



Against the Army: Algeria's Anti-government Protests

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For over a year, anti-government protests have been ongoing in Algeria. Demonstrators are demanding the establishment of a new cabinet which would not be associated with the former regime. These aspirations were not met by the presidential election that took place in December 2019. Most Algerians boycotted the poll, criticising the links between the candidates and the army. Algerian lower officers expressed support for the protesters' demands. The European Union, which is Algeria's most important trading partner, could initiate mediation between the army and protesters.

The Course of the Protests and Election Campaign. In February 2019, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who has been in power since 1999, declared that he would run in the presidential election announced for April 2019. Bouteflika's announcement sparked massive, peaceful protests. Initially, demonstrators demanded the resignation of the president. The army supported these demands and, in March 2019, its' commander-in-chief, Gen. Ahmed Gaid Saleh, called on the president to resign. Bouteflika stepped down, but the demonstrators did not end their protests. He was seen as a puppet president, realising the interests of the influential, corrupt elite led by his younger brother, Said Bouteflika. Following the protests, the presidential election was postponed until December. All five candidates in the election were associated with the old regime and the army. Most protesters boycotted the election. Officially, the turnout was 39%, but independent sources estimate it at 10%.

The election was won by Abdelmajid Tebboune. His role as prime minister during Bouteflika's regime prevented him from ensuring social legitimacy. Despite the president's promised fight against corruption and the release of arrested activists, Algerians are still participating in mass demonstrations calling for a change of government, considering the changes announced by Tebboune as cosmetic.

The Role of the Army. The army, enjoying a strong position since Algerian independence in 1962, contributed to Bouteflika's success in the 1999 election (officers unanimously supported his candidacy when he won a majority in an earlier vote in the barracks). However, during his presidency, Bouteflika tried to strengthen control over the army. This was demonstrated by the dismissal of the presidential defence advisor associated with the army, and the liquidation of the Department of Intelligence and Security in 2015. His goal was to integrate the army, intelligence and police under the direct supervision of the president, who also serves as defence minister. However, the army quickly gained the opportunity to rebuild influence. The corruption scandal related to the detection of over 700 kg of cocaine on a ship in the port of Oran in 2018 and president's worsening health condition contributed to this. The head of the army, at the time also deputy minister of defence, was Gen. Ahmad Gaid Salah. He dismissed, among others, the head of the Algerian police, the head of the gendarmerie and five of the six regional army commanders, replacing them with loyal security personnel. In September 2019, a military court sentenced Said Bouteflika to 15 years in prison for plotting against the army.

Protests were used by the military to consolidate political influence. The goal was to maintain a system that guaranteed access to government decisions, including those regarding the state budget. Despite the deteriorating economic situation (foreign currency reserves decreased from \$179 billion in 2014 to \$80 billion in 2019), expenditure on military and defence exceeded 32% of the national budget in 2019 (Poland's record high expenditure on defence in 2020 accounted for 11.5% of the budget). Army pressure was decisive in organising the presidential election, which the protesters opposed. None of the candidates responded to demonstrators' demands to limit military influence. On the contrary, they thanked the army for the intervention which led to the removal of Bouteflika from power.

The International Context. Since taking power, Tebboune has been trying to gain social legitimacy through international activities. The president is particularly involved in trying to resolve the conflict in Libya. This was evidenced by the visit of the President of the Government of National Accord, Fayez al-Sarraj, to Algiers in January, the meeting of Algerian Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum with Abdul-Hadi al-Hawaj (his counterpart in the government of General Haftar) in February this year, and president's aspirations to organise meetings of Libyan neighbours in Algeria. At the same time, during a meeting with Turkish President Recep Erdoğan, Tebboune refused to support Turkey's military operations in Libya, pointing out that Algeria is committed to maintaining neutrality. He also referred to the principle of non-interference in foreign conflicts, contained in the Algerian constitution. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres proposed for the post of Libya special envoy the former Algerian foreign minister and diplomat in the African Union, Ramtan Lamamra.

The president pursues a policy of consolidating Algeria's image as a neutral mediator in the eyes of foreign partners, seeking in this way to gain international support for his position. The possibilities of obtaining financial assistance associated with such a perception would be beneficial for the Algerian army given its cooperation with the United States NATO and the EU in the field of security. Cooperation with NATO focused on the terrorist threat takes place within the framework of the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Science for Peace and Security programme. The U.S. had been spending over \$1 million annually between 2008 and 2015 for training on anti-terrorism for Algerian officers. Algeria provides the U.S. with information on terrorist organisations in North Africa and the Sahel. In 2018, Gilles de Kerchove, the EU coordinator for the fight against terrorism, went to Algeria for a series of meetings to prepare a second ministerial strategic dialogue between the EU and Algeria on regional security and combating terrorism. The Algerian government cooperates with the EU in monitoring radical members of the Algerian diaspora. For the EU, cooperation on security also involves development assistance to tackle the root causes of instability, such as poor quality of life. In 2018 to 2020, the EU will provide Algeria with up to €132 million. Also, the Algerian authorities plan to spend about \$30 billion in 2019 to 2023, on weapons and defence systems from the U.S. and EU.

For the EU, cooperation in the energy sector is also important. Algeria is the third-largest supplier of gas to the EU (trade in this resource accounts for 85% of its export revenues). In 2015, the EU and Algeria announced energy cooperation to prevent climate change. A year later, the EU and Algeria Energy Forum took place, during which the EU committed to investing in Algerian energy projects regarding the development of renewable energy technologies. Algeria is in the group of countries with the highest potential for the use of renewable energy sources in the world.

Conclusions. The army's influence on Algeria's policy is the root cause of the protests. In the face of Tebboune's connections with the army and the previous regime, reforms are unlikely. Thus, the president's actions on the international level will not ensure the social legitimacy of his authority. The weakness of the protesters lies within the lack of leadership. Although the demonstrations were attended by more than a million protesters, this lack of leadership prevents the consolidation of the opposition, which would allow the movement to negotiate with the government and seek support abroad.

Preserving the status quo will contribute to political stagnation and repeated demonstrations in the future. These, in turn, will deepen the destabilisation of the state, thereby affecting cooperation between the EU and Algeria. The EU, which is Algeria's largest trading partner, can be a mediator between protesters and the government. It could make support for Algeria's efforts to become a member of the World Trade Organisation and its conflict operations in Libya conditional on increasing civilian control over the army and limiting its role in politics. According to a study conducted by the Brookings Institute in 2019, 81% of junior officers also support system change in Algeria. The latter could become a bridge to aid understanding between demonstrators and the army.

Although the quality of life in Algeria is better than in Libya or Egypt, the worsening economic conditions will increase public discontent. The lack of agreement between the authorities and the protesters may result in an escalation of demonstrations and lead to the outbreak of violence. The use of violence in Algeria by terrorist groups from Libya and the Sahel will harm EU security. Due to the persistently low prices of energy raw materials, further EU development assistance to Algeria for the diversification of state revenue sources would be beneficial.