



Algeria at the Crossroads, Between Continuity and Change

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Abstract

Algeria is the only country in North Africa which seems to be relatively immune to the so-called “Arab spring”. Popular protests did erupt in Algeria at precisely the same time as they were enveloping neighbouring countries, but the demands of the protesters never reached a popular consensus calling for the demise of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Drawing on the country’s extensive monetary reserves, the Algerian authorities have responded by implementing a series of economic and social reforms, which have further weakened the resolve and unity of the protesters. After repealing the emergency laws in late February 2011, the government appeared to have regained the upper hand, but strikes and demonstrations have continued. Algeria still faces the real prospect of future popular unrest if the government fails in its promise to enact wide ranging political and economic reforms by early 2012. Given the country’s geostrategic importance at both regional and international levels, the international community and in particular the EU must do more in order to ensure that Algeria is set on a sustainable path for the future.

Keywords: *Algeria / Political reforms / Economic reforms / Democracy / Arab revolts*

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by Andrea Dessì*

Introduction

With Libya engulfed in conflict, Tunisia and Egypt in the midst of uncertain political transitions and the monarchy in Morocco seemingly intent on relinquishing some its executive powers, Algeria is the only North African country which has yet to be visibly affected by the so-called “Arab spring”. Popular protests did erupt in Algeria at precisely the same time as they were enveloping neighbouring Tunisia and Egypt, but the demands of the protesters never coalesced into a unified movement calling for the demise of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in power since 1999. While this has allowed the government to project an image of continuity to the outside world, one cannot discount the possibility of Algeria experiencing a delayed reaction to the waves of change that have spread across the region since early 2011. Algeria’s recent history is littered with recurring outbursts of popular unrest, and while today the government appears to have regained the upper hand, the combined dangers of a deepening economic malaise, widespread social discontent, and a growing crisis of legitimacy affecting Algeria’s political institutions do not bode well for the future. In light of recent developments in the region, this paper explores the causes of social discontent in Algeria, while highlighting the reasons why the country has largely been spared the type of coordinated mass uprisings witnessed by other states in the region. Finally, the paper addresses Bouteflika’s delicate balancing act between continuity and change, while stressing that a continued failure to address Algeria’s underlining features of unsustainability could result in a new era of instability and violence in a country which is still coming to terms with a bloody decade of civil war.

1. Algeria’s interrupted democratic transition and Bouteflika’s false promise of change

With the conflict in Libya seemingly entering its final stages, international attention has once again turned to neighbouring Algeria as the only country in the region which has not been directly affected by the “Arab spring”. The recent decision by the Algerian government to give refuge to the wife and three sons of Colonel Mu’ammar Gaddafi, coupled with (yet unproven) allegations of logistical and military aid to the embattled Libyan leader, have underscored the fact that Algeria is by no means a force for change in the region. Algerian authorities have been profoundly uncomfortable with the recent spread of mass protests and this not least because many of those same socio-economic and political grievances that brought to the collapse of autocratic regimes in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya are also present within Algerian society.

Paper prepared for the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), September 2011.

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The authorities in Algeria have gone to great lengths to dispel the notion that they too may soon find themselves in the crosshairs of their population. They cite the fact that Algeria has already experienced its “spring of revolt” and that this occurred long before the recent events taking place throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In October 1988, two-weeks of mass protests brought the entire country to a standstill, resulting in an abrupt end to twenty-seven years of single-party rule by Algeria’s National Liberation Front (*Front de libération nationale*, FLN). The protests led directly, in June 1990, to Algeria becoming the first Arab country to experiment with notions of democratic reform and free elections. In 1989 Algeria adopted a new constitution and this was soon followed by a series of liberalizing laws, which were approved the following year. These developments brought to the institutionalization of political pluralism in the country, an increase in the legislative authority of the Algerian National Assembly (*Assemblée populaire nationale*, APN) and provisions that enshrined - at least on paper - relatively free print media laws, an independent judiciary, the right to form autonomous civil society groups and the freedom of peaceful assembly.¹

While these reforms amounted to a change of historic proportions for both Algeria and the wider region, the country’s advances towards democratic governance were abruptly cut short in January 1992. Algeria’s first free elections were won by the Islamist-rooted Islamic Salvation Front (*Front islamique du salut*, FIS), and by December 1991, the FIS had secured a landslide victory in Algeria’s first round of parliamentary elections. The prospect of an Islamist takeover caused much apprehension among Algeria’s secular-minded elites and, as the second electoral round approached, the military opted for intervention. Scheduled for 11 January 1992, the second round of elections were abolished by the army, which then proceeded to dissolve parliament and force Algeria’s President, General Chadli Bendjedid (1979-1992), to resign. The army’s coup was completed by mid-January with the banning of the FIS party, the suspension of the 1989 constitution and the setting up of a five-member High Council for Security (*Haut Comité d’État*, HCE), which effectively governed the country until elections were restored in November 1995.² This course of events gave a decisive blow to Algeria’s reform process and the stage was set for what soon became a full-blown civil war that pitched the military against a growing number of armed Islamist groups. Violence and instability followed, causing the deaths of over 200,000 people, and the legacy of Algeria’s “lost decade” has had a profound effect on the country.

The conflict effectively consolidated the army’s control over all aspects of Algerian society, and given that security became the government’s prime concern, no real attempt was made to address those underlining socio-economic and political grievances that had contributed to the outbreak of mass protests in October 1988. Algeria’s advances in the realm of civil liberties and democratic governance were quickly overturned by the military’s use of emergency powers to govern the country. These emergency laws remained in place for nineteen years (1992-2011) and

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¹ Francesco Tamburini, “Algeria: il lungo cammino verso la consacrazione del ‘regime ibrido’”, in *Africa*, Vol. 65., No. 1-4 (marzo-dicembre 2010), p. 82-84.

² James D. Le Sueur, *Algeria since 1989: Between Terror and Democracy*, New York and London, Zed Books, 2010, p. 50-54.

effectively allowed the military to overrun many of the freedoms tentatively gained during the country's brief flirtation with democratic reform in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Long recognized as the "backbone"³ of the Algerian state, since Algeria secured its independence from France in 1962, the army has always maintained a primary, albeit somewhat hidden, role as the true locus of power in the country. This has been particularly evident since 1992. In April 1999, with the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika - the first Algerian president not directly linked to the armed forces - many hoped the country could resume its process of political reform. Bouteflika is indeed credited with a series of important achievements, such as the beginnings of a demilitarization of Algerian politics and an overall restoration of security to the country. Today, however, the cautious optimism that had welcomed his candidacy in the late 1990s has evaporated. Rather than being marked by genuine change, Bouteflika's presidency has increasingly been associated with the continuation of authoritarian methods, and while the military's influence over politics has somewhat diminished, Algerian politics are today overwhelmingly dominated by the executive.⁴ This has resulted in Algeria making a somewhat tenuous transition from a military autocracy to what many now describe as a "presidential autocracy",⁵ and it should come as no surprise that *Freedom House* has consistently placed Algeria's political system on par with that of its regional neighbours - Tunisia, Egypt and Libya - all of which are given the status of "not free".⁶

2. Algeria and the Arab revolts

In early January 2011, as popular protests gathered steam in neighbouring Tunisia, Algeria experienced a wave of violent unrest that spread to twenty of the country's forty-eight provinces - including in the capital Algiers and the second largest city, Oran.⁷ Riots and demonstrations have long been the norm in Algeria and while in the past these have predominantly been of a localized nature, the protests of early 2011 were the first "spontaneous nationwide uprising"⁸ since October 1988.

³ Isabelle Werenfels, "Algeria: System Continuity Through Elite Change", in Volker Perthes (ed.), *Arab Elites: Negotiating the Politics of Change*, Boulder and London, Lynne Rienner, 2004, p. 173.

⁴ Rachid Tlemçani, *Algeria Under Bouteflika. Civil Strife and National Reconciliation*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2008 (Carnegie Papers ; 7), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec7_tlemceni_algeria_final.pdf.

⁵ Yahia Zoubir and Hakim Darbouche, "Algeria. Quale futuro?", in Karim Mezran, Silvia Colombo, Saskia van Genugten (a cura di), *L'Africa mediterranea. Storia e futuro*, Roma, Donzelli, 2011, p. 36.

⁶ Freedom House, "Algeria", in *Freedom in the World 2011*, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&country=7982&year=2011>.

⁷ Andrew Lebovich, "Will February 12 bring revolution to Algeria?", in *The Middle East Channel*, 9 February 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/02/09/will_february_12_mark_a_revolution_in_algeria; Azzedine Layachi, "Algeria's Rebellion by Installments", in *Middle East Report Online*, 12 March 2011, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero031211>.

⁸ Azzedine Layachi, "Algeria's Rebellion by Installments", *cit.*

Social tension had been on the rise for some time, and in December 2010 sixteen separate riots were reported in and around Algiers.⁹ Then, beginning on the night of 4 January, Algeria experienced four days of continuous unrest with scores of frustrated youths venting their anger against the police in scenes that were reminiscent of the violent protests of 1988. The demands of the rioters ranged from calls for more freedoms, job opportunities and better living conditions, to a reconfirming of state subsidies on basic food items and an end to the growing corruption present in the country.

Disturbances were first reported in Babe el Oued, a popular neighbourhood of the capital, where 100,000 people live crammed into an area that covers less than half a square mile.¹⁰ From there, the riots quickly spiralled out of control, spreading to other regions and causing widespread damage to shops, governmental buildings and public property. By 10 January, when calm had largely been restored, the final tally was of five dead, 800 wounded and more than 1,100 arrested.¹¹ Compared to previous occurrences of popular unrest in the country, the authorities displayed a certain degree of restraint when confronting the rioters. In 1988, the army and police killed 500 unarmed civilians in less than two weeks,¹² while in 2001, during the “black spring” riots that took place in the Berber majority region of Kabylia, ten days of unrest resulted in at least 90 deaths and 5,000 injured.¹³

The January 2011 riots never assumed overtly political tones and the demands of the protesters remained largely localized, grounded as they were in calls for more freedoms and socio-economic opportunities rather than a clear and coordinated attack on the regime. Towards the end of January, however, things appeared to change and a series of opposition parties, civil society organizations, independent trade unions and human rights groups gathered under a new movement called the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (*Coordination nationale pour le changement et la démocratie*, CNCD). Founded on 21 January, the group has articulated a clear set of demands, which include a call for “greater democracy” and “social justice” in Algeria, an end to the 1992 state of emergency, the release of all previously arrested protesters, greater job opportunities and a relaxing of the governments’ stringent media laws.¹⁴ While the CNCD was immediately subject to criticism and boycotts from various opposition parties,¹⁵ the group called for a mass rally in the capital on 12 February with a warning that protests would continue every Saturday until their demands were met.¹⁶

⁹ Jack Brown, “Algeria’s Midwinter Uproar”, in *Middle East Report Online*, 20 January 2011, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero012011>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Beatrice Khadige (AFP), “Unrest eases in Algeria as prices drop”, 10 January 2011, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hLhKLduS1LRRYOBpAaq5kpyJNbuQ>.

¹² James D. Le Sueur, *Algeria since 1989: Between Terror and Democracy*, *cit.*, p. 32.

¹³ Ligue algérienne de défense des droits de l’homme (LADDH), *Rapport Algérie. La répression du Printemps Noir, avril 2001-avril 2002*, April 2002, <http://www.tamazgha.fr/IMG/LADDH.pdf>.

¹⁴ Alexis Arieff, *Algeria: Current Issues*, Washington, Congressional Research Service, 13 April 2011 (CRS Report for Congress ; RS21532), p. 2, <http://opencrs.com/document/RS21532>.

¹⁵ Major opposition parties such as the FFS (*Front des forces socialistes*) and the Workers Party (*Parti des travailleurs*, PT) refused to participate in the CNCD’s calls for protests. See Louisa Hanoune, “‘Orange Revolution’ in Algiers?”, in *Fraternité*, 10 February 2011, <http://panafricannews.blogspot.com/2011/02/revolution-in-algiers-editorial-by.html>; “Karim Tabbou: ‘En Algérie, les agitations ne vont pas forcément dans le sens de la démocratie’”, in *Algérie-Politique*, 24

The formation of the CNCD was a clear attempt to emulate similar protest movements in Egypt and Tunisia, and while the group did not succeed in attracting the full spectrum of opposition movements - and most importantly was shunned by the major Algerian trade union, the *Union générale des travailleurs algériens* (UGTA) - the authorities reacted quickly and decisively to the news of its creation. In an attempt to pre-empt the first CNCD demonstration, on 3 February the government announced that the emergency laws would be lifted in the "very near future"¹⁷, while specifying that a 2001 law prohibiting public gatherings in the capital would remain in force.¹⁸ On the day of the planned protest, the government took no chances, blocking roads leading to the city centre and suspending train links to and from the capital. Numbering 30,000 according to media reports, the police harassed and arrested protesters as they gathered in central Algiers, but at least 2,000 people managed to overcome the security cordons and gather in the city's major square.¹⁹

Following its first demonstration, the CNCD staged at least eight more over the coming months, but attendance never reached significant numbers and the police continued to hamper the activities of its members. The deep division present among the diverse CNCD affiliates ultimately weakened the appeal of the movement, which had already split into two opposing groups on 22 February, and thus the CNCD has had trouble promoting itself as a truly broad based national movement for change.²⁰ During the following months, sporadic episodes of unrest and almost daily strikes and demonstrations occurred, with students, doctors, journalists, public servants and even members of the security forces staging separate protests throughout the country. In May more than 70 demonstrations and strikes were reported, and between January and late June 2011 the police had conducted at least 2,777 riot control operations throughout the country.²¹

In terms of reforms, the emergency laws were officially lifted on 24 February, but numerous local and international human rights groups have noted that this will have little effect on the state of civil liberties in the country.²² It was not until April that President Bouteflika made his first televised speech in which he addressed the events taking place in Algeria and the wider region. The president emphasized the country's craving for stability following a decade of civil war while also pledging a series of social

January 2011, <http://ffs1963.unblog.fr/2011/01/24/karim-tabbou-en-algerie-les-agitations-ne-vont-pas-forcement-dans-le-sens-de-la-democratie>.

¹⁶ Elias Melbouci, "La CNCD demande aujourd'hui l'autorisation", in *Le Temps d'Algérie*, 1 February 2011, <http://www.letempsdz.com/content/view/52498/79>.

¹⁷ "Algeria to lift emergency powers", in *Al-Jazeera*, 3 February 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/02/20112315364175524.html>.

¹⁸ Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Algeria: End Public Assembly Ban in Algiers*, 20 March 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/03/20/algeria-end-public-assembly-ban-algiers-0>.

¹⁹ "Algeria protesters push for change", in *Al-Jazeera*, 12 February 2011, <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/africa/2011/02/201121235130627461.html>.

²⁰ "CNCD: c'est la division", in *Le Temps d'Algérie*, 22 February 2011, <http://www.letempsdz.com/content/view/53688/1>.

²¹ Mouna Sadek, "Algeria Responds to Social Protests", in *Magharebia*, 24 June 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/06/24/feature-02.

²² Human Rights Watch (HRW), *Algeria: Restore Civil Liberties*, 6 April 2011, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2011/04/06/algeria-restore-civil-liberties>.

and political reforms. In May, the government set up a three-man committee charged with receiving recommendations for the planned constitutional amendments, but the process was immediately subject to boycotts and criticism by some of the major opposition parties and independent civil society groups active in the country.²³ The panel conducted its meetings between 20 May and 21 June,²⁴ but much scepticism surrounds the constitutional amendments and political reforms the government has promised to unveil in early 2012. These are expected to include a return to a maximum of two five-year terms for the presidency, a division of powers between the prime minister and the president, amendments to the electoral and media laws, anti-corruption measures, increases in public spending and the approval of large-scale housing projects.²⁵

2.1. Understanding the nature of the Algerian revolts

The popular unrest witnessed in Algeria during the first week of 2011 has largely been linked to global increases in food prices. In early 2011, the world prices of cooking oil, sugar and other basic foodstuffs reached new records, higher than those of 2008, which had resulted in violent “bread riots” in countries such as Haiti, Egypt and Indonesia.²⁶ In Algeria, where ordinary citizens spend almost half their salary on food, these price hikes were bound to have a heavy effect on working class families.²⁷ Economic grievances linked to food prices, however significant, cannot alone explain this outburst of popular anger in Algeria.²⁸ While the government was quick to classify the unrest as “food riots”, the presence of deep-rooted social discontent in the country is a reality that long predates the events of 2011.

The authorities reacted to these initial signs of social unrest by implementing a series of short-term economic reforms aimed at diminishing the cost of food, and in particular those of sugar and cooking oil which had increased between 33 and 45 percent since early 2011.²⁹ These reforms, which also included government subsidies on milk and flower as well as generous pay rises for public sector workers and members of the security services, seem to have secured some breathing space for the authorities. Paid for by Algeria’s exports in the oil and gas sectors, further government measures included the scrapping of a 5 percent tax on imports, a 17 percent VAT tax on food products, a 19 percent tax on company production profits and a 25 percent tax on

²³ AFP, “Algeria to hold reform talks, boycotted by opposition”, in *France24*, 20 May 2011, <http://www.france24.com/en/20110520-algeria-hold-reform-talks-boycotted-opposition>.

²⁴ “Chronologie des ‘consultations’ de la commission Bensalah-Touati-Boughazi”, in *Algérie-Politique*, 22 June 2011, <http://ffs1963.unblog.fr/2011/06/22/chronologie-des-consultations-de-la-commission-bensalah-touati-boughazi>.

²⁵ Nazim Fethi, “Bouteflika pledges reforms”, in *Magharebia*, 18 April 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/04/18/feature-01.

²⁶ Rudy Ruitenberg, “World Food Prices Jump to Record on Sugar, Oilseeds”, in *Bloomberg*, 5 January 2011, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2011-01-05/global-food-prices-climb-to-record-on-cereal-sugar-costs-un-agency-says.html>.

²⁷ Azzedine Layachi, “Algeria’s Rebellion by Installments”, *cit.*

²⁸ Hugh Roberts, “Algeria’s national ‘protesta’”, in *The Middle East Channel*, 10 January 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/01/09/algeria_s_national_protesta.

²⁹ Jack Brown, “Algeria’s Midwinter Uproar”, *cit.*

company distribution activities.³⁰ Many of these tax breaks were set to last until the end of August 2011, and as a result of these combined economic measures, the government was forced to increase public spending in the amended 2011 budget by 25 percent (from 64 to 80 billion Euros).³¹ According to Algeria's Finance Minister, Karim Djoudi, Algeria's budget will however only be able to sustain such increases until 2014-15, following which there is a serious risk of crisis in a country whose economic survival is highly dependent on the export of hydrocarbons.³²

While the riots were largely attributed to the global increase in food prices, some of the underlining motivations that caused these popular outbursts resemble those present in Tunisia and Egypt. Chief among these is unemployment. Official figures put it at 10 percent, but it is more likely closer to at least 25 percent, while youth unemployment is estimated at 45 percent against an official figure of 21 percent.³³ These numbers are especially worrying since 70 percent of Algeria's population of 35 million is under the age of thirty, and each year an estimated 300,000 youth join the job market.³⁴ If we combine these figures with the growing legitimacy crisis facing Algeria's political institutions, widespread corruption, inequality and a severe housing crisis, the government is rightly concerned about the future.

Reoccurring instances of popular unrest in Algeria may in fact serve as the most significant proof for the presence of deep-rooted social discontent in the country.³⁵ The fact that these episodes often turn into violent confrontations with the police who are deployed to protect governmental buildings or symbols associated with the ruling elite underscores the extent to which state-society relations have never fully recovered from the events of 1988. "The greater part of Algerian society has been in a permanent state of moral revolt against the regime for the last four or five years", writes Hugh Roberts, and riots have been a regular "feature of the Algerian political landscape for the last decade".³⁶ These periodical outbursts of popular unrest reflect a widespread feeling among the population that the political process has altogether failed to respond to their collective or local needs. This, in turn, has resulted in a growing tendency among Algeria's diverse social or ethnic groupings to consider the use of violence as one of the primary means to extract concessions from what is otherwise widely perceived as a distant and unrepresentative government.³⁷

2.2. Why did the protests fail to gather momentum?

The cautious popular response to the calls for mass protests in Algeria can be explained by a combination of the country's recent history, its political system based on

³⁰ World Bank, *Algeria. Country Brief*, updated April 2011, <http://go.worldbank.org/T2K4PW3270>.

³¹ Fidet Mansour, "Algeria finances strained by strife", in *Magharebia*, 7 July 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/07/07/feature-02.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Azzedine Layachi, "Algeria's Rebellion by Installments", *cit.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Major episodes of popular unrest were recorded in 1980, 1988, 2001, 2005 and 2011 (among others).

³⁶ Hugh Roberts, "Algeria's national 'protesta'", *cit.*

³⁷ *Ibid.* and Azzedine Layachi, "Algeria's Rebellion by Installments", *cit.*

a rentier economy and the factionalism present among Algeria's diverse social, political and ethnic groupings.

The legacy of a decade of civil war which brought rampant destruction and instability to the country has largely been identified as one of the primary reasons why Algerians have refrained from taking to the streets in large numbers to demand the fall of the regime.³⁸ Algerians are understandably grateful for Bouteflika's success in ending the bloody confrontation with the country's Islamists, and while the president's amnesty laws (approved in 1999 and 2005) have been severely criticized by local and international human rights groups due their granting of blanket pardons to members of both the armed forces and the various *jihadi* groups - both of which stand widely accused of war crimes - the country has no doubt benefited from the significant decline in violence since 2001. The memory of the failed political opening of 1989 is still fresh in the minds of many in Algeria and the population is thus hesitant to embark on another uncertain push for political reform, given that this could easily result in renewed political violence and instability.

Moreover, the threat of terrorism remains significant in Algeria and the recent conflict in neighbouring Libya has heightened the state of alert in the country, with reoccurring warnings of arms smuggling by regional terrorist networks adding to the tension.³⁹ In August 2011, two suicide attacks were carried out by *Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb* (AQIM) against military and police targets in Algeria, and the government - with prompt international backing - has quickly taken the lead in hosting a counterterrorism summit to coordinate a region-wide response to the growing threat of violent extremism in the Sahel region.⁴⁰

The legacy of the civil war and a popular craving for stability, however, are not the only reasons for Algeria's perceived "immunity" to the "Arab spring". The country's political system, which has maintained a facade of political pluralism since 1995 and rests largely on the role of the state as a distributive agent, must also be taken into account. It is generally agreed that the army endorsed multiparty politics in Algeria as a means to prolong its primacy over a weak and divided legislative branch of government.⁴¹ The political opening in 1988 resulted in a flourishing of political parties, many of which are based on "identity politics", and this led to a growing factionalism and rivalry among the various opposition forces in the country.⁴² This factionalism, which also extends into civil society and the armed forces, has survived the civil war and the army and intelligence services are widely known to have been involved in co-opting various political parties in such a way as to stoke further divisions among the opposition. These

³⁸ BBC, "Algeria: A hunger for stability?", in *BBC News*, 2 June 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-13616049>.

³⁹ Jemal Oumar, "Terror risk 'high' in Mauritania, 'extreme' in Algeria", in *Magharebia*, 7 September 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/09/07/feature-03.

⁴⁰ Nazim Fethi, "Algeria to host global Sahel conference", in *Magharebia*, 6 September 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/09/06/feature-01.

⁴¹ Francesco Cavatorta and Vincent Durac, *Civil Society and Democratization in the Arab World. The dynamics of activism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2011, p. 37-39; Francesco Tamburini, "Algeria: il lungo cammino verso la consacrazione del 'regime ibrido'", *cit.*, p. 82-84.

⁴² Hugh Roberts, *Demilitarizing Algeria*, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2007 (Carnegie Papers ; 86), p. 3-4, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/cp_86_final1.pdf.

tactics have also spilled over into the media, with many private newspapers being closely associated with a series of influential members of Algeria's elite, with each using private media outlets as a means to advance their individual agendas while attacking those of their rivals. This factionalism, which Hugh Roberts describes as the "heart of the problem of Algerian politics",⁴³ can thus be partly viewed as the outcome of a strategy employed by the various competing elites in the country to advance and protect their interests while preventing the emergence of a coordinated and united opposition to the government.⁴⁴ This lack of unity among the various opposition movements, an example of which is given by the rapid divisions that emerged among the various CNCD affiliates, has limited the prospects for effective mass mobilization against the government. While these divisions are partly explained by the fact that "regime change" has never emerged as the primary objective of the protesters, such factionalism represents a major obstacle for the creation of a united opposition front, which could hold the government accountable for its failures to enact significant reforms.

Algeria's rentier economy, based on hydrocarbon exports, further ensures a high level of co-optation among possible opposition movements, many of which are conscious that their survival rests largely on the state's distributive services, and are thus unlikely to overtly challenge the regime. The presence of large quantities of oil and natural gas in Algeria have cemented the government's role as a distributive agent, something which, in turn, has ensured that the "stakes in factional competition"⁴⁵ have always remained high. Algeria's political system has thus come to resemble a "zero-sum power game",⁴⁶ whereby the various political and social factions compete against one another in order to secure access to government patronage and support.

While credible opposition parties with a broad popular following do exist in Algeria (the *Front des forces socialistes* (FFS) being one example), these have predominantly chosen to boycott the political process and are thus excluded from any decision-making process. Moreover, since the 1997 parliamentary elections, the government has relied on three political parties to monopolize parliament - these are the old FLN, a new government sponsored replacement to the FLN called the *Rassemblement national démocratique* (RND) and the mildly Islamist, *Mouvement de la société pour la paix* (MSP). In exchange, these parties, which in 2005 became formally known as the "presidential alliance", have largely agreed to support any policy pursued by the President or the small group of military commanders who were widely believed to be "calling the shots" before many were replaced or forced into retirement following Bouteflika's re-election in 2004.⁴⁷ This, in turn, has ensured that other political parties, which have a greater tendency to genuinely oppose governmental policies, are largely excluded from the political process, given that their numbers, even if unity among them

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 4-5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* See also Isabelle Werenfels, "Algeria: System Continuity Through Elite Change", *cit.*; Frédéric Volpi, "Algeria's Pseudo-democratic Politics: Lessons for Democratization in the Middle East", in *Democratization*, Vol. 13, No. 3 (June 2006), p. 442-455, <http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/intrel/media/algerias-pseudo-democratic-politics.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Hugh Roberts, *Demilitarizing Algeria*, *cit.*, p. 7.

⁴⁶ Frédéric Volpi, "Algeria's Pseudo-democratic Politics", *cit.*, p. 445.

⁴⁷ Hugh Roberts, *Demilitarizing Algeria*, *cit.*

were to be achieved, represent a stark minority compared to the so-called three-party “presidential alliance” that dominates the Algerian National Assembly.⁴⁸

Factionalism and rivalry in Algeria is also reinforced by the presence of ethnic divisions between the dominant Arab population and the Berber minority, which is largely concentrated in the mountainous region of Kabylie, north-east of Algiers. Over the years, this region has been a major flashpoint for violent riots against the central government. The Berber minority, which accounts for between 15 and 20 percent of the population (exact numbers are disputed), has repeatedly lamented government discrimination, and it was only following a violent uprising in 2001 that the government recognized the Berber language, *Tamazight*, as a national (but not official) language on par with Arabic. Factionalism is further stoked by the growing social and economic disparities present in Algeria and ongoing tensions between seculars and Islamists. All these aspects ensure that a broad based opposition is very hard to achieve, and this in turn has allowed the government to give continuity to its mandate through the age-old tactic of “divide and rule”.⁴⁹

3. Prospects for Algeria

Faced with a growing tendency among Algerians to revert to violent street protests as a means to extract concessions from the government, one of the most daunting challenges facing Algerian authorities is that of restoring public confidence in the political process. While the factionalism present among the various opposition movements has thus far ensured the lack of a united opposition against the government, localized episodes of violent unrest still represent a fundamental challenge for the government’s quest to project an image of stability and legitimacy domestically and to the outside world. The lack of public trust in the political process has long been a characteristic of Algerian society, but this has increased considerably following a constitutional overhaul pushed for by President Bouteflika in November 2008. The amendments scrapped the two-term limit on the presidency and allowed for Bouteflika’s re-election for a third term in April 2009. They also significantly increased the executive powers of the presidency to the detriment of parliament, further consolidating Bouteflika’s primacy as the locus of decision-making power in the country.⁵⁰ Moreover, while Algeria has been holding elections at regular intervals since 1995, popular disillusionment in the political process is reflected in the steady decline

⁴⁸ In 1996, following the resumption of multiparty elections in Algeria, a constitutional amendment was introduced which created an upper house of parliament (the Council of the Nation). Two-thirds of its members are chosen by elected members of the local and regional councils, while the remaining third are appointed directly by the president. Any legislation approved by the lower house needs a three-quarters majority endorsement in the Council of the Nation. Given its potential ability to block all legislation, the government closely ‘managed’ local elections in order to guarantee its control over the Council. See William Quandt, “Algeria’s transition to what?”, in *Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2004), p. 87, <http://people.virginia.edu/~wbq8f/Alg%20Trans%20to%20What.pdf>.

⁴⁹ See Frédéric Volpi, “Algeria’s Pseudo-democratic Politics”, *cit.*; Isabelle Werenfels, “Algeria: System Continuity Through Elite Change”, *cit.*

⁵⁰ Francesco Tamburini, “Algeria: il lungo cammino verso la consacrazione del ‘regime ibrido’”, *cit.*, p. 96-97.

of voter turnout, which reached the lowest point in Algerian history during the country's last parliamentary elections held in May 2007.⁵¹

The political reforms promised by the government for early next year are expected to reverse Bouteflika's 2008 changes to the constitution. A return to a maximum of two five-year terms for the presidency as well as increasing the powers of the prime minister, who will no longer be appointed by the president but will be elected by parliament (as was the case before Bouteflika's 2008 amendments), are widely expected to be among the major reforms enacted by the government.⁵² These reforms, coupled with changes to the electoral laws, provisions meant to ensure the independence of the judiciary and a liberalizing of TV and radio laws, are widely hoped to serve as the beginnings of a process aimed at restoring public trust in politics, especially given that the country's next parliamentary elections are scheduled for 2012, while those for the presidency - pending a dramatic worsening of Bouteflika's health - will be held in 2014.

It is hard to imagine that these provisions will be enough to dispel years of popular mistrust in the political process. Bouteflika's elections (1999, 2004 and 2009) have all been marred by considerable allegations of electoral fraud. While the overall framework of a liberal democratic system has survived the civil war, Algeria is today commonly described as a "pseudo-democracy"⁵³, a "bunker state"⁵⁴ or a "hybrid regime".⁵⁵ While Bouteflika is widely credited with diminishing the army's influence over politics, ending the country's civil war and restoring Algeria's standing in the international arena, his presidency has also been associated with a growing tendency for authoritarian rule. Journalists, civil society groups and opposition parties have all lamented increasing government harassment, and under Bouteflika's watch, the powers of the legislative branch of government have been further reduced to a "rubber stamp"⁵⁶ for the policies of the president. The FLN party, which had governed the country since independence from France until being discredited by the events of October 1988, has returned, since 2002, to become the major political party in Algeria with Bouteflika as its honorary president. Furthermore, the heads of Algeria's secretive intelligence services - who are widely believed to be the true power brokers behind the scenes in Algerian politics⁵⁷ - have thus far resisted Bouteflika's efforts aimed at replacing the major leaders of the armed forces as a means to diminish the army's influence over politics. The combined effects of these developments can result in a characterization of Bouteflika's rule as one which has balanced aspects of continuity (e.g. authoritarianism, a weak parliament and the repression of civil liberties) with a process of hesitant, yet by no means

⁵¹ Ahmed Aghrouit and Yahia Zoubir, "Introducing Algeria's President-for-Life", in *Middle East Report Online*, 1 April 2009, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero040109>.

⁵² AP, "Consultations end for Algeria's new constitution", in *Townhall.com*, 22 June 2011, http://townhall.com/news/world/2011/06/22/consultations_end_for_algerias_new_constitution.

⁵³ Frédéric Volpi, "Algeria's Pseudo-democratic Politics", *cit*.

⁵⁴ Henry M. Clement, "Algeria's Agonies: Oil Rent Effects in a Bunker State", in *Journal of North African Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Summer 2004), p. 68-81, <http://chenry.webhost.utexas.edu/polec/2006/AlgOilRentierJNASsu04090205.pdf>.

⁵⁵ Francesco Tamburini, "Algeria: il lungo cammino verso la consacrazione del 'regime ibrido'", *cit*.

⁵⁶ Azzedine Layachi, "Algeria's Rebellion by Installments", *cit*.

⁵⁷ Hugh Roberts, *Demilitarizing Algeria*, *cit*, p. 12-13.

insignificant, political change (limiting army's influence over politics and increases in the power and autonomy of the presidency).

The economy is widely cited as one area where significant improvements have been made, not least because of the rising cost of oil and Bouteflika's overall restoration of security to the country. However, while the country's macroeconomic growth has steadily increased over the past decade, many of those underlining popular grievances that led to the collapse of the one-party system in 1988 have remained unaddressed.⁵⁸ "The gap between state and society in Algeria has never been wider than it is today",⁵⁹ writes John P. Entelis, and this crisis of legitimacy, affecting Algeria's political institutions, is made all the more damaging given that the country is a major exporter of oil and natural gas.

The governments' ability to withstand mounting popular pressure is primarily explained by its easy access to monetary reserves derived from Algeria's exports in the hydrocarbons industry. It is thanks to these funds that Algeria has been able to pay for the generous public salaries, welfare schemes and state-subsidies that have largely underpinned Algeria's social contract since independence, but it is also due to the country's overreliance on the oil and gas sectors that political and social stability in Algeria have traditionally been exposed to external forces beyond government control. It is no coincidence that a major factor that contributed to the 1988 breakdown of Algeria's state-society relations was the 1986 oil crisis, which effectively resulted in the government no longer being able to draw on those funds needed to placate the country's growing social and political discontent.⁶⁰ In this respect, it is also worth noting that while increases in food prices were not the sole cause for the recent outburst of popular unrest in Algeria, the country remains today highly dependent on imported food items. Such imports increased by 59 percent in the first half of 2011, compared to the same period the previous year, and Algeria has imported 1,4 billion Euros worth of flour, cereals and semolina during the same period - an increase of 99 percent compared to 2010.⁶¹ This again reflects the degree to which social and economic stability in Algeria is widely dependent on external forces beyond the control of the government. It follows that the country could experience renewed unrest in the event of a severe decline in the prices of oil and natural gas, which would result in the state no longer being able to pay for the import of basic food items.

This, in turn, highlights what is an equally pressing challenge facing Algeria - that of diversifying its economy. The oil and gas sector accounts for 97 percent of the country's exports, two-thirds of budget revenues and about 40-45 percent of GDP.⁶²

⁵⁸ Hugh Roberts, *The Bouteflika Presidency and the Problems of Political Reform*, transcript of a FRIDE Conference, Madrid, 3 February 2005, p. 6, <http://www.fride.org/event/78/bouteflika's-presidency-and-the-problem-of-political-reform-in-algeria>.

⁵⁹ John P. Entelis, "Algeria, revolutionary in name only", in *The Middle East Channel*, 7 September 2011, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2011/09/07/algeria_revolutionary_in_name_only.

⁶⁰ James D. Le Sueur, *Algeria since 1989: Between Terror and Democracy*, cit., p. 33.

⁶¹ AFP, "Algeria boosts food imports in bid to quash revolt", in *France24*, 28 July 2011, <http://www.france24.com/en/20110728-algeria-boosts-food-imports-bid-quash-revolt>.

⁶² See the interview with the IMF's mission chief for Algeria: Joël Toujas-Bernaté, "Algeria Should Reduce Reliance on Oil, Create More Jobs, Says IMF", in *IMF Survey Magazine*, 26 January 2011 <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/survey/so/2011/int012611a.htm>.

Learning from its past mistakes, since 2000, the Algerian government has established an oil stabilization fund, which has helped shield the country from global fluctuations in hydrocarbon prices, while allowing for an impressive accumulation of foreign currency reserves. These reserves, which amounted to \$155 billion by the end of 2010,⁶³ have allowed the Algerian government to “bribe” its way out of the initial unrest gripping the country in early 2011. This response can however only be considered as a short-term solution to the growing challenges facing the country. While a new five-year development plan (2010-14) worth \$286 billion, which aims to create employment and diversify growth, has been approved by the government,⁶⁴ the previous five-year plan (2005-2009) did not result in significant benefits for the population at large. Severe socio-economic problems, such as high inequality, unemployment, corruption, inadequate housing, health and education facilities are all pressing problems which have yet to be fully addressed by the government, and could result in further outbursts of popular unrest in the future. The International Monetary Fund has in fact warned that in order for Algeria to begin successfully absorbing the growing number of yearly entries into the job market, the country’s non-hydrocarbon sector must grow by at least 5 percent annually.⁶⁵

Hydrocarbons have traditionally been recognized as an obstacle to democratic reform.⁶⁶ In Algeria’s case, this trend appears to have been vindicated. It is however worth noting that in the event of a serious decline in the cost of oil and natural gas, Algeria’s dependence on hydrocarbons could become a catalyst for political reform (this was the case following the 1986 oil crisis, which contributed to the political opening of 1989). Given that Algeria’s governing elites are those benefiting most from the current *status quo*, it is hard to imagine that they will be hard pressed to enact serious reforms aimed at establishing transparency in the economy and accountability in governance. The factionalism present in Algerian society will further increase their hesitation, given that a broad-based opposition to the government will be hard to achieve. The extensive foreign currency reserves Algeria has accumulated can also be expected to limit the authorities’ sense of urgency in pursuing political and economic reforms. By contrast, there appears to be a growing consensus that change will become unavoidable. Members of the government have expressed their concern that Algeria must prepare for a “post-oil”⁶⁷ future and if the country wants to pursue a sustainable path, reform will be inevitable. At the time of writing, however, there is no saying if this push for change will lead to greater freedoms and transparency. In this respect, a serious restructuring of the economy, coupled with political reforms aimed at restoring popular trust in the political process, are two aspects that can be expected to dominate debates on Algeria’s future. A serious commitment on both these issues is what will ultimately be needed if the government is to begin addressing those

⁶³ Reuters, “Algeria end-2010 forex reserves at \$155 bln”, in *Reuters Africa*, 4 January 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/investingNews/idAFJOE70307W20110104>.

⁶⁴ Alexis Arieff, *Algeria: Current Issues*, cit., p. 14.

⁶⁵ Joël Toujas-Bernaté, “Algeria Should Reduce Reliance on Oil, Create More Jobs, Says IMF”, *cit.*

⁶⁶ Michael L. Ross, “Will Oil Drown the Arab Spring? Democracy and the Resource Curse”, in *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 5 (September/October 2011), p. 2-7.

⁶⁷ Fidét Mansour, “Algeria finances strained by strife”, *cit.*

underlining features of unsustainability that have led the international Centre for Systemic Peace to rank Algeria as “serious” under its 2010 state fragility index⁶⁸.

Conclusion

The Algerian government made a conscious decision to react slowly and gradually to the recent events unfolding throughout the MENA region. Unlike Tunisia and Egypt, Algeria could draw on extensive currency reserves and dramatically increase public spending as a first measure aimed at alleviating those economic grievances that came to the fore in early January 2011. Thus, much as has been the case in other oil exporting countries such as Saudi Arabia and several other Gulf states, Algeria has managed to avoid a full blown public uprising against the regime by simply providing more benefits to the population in the form of pay rises and food subsidies. It was not until April, four months after the start of the “Arab spring”, that Algeria’s president made his first live appearance, in which he addressed the monumental changes taking place throughout the region. By taking his time, Bouteflika was consciously displaying the government’s confidence in its ability to weather the storm, while simultaneously aiming to dispel any notion of a possible spill over effect from the popular protests taking place in neighbouring countries.

While the authorities in Algeria are right to highlight the significant differences separating their country from the autocratic regimes in neighbouring Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, they cannot ignore the presence of similar socio-economic and political grievances within Algerian society. The country no doubt presents some fundamental differences compared to other states in the MENA region, not least of which is the fact that Bouteflika has not been in power for over two decades and the president enjoys at least some degree of popular support for his accomplishments in the realms of security, international diplomacy and the economy. There appears, however, to be a growing understanding among Algeria’s governing elite that political reform is becoming inevitable. In 2012, when the government’s constitutional amendments are expected to be announced, the country will celebrate its 50th anniversary since independence and this is widely regarded as a time for the country to overcome its past and renew the process of democratic reform which was interrupted almost two decades ago.

Since early 2011, there have been a rising number of calls for reform from various sectors of Algerian society, and most significantly some have even come from people directly linked to the country’s long-standing political elite.⁶⁹ In early September, the authorities presented legislation which aims to put an end to the state’s monopoly over TV and radio stations, while promising to establish an independent body charged with

⁶⁸ Algeria is ranked 15 (‘serious fragility’) under the *State Fragility Index*, just one point behind the ‘high fragility’ score of 16. See Monty G. Marshall and Benjamin R. Cole, “State Fragility Index and Matrix 2010”, in *Global Report 2011*, <http://www.systemicpeace.org/SFI/matrix2010c.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Reuters, Lamine Chikhi, “One of Algeria’s founding fathers urges reform”, in *Reuters Africa*, 17 February 2011, <http://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJOE71G03Q20110217>.

supervising the granting of press licences and the administration of fines for libel.⁷⁰ This reform, which was included in Bouteflika's promised measures aimed at "strengthening democracy" in the country, can be considered as a step in the right direction given that the criminalization of journalists has long been a constant feature in Algeria. By contrast, however, features of continuity are also present in Algeria's reactions to the "Arab spring". One example is the government's continued insistence on maintaining a ban on members associated with the outlawed FIS party from re-entering politics, something which has resulted in large swaths of the population being ostracized from the political process. This has had dire repercussions on the state's quest for popular legitimacy. Sooner or later the government will have to come to terms with those segments of the population which display an alternative world-view from that of the government, not least as a measure to ensure their eventual integration into the political process rather than having them be attracted into more violent forms of opposition.

A further aspect of continuity, one which has been repeatedly highlighted by local human rights and civil society organizations, is the government's continued reliance on a series of laws which are used to suppress the right to peaceful assembly (especially in the capital) or the founding of new political parties and NGOs. Following the government's lifting of the emergency laws in late February, Algerian authorities have approved a whole range of new anti-terror legislation which will effectively give the state's security apparatuses a free hand in dealing with any matter deemed as a threat to the nation. These (and other) complaints were raised in an open letter sent to the foreign ministers of EU member-states on 8 June 2011, just days before the sixteenth EU-Algeria Association Council meeting. Signed by three of the most active autonomous civil society organizations in Algeria,⁷¹ the letter called on the European Union to redouble its efforts aimed at holding the Algerian government accountable for its failure to pursue wide-ranging democratic reforms. A passage of the letter is worth reproducing in full:

The undersigned organisations call upon the European Union to insist publicly that the [Algerian] authorities bring an end to the crackdown against peaceful demonstrations in Algeria, and thus to show its clear support for an independent civil society in Algeria. We ask that the EU and its Member States adopt a firm stance vis-à-vis the Algerian authorities and urge the government to honour its human rights commitments and to launch a participatory process that is genuine, transparent and inclusive all at once, in favour of the adoption and implementation of in-depth democratic reforms.⁷²

The way in which the government has gone about collecting recommendations for the expected constitutional amendments does not bode well for the future, and seems to rest on the authorities' preference for continuity rather than change. Major opposition

⁷⁰ BBC, "Algeria's Bouteflika to end state TV and radio control", in *BBC News*, 13 September 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14901330>.

⁷¹ The three organizations are: *Ligue algérienne pour la défense des droits de l'homme* (LADDH), *Collectif des familles des disparu(e)s en Algérie* (CFDA), *Syndicat national autonome des personnels de l'administration publique* (SNAPAP).

⁷² Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network (EMHRN) with LADDH, CFDA and SNAPAP, *EU-Algeria: Council of Association meets amid social and political crisis*, 8 June 2011, <http://www.euromedrights.org/en/news-en/emhrn-releases/emhrn-statements-2011/9834.html>.

parties and civil society groups have boycotted the initiative and expectations are low regarding any significant democratic changes emerging from the process. Even the recent announcement of a liberalization in the country's media laws has received a hesitant and sceptical response from opposition groups, with the FFS party speaking of its "conviction"⁷³ that these reforms will not lead to a furthering of democracy in the country.

In this respect the EU, whose Association Agreement with Algeria entered into effect in September 2005, must do more to ensure that the government approaches the question of reform in a serious and inclusive manner. By strengthening its ties with local civil society groups, the EU could penetrate the veil of stability which the government has been promoting and focus its attention on those aspects which local organizations deem as hindering most Algeria's advances towards accountable governance and the rule of law. The EU's potential leverage over the Algerian government will no doubt suffer from the fact that the country is a major oil and gas exporter to Europe and a leader in both regional and international counter-terrorism efforts. Europe's room for manoeuvre on the question of political conditionality towards Algeria will further be limited by the increasing activities of Asian firms in the country.⁷⁴ Given, however, that a stable and prosperous Algeria is in the interests of the entire international community, Europe must do more in order to ensure that the Algerian government pursue a sustainable path for the future. As proven by the recent events in the region the lack of democracy, the rule of law and civil freedoms cannot be ignored as a means to preserve an image of stability which, as it turns out, is far from the actual reality on the ground. The presence of deep-rooted socio-economic and political grievances, such as growing inequality, high unemployment, the lack of political accountability and the rule of law, inadequate housing, education and health care services are all aspects which need to be addressed by the Algerian authorities. The sooner this process begins and the more inclusive it sets out to be, the greater the chances of the state regaining legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, and this, in turn, is the best - if not only - means for securing Algeria's long-term stability.

Updated 20 September 2011

⁷³ Mouna Sadek, "Algeria advances media, political reforms", in *Magharebia*, 16 September 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/09/16/feature-03.

⁷⁴ Ademe Amine, "Asian companies vie for Algerian market", in *Magharebia*, 3 July 2011, http://www.magharebia.com/cocoon/awi/xhtml1/en_GB/features/awi/features/2011/07/03/feature-01.

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