

Algeria: did the presidential election take place? - Algerian Hirak a year old: assessment along the way

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13 December, 2019, 43rd Friday of mobilisation: during the presidential election, dozens of demonstrators parade through the streets of Algiers, noses covered with flour - an allusion to the trafficking of cocaine and money laundering alleged against the son of the new president Abdeldmadjid Tebboune in 2018, who has since been in temporary detention.

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The demonstrators thus intended to denounce the complicity between the new “boss” of Algeria and the “gang” (*issaba*) held to be responsible for plundering the riches of the country. [1] But official propaganda is trying to sell a completely different image of Tebboune: that of a politician who attacked this same “gang” in the short time that he was at the head of the government in 2017. Having become an embarrassment, Tebboune was dismissed less than three months after taking office then replaced by Ahmed Ouyahia, who occupied the post of Prime Minister four times between 1995 and 2019. [2]

Of these two faces of his personality, which will the population retain? That of a man indirectly involved in a drug trafficking case or that of the politician who wanted to tidy up a house delivered to unlimited plunder? The regime has bet on this image of integrity, which was why Tebboune was chosen and designated as the winner of the last presidential election and will try to imprint in the memory of Algerians who will want to believe it.

A turning point for the regime

The presidential election of 12 December 2019 was neither democratic nor honest (and still less transparent) and did not meet the basic requirement of the protest – namely the opening of a process leading to a new era, defined by a people in struggle.

However, it has marked a turning point for the regime. Its consequences? Not so much the future of the *Hirak* as that of the whole of Algerian society. [3] The official rate of voting participation (39.88%), an entirely artificial figure, is a first indication. In Algeria, a vast territory, the largest part of which is semi-desert, the results of a universal suffrage election, within the framework of the ultra-centralised political and administrative organisation which prevails today, will never be completely transparent or free from manipulation. The battle of the figures, however biased, thus

turns out to be useless – such a context would necessitate reconsidering the guiding principles of the country.

Taking into account the protests which has affected urban centres for more than a year – and is indeed the only barometer which can be used in appreciating the political situation – there is no doubt that the presidential elections have been a major breakthrough. Independently of the manipulations that the regime exercises, the choices that it operates are strategic: thus, the combined scores of the five candidates take on the character of a political message by translating the relationships of forces at work within the regime itself.

The insignificant score (7.28%) of the candidate chosen by the Chief of Staff Gaïd Salah, Azzedine Mihoubi – supported by the main political apparatuses that are the part of the Front de libération nationale (FLN) and the Rassemblement national démocratique (RND) – shows a will to weaken the FLN and RND, even to deliver them to popular vengeance in order to preserve the regime. The score of the Islamo-conservative Abdelkader Bengrina (17.37%), in second position but far behind the winner, sends a strong message to conservative society, which is considered culturally dominant. It is also a way to destabilise what is left of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Mouvement de la société pour la paix (formerly Hamas).

Finally, by placing Tebboune in the lead (58.13%), the regime retains the position adopted from the start of the *Hirak*, namely placing responsibility for the crisis that the country is going through on the back of a limited group: the *issaba*. The criticism of economic liberalism as formulated by the Algerian regime is uniquely moral: this “gang” is above all the fruit of the wildcat economic liberalization for which the said regime is directly responsible. For Tebboune and the regime that put him in power, there is therefore nothing to change in the rules of the economic game. Otherwise, why would his first two short speeches be expressly addressed to “honest” investors, when the majority of demonstrators on Tuesdays and Fridays are essentially students, unemployed, employees, small entrepreneurs and merchants?

It is illusory to expect from Tebboune a democratic evolution which would translate into a just and equitable distribution of work and national wealth.. These issues are, however, the hidden part of the iceberg; they will surface in the times to come. For the time being, the stakes are not economic but political. In this matter, Tebboune – who aspires to return the image of an “independent” statesman, above the parties – adopts the historical position of the regime which consists in discrediting any partisan representation: it seeks in this way to perpetuate the Bonapartist tradition which draws its origins from the politics of Boumedienne (the head of state between 1965 and 1978) at the time of independence, but also from the FLN of 1954-1956. The resolution taken in 1954 by the “six” [leaders of the FLN], namely to lead an armed combat for independence, theorized and programmed by Abane Ramdane and Larbi Ben M'hidi in 1956, instigated the myth of a non-partisan organization realizing unity against the parties within the Front, which were presented as a source of discord. [4] By eliminating these actors, who are unavoidable in political life, the military organization filled the political void that it had itself created.

The historian Mohamed Harbi reminds us in a recent interview that “the FLN was never a party, it was an armed organization”. But if such an organization, by nature authoritarian, finds its justification in wartime in the name of the needs of the fight for independence it is different in peacetime; de facto, the organization of everyday life requires plural political life and expressions. The myth of the need to maintain a iron military power has unfortunately persisted. This is where the slogan *Dawla madania machi 'askaria* (“for a civil state and not a military one”), taken up by the *Hirak*, takes on its full meaning. Despite its authoritarianism and its contradictions, the early FLN, especially under Boumedienne, offered at least clearly announced projects; Tebboune, for his part, seems to have lacked any strategy. His vision for Algeria is limited to ensuring the survival of a

regime by managing the conjunctural crisis.

A call for dialogue?

Politically stimulated by the *Hirak*, Algerians expect more clarity and lucidity, both from their leaders and from the political class. To do this, we must now go beyond the contradictions generated by the history of the country. The first resides in the illusion, inherited from the Revolution (1954-1962) and then duly entertained by the regime, according to which the conflicts which arise within society can only come from abroad (ie the former colonial power) or from “traitors to the nation” (thereby essentialising the notion of popular unity). The second arises from the propaganda, of the regime and its media outlets, presenting any partisan action or expression as a source of discord and manipulation. Admittedly, if the political parties have little weight in the current popular upheaval, civil society does not challenge their existence. We have never witnessed any violence against known party leaders or their acronyms: no hostile slogans against them have been chanted, with the exception of “FLN to the museum” or “FLN out”. What we can emphasize is the new place and role attributed to political parties by the protest movement in its demand for autonomy in relation to political or ideological programs.

After the FLN led the people towards their independence in a militaristic and authoritarian manner, it was only following the mobilisations of October 1988 that an opening of the political field, then locked by a single party, took place: the emergence of parties. For a long time stifled, society could not express itself except through these latter, characterized by a doctrinal and ideological over-determination. The drama of the civil war of the 1990s, the consequence of a political impasse, was attributed to the inability to manage the contradictions inherent in political diversity. Today, the fact that the population protests and acts independently is a sign of maturity. The society of “Fridays and Tuesdays” has freed itself from the trauma of the “dark years”; it has liberated public space since 2001 with a collective and spontaneous elan – a form of “psychological maturation, rejecting all interference experienced as paternalism”, says the psychologist Dalila Samai Haddadi. [5]

The parties are indeed relegated to the role of critical supporters of the uprising, not leaders or organizers of the action – and they seem to have understood this. If they avoid putting themselves forward during the demonstrations, they contribute, according to their means, criticisms which, contradictory and subject to polemics as they may be, are still necessary for the progression of the *Hirak*. With the presidential elections of December 2019 taking place, the mobilizations on Tuesdays and Fridays were marked by a certain decline. Certainly, it seems that a process of political impasse is unfolding.. It is, moreover, the parties, associations and trade unions which try to form, according to their respective orientations, alternative projects.

The gap between the protest movement and the action of parties represents an opportunity for the regime: it can attempt to isolate all partisan, trade union or associative expression, going so far as to imprison certain leaders. At the same time, it opens up all of the media spaces that it controls to its own “experts” and supporters. It is in these conditions that the new president launched, timidly and not without ambiguity, a call for dialogue with the movement whereas its dynamic, in the face of a repressive climate of arbitrary arrests and trials, made the designation of intermediaries with whom to discuss almost impossible.

On the other hand, the calls to self-organization lack clarity. It is indeed not certain that they can bring out representatives from the different segments of the movement; moreover, it could be difficult to offer guarantees of the conditions of a democratic settlement without the intervention of parties, associations and trade unions. The *Hirak*'s rejection of any delegation of power and any

representation by political parties is one of its fundamental characteristics. If this is a strength for some, thereby preventing the regime from breaking the contestation by direct negotiation via potentially corruptible representatives, for others, this represents a weakness: the blocking of any rapid resolution of the “crisis”, leaving the door open to drifts and manipulations. Only the expression of the different components of society can get Algeria out of this critical situation. And the resolution of this contradiction depends on legitimacy, clairvoyance, charisma and the consistency of the project that will be defended by the representatives who could emerge – something we find in the history of all revolutions, like that led by the FLN from 1954 to 1962.

The scope of the Hirak

To get out of this impasse, it is therefore advisable to open up the spaces of political expression to all forces present and to widen them to new voices and forms of organization that have been asserting themselves for more than a year. To open a horizontal dialogue, the widest possible, and not a vertical negotiation. It would be wrong to think that there is on one side a homogeneous block, the *Hirak*, waiting to be structured, and on the other a government to be overthrown. The two entities are traversed by contradictions, each evolving to the rhythm of the political struggle. The *Hirak* is a form of popular and collective struggle which allows the various components of society to gain freedom. Throughout the mobilisation, the movement never stopped, in the streets, reaffirming its ability to carry the demands of society while adapting to the evocation of the issues. Whatever one may say, the political parties and certain political personalities help it to do so: thus, the question of the constituent assembly, introduced in the debate by political criticism. Spontaneity also has its limits.

The society represented by the *Hirak* is, in essence as much as historically, traversed by contradictions. To build a political and social future is to work for an organization capable of taking charge of them. The parties, associations and trade unions must be an integral part of this, as well as all of the emerging rank and file structures: student collectives, committees for the liberation of detainees, nuclei of self-organization and so on. A course remains to be maintained: the need for a political change. To believe that it will be done without popular intervention in the sphere of the state and the political field in general is illusory: the democracy so much demanded depends then on the way of envisaging the political structure.

Currently, the edifice of the regime is structured, from the bottom to the top, by the communal popular assemblies (APC), the Popular Assembly of Wilaya (APW) and finally by the National Popular Assembly (NPC) – the presidency of the Republic capping it all. The mode of designation of the members of these assemblies is done by universal suffrage: a purely formal suffrage, devoid of any political consistency. This is where democracy is flouted, and this at two basic levels: by the suffrage itself, which, as we have said, is not transparent and escapes all popular control; and through the terms of decision-making which involve the management of the city and the country down to the smallest detail. These decisions are concentrated in the hands of the *wali* (the *wilayas* are public territorial organs of government) and heads of *daira* (subdivision of the *wilayas* grouping several municipalities), direct representatives of the central government. *Wilayas* and *dairas* are also spaces and places in which different forms of clientelism takes place..

Continue the process

Should we revise the operating mode of these institutions to make them more transparent and democratic – by establishing representative popular control represented over the universal suffrage

which governs them, for example? Or should we replace all of these institutions with something completely new, with a system of direct democracy, at the base, through popular committees? It must be kept in mind that this is above all, and as in any revolutionary change, a *process* – with highlights and setbacks. What is meant by this term? The term “rupture”, whether it is a rupture of transition, of constituent processes or of continuity, is frequently used.. But, under current conditions, it is not certain that a radical rupture can occur overnight or even in the short term. So, we should maintain the course towards a transition which could take the form of a series of ruptures, whether could happen successively or uninterruptedly – the challenge is to maintain the idea of a *permanent process*. [6]

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P.S.

- Translation IVP, 23 February 2020:
<http://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article6420>
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Footnotes

[1] *Issaba* is a term first used by the former army head Ahmed Gaïd Salah (who died on 23 December 2019) to designate a set of actors — associates of Abdelaziz Bouteflika like his brother Saïd, oligarchs, ministers, general officers, information chiefs, wheeler-dealers and crooks — in power throughout the Bouteflika period. It was taken up in the slogans of the protesters. Some of this “gang” are now in prison following the uprising and the trials launched by Gaïd Salah after the departure of Bouteflika.

[2] Ouyahia is now serving a 15 year prison sentence for embezzlement in the context of the trials of the *issaba*.

[3] *Hirak* is the Arabic for movement and is the term that is used to refer to the mass protest movement in Algeria,

[4] Abane Ramdane and Larbi Ben M'hidi are considered as the main forces behind the Soummam congress in 1956, which provided a programmatic matrix to the FLN and the war of liberation.

[5] The ban on marches or any form of public event in the capital was instituted on 18 June 2001 under the government of Ali Benflis. This decision was taken by the government following the historic march of 14 June 2001, initiated by the citizens' movement of the Kabylie region.

[6] The question of revolution and democracy is a global and historical issue, which does not concern only Algeria. It is treated theoretically at different times throughout the 20th century. On this subject, see the debate between the French politician Henri Weber and the Greek philosopher Nicos Poulantzas.