

2. Algeria: Politics and Protests in Coronavirus Times

Yahia Mohamed Lamine Mestek

Algeria confirmed the first case of Covid-19 within its borders in late February when it was declared that the virus was imported by an Italian citizen who arrived in the country on 17 February 2020 and later placed in isolation. A month later, officials suspended non-cargo domestic and international air and maritime travel and closed all universities, schools, kindergartens, and mosques. Importantly, officials banned the demonstrations held each Friday since 22 February 2019.

In addition to these measures, the Algerian government has followed the recommendations of the World Health Organization (WHO) thenceforth to reduce the spread of Covid-19. Algeria was one of the first countries in the region to close its borders and implement partial lockdowns and curfew measures in critical areas such as Algiers, Blida, Batna, Oran, TiziOuzou, Setif and many other cities with highest number of Covid-19 cases. The state also used mass media to spread awareness.

At the current stage of the pandemic at the time of writing, Algeria is ranked eighth in the MENA region, with 0.062% of the population affected thanks to decisive measures that have limited contagion thus far. Many observers associate this low rate with Algeria's young population (70% are under 30 years old), given that youth tend to face lower risks in terms of the health impact of the Covid-19. However, despite the fact that hospital capacity is increasing and there is a 68.1% recovery

rate, Algeria has ranked second after Egypt in the MENA region for Covid-19 deaths, with a 3.9% mortality rate.

The following chapter will analyze the outcomes of Covid-19 in Algeria by illustrating the growing complexity of its interplay with the Algerian regime and the *Hirak* mass protest movement, which is believed to be the only real opposition.¹ It will demonstrate the political impact of the pandemic on the political transition; then proceed with an exploration of the effect on the socio-economic situation in Algeria. To achieve the chapter's objective, micro-level and multi-variables analysis were adopted to look at all aspects of the subject.

The Political Impact of Covid-19 on Algeria

Since its beginning, the pandemic has paved the way for the Algerian regime to control the *Hirak*. After the government's decree prohibiting the protest movement, nominally to prevent the spread of the pandemic, some key figures in the protest saw the move as a convenient attempt to restrict the demonstrations. *Hirak* decided to mobilize virtually, especially on Facebook and YouTube, where people began going live or using memes and videos to denounce the government's inefficiency. The regime responded by using local oppression, arresting activists under the guise of enforcing the law, especially Article 144 Bis from the Algerian penal code, which punishes any "offenses" or "insults" against the President and public official with imprisonment or fines of 1,000-500,000 Algerian dinars, a prohibitive sum in the country.²

¹ During the last twenty years of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's reign, the "opposition" parties largely embraced the regime for survival. With no real opposition, Bouteflika followed what could be called a "corruption democratization policy" with the complicity of some foreign countries. To minimize the influence of his political opposition, Bouteflika created more than 67 new parties, supporting them financially while exploiting their internal problems and undemocratic structures to ensure their loyalties. This was not a true democracy, by any standards.

² Penal Code (promulgated by Order No. 66-156 of 18 Safar 1386

The regime has already jailed demonstrators and journalists who spoke out against “Le Pouvoir” and its figures, such as the President. It is notable that while 10,000 prisoners have been released by the President, 75 of whom were prisoners of conscience, many new individuals from the protest movement have been arrested and put in jail during the pandemic, and some personalities of the *Hirak* see that as a play by the government to contain the virtual demonstration and put the opposition in check.

The main impact of Covid-19 on the Algerian political scene has manifested in the difficulty to return to physical demonstrations, giving the authorities time to catch their breath.

However, it looks like the President may have the goodwill to respond to the demands of the *Hirak*, but the pandemic has slowed down all political reforms, especially those related to changing the constitution and challenging the political-economical elites. To reach a consensual constitution, the executives shared the constitutional draft with all the actors (political parties and key figures, civil society, and the public opinion). A debate has opened during the lockdown. Many declared that this draft does not reflect the new Algerian ambitions and intentions, dismissing it as a continuation of the current constitution drafted by former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

More than 2,500 remarks and recommendations have been addressed to the Constitutional Committee that prepared the new draft constitution. On 8 January, and less than two weeks after he took power, the Algerian President appointed a constitutional committee of 17 experts in constitutional law, headed by former UN expert Ahmed Araba, to conduct a comprehensive review of the new constitution and reformulate it to build what he calls “the new Algeria.” As of September

2020, the draft constitutional reforms were adopted by Algeria's Parliament and will be put to referendum on 1 November, the anniversary of the start of Algeria's war of independence from France.³

Democracy is a balance of power between the state and the people. Algeria is no exception to that rule, and recently the struggle was defined between the regime and the *Hirak*. This is an unbalanced situation since the *Hirak* is not an institution, and the regime on the other hand owns all the institutions. For this reason, the *Hirak* will not win any other rights unless it becomes an institution.

Historically, all Algerian movements, namely those of October 1988, April 2001, and the Arab Spring in 2011, had a central leadership, a structure, and a political project. All of them were absorbed by the regime. Thus, in the public consciousness, the idea comes to mind that if the *Hirak* were to put forth a central leadership, they too would be coopted.

This is a double-edged sword. The absence of a central leadership or a pivotal force, which would determine the *Hirak's* reaction to the regime's policies internally and externally *ipso facto*, is the reason for the movement's failure to gain more rights. These weaknesses in the *Hirak* (a movement without a leader, structure, or defined political project) have also helped the regime to reach cohesion and respond in the face of demands.

The popular movement's fate is governed by several variables. These variables are:⁴

1. The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic put an end to public gatherings and demonstrations, at the behest of the regime, a year after the mass rallies started in February 2019. However, with the increasing severity of Covid-19 casualties, the popular movement's conviction grew that preventing gatherings is not only a

³ "Algerian Parliament adopts draft constitutional reforms", *Al Jazeera*, 20 September 2020.

⁴ W.A. al-Hay, *Strategic Situation Assessment: The Prospects of Algerian Policy Between Change and Adaptation*, Al-Zaytouna Center, July 2020, pp. 19-20.

political “move” to control the movement, but rather an objective necessity. Accordingly, the regime’s success in confronting the pandemic might serve to enhance its legitimacy and limit the *Hirak* movement. However, its failure might exacerbate political and socio-economic grievances, which would open the way for the *Hirak* movement to return, but less regularly, although there might be a fracture within the movement between those who may “risk” organizing protests and those whose concerns regarding the pandemic prevent them from participating.

2. The confrontations between the regime and the *Hirak* movement in 2019 were generally peaceful. The compliance of the regime with several demands, such as the exclusion of Bouteflika and the imprisonment of some figures symbolic of the regime’s corruption (despite the arrest of some activists and leaders within the movement), has enabled the authorities to strengthen political stability, which it ultimately failed to do during the Black Decade.
3. There are weaknesses in the *Hirak* movement and corresponding advantages enjoyed by the regime, including:
 - The absence of a central leadership or a pivotal force that determines the movement’s reaction toward the regime’s policies internally and externally.
 - The consensus of political visions within the regime: when there was a clash of factions within the Algerian system, the *Hirak* movement was able to achieve many of its demands.
 - The escalation of regional concerns (especially the Libyan crisis), which might push the *Hirak* to wait for the outcome of the Libyan developments. This trend might expand if proxy wars escalate in Libya.
 - Some fractures in the *Hirak* movement, which have manifested during the demonstrations. These rifts are driven in part by arguments between subcultures

and around identity. For example, there is continuous debate about *Amazigh* identity, with significant variation in estimating their population and the limits on expressing cultural identity, such as arrests of some who raised *Amazigh* flags at protests. Amazigh people are present in public institutions, where reports indicate their high percentage in the technocratic sectors, but they have less influence in the military and security institutions, especially after the change in military intelligence. The acceptance of the *Amazigh* language varies: it is constitutionally accepted, though socially, it is less accepted. Identifying it as a national language or an official language is also a topic of debate within the *Hirak*.

Now Algeria is at a crossroads. The government must either take the risk to empower the *Hirak* and coopt it into the political system or keep it politically weak. In a recent article, Dalia Ghanem declares that the Algerian regime has shown a significant degree of resilience and adaptability during upheavals;⁵ this will likely continue.

Despite the mass protest movement and the last presidential election, the People's National Army still dominates the country. This order will likely continue for the foreseeable future. In assessing adaptation by the Algerian regime, Prof. Walid Abd al-Hay found that between 1962 and 2020 the military has comprised the presidency 58.3% of the time, while civilians have governed 41.7% of the same period. It is noteworthy that most of the civilian periods were transitional periods, which were unable to establish stability, allowing the military leadership to be more sustainable.⁶

However, international competition in the region, turmoil in Libya, and persistent tensions to the south of Algeria, especially

⁵ D. Ghanem, *Limiting Change Through Change: The Key to the Algerian Regime's Longevity*, Carnegie Middle East Center, May 2018.

⁶ W.A. al-Hay (2020), p. 18.

in Mali and Niger, might force the regime to pursue the choice of army interference abroad. Moreover, security threats in the country's neighborhood, even without Algerian intervention, keep Algerian decisions in the hand of the military and other security forces and seemingly justifies military spending to the public.⁷

Algeria ranks third globally in terms of the ratio of military spending to GDP, reaching 5.3%. Military spending represents 13.8% of the Algerian government's expenditures. Between 2010 and 2020, the average annual military spending rate is about US\$9.6 billion. With expenditure vacillating due to fluctuating oil and gas prices, the current government decided to reduce its spending by 9%.⁸ Despite this, the country's security apparatus will likely remain strong.

The Impact of Covid-19 on the Algerian Socio-Economic Situation

The economic impact of Covid-19 on Algeria is relevant to explain the interplay between the Algerian regime and the mass protest movement. The words of a famous Algerian aptly sum up the impact of economic downturn on the *Hirak*: "Starve the dog and it'll follow you". During the pandemic, many Algerian people, especially those working in the black market, which represents around 25% of the Algerian economy, lost their jobs, and the regime capitalizes on that by giving them financial aid. The regime continues this policy with some industries and small businesses, and 2,795 artists benefit from this aid. The government sent many solidarity convoys to carry food supplies destined for needy families living in remote areas and *Bedouin* (nomadic) areas, as well as to people with special needs. These measures will enable the regime to strengthen its political stability in the short term.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 3.

However, challenges loom. Oil and gas are the backbone of the Algerian economy, and many global economic institutions foresee stormy days ahead due to the sharp and continuous decline in the prices of oil. The World Bank's last report on the Algerian economic situation declared that the Covid-19 outbreak would slow down consumption and investment while falling oil prices cut into fiscal and export revenues. The new government faces a difficult task maintaining macroeconomic stability, responding to the public health crisis, and pursuing structural reforms.⁹

The present government has the will to liberate the Algerian economy from the control of the energy sector. Nevertheless, Algeria shows a total dependency on hydrocarbons; 95% of its revenues depend on its exports of "black gold". Algeria's foreign exchange reserves have measured at US\$53.6 billion in June 2020, compared to US\$55.2 billion in the previous month.¹⁰

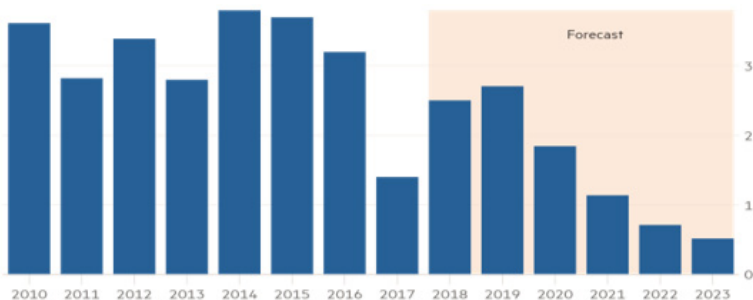
The deterioration of vital Algerian economic sectors has accelerated since the outbreak of Covid-19; hydrocarbons recorded a drop of 3.3%. Mines and quarries show a decrease of 4.8%. Metal, mechanical and electrical industries have seen a decrease of 38.2%. Agro-Food Industries registered an increase of 5.9% in the first quarter of 2020, a positive rate, but inferior to those observed in the previous quarter (+11.3%). Building Materials continued their downward trend and showed a negative variation of -11.5%. Chemical industries observe a drop of 11.5%. Textile industries record a negative variation of -14.6%. The Wood and Paper industries observe a drop of 23.3% in the first quarter of 2020.¹¹

The scene becomes further complicated if we add the decline of the economic growth rate, which started in 2015 (the rate was about 3.5%), and in 2023, it is expected to reach 0.5%, as shown in the following graph:

⁹ The World Bank, *Algeria's Economic Outlook*, April 2020.

¹⁰ *Algeria Foreign Exchange Reserves*, CEIC, June 2020.

¹¹ *Indice de la production industrielle. Au 1er trimestre 2020* (Industrial production index) - in Q1 2020, no. 892, June 2020.



Source: W. A. al-Hay, [Strategic Situation Assessment: The Prospects of Algerian Policy Between Change and Adaptation](#), July 2020 p 11.

Besides, the World Bank report announces that Algeria is facing a combined shock from halving oil prices, a public health crisis, and global economic disruptions following the Covid-19 outbreak. An oil price at US\$30/barrel in 2020 would decrease Algeria's total fiscal revenues by 21.2%. Despite cuts to public investment (-9.7%) and public consumption (-1.6%) envisaged by the 2020 Finance Law, the fiscal deficit would increase to 16.3% of GDP. Meanwhile, the sharp decline in export revenues (-51%) will lead the trade deficit to expand to 18.2% of GDP and the current account deficit to peak at 18.8% of GDP in 2020, despite the regime's efforts to contain imports and weaken domestic demand.¹²

The post-pandemic economic consequences on the Algerian regime's stability and resilience represent an opportunity for the *Hirak* movement to regain the street. Further, the openness of the regime to create new political, economic, and social elite could bring the *Hirak* into the official institutions.

While acknowledging the importance of the economic impact of Covid-19 on Algeria, the social impact also has an

¹² The World Bank (2020), p. 1.

essential role in defining the interplay between the Algerian regime and the *Hirak* mass protest movement.

The increase of violence correlated to the economic situation reveals the extent of the threat to Algerian society. Official statistics indicate an increase in Algeria's crime rate during the first half of the year 2020, recording a quarter of a million crimes, with an average of 693 accidents per day, in which more than 220,000 people were involved. The statistics consider 70,000 cases of violent crimes against women. The statistics mention that unemployed people are at the forefront of those implicated in the crimes. The demographics associated with these crimes also indicate economic factors: 3.8% of those who committed recorded crimes were under the age of 18, 57.3% were between 18 and 30 years old, 25.63% were between 30 and 40 years old, and those over the age of 40 exceeded 13%. The gender distribution was estimated at 97.8% male, and 2.20% female.¹³

Moreover, during the Covid-19 pandemic, Algeria witnessed an increase in domestic violence as well as divorce rates. Official statistics show that 20% of marriages end in divorce and that the divorce to marriage ratio has increased dramatically since 2014, reaching more than 68,000 divorce cases annually at a rate of one case every 8 minutes. This could be caused in part by increased economic and political pressures, leading to social unrest with divorce and domestic violence as a prominent manifestation.¹⁴

Social turmoil indirectly nourishes political turmoil, and vice versa. This may indirectly impact the Algerian regime's grip on power. Furthermore, the *Hirak* movement can continue to challenge the regime by increasing its demands and criticizing its performance, especially since the economic crisis is at the door.

¹³A. Yahya, "700 crimes a day in Algeria and society is at risk", *Independent Arabia*, July 2020.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Conclusion

It seems that the Algerian internal conditions (political, economic, and social), as we described, lead to thinking in two prospects: short term and long term.

In the short term, the regime has to choose from four courses of action: whether it retains power or returns it to the *Hirak* movement, and whether it acquiesces or resists the expansion of political participation. Each option, however, imposes costs on the military and the political system.

1. **Progressive-return and Restrict:** The regime can progressively return power to the *Hirak* movement through purging government officials and pushing new groups to political power by nomination into office or elections.
2. **Semi-return and Expand:** The regime can semi-return power to the *Hirak* movement and permit the previous political groups which were blocked to come to power under new conditions (i.e. political and economic reconciliation).
3. **Retain and Restrict:** The regime can retain power and continue to resist the *Hirak* movement's expansion through political participation. In this case, despite whatever intentions the regime may have, they will inevitably be driven to more repressive measures.
4. **Retain and Expand:** the regime can retain power and permit or, indeed, capitalize upon the expansion of political participation to the *Hirak* movement.

In the long run, options three and four will reinforce the fears of the regime's longevity *ad vitam aeternam*. Based on the previous factors, option one will create the trend to "relative" stability in Algeria and a new generation of political and economic forces could take shape within the next 3–5 years to be more responsive to the local, regional and international challenges. Option two would create real stability through a new political, economic, and social pact between old regime figures and the

new government, based on new values and conditions. This path would take Algeria to durable stability and create real cohesion among all parts of the regime and society. In this situation, Algeria could become a regional player by exporting its stability toward the Sahel region and Libya. It is possible that the political impact of Covid-19 could be used to transition the country toward a better future.