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Algeria's Hirak at a Crossroad: Towards an Impasse or Progress?

Elif Zaim



(Enes Canlı - Anadolu Agency)

This policy outlook examines the two years since the emergence of the Hirak. In doing so, it discusses the major events that took place, assessing the Algerian regime's attempts to ease public pressure by making superficial changes while maintaining its grip on power. The outlook also focuses on the Hirak's political performance and evaluates the movements' predicaments as well as its future prospects.

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The new year began hastily in Algeria as news broke of the acquittal of deposed President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's younger brother Said, along with two former intelligence chiefs by a military court. Said Bouteflika, Lieutenant General Mohamed Mediene, and Major General Athmane Tartag had been sentenced to 15 years in prison in September 2019 based on charges of conspiring against the state and army. Their arrests were part of a wave of detentions targeting Bouteflika's close allies.

These purges of the old guard have been pointed out as one of the most significant tangible results of the Hirak, the mass protest movement in which people took to the streets to publicly oppose the ailing President Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term in February 2019. Since then, the movement had been demonstrating persistently every week until the coronavirus outbreak.

Being a non-violent, civic movement, the Hirak was lauded for creating unprecedented momentum in the country through challenging the established power structures, namely le pouvoir – an opaque network of military, economic, and political elites that has been intact since Algerian independence in 1962.

However, despite the initial euphoria, marking its second anniversary, the movement does not yet seem to have succeeded in compelling authorities to make substantial institutional or political reforms, nor has it had solid impact on key political developments, such as the presidential election and the constitutional referendum.

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"The Portrait" President

Almost everyone was caught by surprise when thousands of people began rallying in nationwide demonstrations against the prospect of President Bouteflika's new mandate. After all, the liberalised autocracy in Algeria was seen as an exception that was resilient and stable, remaining largely unaffected by the uprisings that swept across much of the broader region.

When the protests erupted, the 81-year-old president had already been in power for over two decades. While once hailed for his reconciliation efforts following the devastating civil war (1991-2001) that claimed more than 150,000 lives, his popularity has been continuously on the decline and the stroke he suffered in 2013, which incapacitated him, was the final straw for many people.



Then-President of Algeria Abdelaziz Bouteflika arrives to cast his ballot to elect members of the country's 462-seat parliament in Algiers, Algeria on May 4, 2017. (Bechir Ramzy - Anadolu Agency)

From 2013 onwards, Bouteflika's presidency has been marred with internal power struggles over who would one-day replace him and external criticisms casting doubts on his ability to govern. In fact, after his stroke, the president had only been seen in public a handful of times and was confined to a wheelchair. On other occasions, in his absence, he was represented by his framed portrait.

2019 was a turning point for Bouteflika, which led to improbable changes in a short time. In two months after the inception of the protests by the end of March 2019, due to the unprecedented pressure created by the Hirak, army chief General Ahmed Gaid Salah was forced to step in and call for Bouteflika's resignation through the invocation of the constitution's Article 102, cited on the claim the president was unfit to rule.

On April 2 2019, with Bouteflika out of office, senate president Abdelkader Bensalah was appointed as his interim replacement until new presidential elections could take place. In addition, in a further bid to appease popular unrest, prosecutions including several high ranking government officials and prominent businessman from Bouteflika's entourage were initiated.

However, all of these changes failed to calm the cries of those on the streets, as protests continued unabated. What initially started as a rejection of Bouteflika's candidacy has culminated into a broader act of resistance against the entirety of the regime as people began to demand the overhaul of the existing system and its replacement with a state not ruled by the military.

A Presidential Election Amid Boycotts

On December 12, 2019 during the third attempt of the year to organise presidential elections, thousands of Algerians boycotted the polls. While the initial vote was cancelled because of the Hirak demonstrations, the second vote, planned for July, was called off by the constitutional council due to a lack of candidates.

As expected, all of the approved five contenders who took part in the elections were figures connected to the establishment. To put it in context, front-runners Abdelmadjid Tebboune and Ali Benflis were both former prime ministers who served under Bouteflika, while the three other candidates were former Culture Minister Azzedine Mihoubi, former Tourism Minister Abdelkader Bengrine, and Abdelaziz Belaid a former member of the ruling party, the National Liberation Front (FLN).

That being said, the regime was determined to ensure that the elections were portrayed as free and fair. Motivated by this aim, a week prior to the vote, a live debate between the candidates was broadcast on national television for the first time in the country's history. However, rather than having the intended impact, the debate was criticized for failing to deliver solid policy plans and for its avoidance of key issues, such as the role of the army in politics.

Public apathy and discontent with the competitors were also seen in the election rallies. As none of the candidates were fully accepted by the public, some campaigns had to be cancelled, either due to an absence of supporters or because of interruption by protestors.

For many Algerians, the election was simply a sham procedure held only to formally confirm the army's chosen president. Consequentially, it was denounced by the Hirak supporters as an instrument utilised by the establishment to ensure the perpetuation of the same authoritarian system through which the military continues to hold power.

However, rather than listening to the demands of the Hirak calling for genuine political reforms and a democratic transition process prior to the vote, the regime intensified its crackdown on the protestors. According to Human Rights Watch, during the run-up to the elections, a number of prominent figures from the movement, which was mainly composed of journalists and activists, were detained on charges such as "harming national unity" and "undermining the morale of the army".

Within this atmosphere of mounting tensions, the military was determined to continue with the vote, stating that it was the only way to break through the stalemate of the months-long protests. Thus, despite the boycotts, the much-contested presidential election was held as planned.

When the results were announced, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who was referred to as the preferred candidate of General Gaid Salah, was declared the country's new president. While he achieved victory in the first round by a clear margin of votes, securing 58.15 per cent, Tebboune was deprived of popular legitimacy due to a low voter turnout, which stood around 40 per cent.

Building a "New Algeria"

In the first speech after his inauguration, President Tebboune appeared willing to reconcile with the Hirak and answer the demands of the protestors. He stated, "I address directly the Hirak (protest movement), which I have repeatedly blessed and supported, to extend my hand for serious dialogue with them, for the sake of Algeria and only Algeria".

However, the composition of his new government has been a testimony to the continuity of state policies and maintenance of power for the old elite, rather than change. Analysing Tebboune's mandate, Dr. Tahir Kilavuz, a lecturer at Marmara University remarks, "when proposed as the new president, Tebboune was supposed to be a middle-ground figure within the regime. He was not expected to make any significant changes; the purpose was to have a figure that is not widely contested".



Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune speaks after taking the oath of office during the swearing-in ceremony in Algiers, Algeria on December 19, 2019. (Farouk Batiche - Anadolu Agency)

However, as expected, his rhetorical pledges and contradictory actions did not resonate well with the demonstrators; they carried on their movement until Covid-19 hit the country and brought the protests to a halt. While in the beginning, some people within the movement questioned the seriousness of the pandemic — viewing it as an attempt by the regime to prevent protests — the leading figures soon stepped in and urged the suspension of the mobilisation due to health concerns. For the first time in a year, the streets were empty.

For many, the overarching question was whether the measures taken to prevent the spread of the virus would bring an end to the Hirak, as the movement's main course of action was public gatherings and demonstrations. However, despite the initial concerns, the Hirak has adapted its repertoire of actions, shifting its focus towards social media and protests from balconies, as well as initiating solidarity networks to support relief efforts.

On the other hand, for the regime, the Covid-19 situation has proven to be dire as Algeria was one of the countries that were least prepared to face the pandemic. Thus, the socio-economic fallout caused by the virus has only exacerbated the existing challenges faced by the country, painting a grim future for those most vulnerable. That being said, in terms of its approach to the Hirak, the regime has taken advantage of the pandemic to silence dissent once again by orchestrating an increased clampdown on the protestors and the arrest of leading Hirak figures such as Karim Tabbou.

Within this framework, evaluating the first year of President Tebboune in power, there is consensus among scholars that it was defined by the continuation of the existing system. Dr. Michael Willis, a lecturer in St. Anthony's College at the University of Oxford, interprets the period by saying "the first year of Abdelmajid Tebboune's presidency has seen very little change in Algerian politics. Despite promises to meet protestors' demands and the introduction of a revised constitution, the same power structures have remained largely in place with just some changes of personnel right at the top. The regime has used the Covid crisis to not only forestall the Hirak movement but also, since particularly the summer, to repress it with waves of arrests against leading activists".

On a similar line, Dr. Isabelle Werenfels, a senior fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, also remarks that she believes "we have seen more continuity than change this year. And the change we saw from the government was more in the direction of where trying Algeria was before the Hirak. We see figures of the previous system being somewhat rehabilitated and we see much more restrictions on freedom of expression than in early or mid- 2019".

On the other hand, emphasising how success is defined when looking at Tebboune's mandate, Dr. Kilavuz argues that "if success is defined as a transformative performance, Tebboune was clearly not successful. He did not make any significant changes in the system to increase his and the regime's legitimacy and garner support from the public. But if success is defined as keeping the boat sailing, then he was successful in his own ways".

These considerations necessitate a closer look at the constitutional changes under Tebboune in order to garner a better understanding of his presidential trajectory.

Constitutional Amendments: More of the Same?

Upon his return to Algeria, as the first political act of the new year President Tebboune signed constitutional amendments into law. Since late October 2020, the President was absent from the country while receiving medical treatment in Germany after testing positive for Covid-19. Due to his hospitalisation, which took place only days before, he was also unable to oversee the referendum held on the constitutional revision.

Algerians are most certainly familiar with the constitutional changes that presidents have used over the course of the years as a magic formula to the problems they encountered while in office, whether it was popular discontent or the scope of the presidential powers. Elaborating on this, Dr. Kilavuz argues that "the constitutional amendment is a long-standing strategy of the Algerian regime. We have witnessed several constitutional amendments in Algerian history, some of which came as a response to potential challenges to the regime, following the protest movements in 1988 and 2011". Therefore, keeping up with the tradition, Tebboune's first reflex upon resuming office was to pledge to enact constitutional revisions in a bid to quell demonstrations.

That being said, Dr. Kilavuz emphasises that "on most occasions since the major amendments in 1989, most of the major constitutional changes were more on paper rather than aiming to change the system". Looking at the current 73 amendments covering various issues, technically they include improvements with regards to strengthening rights and freedoms, as well as guaranteeing the separation of powers. However, as Dr. Kılavuz and other critics suggest, the crux of the issue lies with the implementation of these changes.

In this regard, limitations imposed on presidential powers remain a salient issue. While the new constitution states that the president will not be able to serve more than two terms and entrusts the appointment of the prime minister

to the parliament, the president still keeps his authority to dismiss him. Moreover, the president continues to hold his mandate to assign members of the constitutional court. Thus, it seems that far from pulling the country away from authoritarianism, new amendments simply reformulate the existing presidential order differently. On this point, Dr. Willis expresses that "the changes to the constitution made very little difference. Many of the changes actually strengthened the role of the presidency in the system".

How the constitution drafting process took shape is another point of contention; the experts who formed the constitutional committee were chosen by Tebboune himself. This top-down approach lacks transparency and inclusion and seems to reinforce the idea that no matter popular sentiment, the regime will always set the rules for the country. In this regard, Dr. Kilavuz reiterates that "despite the emphasis on the separation of powers, it is not expected for the military to leave the political scene. Which is why most of the democratic forces in Algeria firmly rejects the authenticity of these constitutional changes".

Furthermore, Amel Boubekeur, a visiting fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations, argues that "the constitution should be the reflection of the important issues that are currently on the agenda in the country. But the constitutional revision did not resolve anything so far since it did not focus on the issues that are important to the Algerians. That is why the citizens were so uninterested in the debate and the process".

The historically low turnout for the referendum — which stood around 24 per cent — reflects the existing discontent. The fact that less than 15 per cent of eligible voters approved the changes to the constitution does not bode well for a regime that has been trying to solve its legitimacy crisis since the presidential election.

Evaluating the referendum results, Dr. Werenfels states that "I think it left most Algerians indifferent, as the changes were fairly marginal. If we take electoral participation as an indicator, then we have to conclude that it was a failure with regard to gaining more legitimacy. Official participation was only a little more than half of what it was for the presidential elections". On a similar note, Dr. Willis says that "most of Algerians see the changes as irrelevant and the Hirak and opposition parties ignored the referendum".

On the other hand, discussing the entire drafting process and the referendum outcome, Dr. Dalia Ghanem, a resident scholar at Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, argues "not only that Algeria was not in need of a new constitution but the way it was done deepened the crisis and the lack of trust between citizens and their leadership. The turnout showed that Algerians were not asking for a new constitution, rather what is needed is a serious talk, discussion with the Hirak, and serious economic reforms".

The Hirak: A Series of Pitfalls

Over the course of the two years since the emergence the Hirak, a lot has changed in the Algerian political landscape. The country now has a new president, a new prime minister, a new government, a new military chief, a new constitution to name a few. However, all of these changes have, perhaps counter-intuitively to the outside observer, ensured that the regime remained intact. Nevertheless, for the popular movement, amid its modest achievements and notable failures, two factors have remained constant: resilience and defiance.

The Hirak is exceptional in many regards. According to Dr. Werenfels, "it gave back Algerian citizens a sense of agency and pride and re-appropriation of their history after decades of inertia and having a sense the country's post-colonial elite had highjacked the country and the revolution after independence". Moreover, it brought back adding that "young generations realised that change can happen, and the many discussion on the future of the system, on transition, on rule of law, have laid the seeds for a different future - even if it may take many years to realise it".

Certainly, the Hirak has gained unprecedented momentum, but it has arguably failed to build on this tide of change or capitalise on the regime's legitimacy crisis to become a key player in shaping the political process. Two categorical reasons behind this lack of progress are the internal dynamics of the movement as well as the constraints of the larger political context in the country.

The Hirak's primary leverage rests upon its unity, bringing a wide range of people from different age groups, ideologies, and backgrounds together across Algeria. However, the effort to maintain this sense of solidarity translates into vague proposals and this reality creates one of the most significant impediments for the long-term development of the movement. In a practical sense, as Dr. Ghanem puts it, "a key reason for the low success of the movement to achieve tangible results is the inexistence of workable goals and the absence of a clear roadmap for the day after. Moreover, there was no plan to keep protesters engaged and integrate them into the political process".

Certainly, the Algerian regime is well aware of this vulnerability. According to Dr. Willis "the regime has been extremely active in trying to play on potential divisions within the Hirak on issues such as Islamism, women and Amazigh identity. Most of these efforts have not been very successful". It seems that after the pandemic and halting the demonstrations willingly, these differences have become more explicitly pronounced within the Hirak as intense debates are taking place in online platforms mainly between 'conservatives' and 'progressives'. However, whether these exchanges could turn into concrete plans leading to a real consensus remains to be seen.



Algerians attend a demonstration to demand the departure of all government officials closely associated with former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika in Algiers, Algeria, 03 May 2019. (Farouk Batiche - Anadolu Agency)

Another internal roadblock to the Hirak's success is the absence of appointed leaders within the movement. While this decentralised structure protects the Hirak from the regime's attempts to co-opt or discredit the popular movement, it also has its disadvantages. Elaborating on this point, Dr. Willis argues that "part of the Hirak's original strength was its lack of identifiable leadership and lack of a more developed platform which facilitated such large numbers of people to join and support it. However, this has proved a handicap when producing a platform and figures to negotiate with the regime".

That being said, Dr. Willis further states that "most of the Hirak activists do not, however, believe in the sincerity of efforts by the regime to negotiate and find a solution". Similarly, Dr. Werenfels also emphasises existing concerns by expressing that "the question is also whether it would have been wise to try to seek to engage in a dialogue with the regime, namely the military, rather than refuse dialogue, which large parts of the Hirak initially favoured. But there are also arguments to be made for the danger of co-optation in case of dialogue". This situation, yet again, reverts to the dilemma of formulating a coherent, well thought-through strategy within the Hirak.

However, reiterating the reasoning behind this notion, Boubekeur suggests that "Algerians know the rulers. They know that they are not going to initiate any kind of real transition or promote any genuine reform because they are not ready to share the power. There's a lack of trust for historical reasons. And there is a deep feeling and a deep belief that this is not a regime that can be trusted". Therefore, while talking about the shortcomings of the movement, examining Hirak requires an analysis of both the setbacks imposed on the movement by the regime and the socio-political environment in which it operates.

Dr. Werenfels touches upon several complementary factors in this regard, saying, "I think there are many factors that played a role, most recently, of course, Covid-19, which played into the hands of the regime. The Algerian system, due to its rentier character, its competing informal networks, and opaque decision-making structures is much more difficult to change than a highly personalised system such as the Ben Ali system was, and we see even there how there are remnants that seek to undermine the democratic process and economic reform".

Moreover, the dominance of the army as the main power broker within the government further complicates the situation and hampers any democratisation process that may take place. The arrest of Boutefika's entourage can be seen in this light. Under the pretext of answering the demands of the protestors, the military utilised the situation in its favour to discharge certain figures from its ranks.

A less referred-to actor in the discussions, but who is nevertheless crucial, are the opposition parties. It can be ar-

gued that while the Hirak has created sufficient pressure on the regime to enact some modest changes, past events show that this effort has not been enough to force a genuine transition. Stating that "the momentum that the people's movement created should have been complemented by the opposition elites", Dr. Kilavuz articulates that the weakness of the movement was "not with the people taking to the streets, but elites who had to turn these efforts into significant political changes. Formal opposition had no capability of offering leadership and a clear roadmap, and the independent opposition actors were undermined by both the regime and the formal opposition actors".

A Substantial Conundrum at Hand

Marking the second anniversary of the Hirak, it is important to roughly sketch out the main challenges faced by Algerians domestically at this juncture in time.

First and foremost, the acquittal of Said Bouteflika, General Mediene and General Tartag is a crucial development that needs to be taken into consideration in the context of elite gamesmanship. Explaining the situation Dr. Willis argues that "the acquittals are really about manoeuvring and score-settling at the top of the Algerian regime. These figures were removed and prosecuted by General Gaid Salah who took effective control of Algeria after Abdelaziz Bouteflika's resignation in April 2019". He further adds "following Gaid Salah's death in December 2019, his former enemies are reasserting themselves. This is further evidence that nothing has really changed at the top of the Algerian regime".

Secondly, while the top echelons of power are busy with politicking, the socio-economic situation of the country is alarming. The coronavirus outbreak and the lockdown measures taken to contain it, coupled with the record low drop in oil prices has exacerbated the existing economic crisis. To put it in perspective, for 2020, a contraction of 5.5 per cent in the economy is projected whereas the fiscal deficit is expected to reach 16.5 per cent of the GDP. Moreover, Algeria's foreign exchange reserves are predicted to fall to 44 billion dollars for the same year.

With the state being heavily dependent on hydrocarbon revenues, these steep falls have resulted in a governmental decision to cut public spending by 50 per cent and to suspend national projects. Given the bleak prospects, aggravated by the economic fallout and enraged by the failures of the policies to handle the pandemic, it is highly likely that Algerians could once again take to the streets.

Finally, the increased crackdown on dissent is a major cause of concern. Just recently in December, the government dealt a new blow to freedom of expression by enacting a decree regulating online media under the premise of controlling the dissemination of false news. The law requires digital outlets be located in the country and thus obtain a license to operate in addition to informing the authorities about any illegal content published on their websites.

As mentioned above, since the beginning of the protests, but particularly so since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, journalists have been a regular target of the regime. For example, the prominent journalist Khaled Drareni was arrested on charges of "calling for an illegal gathering" and "undermining national unity" due to his coverage of the Hirak protests. Prior to the law, there were also other journalists who were detained for their online publications. Several news platforms were also blocked because of their reporting on the popular movement. However, this latest move shows that the regime only nominally indulges the demands of the protestors while it is not willing to risk any changes that could put a dent in its political capital.

Conclusion

What is on the horizon for the Hirak seems to be the key question that has yet to be answered. While it is certain that the Hirak will not disband until a fundamental political change takes place, it is unequivocally certain that the movement needs to find ways to overcome its pronounced predicaments. Dr. Ghanem sums up the situation by stating "what the Hirak needs to do after the end of confinement measures is to reorganise locally, regionally, and nationally to galvanise people again and create momentum. It needs also to have a discussion in order to choose (or not) a leadership, but above all to discuss the strategy to move forward".

The Hirak is standing in front of a crossroad. While it is not defeated, it has not achieved substantive victory either. If the movement formulates a feasible and practical roadmap, clearly defining both short-term and long-term objectives, it can certainly break this impasse. However, in order to do so, the Hirak not only needs to come up with an alternative plan that can sufficiently pressure the regime to enforce genuine change but also needs to create a genuine consensus among its different cleavages. This effort should be accompanied and supported by opposition parties in order to create a united front capable of making the regime budge.

That being said, what needs to be acknowledged is that as much as the redefining of the Hirak itself is vital for the democratisation of Algeria, as long as the military is determined to rule the country behind a civilian façade this alone certainly will not be enough. While it would be unrealistic to think that the army will be willing to leave power without securing its own interests, a gradual transition through negotiations is still possible.

2019

February 10
President Bouteflika announces he will seek a fifth term in office.

February 22
Hundreds of thousands Algerians coming from diverse backgrounds rally across the country, in what later became known as the Hirak, against the prospects of Bouteflika's new mandate.

March 11
Under growing pressure, Bouteflika declares that he will withdraw his candidacy and postpones the elections.

March 26
Army Chief Gaid Salah calls Bouteflika to be declared unfit to rule the country through invoking article 102 of the constitution.

April 2
Bouteflika resigns. Protestors take to the streets for celebrations.

April 9
Parliament chooses Abdelkader Bensalah as the interim president until new elections.

May 4
Saied Bouteflika, General Mohamed Mediene and General Athmane Tartag are arrested on charges conspiring against the state and the military.

June 2
Constitutional Council cancels presidential election citing a lack of candidates.

September 15
Bensalah announces the scheduled date for the presidential vote as December 12 as General Salah insists on holding elections as the only way forward.

September 20
Demonstrations continue unabated in its 31st consecutive week as protestors call for General Salah to step down.

November 17
Presidential election campaign begins. All of the approved five contenders are linked to the establishment having served in previous governments

December 12
Voting takes place amid mass boycott.

December 13
Abdelmadjid Tebboune, referred to as the military's preferred candidate, achieves victory in the first round with 58.15 per cent of the votes.

December 23
General Gaid Salah dies, and General Said Chengriha is appointed as the interim chief of staff.

December 28
President Tebboune appoints Abdelaziz Djerad as prime minister.

2020

January 2
Prime Minister Djerad forms a new government composed of 11 out of 28 ministers who held office under President Bouteflika.

January 8
President Tebboune forms a constitutional committee to develop a new constitution to ease the protests.

March 20
The Hirak suspends protests willingly for the first time since its inception due to health concerns.

April
The regime identifies its crackdown on protestors through arbitrary arrests targeting leading Hirak figures.

March
The government implements a series of measures such as the closure of schools and ban on public gatherings to mitigate the spread of Covid-19.

October 27
President Tebboune is hospitalised after testing positive with Covid-19, he later travels to Germany for treatment.

October 2
Saied Bouteflika, General Mohamed Mediene and General Athmane Tartag are acquitted.

November 1
Constitutional amendments are approved in a referendum with a historically low turnout standing around 24 per cent.