



# Algeria's Revolutionary Crisis

Dave Stockton Sun, 31/03/2019 - 17:06

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Algeria's 82-year-old president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in office for two decades, has been forced by weeks of protests and a general strike to abandon standing for a fifth term in elections which were due on April 18. On successive Fridays, many hundreds of thousands took to the streets of Algiers, the port of Bejaia, and other cities, culminating in a general strike.

The background to the mass discontent evidenced by the protests is not simply political resentment and the farce of prolonging the rule of a man incapacitated by a severe stroke and hardly ever seen in public. Algeria's economy is in a parlous state. The Algerian Human Rights League in a 2015 survey claimed that 35 percent of the population, or 14 million people, lived on a wage of less than US\$1.25 per day.

Today, the unemployment rate is already at 11.7 percent, but joblessness among the young is far greater, at 29 percent, in a country where half the population is younger than 25. This situation has persisted for years. No wonder the youth were in the forefront of the protests.

Indeed, Bouteflika's message, announcing his withdrawal from the next presidential elections, read out on TV, stated: "I listened and heard the cry of the hearts of the demonstrators, and in particular the thousands of young people who questioned me about the future of our country.?"

Bouteflika has now announced that presidential elections could only be held after convening a national conference to discuss a new political settlement, to be embodied in a new constitution, even, "laying the foundation for a new republic?". No mention, be it noted, of free and fair elections to a sovereign constituent assembly, and one without the guardianship of the military high command. In other words, the plan is to save the regime and thwart the democratic aspirations of the youth and the workers.

No wonder then that the mass demonstrations continue, on Friday, March 22, there were hundreds of thousands on the streets, despite heavy rain and those on Friday March 29 were reportedly even bigger and more widespread. Reuters quoted a 37-year old teacher, Mahmoud Timar: "We stay here until the whole system goes?".

## A pre-revolutionary situation

GDP growth is down to 0.8 percent according to the latest figures and the fiscal deficit will likely to hit 10 percent of GDP this year. The Algerian government relies heavily on oil revenue to fund its government spending, yet the price of benchmark Brent crude has fallen from \$100 a barrel in mid-2014 to around \$66 recently. Pressure mounted from Algeria's foreign lenders to impose austerity upon an already impoverished population.

So, when oil workers joined the protests, the regime knew the game was up. The Hassi Messaoud oil field in eastern Algeria, owned by the state company Sonatrach, as well as oil fields in Hassi R'mel, Hassi Berkine and in Amenas, came to a halt.

This year has also seen a rising tide of strikes by other sections of workers, protesting at low wages and the high cost of living. These have included, port workers, transport workers in the Kabylie region, textile workers at the huge Tayal factory in Sidi Khettab, Relizane, and autoworkers at Hyundai's joint assembly plant in Tiaret.

When the police and the army made no attempt to prevent the peaceful demonstrations, all the conditions that define at least a pre-revolutionary situation were present; the masses were unwilling, and the ruling powers unable, to carry on in the old way. As with events during the Tunisian and Egyptian Spring of 2011, fissures appeared in the clique of oligarchs hiding behind the moribund octogenarian and the army was clearly unwilling to be used for harsh repression.

The demonstrators rapidly made clear that they would not be satisfied with the indefinite postponement of the elections and the prolonging of Bouteflika's fourth term. Rivalries within the shadowy group behind him, known as "le pouvoir", the power, had prevented the choice of a successor. On the streets, slogans reminiscent of the Arab Spring reappeared; "the people want the downfall of the regime" and "the police, army and people are brothers".

### Lessons of History

Events in Algeria echo the pattern of developments in Egypt in the early days of the Arab Spring. There, the failure of the working class forces and the progressive youth to form a political force, a party, and to extend the committees that had mobilised the strikes, opened the road to the Muslim Brotherhood's candidate, Mohamed Morsi, to win the elections and to impose a reactionary "Islamic" constitution. Then, as discontent with him mounted, there were calls for the military to intervene in the name of defending democracy. Once again, the left forces utterly deceived themselves and misled the masses into supporting the July 13, 2013 coup by Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who then step-by-step imposed a dictatorship even harsher than Hosni Mubarak's.

Algeria has itself already passed through a similar, if not an even bloodier, cycle of a failed democratic revolution followed by Islamists monopolising the electoral terrain and then military counterrevolution.

The National Liberation Front has ruled Algeria since 1962, though with changes in the inner cliques that control the regime. It was the dominant force in the long war against the French colonialists, which lasted from 1954-1962 and cost 1.5 million lives.

In October 1988, a massive youth uprising seeking democratic change erupted, ushering in a turbulent period that left wing forces and the working class proved unable to resolve. This led, in 1992, to an electoral victory for an Islamist alliance, the Islamic Salvation Front, FIS, which, in turn, led to the FLN-dominated military intervening to set aside the results.

There then followed the so-called "black decade" of repression, guerrilla war and terrorism, in which an estimated 200,000 people died, a conflict unparalleled in its brutality until Syria and Yemen. After the crushing of the Islamists, Bouteflika was brought back from a self-imposed exile to head what was billed as a controlled normalisation process. This has been the "justification" for his two decades of rule and has restrained oppositionists who obviously did not want any repetition of the atrocities of the 1990s.

### Combating the bourgeois opposition

Algeria under Bouteflika was not a totalitarian regime, more a form of plebiscitary bonapartism, with a generally low level of participation in elections and real power resting with the FLN and the armed forces. Nevertheless, there are a number of opposition parties, indeed Al Jazeera reports a meeting in Algiers of more than 30 opposition parties, including the Workers' Party, PT, of Louisa Hanoune, and the Talaie El Hourriyet party, founded by Ali Benflis, Bouteflika's former prime minister.

These parties certainly have no desire to put themselves at the head of a democratic revolution to sweep away the old regime. Rather, they hope to negotiate with the "pouvoir" for places at the feeding trough of graft and corruption which characterises the country's bourgeois system. Success for them would not be the "downfall of the regime" demanded by the young demonstrators. Likewise, the "pouvoir" will no doubt do all in its power to control and nominate the participants in the proposed national conference.

What can the youth and the workers do to stop the corrupt FLN hierarchy, the chiefs of staff of the armed forces, and the rich elite who control the economy, from holding on to power? What can they do to prevent the mass Friday

mobilisations eventually burning themselves out? In the first place, the young organisers and union rank and file militants in the factories and oilfields need to adopt clear political and social goals and create permanent organisations to fight for them.

The demands raised on the demonstrations have already moved on from the resignation of Bouteflika to the removal of the entire FLN regime, "le pouvoir". In this situation it is vital to focus the striving for democracy around the call for elections to a sovereign Constituent Assembly. Its tasks should be those of completing a thoroughgoing democratic revolution. To make such elections reflect the will of the working people, councils of delegates from workplaces, local communities and the rank and file of the armed forces should be formed to oversee this. The media; TV stations and newspapers, must be put under their workers' control and the delegates to the CA must be answerable to, and recallable by, their voters.

Given the dire economic straits of the country, political democracy alone cannot satisfy the masses' needs; fundamental social and economic tasks must be addressed including social ownership of the means of production. To enact this, a workers' and peasants' government, supported by the Assembly but relying on the democratic organisations of the workers' and their allies, will be needed.

As Egypt showed, if the levers of power, or the means of communication, remain in the hands of elements of 'le pouvoir' or fall into the hands of either the bourgeois or Islamist parties, then the democratic and social demands of the masses will be frustrated and another repressive regime be installed.

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