underestimated the ultra’s capacity to mobilize beyond their own ranks and fight for social recognition and justice. Yet it is precisely here where the ultras and their songs have played such a vital role in the current mass movement.

The songs, written by bands of ultras like Ouled El Bahdja or Verde Leone in Algiers, as well as other slogans shouted by supporters, openly expressed what most of the population felt in silence: injustice can no longer be accepted, aspiration for freedom is legitimate, and better living conditions should be guaranteed. Since the beginning of protests in February, these slogans have been widely adopted by protesters of different backgrounds as they draw on painful shared experiences that are relatively recent and that became part of collective memory. These slogans also draw on shared imagery of acts of resistance stemming from Algeria’ history of independence. In basing them on widely shared grievances and collective symbols of protest, the slogans led to a “reconciliation” between the most disadvantaged communities - from which the ultras usually come - and the most privileged ones, historically separated by years of mutual blaming for the situation of the country. Indeed, both groups agreed on adopting the same messages of the “oppressed” against the “oppressors” in the face of a historical liberation. These songs and slogans became mantras for the galvanized crowds, with the ultras becoming conductors of sorts, setting the tone for thousands of people who learn the songs by heart whenever new ones are introduced. In this sense, the slogans and songs have been able to unify the protestors by drawing on shared tropes, allowing for a shared diagnosis of the causes of grievance and shaping the collective understanding of the envisioned way forward.



# Slogans as framing devices for the Hirak

### ***“Jibu El BRI ou zidou saa’iqa, makach el khamssa ya Bouteflika”***

On 22 February, as Bouteflika’s entourage was mobilized for his highly contested fifth term, the first slogan to be used was a rejection of this possibility. Protesters sang “Jibu El BRI ou zidou saa’iqa, makach el khamssa ya Bouteflika” (Bring the Intervention Brigades and the Special Forces, there will be no fifth term for Bouteflika), challenging the government to send the feared Special Forces as a way to show their determination to oppose Bouteflika and the fearless nature of their movement, ready for confrontation or repression. This slogan also expressed the protesters’ awareness of the regime’s ability to resort to violence and their readiness and resilience to face it, perceiving the movement as their “last chance” for real change. This first slogan, although contextual to the first weeks of the movement, before the resignation of Bouteflika on 2 April 2019, has remained one of the most powerful since. First, it is a clear and incisive message directed toward the regime: Bouteflika will never be elected for a fifth term. Second, it shows the strong determination of the movement despite the risk of state violence. Third, it gives the tone for the upcoming protests: the movement shall remain pacific, whatever the cost. This slogan, which appeared at the dawn of the movement, carefully reflects the willingness of the Hirak to stick to the “silmiyya” (pacifism) and clearly tells protesters to be strong in the face of violent repression. Indeed, the act of calling for peaceful protest is a manner of both willing non-violence into existence but also building courage in the face of violent repression.

### ***La Casa Del Mouradia: an anthem of the Hirak***

The very well-known song “La Casa del Mouradia”<sup>2</sup> was recorded in April 2018 by Ouled El Bahdja, an ultras music band of fans of the Algiers football team USMA. La Casa Del Mouradia, whose title refers to the famous Spanish Netflix series “La Casa De Papel,” sarcastically compared the Presidency, whose headquarter is *El Mouradia Palace* in Algiers, to a gang of robbers. It expresses the revolutionary mindset of its protagonists and addresses issues of freedom, the political conscience of the youth, and the unanimous rejection of Bouteflika’s system and its oligarchs.<sup>3</sup>



## Arab Reform Initiative

The refrain of La Casa Del Mouradia is a heartbreaking declaration of a young man living in very modest conditions and mourning with anger and anxiety his difficult life. The refrain also reflects spite and despair towards life in Algeria as youth cannot find sleep, are consumed by life (in another sense, spending their nights consuming drugs), with limited ability to identify who is responsible for their situation. Further, verses, however, more explicitly refer to actual events. Ouled El Bahdja gives us a short summary of each of Bouteflika's four terms through their negative milestones. The first one was marked by the end of the civil war. Ouled el Bahdja reminds that Bouteflika's election (or nomination) was not contested because most of the population was still shocked by a decade of violence. The second term was marked by a clear positioning of Bouteflika and his entourage as a ruling clan notably with the nomination of new officials from his direct circle. The third term was marked by a substantial reinforcement of the power of the president, partially with the suppression of presidential term limitations but also with increasing power given to corrupt businessmen. During the fourth term, Bouteflika is referred to as a "doll," as a stroke made it difficult for him to talk or to move, let alone govern and as he became a "puppet" in the hands of his clan.<sup>4</sup>

La Casa Del Mouradia has been sung in stadiums since 2018 and was very quickly adopted by the Hirak in the first weeks of the movement. This song, with its simple words, its poignant melody, and its intense messages about the state of the country, is considered an anthem for the Hirak as it expresses with subtlety the suffering of the young generation. It also, though, displays a surprising understanding of complex political affairs.

***"Goulou lel Gaïd, ynavigui carte Chifa, ou chaab rahou fayeq, nahina Bouteflika"***<sup>5</sup>

After the resignation of Bouteflika in April 2019, Ahmed Gaïd Salah, Vice Minister of Defence and Commander in Chief of the Army, stood out as the highest authority in the country – and was recognized as the new face of the regime.<sup>6</sup> This slogan is the first one explicitly mentioning Gaïd Salah as the main target of the Hirak. It satirically calls on him to get medical coverage, an implicit manner to ask for him to retire (the retirement age for high ranked military officers being 65). Moreover, the second part of the slogan reminds Gaïd Salah that Bouteflika was removed by the people and not by him, as he has often repeated.<sup>7</sup> Protesters used this slogan

5 [Shouting for a New Algeria: Slogans as Foundations of a Political Project?](#)



## Arab Reform Initiative

to ask for the unconditional departure of Gaïd Salah, undermining his role in their previous successes. A second verse is usually added by protestors,<sup>8</sup> which emphasizes the Hirak's rejection of the military ruling the country since independence in 1962 and the demand for a civilian government.

***“Ya Ali Ammar, bladna fel danger, nkemlou fiha la bataille d’Alger, makach marche arrière ou doula fourrière, el yed fel yed, nedou el istiqlal”<sup>9</sup>***

This last slogan is very particular for its resounding meaning among the ultras, as it is a call of distress addressed to Ali Ammar (a.k.a Ali La Pointe), a hero of the independence war against France who shares characteristics of the ultras in terms of social condition and behaviour towards authority. Ali Ammar suffered poverty in his adolescence in the casbah yet had a very active role in the battle of Algiers. During his young adult life, Ali was famous for his “bad boy” reputation, allegedly involved in smuggling, gambling or targeted robbery against French businesses. Upon his involvement in the revolutionary movement, Ali was considered as a dangerous element by the French colonial administration for his mastery of guerrilla tactics and his code of honour. Thus, it is not surprising that among all the “martyrs of the Revolution,” Ali La Pointe is used here as a notable reference, as he represents the marginalized and the poor who are passionate, who defy authority, and who give a primordial importance to honour. The slogan in itself is a call addressed to Ali, to remind him (and the movement) that the young protesters will carry on the legacy of Ali La Pointe and the battle of Algiers, albeit through a strategy of non-violence. Finally, the slogan is a call for solidarity and a reminder for everyone that the movement is the last chance for the country to gain its “true” independence from corrupt interests.

## **A horizontal grassroots movement refusing representation: beyond the romanticism of the Hirak**

Since 22 February, dozens of creative songs and slogans were imagined and sung every week by protesters and students alike. Despite their simplicity, these slogans carry explicit and powerful political messages demanding the dissolution of the



## Arab Reform Initiative

entire regime and express a sense of social malaise, the need for solidarity and union against the regime, and defiance. Like ongoing protests in Lebanon and Iraq, the 22 February HIRAK rejects representation or organization. Attempts to structure it by opposition parties or civil society organizations have failed as the movement refuses to obey a charismatic or consensual figure and rejects all forms of authority. In fact, lack of trust in politicians of all sorts has pushed the movement to refuse dialogue with the regime. Instead, protesters choose to send messages to the regime through the slogans, sometimes responding to official speeches or decisions with new slogans or completely disregarding the existence of the government through subtly humorous songs. These slogans have helped the HIRAK pull off important concessions from the regime by demonstrating the social cohesion and the political consciousness of the masses and setting a common tone for usually contradictory demands. Indeed, the slogans have allowed common causes to emerge and have helped to sustain them, and namely the ousting of President Bouteflika, the cancellation of three presidential elections, and the resignation of a number of ministers. They have served to completely discredit the political system among Algerians.

Yet, slogans as an alternative to political dialogue will eventually reach their limit. Throughout the world, many horizontal social movements have appeared, with one similar feature: a continuous rejection of representation. These new social movements, like the Algerian HIRAK, show us exceptional determination and an indefectible quest for radical change, a fundamental condition for restoring trust between people and politics. In Algeria now, change is only envisioned through the entire dismantling of the regime and its entrenched discriminating and corrupt practices. Nevertheless, a legitimate question must eventually be asked: what could replace a political system that lasted for decades if no political project is introduced?

The HIRAK, through its youth, has shown an incredible ability to voice clear and articulated claims via simply worded slogans, which helped maintain cohesion between diverse social groups of Algerians. If these songs and slogans were born in stadiums, they sum up what Algerians aspire to: a civilian state replacing a long-lasting military tradition, the departure of the figures of the former regime, an end to corruption, more participation in political life, and well-designed economical



## Arab Reform Initiative

strategies that guarantee better living conditions. Hence, credible and supportive intellectuals and civil society (local councils or independent initiatives) organizations can carry out substantial work to better understand the social movement and extract political substance and formal political proposals from these slogans. For instance, participative and inclusive round tables and consultation meetings can be organized at the local level with a view to formulating structured socio-economic and political proposals that address the demands expressed through the slogans of the Hirak.

Whatever the outcome, such proposals, if they materialize, are dependent on a good and strong political will on the part of the authorities who need to take into consideration the new dynamics in place since February: a greater aspiration of the people, especially the youth, to play a key role in the way they are governed. Although it is difficult to convince Algerian people to gather behind a representative, it is crucial to opt for participative mechanisms that start at the local level. Despite popular opposition, the Algerian regime is persistently pushing for presidential elections scheduled to take place on 12 December 2019, which could antagonize the Hirak.

It is critical to understand that the new generation of Algerians, like their peers in Lebanon, Chile, or Ecuador, have understood that states cannot survive if new modes of functioning are not embraced. This is even more important today with the rise of social networks: centralized autocratic systems cannot keep on indefinitely, and deep participative reforms, based on grassroots community solutions, have to be implemented. Indeed, the Hirak slogans have reflected the wish from the community to return power to the people and to achieve independence from corrupted interests, located in the hands of hyper-centralized institutions that have no regard for the future of the population. Because the movement has succeeded in creating cohesion between different social groups and categories of Algerians, it is crucial to consider that the slogans of the Hirak may not just be humoristic and simple ways to express disagreement. They could be the foundations of a concrete political project.



## Endnotes

1. An example is the *Virage Électrique Orchestra*, adapted from classic *chaabi* music by youth fans to honour the USMA (Union Sportive de la Médina d'Alger) during the 1969 Algerian Cup final.
2. Translation of lyrics: “Until dawn, I cannot find sleep, I am slowly consuming (or slowly consumed), and who is responsible for this? Who should I blame? We are fed up of this life. The first one, we accept it went through, they scammed us with the Black Decade. The second one, the story became clear, it is La Casa Del Mouradia. The third one, the country was emaciated, Because of personal interests. The fourth one, the doll passed away, yet, the case is still open”. Song available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHZviPhZQxs>
3. Prominent among them is Ali Haddad, who is also the President of the CEOs Forum (Forum des Chefs d'Entreprises) and owner of USMA.
4. Many consider Bouteflika was obliged to stay in power by his brother Saïd Bouteflika, who controlled him and wielded power in his stead between 2014 and 2019.
5. “Tell Gaïd (with reference to Ahmed Gaïd Salah) to get a medical cover, the people are conscious, we took off Bouteflika”.
6. This is despite the fact that Bouteflika was officially replaced by Abdelkader Bensalah as Interim President.
7. Gaïd Salah called in March 2019 for the application of Article 102 of the constitution, which provides for the removal of the president on medical grounds.
8. “Gouloulou, sebaa ou khemsine s’na aaskariya, gouloulou, hna habinaha madaniya,” which can vary depending on the situation.
9. “Ali Ammar, our country is in danger, let’s carry one the Battle of Algiers, there will be no return to our previous condition, send the State to the pound, hand in hand, we will take our independence”



# Arab Reform Initiative

## About the author

### Nassim Balla

Independent Algerian researcher and civil society activist

## 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](http://arab-reform.net)

[contact@arab-reform.net](mailto:contact@arab-reform.net)



© 2019 by the Arab Reform Initiative.

To view a copy of this licence, [click here](#)