



Post-Bouteflika Algeria: Growing Protests, Signs of Repression

Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Briefing N°68

Algiers/Brussels, 26 April 2019

What's new? On 2 April, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Algeria's aging and ailing president, resigned under pressure from the military. The move was the result of five weeks of street protests at the prospect of Bouteflika running for an unprecedented fifth term in elections originally scheduled for mid-April.

Why does it matter? The end of Bouteflika's twenty-year rule augurs a period of uncertainty. The regime so far remains in place and has stepped up repression to persuade protesters to accept a regime-led transition and go home. But protesters distrust the interim leadership's promises and are clamouring for more fundamental change.

What should be done? The regime and protesters should commit to non-violence and launch a dialogue that aims to establish a roadmap for a transition whose outcome ought to be broadly acceptable to protesters, regime leaders and society at large, lest police repression escalate and street protests devolve into chaos and violence.

I. Overview

It took five weeks of street protests to end the reign of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, thwarting his fifth term as president. But now, three weeks later, a stalemate looms as protesters and security forces disagree on the pace and content of a political transition. Key regime figures rejected by the street remain in power, prompting demonstrators to call for a clean break with the past: the departure of all Bouteflika-era figures and the drafting of a new constitution. In response, the authorities have banned all demonstrations, apart from those held on Fridays, and are showing a new assertiveness. Yet the protests are only growing. The Algerian leadership will therefore need to give clear signals that real change is underway: by sacking governors, dissolving parliament and postponing presidential elections. Above all, it should embark immediately on a dialogue with civil society leaders accepted by the protesters to reach agreement on the outlines of a political transition that would serve to restore confidence and prevent an uncontrolled cycle of violence. Change in Algeria should come from within, not from outside: any external interference now risks undermining the legitimacy of the transition taking place.

II. A Repressive Turn

On 2 April, Ahmed Gaid Salah, the army chief of staff and vice minister of defence, secured Bouteflika's resignation by virtue of the latter's incapacity to carry out his duties as president, in accordance with Article 102 of the constitution. Protesters cried victory, yet soon realised that change had been cosmetic.¹ Bouteflika was gone but the regime (*le pouvoir*) was still there: in the persons of Abdelkader Bensalah, the head of the National Assembly (parliament's upper house), now interim president; Noureddine Bedoui, the new prime minister appointed when the government fell in mid-March, and the previous cabinet's interior minister; Tayeb Belaiz, the head of the Constitutional Council (who subsequently resigned on 16 April), a former interior minister; and Gaid Salah himself, the transition's architect now sitting unambiguously at the pinnacle of power.

In the protesters' eyes, replacing Bouteflika with Bensalah, who promptly announced a presidential election for 4 July, was another insult. The move was consistent with the constitution, which mandates elections within 90 days of the sitting president's departure, but protesters, who have ruled the streets since 22 February, viewed it as a regime manoeuvre to dissolve their movement (*hirak*) and ignore their demand for a system overhaul.² Bouteflika's forced departure, far from ending the uprising, encouraged people to reaffirm their ultimate goal.

In response, the authorities banned all but the weekly Friday marches.³ During the week of 8-11 April, the police went out of their way to suppress all protests in the capital, especially those led by students. They acted more firmly than during previous weeks, using water cannons, tear gas canisters, rubber bullets and, for the first time, sound bombs, as well as arresting some protest leaders.⁴ Yet demonstrators managed to retake Grande Poste Square, the movement's emblematic gathering place in the capital, which they had briefly lost to the police.

In anticipation of the eighth weekly march, on Friday 12 April, the police sent reinforcements to Algiers, while units of the national gendarmerie deployed on the capital's outskirts, especially at access points, to prevent protesters from surrounding towns, such as Béjaïa, Bouira, Tizi Ouzou, Blida and Tipaza, from joining their compatriots.⁵ On the day itself, huge protests unfolded in 26 of Algeria's 48 provinces, including in Algiers, where hundreds of thousands of people poured into the streets.⁶ Despite repressive counter-measures, protesters showed no sign of giving in. To the contrary: the pattern was repeated a week later, on Friday 19 April.

The 12 April was the first time since the demonstrations started on 22 February that protesters openly expressed their hostility toward the army, shouting slogans

¹ Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators, members of civil society organisations, Algiers, 5 April 2019.

² Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators, members of civil society organisations, Algiers, 12 April 2019.

³ The authorities made no official statement, but members of the security forces said they had received instructions to this effect. Crisis Group interviews, police officers, Algiers, 10 April 2019.

⁴ Crisis Group observations, Algiers, 10-12 April 2019.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Crisis Group observations, Algiers, 12 April 2019. "Direct : 8e vendredi de manifestations populaires. Le peuple maintient la pression", Interlignes.com, 12 April 2019.

such as “Gaid Salah, clear out!” and “We said *all*. That means *all!*” – a reference to the Bouteflika clan and those around them.⁷ In the protesters’ view, the fact that Gaid Salah is imposing the pace and content of the transition is a betrayal of their cause.⁸ The military leader has actively fed this perception. In a communiqué on 10 April, for example, he said that “foreign parties” had infiltrated the protest movement – a statement that protesters saw as designed to discredit dissent. Salah also called protesters’ demand for a total break with the system “unrealistic” and insisted that constitutional rules be strictly respected.⁹ Until that moment, many had viewed Salah as a supporter of their cause, notably after his 26 March speech in which he stated that Bouteflika should resign.¹⁰

III. The Point of No Return?

So far, the protests have lacked any identifiable organisation or leadership. No political figure has stood out or spoken up; the only voices to be heard have been those of ordinary citizens. Independent trade unions, human rights associations and youth groups – all capable of staging protests on their own – have effectively replaced opposition political parties, some of which at times have been part of the government, as the political address of Algerian dissent. Protesters associate these parties with *le pouvoir*. They are demanding a transition of power to a new generation – new faces that have never been part of or close to the system.¹¹

The lack of identifiable leadership among protesters allows for staging mass action but not for formulating a clear set of broadly supported demands. Political parties are trying to take advantage of this weakness to stage a comeback, and they have seized upon the elections question in particular. On 16 April, several opposition parties, from centre-leftists to Islamists – the Rally for Culture and Democracy, the Movement of Society for Peace and the Party for Justice and Development – released a joint statement calling for an election boycott as long as the authorities fail to carry out concrete reforms, including establishing an independent electoral commission to ensure fair vote counting.¹² On 18 April some political party figures met with the interim president, Bensalah, who invited them to participate in a national dialogue, the aim of which would be to create an independent agency to prepare for a presidential election on 4 July.¹³ The protesters, however, backed by civil society

⁷ Crisis Group observations, Algiers, 12 April 2019.

⁸ Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators, members of civil society organisations, Algiers, 10-12 April 2019.

⁹ “Transition : Gaid Salah accuse ‘des parties étrangères’ de chercher à imposer leur solution”, *Tout sur l’Algérie*, 10 April 2019.

¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators, Algiers, March-April 2019. “Gaid Salah annonce l’application de l’article 102 de la Constitution”, *HuffPost Algérie*, 26 March 2019.

¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators, Algiers, March-April 2019.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, political activists, Algiers, March-April 2019. “Les partis de l’opposition ne participeront pas à la présidentielle du 4 juillet”, *Algérie Presse Service*, 16 April 2019.

¹³ Crisis Group interviews, Algiers, and by phone elsewhere in the country, 19 April 2019. Bensalah met with three political figures on 18 April: Abdelaziz Ziari, a former president of the National Popular Assembly; Abdelaziz Belaid, president of the Front El-Moustakbal; and Miloud Brahimi, a lawyer. Bensalah subsequently called for a meeting with political parties to be held on 22 April, but

organisations, fear that this dialogue is a trick – that the government will conduct it exclusively with the parties and associations it has long since co-opted.¹⁴

The marches on 12 and 19 April were a way for Algerians to express their opposition to any initiative coming from Bensalah and other regime figures. Though the regime has resorted to more repressive actions and hardened its rhetoric (by claiming external interference in the demonstrations and warning protesters not to obstruct ways of ending the crisis),¹⁵ for now this tougher stance appears to be backfiring: it is only convincing protesters to continue their fight.¹⁶ A number of civil society organisations and political figures, including many former leftists who resigned from their parties during regime attempts to co-opt them a decade ago, expressed their indignation at the coarsening of police tactics.¹⁷

The protest movement has only grown, as other forces join the fray: army generals who had been sent into early retirement in recent years; security commanders and officers frustrated by the 2015 dismantling of the Department of Intelligence and Security; and businesspeople prevented from maximising their profits by the Bouteflika clan.¹⁸ Many decided to throw their weight behind the protest movement, either openly or behind the scenes, and are now encouraging it to expand into other sectors, including the judiciary and the labour movement, to put broader pressure on the regime and effect a more drastic political transformation.¹⁹

Protests also are taking place in the country's Kabylia (Berber-speaking) region, but the demands raised there are no different from those in other cities.²⁰ It is the first time since independence in 1962 that the country has seen such unity in the demand for regime change. Protesters chanted: "No Berbers, no Arabs, no ethnicity or religion! We're all Algerians!"²¹ Social media are saturated with calls for a general strike aimed at paralysing the country's economic nerve centres, which would hurt the vital interests of government leaders, military commanders and businesspeople closely tied to *le pouvoir*.

The movement has grown in a seemingly helter-skelter way, each locality sprouting its own methods and demands. On 12 April, twelve autonomous unions joined the demonstrations. The next day, university-based groups, journalists and other activists called on the population to form citizen committees to work toward a demo-

these parties declined the invitation. "Elections : rencontre sur les mécanismes de création d'une instance indépendante", Algérie Presse Service, 23 April 2019.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, political and civil society activists, Algiers, April 2019.

¹⁵ "Gaid Salah : les tentatives ciblant la stabilité de l'Algérie ont échoué et vont encore échouer", Algérie Presse Service, 18 April 2019.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators, independent political personalities, civil society activists, Algiers, March-April 2019.

¹⁷ Crisis Group interviews, civil society and political activists, Algiers, 12-13 April 2019.

¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, former senior executives, retired military, investigative journalists, civil society activists, Algerian businessmen, Paris, Algiers, March-April 2019.

¹⁹ Crisis Group interviews, former senior executives, retired military, investigative journalists, civil society activists, Paris, Algiers, March-April 2019.

²⁰ On 12 April, strikes broke out throughout the country, notably in Béjaïa (Kabylia), where municipal service workers had already walked off the job weeks before, including in Béjaïa's seaport.

²¹ Crisis Group observations, Algiers, 12 April 2019.

cratic transition.²² A judges' association announced that it would boycott supervision of the upcoming presidential election.²³ Likewise, on 16 April, 130 mayors in the northern region (out of 1,500 nationwide), mainly belonging to the historical opposition party Front des forces socialistes, which is predominantly Kabyle, announced their refusal to help organise the 4 July presidential election in their municipalities.²⁴ On 17 April, lawyers staged marches in different cities, calling for the "independence of the judiciary" and "respect for the sovereignty of the people".²⁵ On 14 April, workers in the oil and gas sector went on strike to support the movement, notably in Hassi Messaoud (heart of the country's fossil fuel industry) and in Hassi Rmel in the Laghouat region.²⁶

Combined, these developments are inspiring ordinary Algerians to talk about their actions having reached the point of no return. The pace of events suggests that they will not stop protesting, even if repression increases, until the authorities give clear signals that they are ready to make a clean break with the past – even if it remains unclear what precisely this rupture would entail.²⁷

IV. What Next?

In the absence of clear signals that the regime is dismantling its own apparatus, the dangerous cycle of mass action prompting repressive responses sparking ever larger protests, is likely to continue. The protesters' demands have remained inchoate, but they seem to aim for, or could easily escalate to become, the complete departure of all regime figures. In a statement published on 18 March, a group of 22 civil society organisations outlined key steps of a transition, including the interim president's departure; the creation of a high commission for the transition, composed of persons "with moral authority" and broadly accepted by the population; the establishment of a transitional government, which would organise a dialogue gathering all sectors of society and representatives of the protest movement; the election of a constituent assembly; the drafting of a new constitution; and a subsequent return to constitutional rule.²⁸

While the organisations advancing these demands are untainted by association with the regime, they also appear to mainly represent the educated urban middle class. Demands from other sectors of society vary by locality and the group present-

²² "Des universitaires appellent les Algériens à former des comités citoyens", *HuffPost Algérie*, 13 April 2019.

²³ "Le Club des magistrats refuse de superviser les élections présidentielles du 4 juillet", *Tout sur l'Algérie*, 13 April 2019.

²⁴ Crisis Group phone interview, Bejaïa municipal council member, Tunis, 16 April 2019; and "Encadrement de l'élection présidentielle: Le niet des maires et des SG des communes", *El Watan*, 16 April 2019.

²⁵ "Les robes noires manifestent à travers le pays pour l'indépendance de la justice", *Algérie Service Presse*, 17 April 2019.

²⁶ "Direct : 8e vendredi de manifestations populaires. Le peuple maintient la pression", *op. cit.*

²⁷ Crisis Group interviews, demonstrators, civil society activists, Algiers, 12-13 April 2019.

²⁸ "La société algérienne propose sa feuille de route pour l'instauration de la nouvelle république", *Ligue algérienne des droits de l'homme*, 18 March 2019.

ing them. Some have mentioned the need for certain signals from *le pouvoir* that would indicate its intent to transform itself. These could include sacking governors, postponing presidential elections, dissolving parliament and establishing a national unity government.²⁹ Some civil society organisations and unions are reported to be drafting a proposal for a future national-unity government's composition.³⁰ But there is no sense of coordination or broad consensus other than the vaguely defined desire for a break with the past.

The regime has taken advantage of the protest movement's lack of unified leadership by seeking to co-opt and divide it, and – under the mantle of an anti-corruption campaign – settling internal scores. In April, security forces arrested Ali Haddad, the former chair of Algeria's Business Leaders' Forum (Forum des chefs d'entreprises) and the four billionaire Kouninef brothers as part of an apparent anti-corruption crusade. All five businessmen have been regime pillars, though not allies of Gaid Salah.³¹ The corruption charges they face are identical to those levelled in the past against persons inside the military in what many interpreted at the time as score settling and which, according to a former senior official, "did nothing to change the system".³² As a further step later in the month, authorities arrested Issad Rebrab, a billionaire who is considered Algeria's richest person, in a striking example of the state going after businesspeople who have long backed Bouteflika opponents.³³ Instead of the regime reassuring protesters that it is willing to fight the scourge of corruption, be it by Bouteflika supporters or opponents, many believe that it is trying to use the pretense of an anti-corruption campaign to regain its footing, engaging in an internal purge of sorts while doing nothing to root out corruption within the regime itself.³⁴

Should the regime's gambit fail, namely if people continue to mass in the streets calling for a complete system overhaul, it might choose to step up repressive measures in order to deter participation by anyone other than hard-core activists and then crack down hard on the holdouts. But in the current atmosphere, even such deterrent measures may fail to put an end to mass action.

In the face of the risk of a bloody and destabilising showdown, the best possible way forward ought to have the following three elements: a mutual commitment to non-violence; a regime-citizen dialogue that is broadly inclusive of the main sectors of society; and, through this discussion, an attempt to work toward accommodating protesters' principal demands for change as described above, but with guarantees to the regime that it will not be the target of revenge so as not to push it into a corner.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, civil society and political activists, Algiers, Paris, March-April 2019.

³⁰ Crisis Group interviews, human rights activists, leaders of Rassemblement action jeunesse (civil society organisation), Algiers, 12 April 2019.

³¹ See "Algérie : le simulacre de justice de Gaïd Salah", *Mondafrique*, 24 April 2019.

³² Crisis Group phone interview, former senior executive, Tunis, 23 April 2019.

³³ Agence France Presse, 23 April 2019. For background, see Crisis Group Middle East and North Africa Report N°192, *Breaking Algeria's Economic Paralysis*, 19 November 2018.

³⁴ Crisis Group phone interviews, civil society activists, Tunis, 23 April 2019.

V. Conclusion

Post-Bouteflika Algeria stands at a fork in the road. It could go down the path of substantive reforms and initial steps to change the system. Alternatively, the regime may resort to its more habitual autocratic and repressive tendencies. That latter course ultimately might also end up with the system's collapse, but at a far higher human cost.

The safest, most sensible option would be an open dialogue between regime and protest leaders over terms for a broadly acceptable transition that reflects the protesters' most immediate concerns while reassuring the regime that the outcome will not lead to a cycle of reprisal. To fashion such a transition would be to thread a small-eyed needle, but now that Algeria has embarked on its post-Bouteflika journey, there would appear to be no better alternative.

Algiers/Brussels, 26 April 2019



International Crisis Group

Headquarters

Avenue Louise 149, 1050 Brussels, Belgium

Tel: +32 2 502 90 38. Fax: +32 2 502 50 38

brussels@crisisgroup.org

New York Office

newyork@crisisgroup.org

Washington Office

washington@crisisgroup.org

London Office

london@crisisgroup.org

Regional Offices and Field Representation

Crisis Group also operates out of over 25 locations in Africa, Asia, Europe, the Middle East and Latin America.

See www.crisisgroup.org for details

PREVENTING WAR. SHAPING PEACE.