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The Future of the Algerian Hirak Following the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Algerian protesters before the Hirak suspends its weekly protests. © PPAgency



Arab Reform Initiative

Since 22 February 2019, thousands of Algerians have taken to the streets every Friday to demand a radical change to the political system and the establishment of a rule of law state. They were not deterred by the winter cold, the hardships of fasting or the summer heat. They were not taken in by the state's manoeuvrings, nor were they convinced by the various offers it made, including the presidential elections that the authorities organised last December.

However, since the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic began to sweep across the world at the end of December, warnings by experts about its swift spread through human interaction and calls to avoid gatherings prompted discussion on social media about the future of the Algerian popular protest movement (Hirak) if the virus were to reach Algeria. The discussion intensified and grew more divisive when the Algerian government announced the first case in Algeria on 25 February 2020.¹ Some initially took the announcement lightly and considered it to be an exaggeration meant to frighten Algerians into halting their participation in weekly protest marches. However, a conviction speedily prevailed on the necessity of temporarily suspending marches, and influential figures in the protest movement, including prisoners of conscience, former prisoners and lawyers well-known for their defence of public freedoms, called for such a suspension.²

At the same time, the discourse of the authorities denied any intention of exploiting the spread of the pandemic for political ends. In a speech on 17 March, the president said the pandemic “is a national and health security issue that concerns everyone”, making it incumbent on the government to restrain public freedom **on a temporary basis** to preserve public health by deciding to “prohibit all gatherings and marches, irrespective of their shape and declared purpose.” Prime minister Abdelaziz Djerad had previously stated during a visit to Blida on 14 March that the state “is not here to search for political exploitation as some would do, but I tell them that you must be careful because this issue affects your health and your lives.” He called on everyone to “be careful and take all necessary precautions”, adding that “Algerians are entitled to demonstrate, providing that they observe the recommendations of doctors on the necessity of observing social distancing and avoiding mingling.”³

Friday 20 March was the first Friday on which no popular marches on the streets of Algerian cities were seen since the start of the Hirak movement in February 2019. It



appears everyone had been convinced of the need to act responsibly in the face of an unprecedented health crisis. Some students came out on the preceding Tuesday to signal to citizens the necessity of suspending the marches.

The protesters expected the authorities to reciprocate by treating the Hirak movement in the same responsible way in which they had behaved concerning mass marches. The spread of the disease necessitated that the state should put forward measures to calm the situation down and build bridges of trust between institutions and the people in the interests of cooperating to fight the spread of the disease. So protesters were expecting the release of prisoners and the cancellation, or at least the suspension, of legal measures against activists.

However, events following the Friday on which mass marches were suspended revived fears about the veracity of the authorities' declaration that it had no intention of exploiting such humanitarian circumstances to score political gains. The retrial of political activist Karim Tabbou and the increase of the penalty imposed on him, the jailing of journalist Khaled Drareni after he had been under judicial surveillance, the arrest of some activists, the continued summoning of others in the country's various states to security centres and the initiation of legal proceedings against them⁴ despite the ministry of justice instructions to halt most such legal action, are all indicators that have caused anxiety amongst Algerians about the future of the Hirak.

This paper seeks to discuss the effects of the spread of the COVID-19 disease on Algeria's Hirak, in the sense that this movement resorts to peaceful street demonstrations as its basic – and perhaps sole – instrument to pressure the authorities to achieve a genuine democratic change, whereas the main principle of combating the spread of the disease is to practise social distancing, avoid gatherings and remain at home. It will try to address the following questions:

- What are the current and future effects of the spread of the coronavirus disease on the Algerian Hirak?
- How will the authorities take advantage of the suspension of marches to deal with a mass movement that has taken root in time and place, and that has a moral and political position that is gaining ground as time progresses?



- How has the Hirak dealt with the disease? What resources will that movement draw upon once the pandemic is over?

The failure of the authorities to half the Hirak

Like any political system facing a popular revolution, the Algerian regime did everything in its power to stop the Hirak, or to at least benefit from it to strengthen itself after being undermined by Bouteflika's fourth presidential term and attempts to impose a fifth term. Such determination is not only attributable to Machiavellian intentions but is first and foremost attributable to this undemocratic regime's lack of instruments to deal with a revolutionary movement that peacefully occupies the streets. Even if Algeria's Constitution is pluralistic and guarantees a basic minimum of freedoms, the existing Algerian regime is accustomed to exercising power and government without limits (separate powers, an independent judiciary, a free press) and in the absence of Algerians on the street.⁵ During 30 years of superficial pluralism, the ruling power depended mainly on preventing Algerians from occupying the streets and on precluding the emergence of public opinion in the mainstream media. In other words, political pluralism was emptied of its content, making it ineffective as a tool for producing any regime alternatives. The regime contends that it is representative of the entire people and is its only mouthpiece, preventing, thus, all forms of political, social and mass expression outside the political and collective frameworks that it closely monitors. The Hirak has, therefore, gained a moral high ground that will in time turn into a problem for the ruling power, which had hoped Algerians would limit their demands Bouteflika's removal, and would not extend to a change of the foundations of which the regime is basing itself.

Following Bouteflika's removal, the regime's attention focused on repairing its legitimacy and image, which involve primarily returning the public space to its pre-February 2019 state. Therefore, a political regime facing such a problem cannot forego the opportunity to benefit from the suspension of mass protests to shore up its position, re-establish its client networks, enhance its image⁶ and seek to silence voices it considers influential within the circles of the protest movement. However,



is this possible given the spread of the pandemic and the difficulty of controlling it, the structural weakness of the health system and the collapse of oil prices and revenues that provide the state's only source of income? Will it not be the government's image that will be jeopardised, given that it has promised Algerians a new Algeria that breaks with the practices of the past?

The COVID-19 pandemic: A new kind of challenge

Many Algerians ask: Will COVID-19 stamp out the Hirak in the same way that it completely paralysed life in major countries? Will it be possible for marches to take place again on the streets of Algerian cities? The challenge the coronavirus pandemic poses to the Algerian Hirak is that it affects its very essence and the main source of its strength: **gatherings and demonstrations**. Algerians taking part in the popular Hirak knew that if the disease spread in Algeria, mass marches would automatically stop because no one would be willing to risk their health. The Hirak is a peaceful struggle to establish a state of law that puts the individual at its heart, and it cannot be a means for achieving any other project. Once the first case of the coronavirus appeared in Algiers, Algerians were more focused on listening to the advice of experts and doctors than to any other voice. Although the popular Hirak movement had no leadership or framework, when the disease began to spread, the voice of doctors (the objective scientific voice) turned into a “leadership voice” that rose above ideological, political differences, adjudicating amongst different viewpoints. As expected, doctors worked through social media to convince doubters of the disease's danger, of the official discourse, of the seriousness of the situation, and of the argument that the government was not exaggerating the situation to halt the Hirak protest. As soon as the first victims were noted, everyone was convinced of the seriousness of the situation, and committed to not going out to demonstrate. The rising number of cases and deaths convinced the minority that went out on Friday 13 March that doing so was not feasible, and that there was a need to avoid holding the Hirak responsible for spreading the disease, given that the pro-regime media was waiting to pick up any mistake committed by the Hirak.⁷



The Hirak movement during the pandemic

Friday 20 March was the first Friday without mass processions on the streets of Algerian cities. Although the Hirak has no centralized or local leaderships, its basic directing force derives from the most pressing issues of the day. It uses social media, particularly Facebook, to build public opinion and a joint position regarding a particular issue, slogan, or initiative. Subsequently, the debate takes shape as slogans and positions on the street on Fridays and Tuesdays. For a full year, the Hirak marked national occasions, the anniversaries of historic events, and the regime's positions, initiatives and projects with slogans and positions. To the same extent that the Hirak served to repossess history and the national memory and use it to bolster its moral and national status, it also worked to offer initiatives and to propose solutions and ideas for the Algeria of tomorrow.

Many Algerians see the Hirak as the moral conscience of the Algerian nation and believe that its role is to save the state, preserve national unity and build elected and representative political institutions. Weekly demonstrations, therefore, opposed all regional, racial, partisan and ideological slogans, and all forms of insult to state institutions. Despite attempts by many partisan, ideological and regional oriented tendencies to become part of the movement, the Hirak quickly rejected them by stressing its basic objective of achieving a situation that allows political participation by all Algerians, and affirming that the Hirak movement is not a space for practising politics, but an instrument for Algerians to build the political arena.

Hence, the ease with which the Hirak movement is capable of taking decisions is the result of avoiding controversial issues and focusing on those that enjoy moral, political and ideological consensus amongst Algerians.⁸

Algerians suspended their marches on the recommendation of doctors and out of their keenness to protect the public health. At the same time, activists took to social media to call for solidarity with families that had lost their income because of the lockdown; for participation in campaigns to clean and sanitize neighbourhoods, hospitals and public spaces and for participation in any official



or unofficial efforts that would help combat the spread of the disease.

Social media channels were used to criticize all aspects of the regime's exploitation of the pandemic to try activists, arrest some of them, and summon others to appear before courts at a time when the world was preoccupied with fighting the pandemic. The Hirak movement has also continued to monitor the government's performance during this health crisis, particularly in relation to its tardiness in approving a complete lockdown and the health system's lack of preparedness to deal with such a crisis. In general, Algerians have taken advantage of this pandemic to demonstrate the Hirak movement's high moral ground and the legitimacy of its demands for reforms beyond the superficial ones the regime is trying to press. Although all public and private media outlets have shut out Algerians participating in the popular Hirak movement, the latter have to date succeeded in showing through social media a sense of responsibility, an ability to identify priorities and an understanding of when to differentiate between the state and the political system as well as when to oppose and protest and when to show solidarity with the government.

The future of the Hirak after the pandemic

After more than a year, it has become clear that the Algerian Hirak protest movement is not a passing protest or a sectoral movement, nor is it driven by trade unions that the authorities can deal with as they have been accustomed to when dealing with traditional protest movements. The Hirak movement does not depend on specific leaders and cannot, therefore, be put down by making arrests. Contemporary Algeria has never known a protest movement that is so rooted in time and place, nor has it known a movement that is so trans-ideological, trans-regional and trans-political. This movement is an expression of deep social transformations with which the regime has been incapable of keeping up, responding to, or understanding. It expresses a deep-seated rejection of the regime's modus operandi, management of the state and its renewal of the political elite in society. It is a revolution against the failure and corruption that have affected the state at all levels, and against the structural crisis affecting the state



since independence. It embodies the disconnect between the governing power and the governed in all fields. COVID-19 may dampen the Hirak protest movement for a time, but the Hirak's attributes allow it to renew itself if the manifestations and original causes of failure persist. The Hirak's resurgence is linked to the government's performance during the current health crisis and the regime's management of the political sphere during the suspension of mass protests.

However, in all cases, COVID-19 will be more of a test and a challenge for the government than for the Hirak. The current situation will not be an easy test, given the inability of strong governments with huge resources to confront a lethal, contagious disease with nothing more than fully suspending public life. However, suspending economic life in a country in which the unofficial (informal) economy accounts for 50% of the overall economy is too costly for the current Algerian government to bear economically, politically and socially.

The initial reactions of Algerians on social media indicate discontent with how the government has dealt with COVID-19, and some hold it responsible for the spread of the disease for several reasons. They include its tardiness in closing Algerian air space and borders to traffic and failure to closely monitor individuals returning to Algiers, particularly since most available statistics confirm that most of those who were infected in the first two weeks were Algerians arriving from France.

Anger increased during the second week when the government began to ratify its initial partial and total lockdowns (in Blida) without an integrated plan to guarantee people the ability to stock up on basic foods and to supply hospitals with sufficient medical equipment and pharmaceuticals. Semolina, which is one of the basic foods, disappeared from the market, and long queues have appeared in cities, risking the creation of new hot spots for the spread of the disease.

While it is true that the crisis is too big to be controlled by the strongest governments in the world, the Algerian government's problem lies in the discrepancy between its official line that insists that the situation is under control and the reality which activists continue to expose on social media.

Conclusion



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In theory, the spread of COVID-19 allows the regime to see off the burden of the Hirak protest movement as a result of the suspension of weekly processions. However, no sooner were the processions suspended by Algerians than the regime found itself facing a global health crisis that it was ill-prepared to tackle, and which greatly exceeded the capacity of its material and human resources. This confronts the regime with a difficult test, even in the eyes of the social sectors that have chosen to support its electoral choice for a presidency in December 2019 and stopped participating in weekly processions.

The regime has benefitted from a “truce” called by a street that occupies the moral high ground, that knows very well how to define priorities and that has demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and concern for the future of the state. Instead of using this truce to invest in building trust between itself and Algerians, mobilize all national capabilities to tackle the pandemic, and lay the political foundations for dealing with upcoming issues (including amending the Constitution, preparing for legislative elections, etc.), the regime has persisted in the same contradictory actions it had practised before the pandemic. Those practices include denying the existence of the Hirak movement at times, praising it at other times, and putting activists on trial.

The Algerian protest Hirak movement draws its strength and arguments from the discrepancy between the regime’s discourse and its practices. Even if the regime can manage the COVID-19 crisis (which is difficult), the looming financial and economic crisis caused by plummeting oil prices⁹ and the global economic effects of the coronavirus pandemic will render it incapable of fulfilling the promises it made to Algerians, and of maintaining its generous social policies. This may lead to a second wave of mass protests that will be more powerful than the first, and that will render planned political moves problematic.

Will the regime review its strategy of dealing with the mass Hirak protest movement by building trust and reducing tension to prepare for upcoming scheduled political events? Or, will it continue to be preoccupied with immediate issues and miss the opportunity of the solidarity and unity prevailing amongst Algerians during the pandemic to rebuild its relations with the street and make Abdelaziz Djerad’s government more popular?





Endnotes

1. This relates to an Italian national working for an oil company in southern Algeria. Subsequently, two cases were recorded in Blida on 1 March 2020, relating to an Algerian immigrant and his daughter. Since then, cases increased, but this did not prompt the government to take strict measures similar to those facing a similar situation.
2. For example, the lawyers Abdul Ghani Badi and Mustapha Bouchachi. Also, Karim Tabbou sent a letter from prison calling on Algerians to suspend processions until the epidemic recedes. However, ex-prisoner Samira Messoussi acted in an opposite way, going out on 13 March, and stating that the epidemic did not exist in Algeria. The same applied to the left-wing activist Sadek Akrouf, who called for not halting processions because of the epidemic.
3. See prime minister Djerad's statement to the Algerian Press Agency: <http://www.aps.dz/ar/algerie85238-2020-03-14-18-17-53>
4. We are not sure whether those summonses had been previously planned, or whether they were new. But it is clear that they did not cease, even after the authorities introduced strict measures to stop the disease from spreading, which included postponing all trials, except for those already scheduled.
5. Even the president spoke of the need for a genuine separation of powers to protect the state from falling once again into individual rule. However, the problem is that such statements strengthen the Hirk's position, since they underline the regime's insistence on imposing its reform agenda using the same mechanisms and persons that Bouteflika used for his reforms.
6. The regime is resorting to doublespeak. It is officially blessing the Hirk and saying that it is working to achieve its demands. However, some networks that are supportive of the regime's discourse are attacking Hirk figures on social media and trying to defame activists. However, even official discourse does not hesitate occasionally to say that the Hirk's demands are deliberately high to ensure they cannot be met, and that they deviated following the eighth week.
7. For an entire year, the media denied the existence of the Hirk in their news coverage, but at the same time exaggerated anything that might defame it or throw it off course.
8. It is important to note that one of the reasons for the division in the Hirk, and the move by large parts of it to support the regime's plan, was the raising of slogans against the army. The army in Algiers still enjoys a high symbolic status, which was earned during the war of independence, and many Algerians therefore feel that it constitutes a safe haven during political crises.
9. Oil prices plummeted to per barrel at a time when the state budget for this year assumes a price of around per barrel. Foreign currency reserves fell to billion. Experts say that the budget requires a breakeven price of per barrel, given that oil sales constitute 97 per cent of government revenue.



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