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## ALGERIA: TO VOTE OR NOT TO VOTE?

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We asked a mixed group of five promising Algerian and European young researchers and political analysts to shed some light on the situation in Algeria a few days before the scheduled date of the elections (on 12 December). Is Algeria ready for the elections? What is at stake?

### **Algerians may head to the polls, but the election will not end the crisis**

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"We swear: elections won't take place"; "It is our country. We are the ones who decide". These are some of the slogans that Algerian demonstrators have been screaming since the beginning of the official electoral campaign in earlier November. For protesters, the elections only promise the continuance of the old and opaque regime, which mainly consists of senior figures within the People's National Army, political parties with close ties to the regime, and influential economic elites. The ruling government and the army have called Algerians to head massively to the polls, reiterating the idea that elections are the only viable solution to end Algeria's political crisis.

If it is true that a newly elected President will formally end the transition stage, it is also unlikely that it will turn off the unrest. Contenders' political programs are vague. All candidates have been involved in one way or another in Bouteflika's regime. Ali Benflis and Abdelmadjid Tebboune were prime ministers, Azzedine Mihoubi was Culture Minister, Abdelkader Bengrine was Tourism Minister and Abdelaziz Belaid was the head of the El Mostakbal Movement party.

The situation may get even worse. The ruling authorities have scaled up the repression against demonstrators and the

opposition – according to the National Committee for the Release of Prisoners, 140 political activists have been jailed in the last five months. The outcome of the vote will be used by the regime as an excuse to legitimate its power and consequently to defend it, cost what it may. However, in the eyes of most Algerians, legitimacy will be missing for the next President.

Also, it is unlikely that the new government will be able to address the citizens' economic and social frustrations. In a country where the economy still relies heavily on hydrocarbons, a diversification of the economic sector is much needed. Yet, one can seriously doubt whether the elected leadership will open up and promote both economic and political liberalisation in the short to medium term.

Therefore, the *Hirak*, the opposition political parties and civic associations will need to elaborate a strategy, beyond the possible elections' boycott and the protests in the streets. They will need to identify a representative leadership of some sort and propose a roadmap. If being leaderless may have served the movement in its early days, events have shown that it may have weakened it over the last weeks. Without a proper leadership, the *Hirak* is losing its *raison d'être*: becoming a political interlocutor.

All in all, nine months of protests have demonstrated that Algerians, and its youth in particular, are eager to take their political future into their own hands. The stakes are high. It is about ensuring that society will not continue to be completely detached from its electoral representation.

### **Business as usual is no longer an option. When stopping an electoral process is the best option for democracy**

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As paradoxical as this may be, cancelling the electoral process scheduled for December 12 would be a win for the democratic struggle in Algeria. Fixed at the injunction of the Army Chief of Staff General Ahmed Gaid Saleh – Algeria's de facto ruler since President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was forced to step down on April 2 –, the upcoming presidential elections are widely perceived as a manoeuvre used by the Algerian regime to maintain its grip on power. The rationale is that the regime, referred to among Algerians as "*le pouvoir*" (the power) – an

opaque network of military, political and economic leaders that has ruled Algeria since independence – is attempting through this election to find a new civilian façade to continue business as usual.

From its early hours, the historical movement that started on February 22 and came to be known as the *Hirak* aimed for more than just the removal of Bouteflika. Through slogans like "*El chaab yourid isskat ennidam*" (The people want to bring the system down), "*Yetnahaw gaa*" (All of them will be

removed) and “*dawla madania machi askaria*” (A civilian state, not a military one), the millions of people who have been marching over the past 10 months made it clear that they were seeking a rupture with the regime. A clear rupture would require the departure of key figures from the old system including interim President Abdelkader Bensaleh, and Prime Minister Nourddine Bedoui, the opening up of the political space to new parties and associations, freeing public media, and holding a genuine dialogue over the transfer of political power from the military to civilian rule.

However, the response of the regime falls short from satisfying popular demands for radical change. After an *anti-corruption* campaign that saw the arrest of dozens of Algerian political figures, the regime has refused to make any further concessions. General Gaid Saleh insists that holding presidential elections in the shortest delay is the only way for putting an end to the crisis and entering a new phase. Yet, all of the five candidates running for the presidency have either supported Bouteflika or took part in his government. Moreover, without any transparent update of the electorate lists, nothing guarantees that fraud will not take

place. Meanwhile, authorities have increasingly cracked down on protesters. Algerian jails count over 320 political prisoners, including opposition leaders, human rights activists, students, journalists and cartoonists.

Despite mass protests across the country and a call for a general strike, the regime seems determined to hold the December 12 elections. While the future is uncertain, the new president will likely suffer from a significant lack of legitimacy and will be unable to engage in any major reforms. With no signs of the *Hirak* abating, the country is set to be trapped in a political stalemate. The regime will need to sit at the negotiating table with opposition parties and civil society organisations to define the terms of a coherent political transition that will set the ground for a fresh democratic system, based on the rule of law, the respect of individual and collective freedoms, and social justice. This being said, the absence of organized platforms capable of channelling the people's aspirations remains a serious threat to the success of the country's political transition. Political initiatives emerging from the *Hirak* will be crucial in determining Algeria's fate.

### **Distrust is skyrocketing high. No scenario can be discarded**

*Kamel Meili* | Researcher

Understanding the deep distrust between the Algerian population and the political system requires a careful look at the country's electoral history. Fraud has always

marred Algerian elections amid a general indifference and the participation of a well-known voter base composed of supporters of the National Liberation Front and the

National Democratic Assembly (RND), its political allies and affiliated associations. However, this has changed: the indifference that, in the past, materialized in record low turnouts, has now turned into a strong protest movement.

The interim President and the pro-election camp have claimed that mediation and dialogue institutions are the best way to end the crisis. However, they have not convinced Algerians, who have expressed their concerns over a number of developments, including the way the electoral organic law was revised and the appointment of the members of the Higher Independent Council for the Organisation and Supervision of Elections (ANIE), which is presided by Miloud Chorf, former Minister of Justice under Bouteflika.

International human rights NGOs have also highlighted these worrying developments, in particular regarding press and political freedoms. An unprecedented number of journalists and activists were arrested in 2019 for alleged defamatory reporting. Some reports also point to public and private media being pressured to convey some specific messages and limit the coverage of popular movements.

The strong opposition to the current presidential election process has been fuelled by the fact all candidates are seen as having participated or supported to some extent the presidency of Bouteflika. As a result, the campaign is taking place in turbulent circumstances, as exemplified by the chaos

accompanying electoral rallies. Since the start of the election campaign on November 17, the five candidates have avoided major cities in the densely populated northern part of the country and shunned the announcement of their electoral meeting agenda in advance. This does not prevent them from being received regularly by angry demonstrators that have sometimes succeeded in disrupting these meetings, despite the strong police deployment.

As polls approach, the fear of an extremist reaction from either side increases. Elections' advocates and opponents are trading accusations and call each other traitors. Observers are concerned with the risk of reaching an inflection point of violence as authorities continue to instigate the people one against another. For many Algerian experts, the threat of extremism carries the risk of prompting a deep division within the country adding to the vertical division between the rulers and the ruled. However, incitement to violence is not in the interest of any party, because what the power may gain in the short term will turn into the "impossibility of governing" after the elections.

A few days ahead of the scheduled election day, the scenario of a disruptive political or security development occurring before, during or after the elections and making them impossible to take place or compromising their results cannot be discarded. It would have wide-ranging internal and external consequences. However, the most likely

scenario is that the election will take place with a very low turnout and amid volatile and possibly violent situations, which may concentrate in three Amazigh areas: Bejaia, Tizi Ouzou and Bouira.

In this context, the new president will have two options. The first will be to continue the

old regime strategy by injecting colossal sums into social expenditures, distributing the rent, or what remains of it to its supporters and possibly inviting false representatives of the *Hirak* in a National Conference. The second will be to lead the country towards a genuine democratic transition.

### **An unwanted reality: Algerians are ready to vote, it's the system that's in the way**

*Luca Miehe* | Research Assistant, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP)

The Algerian military regime believes it stands to gain from an election – and made it happen at any cost. It has thus far managed to divert attention away from fundamental resistance to that focused on the ballot, while many pressing issues remain unaddressed. With faces from the Bouteflika-era dominating the race for and organising the election, the vote will hardly satisfy popular demands. On the contrary: for many Algerians, this rigged system can only produce rigged results. The pre-electoral campaigns are conducted in complete separation from the societal sphere. Whenever they cross paths, repression and detention awaits.

What's at stake is not the election's outcome per se, but whether or not the unifying spirit of the *Hirak* can be maintained after the lowest common denominator of rejecting the election has become obsolete. Thus, the post-election period will be another litmus test for the movement, as it will have to prove again its determination vis-à-vis the newly elected government.

While there are serious concerns over the fair and transparent conduct of the election, this will not hinder the to-be-President and government to claim victory and try to generate legitimacy from the ballot. Algerians have consistently requested change over the last 10 months, but instead the country was bullied into an unwanted election. The military, led by General Ahmed Gaïd Salah, used the election to play out ethno-political fault lines, silence media and civil society and push through major legislation.

The regime was able to buy time, reshuffle networks and muddy the waters of Algeria's already opaque military, political and economic powers, also referred to as "*le pouvoir*" or "*Issaba*" (Arabic for gang). The strategy is not new – many times in the past, elections were used to try and give a democratic façade to authoritarian rule. By announcing the elections in mid-September, the regime managed to reclaim some control over the public debates. Long

enough now, the *Hirak*'s time and energy were channelled away from core challenges. Let's hope Algeria gets this election quickly over with, so the currently sweeping repression wave can calm off and more

pressing issues can be addressed: a new social pact, the encroaching economic crisis and a re-definition of military-civil relations. Algerians are ready to vote, it is the system that's in the way.

### **L'issue? Un nouveau report, une période transitoire conduite par des acteurs crédibles et de nouvelles élections**

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L'Algérie connaît depuis le 22 février 2019 un mouvement populaire caractérisé par sa spontanéité, son hétérogénéité, son horizontalité, mais surtout par son pacifisme. Le *Hirak* est décrit comme une révolution citoyenne caractérisée par la forte et remarquable participation des jeunes. Ce mouvement a instauré le vendredi comme jour de manifestation dans toute l'Algérie et le mardi comme jour de manifestation pour les étudiants. Après plus de 40 semaines, le mouvement qui est né du rejet d'un cinquième mandat pour l'ancien Président Bouteflika, rejette aujourd'hui la tenue même des élections.

Dans les slogans scandés chaque vendredi et déclinés sur les pancartes, le rejet de la tenue des élections présidentielles semble catégorique et est justifié par le fait que ce sont les acteurs de l'ancien système qui contrôlent le processus et le déroulement des prochaines élections. Avec l'expression « *Yetnahaw gaa* » (Qu'ils dégagent tous), le mouvement populaire plaide pour une rupture avec le système et l'exclusion définitive de tous ceux qui ont été liés au régime.

Le pouvoir semble vouloir que les élections se tiennent coûte que coûte mais l'organisation d'élections considérées illégitimes avec le spectre d'une très faible participation, est susceptible d'affaiblir les autorités en place et rend difficile la mission du nouveau président dont la légitimité sera contestée. Dès lors, il existe deux scénarios possibles :

- Un troisième report de l'élection présidentielle permettrait de gagner plus de temps pour une meilleure préparation des élections. Ces élections résulteraient d'une brève étape transitoire conduite par de nouveaux acteurs crédibles et consensuels.

- Procéder à la tenue d'élections auxquelles la majorité du peuple n'est pas disposée à participer et faire élire un Président dont la légitimité émanera seulement des forces occultes du pays, qui subira leurs pressions et répondra à leurs intérêts. Cela entraînerait probablement un état de mécontentement populaire accru avec un risque d'escalade réel.