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Algeria Protests and the Repercussions of Bouteflika's Bid for a Fifth Term

Policy Analysis Unit

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Policy Analysis Unit

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Protests around Algeria peaked on Friday 8 March with the Algerian authorities deciding to bring forward the spring holiday for schools and universities from 21 to 10 March and extended it until April 4 in an effort to contain the protests. The protests against the nomination of Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika for the fifth term continue to expand, increasing the pressure on regime supporting parties to withdraw the nomination of the president, who is currently in critical condition at a Swiss hospital according to medical sources.⁽¹⁾

Regime Concessions or Maneuvers?

Since Bouteflika's candidacy was announced last February, Algeria has been host to spontaneous protests with the aim of pressuring the regime to withdraw the president's candidacy due to the continuous deterioration of his ability to perform presidential duties since suffering a stroke in 2013. Yet the regime decided to proceed with the nomination of the president. The Minister of Transport and manager of the presidential election campaign, Abdel Ghani Za'alan, submitted the nomination to the Constitutional Council on 3 March 2019, due to the president's inability to present them in person. Undaunted, the protesters were not convinced of promises made by the president (or in his name) for fundamental reforms, which include:⁽²⁾

- Organizing a comprehensive national symposium after the presidential elections in order to discuss and adopt wide ranging reforms in order to establish a "new reformist regime for the Algerian national state".
- Organizing early elections in accordance with the agenda adopted by the national symposium, in which Bouteflika will not be a candidate, and the arrangement of a new constitution that will enshrine the birth of a new republic.
- Launching urgent public policies to ensure the equitable redistribution of national wealth and eliminate all marginalization, exclusion and corruption.
- Taking immediate and effective action for young people to play an active role in public life and benefit from economic and social development.
- Reviewing the electoral law with a focus on the establishment of an independent instrument to regulate the elections.

The Insistence on Bouteflika's Nomination

By continuing the protest movement, the opposition were hoping to create a rift within the structure of the regime and to push the military establishment or the presidential alliance (the National Liberation Front, the National Rally for Democracy, the Rally for Hope in Algeria party and the Popular

1 "Geneva Hospital talks about the health situation of the Algerian president," Russia Today, 2/3/2019: <https://bit.ly/2EFOR2P>

2 "Candidate Abdelaziz Bouteflika sends a message to citizens", Algerian radio, 4/3/2019: <https://bit.ly/2NK1uNq>



Algerian Movement) to abandon Bouteflika's candidacy. The protestors are seeking a replacement that would follow a minimum standard of fair competition conditions in the presidential elections.

The report quoted by the official news agency on 22 February 2019, presenting the demands of the protesters, raised hopes that the regime would withdraw Bouteflika's nomination.³ But this quickly dissipated when the army leadership, represented by the chief of staff Ahmed Gaid Salah, expressed his disapproval of the protests. Similarly, the leaders of the National Liberation Front (represented by its Secretary-General Mouad Bouchareb) and the National Rally for Democracy (represented by Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia) condemned the protests, insisting on the president's right to stand for election. This position has created a challenge for the protesters, prompting them to change their slogan rejecting the fifth term towards more radical demands. These demands now involve the integrity of the elections and elections bodies and doing away with the influence of the oligarchy that rules on behalf of Bouteflika. The insistence on the nomination of the elderly and bedridden president, without any convincing justification, is suspicious to many Algerian citizens. What are the reasons and forces behind the regime's insistence and who are weaving the network of interests continuing to rule the country in the name of a president who is clearly incapable of leading the country?

The Forces Behind the President

When Bouteflika became president in 1999, power was spread between the presidency of the republic and the army; the chief of staff and intelligence leadership, and the public administration represented in government, with clear preference afforded to the intelligence apparatus, which played a key role in the production of presidents, prime ministers and ministers. But Bouteflika since declared that he wants to be a "full president" not a "half president," prompting him to concentrate a lot of power in his own hands. Indeed Bouteflika made the army answerable to the president, a positive move from the perspective of building state institutions. On the other hand, the powers have been entirely re-channeled to the presidency. This led to power and influence being granted not only to the President, but to anyone who works in the name of the President.

- **Public administration**

In the first years of his rule, Bouteflika re-structured the government apparatus in a manner that guaranteed absolute loyalty to him, especially after his huge dispute with former prime ministers Ahmed Benbitour and Ali Benflis. The administration under Bouteflika was composed mostly of former governors and local executives indebted to the president for their positions as opposed to the elites and technocrats upon whom the state had previously relied characterized by some degree of independence and initiative. This gave the president, especially after replacing the position of prime minister with the post of "first minister", full and direct control over the government administration, which today represents an important force behind the president's candidacy.

³ "Peaceful demonstrations in Algiers and other areas of the country reflect demands of a political nature," Algerian Press Agency, 22/2/2019: <https://bit.ly/2UtPp1z>

- **Business Men**

Over Bouteflika's reign, a new group of wealthy elites benefited from their proximity to the president's surroundings, especially his brother Saïd Bouteflika, during the oil price boom of 2006 - 2014 and the state's subsequent inflated fiscal revenues and came to dominate large sectors of the economy. This ruling oligarchy received the generous loans from the state and purchased hard currency from government banks without a cap at almost the official price, and also benefiting from tax and customs exemptions. This contributed to the creation of a new economic sector, mediated by the private and public sectors, which may be called the public-private sector. It is private in terms of ownership, administrative and legal structure, and general in terms of sources of funding; all its economic activities have been funded by the state treasury and live on a clientelist relationship with the state and its projects. Although this situation existed before, it expanded in Bouteflika's reign, during which he allowed loyal businessmen to play political roles and take control of newspapers, television channels and other media outlets.

A large number of businessmen who formed the "Businessmen Forum" participated in the 2017 legislative elections, and prominent figures in the forum were included at the top of the candidate lists for all parties in the presidential alliance and other parties. Some sources even say that the "Business Forum" is represented in parliament (through regime parties) by about 130 deputies out of 462, which makes it the largest political force in Algeria. That is, they have more that the FLN and the National Rally for Democracy, who obtained the majority of seats nominally. The forum's ability to control Parliament, the ruling coalition parties, and the administration became clear in the summer 2017 conflict between newly appointed Prime Minister Abdul Majid Tabbun and the Business Forum. This ended with the swift dismissal of the Prime Minister, less than three months after taking office, to be replaced with Ahmed Ouyahia.

- **The Military**

Over the past two decades, President Bouteflika managed to impose almost total control over the army after he got rid of the remaining generals of the 1992 coup. Bouteflika succeeded where four former presidents had failed, after losing their respective battles with the generals. Chadli Bendjedid was deposed, Mohamed Boudiaf was assassinated, Ali Kafi's responsibilities were terminated and Lamine Zeroual was pushed to step down before the end of his term. This movement allowed the president to restructure the administration, by injecting it with officers of his own choosing and loyalists, headed by General Caid Salah, who became the president's representative within the army, keen to ensure the loyalty of his wards to the president. In this context, a large number of senior army generals, whose loyalty was in doubt, were relieved from duty. Officers in the security forces were also forced into early retirement in 2018.

In addition to tightening his grip on the army, the president restructured the intelligence services. Throughout the period leading up to the arrival of Bouteflika, the intelligence apparatus was the de facto ruler of the country and a mine of regime secrets This allowed him to influence at all



levels of civil and military power. Bouteflika restructured the chiefs of staff in a first step toward separating the intelligence agencies from the military and reducing their influence in the military establishment. The second and most important step to control the intelligence was to replace the Security and Information Service attached to the Ministry of National Defense with the Department of Security Services attached to the Presidency, and to force strongman General Toufik to retire, putting retired general Bachir Tartag, at the head of this device so that the President could make the strongest organs of power in the country answerable to him.

- **The Presidential Alliance**

The President continued to rely on a group of political parties that represent a necessary bridge for the public and local communities. The alliance consists of four parties: the National Liberation Front, the National Rally for Democracy, the Rally for Hope in Algeria party and the Popular Algerian Movement. The leadership of these parties ensure the continued support of their bases for the President, and try to obstruct any movement against his candidacy, although signs of an insurgency within the parties and bias to the demands of the protesters have recently emerged.

Outcomes of the Uprising

At the beginning of his fourth presidential term, President Bouteflika managed to concentrate the most powerful sources of power in his hands and to create a wide network of beneficiaries and stakeholders around him. But his illness and inability to perform his duties open the way to contradictions between the competing centers of power within the structure of power, which had been brought together by the presence and performance of the President.

With the popular uprising against the blatant attempt of the unelected elites to hide behind an elected president, there were signs of disparities within the circles of government. There are, to a limited extent, two camps: the first includes the presidency, the administration and the business forum; supporting Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term even if he is unable to complete it or to carry out his most basic duties. This camp did not prepare itself so quickly enough to insure its interests without Bouteflika. They need time.

The second camp calls for a new start by nominating a new face of the regime, as long as this is possible. This option satisfies the people by changing the candidate, while also preserving the continuity of the existing regime and its ruling party and the continuity of the network of interests to which it is linked. This includes the intelligence apparatus of Bouteflika. The military might change its position if it becomes clear that Bouteflika could not continue the presidential race. The victory of either of these two currents will depend on the protest movement's ability to rally, continue and expand, and more importantly, organize and interact with the official political opposition forces. Circumventing the demands of the protesters to nominate another representative of the ruling elite without holding genuinely fair, pluralistic and democratic elections will depend on the opposition's

ability to agree on a single presidential candidate who adopts a democratic reform program if the regime decides to postpone the elections and withdraw Bouteflika's candidacy to the elections.

Conclusion

Algeria has already undergone civil war; the memory of which is undoubtedly one of the most important motives for the Algerian people to maintain order and refrain from using violence. In the post-civil war period, state institutions were rebuilt, some level of party pluralism and relative freedom of expression were established, and Algerian civil society rose. President Bouteflika has played an important role in reforms and in military integration into politics. A ruling oligarchy has emerged around the president, composed of the bureaucracy of the state apparatus overlapping with party bureaucracy influential businessmen, and the security apparatus. This ruling elite has become an obstacle to the economic, social and diplomatic development of Algeria, to the extent that they are trying to impose a candidate to the presidency who is absent and incapacitated.

The time for change has dawned in Algeria. This can be peaceful and institutionalized through dialogue between political elites in the ruling parties, the opposition and the Algerian populace to achieve truly pluralistic and pluralistic elections. The Algerians have gone a long way in reforms, and they have reached levels of civic awareness demonstrated by peaceful protest. The time has come for democratic change.