

Coronavirus tests Algeria's protest movement

Wednesday 18 March 2020, by [ALLAHOUM Ramy](#) (Date first published: 14 March 2020).

The virus's rapid spread in the North African country is threatening the momentum of the year-long demonstrations.

Month after month, protesters in Algeria have braved cold weather, the threat of force and arrests to demand an end to decades of kleptocratic rule - only to now be confronted by an unexpected obstacle: the new coronavirus.

With 37 confirmed cases to date and three deaths recorded from the coronavirus outbreak, now classified a pandemic by the World Health Organization, members of the year-old protest movement appear divided on how and whether they should continue their weekly demonstrations.

Still, several hundred protesters on Friday took to the streets of central Algiers, defying authorities' calls to desist marching.

"Neither the coronavirus nor the cholera is going to stop us, we're getting our freedom, come what may," they chanted. "The coronavirus isn't going to scare us, we were brought up in misery."

But not everybody appeared to be singing from the same hymn sheet, with many taking to social media to denounce what they called irresponsible behaviour.

"You won't be of much help to Algeria if you're dead," wrote one Twitter user.

In Oran, Algeria's second-biggest city where literature laureate Albert Camus's famous novel *The Plague* is set, protesters appeared to be heeding authorities' calls, with far fewer numbers taking to the streets on Friday.

□□ Le [#coronavirus](#) va-t-il aussi avoir des conséquences sur la révolution en [#Algerie](#) ?

Réponse de [@khaleddrareni](#) dans [#64Minutes](#) sur [@TV5MONDE](#) [#Hirak](#)
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[pic.twitter.com/1GelyXPExQ](#)

— Mohamed Kaci (@MKACITV5M) [March 12, 2020](#)

The government has responded to the outbreak, which has spread in some 130 countries worldwide, by shutting down schools and universities across the country in an effort to prevent the spread of the virus. It has also limited, and in some instances cancelled, flights to hard-hit countries in Europe.

Authorities, however, have stopped short of implementing a full lockdown.

On Tuesday, Health Minister Abderrahmane Benbouzid said President Abdelmadjid Tebboune "has given instructions to suspend meetings and gatherings of a cultural, economic, political and sporting

nature”.

Khaled Drareni, an Algerian journalist with a considerable following on social media, raised a few eyebrows this week after telling French broadcaster TV5 Monde that authorities were using the coronavirus as a pretext to stop people from protesting.

Drareni told Al Jazeera that he specifically did not call on Algerians to go out and protest in the face of a health crisis, stating instead that the government would most likely seek to exploit it for political ends.

“The government has for more than a year now used numerous pretexts to dissuade people from going out,” he said.

“People will continue to go out and protest despite the government’s calls not to because they are sceptical of everything it says,” Drareni added, while also insisting that the coronavirus must be taken seriously.

The demonstrations, which initially erupted early last year in response to former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s decision to seek a fifth term in office, quickly transformed into demands for systemic change.

But the unprecedented wave of anger gradually began to dissipate after the military stepped in and pressured the ailing Bouteflika to resign in early April.

The popular movement took another hit when a presidential election was held in December despite boycott calls, with Tebboune elected head of state after garnering a majority of the vote in the first round that was marred by low turnout.

Despite holding reservations about Tebboune, a former prime minister and onetime Bouteflika loyalist, many people were relieved that a healthy president capable of performing his duties had assumed office.

Echoing Drareni’s comments, Riad Kaced, a US-based activist, said suspending the protests and large gatherings was the right thing to do, with one caveat.

“We have to understand that the challenges are slightly different. In Algeria, the government’s calls for cancelling the protests are not motivated by sanitary concerns as it is the case in France, the US or elsewhere.”

“The Algerian regime wants to seize this opportunity to strangle the Hirak and kill it off,” continued Kaced, who says he flies out to Algiers almost every second week to take part in the demonstrations.

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