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Protest Movements in Algeria

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Introduction

This paper attempts to provide a sociological explanation for the recent (January 2011) protests in Algeria. Although they replicated many earlier social protests that had taken place over the previous three decades, these latest protests had characteristics specific to them. Some of the shared aspects of all the Algerian protests are weak organizational structure and the absence of middle and educated classes. Another trait is the prominent role played by youth from the popular quarters, in initiating and participating in them, and in their resort to forms of violent expression that remain symbolic, despite the traditional perception of the Algerian popular political culture as ‘radical’; though sometimes used as such by others, ‘radical’ is not always a synonym for ‘violent’.

The protest movements throughout Algeria in January 2011 are strong indicators of the economic, social, and political aspects of the Algerian situation. They reveal the stagnation of the country’s official political parties and its opposition, and indicate the restrictions dominating the media and political sectors, as well as pointing to the prevalence of economic malpractice. At a time when the country’s financial situation has improved considerably, an increasing marginalization affects the youth, who have a considerable demographic presence. Rampant corruption further darkens this picture, and has spread into symbolically significant institutions like the public energy company Sonatrach.

The specific nature of the Algerian protests cannot be truly understood without going through the cultural and intellectual positions of Algeria’s cultural and political elite, and the role it plays, with a particular emphasis on its history of ineffectiveness and uselessness. This elite is committed to the divisive logic upon which it was founded,¹ in a society that was long ruled by settler colonialism.

Since 1980, Algeria has witnessed several popular protest movements,² and many Algerian cities (Oran in 1982, Algiers in 1985, Sétif in 1986, etc.) saw protests that formed waves of social movement that arose from the particularities of Algerian society. In this context, the events of October 1988³ that broke out in Algiers, and spread across the country, are a salient example

¹ In this, it is unlike other Arab countries, including other Maghreb countries. In Algeria, effective cultural institutions like Zaytuna or the Qarawiyyeen have not emerged, leading to a weak presence of the intellectual and cultural elite, which is internally divided by both language and values.

² Abd al-Nasser Jabi, *Al-Jaza’ir min al-Haraka al-Ummaliya ila al-Harakat al-Sha’biyya* [Algeria: From a Labor Movement to Popular Movements], (Algeria: Al-Ma’had al-Watani lil-‘Amal, 2001).

³ There is a dearth of material on the events of October 1988, but there are eyewitness accounts collected in Sid Ahmed Semiane (dir.) *Octobre, ils parlent* [October, They Speak], (Algeria: Le Matin, 1998); see also some French publications, including Didier Le Saoute and Marguerite Rollinde (dir), *Émeutes et mouvements sociaux au Maghreb*, [Tumult and Social Movements in the Maghreb], (Paris: Karthala-Institut Maghreb-Europe, 1999).

of such protests due to the nature of the important political results that they achieved, including the announcement in the direct aftermath of the protests of the establishment of political pluralism, the drafting of a new constitution that provided the right to form political parties and unions, the right to strike and the right to publish. The new constitution paved the way for the first multiparty municipal and legislative elections in Algerian history (1990/1991). However, the results of the elections were cancelled immediately after the announcement of the victory for the Islamic Salvation Front (ISF).⁴ This was the spark that dragged the country into a cycle of violence and instability from which it still has not recovered.

Containment efforts

The decision to increase political and media pluralism did not stop the protest movements, but some radical political religious factions attempted to appropriate them, imposing an unintended dimension onto them.⁵ While these movements have certainly been affected by the security crisis that raged for over a decade in Algeria (1992-2002), the protests have also continued to be a social practice based on legitimate demands, even if they have lost numbers at certain points. Protests expanded geographically to include the entire country and reached areas that were previously calm, such as the deep south (Adrar⁶ and Ghardaia⁷), the higher plains, and other small- and medium-sized towns; the protests even reached some rural villages. As these protest movements reached the rural areas, they took on a sub-national logic; simultaneously, the role of the state and its institutions began to recede. Thus, these movements were characterized by a tribal logic even as they made modern demands related to the poor performance of some

⁴ The ISF won the majority of seats in municipal elections in 1990, and proved its prominence and power in the first round of legislative elections, in which it won most of the seats in December 1991. This victory occurred in an agitated political environment which the official establishment and elite could not handle or control, which led to a state of panic and resulted in the cancellation of the results of the first round of parliamentary elections and the subsequent dissolution of local municipal councils after the outbreak of violence between Islamist groups and the state. For more detail, see: Abd al-Nasser Jabi, *Al-Intikhabat, al-Dawla wa-l-Mujtama* [Elections, the State and Society], (Algeria: Dar al-Kasbah, 1999).

⁵ Despite the passage of over 20 years since the events of October 1988, there is no difference in the spontaneity of the events or those political actors behind them, although several analysts have agreed that the official political centers of power have been behind them, without that meaning that the events were premeditated or pre-programmed. The 1988 movement at the beginning, and for more than four days, began as a violent protest movement (approximately 500-600 victims) without slogans or political goals, before it was appropriated by the radical Islamist front.

⁶ The protest movement in Adrar and in surrounding cities began in May 2004; city residents shut off the Saharan road that connected Adrar and Ghardaia, and destroyed the city hall as well as the offices of public and national companies and other departments in protest at the authorities' delay in providing them with services after the floods that had hit the region in Spring 2004.

⁷ In Spring 2008, the protest movements in Ghardaia took on a sectarian aspect, with Sunni Malikis pitted against the Ibadi Amazigh.

economic, social and political institutions and spoke about modern social and economic issues, such as the relations between citizens and various state institutions (including municipalities, provinces and security apparatuses).

In turn, the Algerian tribal regions (inhabited by Algerian citizens who speak Kabyle, an Amazigh language), also witnessed a series of protest movements that in some cases represented a significant leap in the power of collective and political mass mobilization. These regions saw the events of April 1980,⁸ the strikes during the academic year 1994/1995,⁹ and what became known as the Tizi Ouzou events of 2001/2002,¹⁰ which were characterized by an unprecedented level of violence that had not previously been part of the Amazigh protest movements. Prior to this, protests had been contained both politically and socially, and were characterized by their collective and political framings, as well as peacefulness. Later, they lost their political framing to a new generation of activists who preferred to express themselves as being part of *Uroush* or “Citizenship” movement.¹¹

Despite some characteristics that are unique to the most recent protests, when compared with those of the past, the events of January 2011 were not new. For example, as in previous protests, these recent ones began in the larger cities, and were characterized by large mass mobilization. They are even similar to earlier protests in the degree of violence used, as well as the weakness of the authorities, and in the political and social contexts that have distinguished the popular protest movement for over two decades. All these protest movements, past and present, also drew cautious reactions from the middle classes and political elites, including those in the opposition. These groups are wary of infiltration and containment of the protesters by the intelligence community, and there is much speculation over the subject within these circles.¹²

⁸ For more on the events of April 1980, the following book collects testimonies from major actors, including officials. It is worth noting that the events were ignited by the banning of novelist and writer Mouloud Maameri from delivering a lecture on Amazigh poetry at Tizi Ouzou university, which now bears his name. See: Arezki Aït-Larbi, *Insurges et officiels de pouvoir racontent le printemps berbère*, [Insurgents and Officials recount the Berber Spring], (NP: Éditions koukou, 2010).

⁹ This was a widespread boycott of school by Kabyle inhabitants during the academic year 1994-1995, after calls to do so by the Berber movement.

¹⁰ See Mohamad Brahim Salhi, *Algérie, citoyenneté et identité* [Algeria, Citizenship and identity], (Tizi Ouzou: Éditions Achab, 2010).

¹¹ The Kabyle region is known for the strong party presence of the socialist movement and the Rally for Culture and Democracy, in addition to other national parties. This region also has a powerful union presence; despite all of this, the protest movement arose under the umbrella of the Uroush movement, which was against parties and the elites that spoke in their name.

¹² The Algerian political and intellectual elite live in fear of the powers of penetration and influence of the intelligence and security apparatuses in general. This has led to a level of apathy among this elite, which imagines

Also prominent is the continuity of the official response to these events. The state's discourse continues to focus on the economic and social aspects that are directly behind such events, such as the rise in prices for sugar and cooking oil in the case of the January 2011 events. The traditional nature of the "rentier state" allows it to adopt an approach that seeks to "buy" a certain type of social security, thanks to the financial resources that it possesses, while refusing to discuss the protesters' deeper political demands. The official media and political discourse also highlights certain features of the major participants in these protests (i.e., youth, including teenagers and even children) and claims that these people do not represent Algerian society as a whole. The official discourse assigns other labels to the protests, such as 'tribal' or 'Kabyle,' in order to obfuscate the protesters' identities and/or make it difficult to identify with them. One novelty this time, however, is that the protests coincided with the revolution in neighboring Tunisia, which succeeded in removing Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali from power after a quarter-century of dictatorial rule.

The events of January 2011

Our case analysis focuses on the protest movement that broke out in January 2011, and which coincided with the events in Tunisia and were closer to the Leninist model of change. If we are to compare the major differences between the events in Tunisia and Algeria, especially in key areas, we must try to answer the following important question: why did the Tunisian revolution succeed, despite the calm that traditionally had characterized that country, while the many protests in Algeria have failed to produce lasting political or even economic gains, whether at the macroeconomic level or the qualitative process level? As we attempt to understand this apparent discrepancy, we would do well to recall that the history of the two peoples and the two countries reveals that what happens in Tunisia often finds a rapid echo in Algeria, generally in a manner that is more radical and widespread, as a result of the latter's political and cultural specificities.¹³

The protest movement in Algeria broke out on Monday, January 3, 2011, immediately after the start of the new year, which saw rises in the prices of consumer goods, especially sugar and oil, two widely used commodities. Rumors¹⁴ spread in the capital and in many regions that

the informant to be everywhere, and attributes mythical power to this individual that has nothing to do with reality. These speculations have lost some of their intensity since the acknowledgment of pluralism, but they are still pervasive in many circles.

¹³ Algeria was affected by the experience of the Tunisian labor movement, and the role played by the union leader Farhat Hashad, for example. Activists from both countries also played a role in the nationalist struggle and the armed revolt.

¹⁴ Similar rumors had spread a few days before the October 1988 revolt. This similarity led some to focus on conspiracy theories and their use in similar protest movements as it is happening at the international level. See, for

something was going on, that the youth were going to clash with the police and demonstrate against the rising prices and the high cost of living. Quickly, events spread to several parts of the country,¹⁵ beginning on the evening of January 3 in Oran in western Algeria, and spreading as of January 4 to towns in the central province of Tipasa, including Bou Ismail and Faouka.¹⁶

The spread of unrest to the capital, Algiers, on Wednesday, January 5, represents a considerable leap, especially once it reached the popular areas that had been associated with such protests in the past, such as the neighborhoods of Bab el-Oued, Balkor, and Bash Jrah.

The protests were not confined to the western and central regions, and quickly spread through the Kabyle region,¹⁷ heading eastwards towards the cities of Annaba, Skikda, al-Tarif and Souk Ahras in the far east of the country, on the Tunisian border. Unrest also spread southwards to the cities of Warqla, al-Jafla, and al-Aghwat, to return and spread even more widely across western Algeria, reaching towns that had been unaffected the first time, such as Tilmsan, Muaskar, and Sidi Bel Abbès, which saw widespread clashes between the young protesters and the security forces.

Friday, January 7, was the most important day of these events. The authorities feared that large numbers of people would join the protests after Friday prayers and form massive demonstrations, especially in the popular neighborhoods.¹⁸ However, contrary to expectations, the day passed peacefully not only because of the increased police presence and other security measures, but also, and perhaps mainly because, this calm was the fragmentation of the radical Islamist movement, which had led the armed resistance to the state for a long period. Furthermore, a schism in relations between the Islamist movement and the typical Algerian citizen may have been another significant factor behind the calm. All indications are that the widely expected alliance between the protest movement and the radical Islamist movement – which happened in

example, Erik Neveu, *Sociologie des Mouvements Sociaux* [The Sociology of Social Movements], (Paris: Éditions la découverte, 2002).

¹⁵ The interior minister spoke of 20 provinces (out of 48) in which protests had broken out.

¹⁶ Bou Ismail province was the site of the protests' second fatality, on 8 January, and the first death by a police bullet was on the same day in Ail al-Hajl in M'Sila Province.

¹⁷ The protest movement of January 2011 is the first that began outside the Kabyle region and then spread *into* it. The October 1988 events did not really affect the Kabyle region; the Amazigh spring events (1980) did not spread outside the Kabyle region, except to Algiers, and then only onto university campuses. In 2001, events began in the Kabyle region, but did not spread outside.

¹⁸ Ali Bilhah, a leader of the banned Islamist movement, was the victim of such speculation. He contacted the young protesters in Bab el-Oued, to which worshippers from his old mosque (the Sunna Mosque) were flocking; however, he was arrested by the police and only released from prison after the events were over.

October 1988 – did not come about this time. This leads us to ask: are the events of January 2011 the beginning of the post-political Islam era in Algeria?¹⁹

The events of January 2011 took the same pattern as other, earlier protest movements: young men aged 16-24 formed small groups in their neighborhoods, then emerged onto the public roads and set up roadblocks and barricades using burning tires. After that, they clashed with security forces, and younger protesters began to vandalise shops and state institutions near their gathering places, and attempt to break into them. This happened in many areas, as police headquarters, public schools and post offices were broken into, as well as privately owned car dealerships and stores carrying items like electronics, watches, and mobile phones. One difference between events in Algiers and those in other cities this time around lay in timing: the capital features large numbers of closed-circuit TV cameras, so protests typically began at night as participants sought to avoid being caught on videotape. Many of these cameras were among the first targets of the protests.

The absence of slogans

The protest movement of 2011 also lacked specific political or social slogans.²⁰ State media used this to deny that there was any political dimension to the uprisings, arguing that they were merely protests against the rise in the cost of certain items. This was the stance taken by all the authorities. In fact, the government refused to allow the police to enter into conflicts with the young protesters even as they cut off roads; instead, it largely limited police activity to merely defending against attempts to break into police stations or other public institutions. This position minimized the numbers of casualties among the young protesters.²¹

The first official reaction was given by the minister of commerce (a representative of the Movement for the Society of Peace, the political branch of the Algerian Muslim Brotherhood); this was followed by a statement from the minister of youth and sports (the representative of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's National Liberation Front, or NLF), who expressed his support for the official view of events that represented them as protests against the rise in the cost of food carried out by unemployed youth who had no culture or other outlets, and who were suffering from social problems due to their age. The interior minister – the minister in charge of security –

¹⁹ In Tunisia, political Islam – represented by the Ennahda movement and other Salafist currents – did not have a strong political presence.

²⁰ Unlike in Tunisia, where the poetry of Abu-Qassim al-Shabbi was used intensively during the protests.

²¹ The security forces acted very differently in the Tunisian and Algerian cases: whereas over a hundred were killed in Tunisia, only five deaths were recorded in Algeria. This could be a major factor in explaining the disparity in outcomes.

did not appear until the seventh day, on Sunday, January 9,²² after the first victim had fallen, and described the protests as criminal acts by criminal gangs, even if some young men suffering from social problems like unemployment and the high cost of living were also involved. Apart from these three officials, no one appeared: not, for example, the prime minister,²³ nor the president – who has frequently been absent for long periods of time, and does not appear on state media, or intervene in events, no matter how serious. The lack of intervention by the prime minister and the president can be put down to meticulous political calculations that led them to conclude that addressing the protests publicly would adversely affect their popularity²⁴ and future political plans.

At this stage of the analysis, we must address the relationships between these protests and the current political climate in Algeria, especially since 2011 could have been calm, since it is not an election year, unlike, for example, 2009, when presidential polls were held, or 2012, which will see local and parliamentary elections. Nonetheless, the end of 2010 saw some political agitation, among the most significant manifestations of which was the struggle within the NLF (the party with the most parliamentary seats) after two of its ministers attempted to break ranks in protest against the secretary-general of the NLF, Abdel Aziz Belkhadem, who serves as a minister of state and as Bouteflika's personal representative in the Cabinet. There were rumors during this period about the possible candidacy of Bouteflika's brother and presidential advisor, Alsaïd Bouteflika, for the presidency in the event that the incumbent was unable to complete his term – scheduled to end in 2014 – due to ill health.²⁵ The succession issue was linked to the ongoing crisis in the NLF, while other rumors linked the political crisis to the protest movement, lending credence to the belief that circles opposed to Alsaïd Bouteflika's candidacy – on grounds of nepotism – may be behind the protests.

These interpretations liken the January 2011 protests to those of October 1988, in terms of their use for political manipulation. There are many indicators that support this point of view,

²² The minister appeared on the French-language Channel 3, where he announced that two victims had fallen: the first in Ain Lahjal, and the second in Bou Ismail, in addition to 300 wounded protesters and 320 wounded police officers.

²³ Even when the government convened a ministerial meeting under the auspices of the prime minister on January 8, to take decisions to lower the prices of sugar and oil, state television did not cover the meeting.

²⁴ Algerian media sources speak of the political ambitions of the current prime minister regarding the 2014 elections. This is his third term as prime minister; he is also the head of the National Rally for Democracy, which gives him great influence over the upcoming presidential elections in the event that President Bouteflika decides not to run for a fourth term.

²⁵ The daily *Al-Jaza'ir News* ran a long interview with Ahmad Ayashi, who as a party leader announced that his faction was gathering signatures to nominate Alsaïd Bouteflika for the presidency though he himself later denied that he had said this in the same paper, in a statement that ran the next day.

such as the start of the movement from Algiers, the strong presence of young folk, and the tense national political climate in which the protests occurred.

Points of similarity between 2011 and 1988

There are several similarities between the events of 2011 and those of 1988 that lead to some general conclusions about the specific nature of protests in Algeria. Based on direct observations of the 2011 protests, as well as on earlier studies²⁶ of the kinds of social movements that have defined – and continue to define – Algerian society, we can summarize that these protest movements share:

- A weak organizational structure, and the absence of any effort by political parties, groups and labor organizations to organize or manage the protests, even after they had begun; this is the opposite of what happened in Tunisia, for example, where organized social groups and some political parties played prominent roles. The weak organization of such movements makes them more tribal, since they can be manipulated from the outside by organized or semi-organized, behind-the-scenes political forces, as in October 1988, when the radical Islamist movement was able to appropriate the protests. Weak organization also suggests a crisis on the Algerian political scene, and makes these protests appear to be “rough,”²⁷ as often happens in a political vacuum, and it opens up the possibility of moving beyond political Islam, which the nearby Tunisian experience affirms, even if partially.
- In terms of demands, we can deduce from the events of the latest protests in January 2011 that socioeconomic factors are often the spark that ignites such unrest. This does not mean that the protesters do not link socioeconomic issues with political ones. As observed from the latest protests, as well as earlier ones, the political atmosphere is an event, not a direction, and can influence protests, and intensify their tone. Certainly in Algeria in the past two years, the cases of corruption over large development projects (roads, dams, housing) undertaken by the state due to its increased wealth have played a prominent role in creating a climate of resentment, which is expressed by the state of constant protest in Algerian society. As in Tunisia, protests in Algeria largely represent a crisis over national wealth distribution between social classes, and even between regions.

²⁶ Abd al-Nasser Jabi, “al-Harakat al-Ijtima’iyya fi-l-Jaza’ir bayn Azmat al-Dawla wa Shurukh al-Mujtama’” [Social Movements in Algeria: Between State Crises and Social Schism] in *al-Harakat al-Ijtima’iyya fi-l-‘Alam al-‘Arabi* [Social Movements in the Arab World], Cairo: Center for Arab and African Studies and Madbouli Library, 2006. See also: A. N. Djabi, *Algeria: From Social Regimentation to New Popular Movements*, in: Polet, François, *The State of Resistance: Popular Struggles in the Global South*, (London and New York: Zed Books, 2007).

²⁷ The authorities postponed local football league games, fearful of the youthful attendees at such events; sociologically speaking, football attendees and the protesters share much in common.

- Younger residents of popular neighborhoods²⁸ in large- and medium-sized cities and towns played the main role in these protests. The protests also mobilized wider swathes of the population when they emerged in small cities and villages. The social issues that were brought up affect many people, whether directly as individuals or socially as communities; these include unemployment, abuses by security forces, and even electricity and water shortages. However, it is also worth noting that as the protests moved into rural regions and away from the northern cities, they became attached to subnational identities, such as Uroush identity (this is a traditional social grouping in the Maghreb region that involves families who are not connected by blood), tribal identity, or even regional identity.²⁹ In addition, each time, the protests were undertaken by a new generation of Algerians, without any accumulation of experience or expertise, meaning that they were condemned to repeat the same errors every time.³⁰ The latest movement, unlike the October 1988 revolts or the Tizi Ouzou events of 2001/2002, did not succeed in mobilizing people outside the group of young people who started protesting and continued alone.
- The common characteristic of all these protests movements is self-replication by resorting to almost exactly the same forms of protests and aiming to achieve the same goals, which are dominated by socioeconomic factors. The geographical spreads also have followed similar patterns, with protests extending from one region to others without benefiting from organizational structures that might magnify their overall impact. This repetition affirms the restless dissatisfaction of Algerian society, and the inability of its popular forces to express their demands through modern political actors like parties or labor unions, as opposed to traditional groupings such as the Uroush movement. This is in contrast to Tunisia, where effective organization emerged very soon after the

²⁸ A week after the end of the protests, high school students began a series of marches and protests, demanding that baccalaureate tests scheduled for June 11 reflect the high school curriculum. These were not violent, but consisted of peaceful marches from high schools across the country.

²⁹ The regional presence was much stronger in Tunisia, and was expressed by the middle cadres of the General Labor Union during the latest events. This union had historically been the major outlet for southern residents, whereas the National Democratic Rally had been dominated by the coastal elites, and was more present in the state. The struggle between the NDR and the Union in some aspects was a struggle between political elites, a struggle between a union-supporting south, with a pan-Arabist and nationalist trend, and a more Western-facing, politicized north.

³⁰ The youth from popular neighborhoods who were the essential component of these protests are characterized by a low level of education and qualifications, and are not involved in the workforce. This helps to explain why these movements, unlike those in Tunisia or Egypt (for example, the Egyptian April 6 movement) did not resort to modern communications methods, such as the Internet in general and Facebook in particular. Instead, they resorted to popular direct action and confrontations with the various security apparatuses. In contrast, we can note the rise in youth movements that are more tech-savvy, belong to the middle classes in general, and are more socially integrated; however, these are less violent, more peaceful, and clearer in their demands, which are mostly political, such as the demand to free speech and the cancellation of emergency laws. Despite this, the Algerian authorities hacked Facebook and interfered with SMS communications during the January 2011 events.

spontaneous outbreak of events there. This raises the possibility that political transition in Algeria will be more costly than in Tunisia.

- Despite some manifestations of violence associated with these movements, upon careful examination one notices that the violence remains symbolic; its primary goal is to draw attention to the protesters, rather than to cause harm. Usually, as observed in more than one neighborhood in Algiers during the January 2011 events, the highways are closed and some public offices and private enterprises are attacked, but people are not harmed. The protesters want to express their problems in this public, slightly violent way in order to draw the attention of the authorities and in order to engage them in dialogue, since insitutionalised channels of communication have been closed to them. This is a symbolic violence, as in the case of the late Mohammad Bouazizi, and the many copy-cat cases across the Arab world. However, this symbolic violence may transform into a more insidious, deliberate one, as the protest movements continue to place hundreds of thousands of citizens in confrontations with security forces that cannot always be counted on to control their reactions, which happened in January 2011. This is especially true if the protests continue and the violence of protesters increases.

Although the latest protest movement came to a halt by the second week of January 2011, its repercussions are still being felt in the daily lives of Algerians, who cannot stop comparing what happened in their country with what happened in Tunisia. Circumstances are different in the two countries, and Tunisian society is far more socially and culturally homogeneous than Algerian society. This applies not just on the level of society alone, but also on the level of the political and intellectual elite. In Algeria, these elites are dominated by ideological matters and do not agree on actual, achievable projects for change. This situation weakens their ability to confront the state, allowing the latter to increase its capacity to buy a sort of social peace due to its cash liquidity and its nature as a rentier state, in a society that has known a lot of agitation in a short amount of time, and has allowed large sectors of the population, including the popular classes to take advantage of it.³¹ Finally, we must note the role played by the middle classes, which dominated the Tunisian scene, unlike in Algeria, where the middle classes are dispersed, which is related to Algeria's having adopted neo-liberal economic practice, unlike Tunisia.³²

³¹ After independence, Algeria began to address its comparatively low educational performance, and has recorded education levels on a par with Tunisia in recent years. Also, Algeria has caught up with Tunisia, the most developed Maghreb country, on other development indices in recent years.

³² The dismantling of the public sector and structural reforms that were adopted during the security and political instability period of the mid-1990s played a powerful role in crushing the Algerian middle class, which historically had developed according to a socialist model.

Official media and political discourse³³ rejects any comparison between the events in Algeria and those in Tunisia, and refuses to acknowledge any political dimension whatsoever to the protest movement. This did not, however, stop opposition parties and civil society organizations in Algeria, weak as they are, from undertaking initiatives.³⁴ In fact, the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD)³⁵ proposed that a march be held in Algiers on January 22; the application was rejected by the authorities, and a heavy state presence on that day ensured that the march was a failure.³⁶ This was the first march called for by the RCD in six years. The last one took place in 2004, and was marred by violence, to which the state has responded by refusing to approve a single application since that time, but given the general unresponsiveness to expression of discontent via other means, the primary challenge remaining for Algeria is how to allow effective political action that takes place away from the streets.

³³ Some of the main differences emphasized by state discourse is that Algeria did not experience the types of repression that Tunisia experienced under Ben Ali, whether politically or in terms of the media, and especially not with regard to individual liberties.

³⁴ The Algerian Association for the Defense of Human Rights and a number of independent labor unions called for a meeting on January 21, and the Reform Movement proposed a charter of rights and democratic freedoms. For its part, the Movement for the Society of Peace announced the initiation of deliberations with other parties based on what was known as the “national initiative”. See: www.hmsalgeria.net/ar

³⁵ The RCD condemned attempts by the prime minister’s NRD party to interfere in the march. The General Union of Algerian Workers did the same, and also set up “awareness cells” to monitor institutions. See www.rcd-algerie.net

³⁶ The police force does not have the same status in the two countries. The role played by the police in Tunisia – including security and intelligence work – is undertaken by the army in Algeria. Nonetheless, Algerian police forces have evolved in their roles and prominence due to the role they played in fighting terrorism during the violence of the 1990s.