

**THE ARAB SPRING: IS ALGERIA THE EXCEPTION?***Yahia H. Zoubir\**

Following the uprising in Tunisia, media attention focused on Algeria, which many believed was next in line. Middle East and North Africa (MENA) pundits did not envisage that Egypt or Syria might follow suit but were instead firmly convinced that Algeria would soon witness an upheaval of greater magnitude than the one in Tunisia. Certainly, the dire socioeconomic conditions prevailing in the country, coupled with the government's paralysis due to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's illness, supported such a prognosis. Indeed, in 2010 alone, 10,000 riots had swept across Algeria. On 5th January 2011, another wave of more violent protests, triggered by rising basic foodstuffs prices (mainly, cooking oil and sugar), spread throughout the country. The prices of those essential items had risen by as much as 30% at the beginning of January. In many cities, the rioters ransacked buildings, including banks, shops and businesses, government offices, schools and libraries. Some rioters in the city suburbs established roadblocks to extort money and jewels from car passengers. After four days of violence, three people were left dead (the death toll reached five a few days later), 800 wounded, amongst whom 763 were police officers, and 1,100 arrested. The rioters were mostly young, marginalised youths, most of whom were minors. However, these riots were and continue to be, to a large degree, related to the population's pressing problems, such as the increasingly high cost of living, poor housing conditions, unemployment, and the feeling of abandonment by a regime characterised not only by a high degree of nepotism, clientelism and corruption, but also as one that limits citizen participation in political life and genuine representation, hinders democratic freedoms, and violates people's *dignity*. Thus, while in appearance the cyclical riots are socioeconomic in nature, they in fact reflect, as in the rest of the Arab countries, the multifaceted frustrations with bad governance in general. The Algerian government's response was to cut duties on oil and sugar by 41%. Rather than address the most important political grievances through genuine reforms, the regime has consistently sought to quell the protests in all the sectors by using its redistributive capacity thanks to the revenues from sales of hydrocarbons. This has become the regime's main pattern: distribute part of the profits to subdue the protests.

However, the capacity of the regime to buy its way out does not fully explain why Algerians have not risen up to emulate what the Tunisians, Egyptians, Libyans, Yemenis and Syrians have done.

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Yahia H. Zoubir is Professor of International Studies and International Management, and Director of Research in Geopolitics at EuroMed Management, Marseille School of Management, France.

There were several cases of immolation as well as attempts to mobilise the population to revolt against the regime. Indeed, an attempt to channel the protest movement and mobilise the population was made soon after the riots with the establishment on 21st January of the Coordination Nationale pour le Changement et la Démocratie (CNCD), which incorporated a number of opposition groups, such as the Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie (RCD), the Ligue Algérienne pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme, as well as independent trade unions. The effective police crackdown, coupled with splits within the CNCD, resulted in the slow death of the movement which had attracted insignificant support within the population. In order to understand the reasons why Algerians did not rebel, a historical perspective is necessary.

Algerians have experienced two traumatic events in their contemporary history: 1) the war of liberation from France which left hundreds of thousands of Algerian Muslim victims, and 2) the “red decade” of the 1990s, which resulted in 200,000 dead, mostly innocent civilians. The latter is probably the greatest deterrent against an uprising although the ingredients (bad governance, corruption, unemployment, and other development challenges) remain the same. In the aftermath of the tragic riots of 1988 (500 victims), the regime was compelled to initiate reforms, which, as it turned out, were a mere “democratic” façade for the incumbent rulers in the hope of offering the regime a semblance of legitimacy. The establishment of a multiparty system saw the emergence of a gamut of political parties which marked, at least in theory, the end of the FLN's hegemony, making it *un parti comme les autres*; that is, no longer the ruling party. The period 1989-1991 was the most exciting in Algeria's political history; it generated genuine optimism regarding the democratisation of the country. In addition to the plethora of political parties and associations that emerged on the political scene, a vibrant independent press also came to life. But the emergence of the catch-all, powerful Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which sought to be no less hegemonic than the FLN was during its heyday, resulted in a complex situation that led to the interruption in 1992 of the electoral process, which the FIS was poised to win. The civil strife that ensued has left an indelible mark on the Algerian psyche.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika's first term in office (1999-2004) brought hope to Algerians, who approved the 1999 Civil Concord and the 2005 National Reconciliation, in spite of the shortcomings of these laws (for instance, no truth commission was set up). But, even if terrorism has not been completely eradicated, the country has witnessed a return to relative security and stability. The economy also experienced some progress; the high oil and gas revenues enabled the government not only to repay its debt but also to invest heavily in the revamping of the country's infrastructure; public investment programmes (housing, water systems, education, health, and other public services) have been remarkable indeed. But the absence of a concomitant programme of institutionalisation and

transparency in the allocation of contracts and the lack of structural reforms has resulted in an increased level of corruption. What is more, the weakness of a solid private sector and the continued expansion of the informal economy have undermined the establishment of a sound economy, while discouraging foreign direct investments outside the hydrocarbons sector. In short, like his predecessors, Bouteflika failed to transform the economy into a productive one or to diversify it; Algeria remains a one-commodity producer and relies on imports for most of the country's needs. The botched liberalisation has not resulted in the emergence of a productive class of entrepreneurs; clearly, in the absence of productive small- and medium-size enterprises, investment in public works alone cannot reduce the level of unemployment among youths and university graduates.

The country has made few democratic advances under Bouteflika. If anything, Algeria has undergone a transition from "military authoritarianism" to "presidential authoritarianism." Not content with the institutional and constitutional arrangements of his predecessors, Bouteflika established a new form of authoritarianism, albeit one with a human face. The electoral promises he had made before being enthroned were obviously meant to gain international support. In reality, he made parliament, whose members have little popular legitimacy, a rubber-stamp institution. He has also shown disdain for the political parties. He even afforded a presidential alliance made up of three major parties, the FLN, RND, and MSP, which basically have no say in the decision-making process. Bouteflika marginalised the other parties to such a point that their existence is visible only during meaningless elections, as demonstrated by the electorate's low turnout. Amazingly, these parties, secular or religious, never aspire to accede to power, thus defying the role that political parties are supposed to play. The audio-visual sector has remained under the authority of the state, at the service of the president. The Constitution of 1996 limited presidential mandates to two terms; however, Bouteflika managed to have it revised in 2008 and be overwhelmingly passed by the deputies who first obtained a 300% salary raise, even though their salaries and benefits were already considerable compared to those of the average citizen. Unsurprisingly, Bouteflika was re-elected for a third term in 2009 despite his poor health, the mixed results of his presidency and the incredible corruption that has pervaded the country under his rule. Clearly, the root causes that led to the uprisings in the Arab countries, or to the October 1988 riots for that matter, are also present in Algeria. The legitimate questions are: why has there not been an uprising in Algeria? How has the regime responded to thwart a similar uprising?

Riots, protests, demonstrations, sit-ins and strikes have become widespread and occur on an almost daily basis; all sectors, including medical personnel, steelworkers, communal guards, lawyers, teachers, students, retired soldiers and the unemployed, have protested against their working conditions, salaries, and/or injustice. This piecemeal revolt has undermined the legitimacy of the

regime but has not led to a fully-fledged rebellion. There are many reasons for this. There is no doubt that the civil strife of the 1990s and the trauma it inflicted is still fresh in the memories of most Algerians, although the regime would be wrong to think that the marginalised youth and the under-unemployed, the *lumpenproletariat*, would forever have the same restraint as the rest of Algeria's population. The way many of the rioters acted in January 2011 is indicative of their destructive capacity. Had it not been for the better experienced and better trained security forces, which were ordered not to use lethal weapons against protesters, Algeria would certainly have experienced a situation similar to what happened in neighbouring Arab countries. The other reason why the protest movement that emerged after the January riots failed to carry the masses is the lack of popular base of its promoters. For instance, the head of the RCD, Saïd Sadi, is perceived as an atheist and a pawn of the regime; during the banned regular gatherings he co-organised with the CNCD on Saturdays, Sadi was mocked as *Saïd samedi*. There is a big gap today between the political and intellectual elite and the vast majority of the population. In addition, the opposition is highly divided; the regime has succeeded in obstructing the free functioning of the independent unions, autonomous associations and political parties. It has been able to create dissidence within these parties through cooptation and financial incentives. But these divisions are also due to the incapacity of these groups to form a solid, united alliance capable of exerting potent influence in the political and social realm. An additional reason is that Bouteflika still enjoys a degree of popularity, especially in the rural areas. He is perceived as the president who brought back stability and relative security. In Algeria, protesters attack the regime, a blurry notion, rather than the president, as was the case against Ben Ali, Mubarak, Qaddafi, Saleh, or Assad. One can also cite another reason: the turn of events in Libya; foreign intervention has served as a deterrent against an all-out rebellion. While Algerians do not think that this time the military will not shoot at unarmed civilians in case of uprising, as happened in 1988, they are not willing to see the country break apart and be occupied by foreign forces.

Algerian authorities have not been oblivious to the Arab Spring, which undoubtedly worried them, but not to the degree that one might have anticipated most probably because they believe that the protests are socioeconomic in nature and that they can address the grievances through economic remedies (distribution of highly-subsidised housing, salary increases...). In fact, they repeat ad nauseam that Algeria is not Tunisia or Egypt; Bouteflika refused to immediately respond to the protests in January and February because he refused to succumb to pressure from the streets. According to one of his associates, Bouteflika stated vehemently that "I will not initiate reforms under anyone's threat." Nevertheless, the authorities did react by lifting on 23rd February the state of emergency that had been in place since February 1992, following the annulment of the electoral process and the banning of the FIS. Regardless, the new legislation allows the military to carry on

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their role, as they did under emergency rules, to fight terrorism and subversion. Demonstrations in the capital Algiers are still forbidden.

On 15th April, President Bouteflika announced a number of major reforms, to “strengthen democracy,” which would include the amendment of the constitution as well as the revision of the legislative framework pertaining to the electoral law, the law on political parties and the media (audio-visual) law. He also set up a commission – Commission Nationale de Consultations sur les Réformes Politiques (CNCRP) – whose task was to collect the opinions and proposals of those consulted. The CNCRP’s mission was also to make proposals to the president who will then submit them for approval either by way of referendum or parliamentary vote. So far, the government has allowed the creation of private audio-visual channels and the increased quota (30%) of women in parliament.

The question remains whether the regime is genuinely seeking to bring about tangible structural reforms and initiate an authentic transition to democracy. The slow manner with which the modest measures are being implemented raises doubts as to the willingness to transform the obsolete political system and the failed developmental policies. Furthermore, the president has not shown any willingness so far to call for a constitutional assembly, set up a government of transition, and to establish an independent national commission for the revision of the constitution, among other initiatives that would prove that the country is heading toward a democratic polity that would spare Algeria from a bloody uprising. The youths in the country, particularly in the poor neighbourhoods, are restless. Widespread discontent is evident throughout the country. The growing gap between the nouveaux riches, who often made their fortunes through illicit means, and the poor, coupled with precarious socioeconomic conditions, is a dangerous cocktail which can be sparked at any moment with unpredictable consequences. While the October 1988 riots were a tragedy, an eventual uprising today will certainly not be a farce.

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