

Post-Bouteflika Algeria: For a Democratic Transition

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In Algeria, the slogan *Yatnahaw ga'*, "that they all blow off", sums up the widely shared popular will to put an end to the "Bouteflika system". It is a question of setting in motion a process of transition to a Second Republic.

In homage to Ramzi Yettou, a victim of repression who died at the age of 23, on Friday 19 April, of internal hemorrhage and head injuries after being beaten by the police during the big march on Friday 12 April. He is the second martyr since the beginning of the movement on 22 February after Hassan Benkhadda, son of Youcef Benkhedda, a great figure of nationalism and the anti-colonial Algerian revolution, who died on 1 March during a demonstration in Algiers in circumstances that have not yet been clarified. The online news media TSA (Tout sur l'Algérie) reminds us that "Hassan Benkhedda was also the nephew of the martyr Mohamed Al Ghazali Al Hafaf, the first to wave the Algerian flag on May 1, 1945, before being brutally killed by the French army".

The words of the singer, musician, singer-songwriter and poet Kabyle Lounès Matoub, assassinated on 25 June 1998, have resonated, in consonance, in a different light since the insurrection of consciences in Algeria: "I do not expect anything from a corrupt power. And I expect nothing from the fundamentalist alternative. I do not expect anything from a power discredited by the entire population. The popular maturity exceeds the governmental maturity in our country. These murderers must appear before the courts. I am only a poet who has witnessed my time."

Mandates of shame

In many African countries, heads of state enjoy substantial support from the system they set up to be in power at all costs, even if it means amending the constitution to seek new mandates, a democratic screen that cracks over time.

In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, elected in 2014 in a sham democratic election under the military regime he brutally reinstated in the summer of 2013, amends the constitution to increase his second term from four to six years, ending in 2024, giving him the opportunity to run for a third term... until 2030.

In Uganda, on 18 April, the Supreme Court approved a measure abolishing the age limit of 75 years for running for the post of president. This disputed provision adopted at the end of 2017 will allow President Yoweri Museveni, who has been in power since 1986, to run for a sixth term in 2021. The constitution had already been amended in 2005, allowing him to run for his 3rd, 4th and 5th terms at the head of the country

In Algeria, the people, in a coordinated and massive way, suddenly went beyond the sectoral demands that they were raising so far, since February 22nd, the head of the state, Abdelaziz Bouteflika wanted to run for the fifth mandate. The most significant uprising since independence in 1962 was so intense that Bouteflika had to resign on Tuesday, April 2, under pressure from the

street and the army.

Indeed, the Deputy Minister of Defense and Major General representing the military high command, Gaid Salah, who supported Bouteflika's fifth term before retreating under popular pressure, took the opportunity to push him out in order to preserve the regime in place.

Bouteflika has thus been added to the list of president-dictators thrown out of power by the popular insurrections, from Ben Ali, who remained in power for 23 years in Tunisia, and Mubarak, almost 30 years at the head of Egypt, both overthrown in 2011, to Blaise Compaoré, 27 years President of Burkina Faso, who had to flee with the help of France in 2014, or most recently Omar al-Bashir, who remained in power for 30 years in Sudan... These personalities had plenty of time to shape a system that was tailor-made for them and difficult to deconstruct.

The popular insurrection thus succeeded in bringing down Bouteflika. Certainly a first victory, but not enough for the "*Hirak*" [1] demanding the exit of the "3B" or "4B", referring to the interim president since April 9, Abdelkader Bensalah; prime minister Noureddine Bedoui; Tayeb Belaiz who finally resigned from the presidency of the Constitutional Council on April 16 under pressure from the popular movement and the president of the National People's Assembly (APN, the lower house of Parliament) Mouad Bouchareb.

The slogan *Yatnahaw ga'*, "get rid of them all", sums up the widely shared popular will to put an end to the "Bouteflika system" gangrened by corruption and clientelism. There is also a categorical refusal to let the regime's personalities organize the presidential elections scheduled for 4 July by the government of Abdelkader Bensalah - a faithful member of the Bouteflika clan, a strong supporter of his candidacy for a fifth term -, representing a system in which, over the past twenty years, "pluralist" elections (reintroduced after decades of single party regime from 1965 and the civil war in the 1990s) have been marked by massive electoral fraud.

It is a question of starting a process of democratic transition, outside the institutions inherited from the Bouteflika system, in order to move towards a Second Republic. The army, or more precisely its high military command, is clearly a major obstacle, as evidenced with the failure of the revolution in Egypt in overcoming the military control in the post-Mubarak transition.

Impact on diplomacy and the role of the media

The 30th Summit of the League of Arab States finished on 31 March in Tunis but Arab diplomats have not yet issued any official statement since the announcement of Bouteflika's resignation. In Egypt, President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi, who came to power following a military coup d'état smothering a massive popular movement in 2013, accused the protest movements of several states in the region of bringing "these countries" to their knees. "Currently, in the states of our region, people are talking about the economic situation and difficult living conditions. In this way, they are only ruining their country and leading it to its downfall," he said in a television address.

In the Egyptian press, controlled or muzzled by the government, Bouteflika's resignation and the demonstrations disrupting Algeria remain relatively unremembered. For its part, the French press confines itself to reporting the most significant events without going back on the connivance of the French State - which colonized Algeria for more than a century - with the regime or the claims of "second independence" while the first remains unfinished...

Indeed, it was only after independence on 5 July 1962 that Algeria put an end to 132 years of French colonialism. But this too "formal" independence leaves a bitter taste and many are demanding a second independence with a real sovereignty that puts an end to all foreign interference, the

plundering of the country and its resources by the elites, especially in the Saharan region rich in gas and oil, where a strong resistance against the exploitation of shale gas emerged in 2015. An opinion that the regime does not like to hear.

This foreign control operates much more in the depths of the Algerian soil to extract resources from it rather than within the ongoing uprising in order to destabilize the country, as the Algerian regime claims in order to discredit the latter. On the contrary, in order to preserve its economic control, France has every [interest](#) in a rapid “return to calm” and a stable political situation; but since it cannot openly go against a massive and peaceful popular movement, the former colonial power remains cautious in its official statements.

Before becoming President of the French Republic, during a trip to Algeria on February 5, 2017, Emmanuel Macron stated that “colonization is a crime against humanity”. When asked by the online French journal Mediapart on May 5, he replied: “I will take strong action.” On this 8th May 2019, the sad anniversary of the bloody repression of the anti-colonial demonstrations in Setif, Guelma and Kherrata, which would have left between 15 to 45 thousands Algerians dead, it is essential to finally move from words to deeds, starting by correctly mentioning these events in history textbooks and programmes.

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Footnotes

[1] The *Hirak* is an Arabic word meaning “movement” and is also used to refer to the popular protest movement that shook the Rif region of Morocco in 2016-2017, for example. This movement was severely repressed. Nasser Zefzafi, 39, and three other activists forming the hard core of the protest have been sentenced to 20 years in prison.