

Hirak's Trajectory and the "New Algeria"

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Abstract: In February 2019 popular protests erupted throughout Algeria. This inclusive and peaceful movement, commonly referred to as Hirak, started the so-called “revolution of smiles” over President Bouteflika’s attempt to seek a fifth term in office, asking for the removal of the old political system. More than two years after the beginning of the mobilisation, military interference in politics remains strong, the new president is considered as an emanation of the former regime and the Hirak’s demands are still unmet. Neither a constitutional referendum nor early legislative elections have helped those in power to gain popular legitimacy. With the authorities more committed to repression than opening towards the movement, political change in the country has yet to come. Meanwhile, Algeria’s relations with its foreign partners seem to have not been affected.

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Introduction

In February 2019 the so-called “revolution of smiles” spread throughout Algeria. President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s announcement that he would seek a fifth term in office triggered an unprecedented popular mobilisation calling for the removal of the old political system. Although the country’s recent history was marked by social and political “unrests”, Algeria was spared by the so-called first wave of Arab uprisings that rocked the Middle East and North African region in 2011.

Indeed, even though protests did occur in Algeria as well, they did not bring changes in the system of power. The popular demands for more freedoms and socio-economic opportunities (although they also included calls for social justice and democracy)¹ were soothed particularly through an expansion of social benefits. The government increased public spending and wages, granted loans for enterprises run by young entrepreneurs as well as for housing, all paid for by oil and gas exports’ revenues. In addition, in 2012, in a speech that was considered historic, Bouteflika called on the youth to take charge of the country and asked the old guard to take a step back,² while announcing a series of reforms including a constitutional revision. The government also increased women’s representation in parliament, setting a 30 per cent quota of seats for female deputies. While these openings were more cosmetic than substantial, both legislative and local elections confirmed the majority of votes and seats of the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Rally for Democracy (RND). Furthermore, public concerns about instability in neighbouring Libya and the threat of terrorism, together with the very much persistent legacy of destruction of the 1990s civil war, helped the regime keep control of the situation. Such “Algerian exceptionalism” was not going to last, however.

1. The revolution of smiles

The socio-economic situation of Algeria has been deteriorating since 2014, when hydrocarbon prices started to decline. As a result, in the following years, due to the fall and mismanagement oil revenues and to a lack of investment in diversification, the government has not been able to strengthen its welfare system. On the eve of the protest movement, the high rate of youth (aged 15–24) unemployment, which oscillated around 30 per cent in both 2018 and 2019, the state of public services (particularly education and health) and the level of corruption³ were major factors of social anger.

The hallmark of Bouteflika’s twenty-year rule (1999–2019) was a system of power marked by corruption and patronage towards business groups, ministers, officials and other authorities to secure his power and that of his entourage (main governmental political parties, economic elites, among the others). Massive clientelism typically deriving from rentier

¹ For a broader analysis see Andrea Dessì, “Algeria at the Crossroads, between Continuity and Change”, in *IAI Working Papers*, No. 11|28 (September 2011), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/3379>.

² Gian Paolo Calchi Novati and Caterina Roggero, *Storia dell’Algeria indipendente. Dalla guerra di liberazione a Bouteflika*, Milano, Bompiani, 2018, p. 398.

³ Michael Robbins, *The 2019 Algerian Protests*, Arab Barometer, August 2019, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABV_Algeria_Protests_Public-Opinion_Arab-Barometer_2019.pdf.

economies, the lack of government transparency and the low independence of the judiciary contributed to the high level of internal corruption. In 2019 Freedom House classified Algeria as “not free” and the Corruption Perceptions Index ranked Algeria 106th out of 180 countries.⁴ Bouteflika’s seeking re-election – despite his debilitating stroke in 2013 and his sporadic appearances in public since then – was seen a manoeuvre to keep this system in place. However, in 2019 the deep economic crisis made it overly difficult for this rentier system to win over domestic unrest. Furthermore, the insistence on the “provision of security,” a claim used by the political class to legitimate itself since the end of the civil war, seemed to have lost sway. Young generations do not have living memories of these events. In addition, support to the Hirak from popular figures from the time of the battle of Algiers⁵ during Algeria’s struggle for independence, delegitimised the claim to revolutionary legacy that former governments used to remain in power.⁶

The Hirak started its marches with a broad social base, involving people from all walks of lives regardless of social, ethnic, religious and political backgrounds. Remarkably, the percentage of women’s participation in the street demonstration was high – this does not come as a surprise considering the long tradition of women’s activism in Algerian history. In March 2019, numerous Algerian feminists from the civil society organisations as well as students and intellectuals developed and shared a declaration underlining the need for full equality between citizens, regardless of gender, class, religion or beliefs for constructing a common future, while paving the way for their participation in the Hirak’s weekly demonstrations with the set-up of the “feminist square” (*Carré féministe*).⁷

Slogans such as “*No à le mandate de la honte*” (No to the term of shame) and “*Karama*” (Dignity) were campaigned during weekly marches against the fifth term of Bouteflika and for the removal of all the figures associated with him. Regime change was the main demand cementing the mobilisation of the Hirak, which however went further in asking for a real civilian-run state, the independence of the judiciary, the rule of law and freedom of the media, among other things. In addition, the presence of women also favoured an intra-Hirak debate in terms of gender equality demands.⁸

Core successful strategies of the Hirak were both its peaceful nature, to which the presence of women seems to have contributed,⁹ and its use of humour. Memes and jokes directed to Bouteflika and his affiliates, comedically twisted public official speeches, as well as political caricatures were among the means used to express discontent towards those in power.¹⁰ In

⁴ Transparency International, *Corruption Perceptions Index 2019, 2020*, p. 3, <https://www.transparency.org/en/publications/corruption-perceptions-index-2019>.

⁵ See as an example, the participation of Djamila Bouhired, hero of the battle of Algiers.

⁶ For a broader analysis see Yahia Zoubir, “The Algerian Crisis: Origins and Prospects for a ‘Second Republic’”, in *Al Jazeera Centre for Studies Reports*, 21 May 2019, <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/node/1620>.

⁷ Saadia Gacem et al., “Femmes algériennes pour un changement vers l’égalité”, in *El Watan*, 21 March 2019, <https://www.elwatan.com/?p=565017>.

⁸ Some activists preferred avoiding ideological divisions to keep the movement united around the central aim of regime change. Some others, especially feminists and members of progressive associations/parties, considered the 2019 uprising to be the right time for putting gender equality issues on the table. See Tin Hinane el Kadi, “Women’s Role in Algerian Pro-Democracy Movement”, in Lorenzo Coslovi et al., “Women in Transition: The Role of Women and the Arab Springs 2.0”, in *CeSPI Research Reports*, December 2020, p. 35-42, <https://www.cespi.it/en/node/1646>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Hiyem Cheurfa, “The Laughter of Dignity: Comedy and Dissent in the Algerian Popular Protests”, in *Jadaliyya*, 26 March 2019, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/38495>.

addition, the leaderless nature of the Hirak favoured its capacity to gain massive participation. The choice of not linking protests to any ideology and focusing on regime change helped to bring together a great number of people.

Unlike what happened in 2010–2011, protests were now more linked to political demands “over the social and economic ones previously made”.¹¹ The main target of the Hirak was directly the system of power. In addition, it seems that the strength of this movement was to have learnt from the mistakes that occurred in neighbouring countries after the 2011/12 uprisings: together with the removal of the ruling elite, the Hirak asked for the end of military interference in politics. Furthermore, some analysts noted that most Islamists who took part in the protests did so as national, rather than Islamists,¹² united in the demands for regime change. The regime has tried to foment identity-based fractures within the movement, for instance by arresting demonstrators holding the Amazigh flag under charges of undermining national unity,¹³ but the Hirak remained united. The inclusiveness of this uprising thus made those in power unable to apply a *divide et impera* approach to weaken or co-opt some of its various segments. The decentralised organisation of marches through Facebook pages spreading messages throughout Algeria and avoiding government-controlled media channels, made the movement hard to be discredited or controlled, at least until the covid-19 pandemic spread throughout the country.

Rallies were continuously held until covid-19 started to become a challenge for street demonstrations. The decision to stop rallies in March 2020 was due, apart for governmental bans, to a request coming from different actors taking part in the protests, to avoid the spread of the virus. During the pandemic, the Hirak switched to online activism, through Facebook groups and web platforms. This virtual version was also supported by many representatives of the Algerian diaspora. Among them were Algerian columnists from all over the world who work with the *Radio Corona Internationale* station, founded to deal with the evolution of protests in the face of the covid-19.¹⁴ Furthermore, the movement reinvented itself also in the role of “service provider” during the pandemic, mobilising supplies for hospitals trying to cope with the shortcomings of the Algerian health infrastructures. In addition, it was involved in raising awareness campaigns on the risks of covid-19 and promoting phone-based medical consultations with doctors to reduce hospital visits.¹⁵

Meanwhile, (online) initiatives such as Nida 22 were launched to both keep the mobilisation alive and open an intra-Hirak debate for coordinating different activists of the movement. The collective advocated for the full sovereignty of the people within the framework of a civil, democratic and civilian system, the respect for human and citizens’ rights, individual and collective freedoms, equality between citizens, a state governed by the rule of law,

¹¹ Inès Osman, “Algeria: The Arab Spring’s Late Bloomer?”, in *Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy Analysis*, 9 February 2021, <https://timep.org/commentary/analysis/algeria-the-arab-springs-late-bloomer>.

¹² Aili Mari Tripp, “Beyond Islamist Extremism: Women and the Algerian Uprisings of 2019”, in *CMI Briefs*, No. 2019:09 (October 2019), <https://www.cmi.no/publications/6983>.

¹³ Mahpari Sotoudeh, “Successes and Shortcomings: How Algeria’s Hirak Can Inform Lebanon’s Protest Movement”, in *Middle East Institute Articles*, 3 June 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/node/81308>.

¹⁴ Sara Zanotta, “Hirak Behind Closed Doors. The Evolution of Algerian Protest Movement while Facing Coronavirus”, in *NAD*, 24 April 2020, <http://nad.unimi.it/?p=3597>.

¹⁵ Elizia Wolkmann, “Algeria’s Protesters Say Covid-19 Will Not Kill Movement, Just Transform It”, in *Al-Monitor*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/25371>.

independence of the judiciary, and the separation and balance between powers, among other claims.¹⁶

2. Domestic political dynamics during the Hirak uprisings

The military apparatus has played a fundamental role in arbitrating internal political dynamics and favouring presidential appointments since Algeria's independence. 2019 was no exception. With social tensions emerging, the generals put political representatives aside to temporarily take control, in the attempt to safeguard their economic and political privileges effectively managing the interim phase leading to the presidential elections.

Indeed, in March 2019, the chief of staff Algeria's armed forces, Ahmed Gaïd Salah, demanded the immediate resignation of Bouteflika referring to article 102 of the constitution, which allows for "the president's removal on grounds of ill health".¹⁷ The presidential removal in April was arguably a way for the military to maintain power by meeting people's demands. But this move did not translate into a halt of the Hirak. The resignation of President Bouteflika was considered just a half victory by the people, who kept on asking for regime change. With slogans such as "*Dawla madaniyya mashi askariyya*" (civil and not military state), demonstrators strived for the establishment of a truly democratic state run by civilians rather than a feckless civilian-led government that is managed by the military.

The response to social turmoil of the ruling elite in the past two years has relied on four pillars: the holding of presidential elections, the revision of the constitution, early legislative elections and the repression of opposition activists.

Due the massive boycott by the Hirak, elections were postponed from April to July but due to the lack of viable candidates they were held only in December. Although protesters were asking to postpone the vote until the military and the old guard had quit politics,¹⁸ the five candidates who ran for the presidency in December either supported Bouteflika or had participated in his government. These elections were thus seen by both the Hirak and many political opposition forces as a fraudulent way to restore the old power.

This raises the question as to why the Hirak, which had the support (to varying degrees) of many opposition parties, did not transform into a politically more structured organisation. One reason is the nature of the movement. The inclusiveness of the Hirak has been an asset in terms of mass mobilisation, but has also brought challenges in terms of representation. In addition, the Hirak uprising represented for many protesters the first time they became interested and invested in political issues, as mistrust towards politics was widespread during the Bouteflika era. Such mistrust was extended to politics at large, which may explain why the transition from movement to party for the Hirak was anything but natural. Nor was the

¹⁶ Abdelghani Aichoun, "'Nida 22', une initiative pour une concertation autonome intra-hirak", in *El Watan*, 22 October 2020, <https://www.elwatan.com/?p=681461>.

¹⁷ James McDougall, "How Algeria's Army Sacrificed a President to Keep Power", in *BBC News*, 6 April 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47821980>.

¹⁸ Joane Serrieh, "Algeria Holds Presidential Election as Thousands Demonstrate against Vote", in *Al Arabiya*, 12 December 2019, <https://ara.tv/y5hyg>.

incorporation of the Hirak into the existing opposition a goal the movement was really eager for.

Many opposition figures were systematically co-opted by the regime and their interests seemed more linked to accessing benefits deriving from parliamentary participation (high salaries, parliamentary seats, etc.) than the struggle for democracy.¹⁹ Their participation in elections – except for some occasional boycotts – in the past two decades to some extent validated the process they were trying to oppose. The fact that the February 2019 protests were not organised by any of the political entities in Algeria in some way attests to “the rift between the people and the political elite”.²⁰

When Abdelmadjid Tebboune, former prime minister in the Bouteflika era, won the elections with the lowest turnout ever (around 40 per cent), it was clear that he lacked popular legitimacy. Nevertheless, he soon declared his readiness to “extend a hand to the Hirak” for the making of a “New Algeria” and promised an amended constitution.²¹ The promise of both political reforms and constitutional amendments usually follows internal crises in Algeria and shows similarities with the agenda that Bouteflika implemented to cope with the 2010/11 protests. This time, however, the movement did not recognise the new president, and relations further worsened when the pandemic spread throughout the country forcing the protests to halt physically. Tebboune’s open hand towards the Hirak was thus soon replaced by a more robust counter reaction.

Initially, the authorities presented restrictions to public gatherings as a temporary measure, but they soon opened the way to repression, especially of activists. According to Human Rights Watch, courts sentenced and jailed leading Hirak figures between March and April 2020 on charges of harming national unity, excluding them from the pardon that freed around 5,000 inmates to reduce overcrowding of prisons during the pandemic.²² In addition, in April 2020 a bill was approved to criminalise the breaking of lockdown measures and the spreading of “fake news” harming national unity.²³ As a result, privately owned news and radio websites were blocked.

The constitutional revision was announced while the repression was going on. Presented as a flagship initiative by Tebboune’s government to meet the Hirak’s demands, people were called to vote on 1 November 2020. The date was symbolic as it was the anniversary of the start of Algerian war of independence against France. Again, due to a boycott championed by the Hirak, participation was at a record low (around 24 per cent), a proof the Hirak had not lost its mobilisation strength.

¹⁹ Dalia Ghanem, “Limiting Change through Change: The Key to the Algerian Regime’s Longevity”, in *Carnegie Reports*, April 2018, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/76237>.

²⁰ Ismail Yaylaci and Muhammad Amasha, *Islamist Movements and Parties in the Algerian Uprising*, Istanbul, Al-Sharq Strategic Research, 10 July 2020, p. 18, <https://research.sharqforum.org/?p=16188>.

²¹ “Algérie. Le nouveau président Tebboune ‘tend la main’ au mouvement de contestation”, in *Ouest France*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.ouest-france.fr/monde/algerie/algerie-le-nouveau-president-tebboune-tend-la-main-au-mouvement-de-contestation-6653266>.

²² Eric Goldstein, “During Pandemic, Algeria Tightens Vise on Protest Movement”, in *HRW Dispatches*, 19 April 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/node/341495>.

²³ Committee to Protect Journalists, *Algeria Blocks 3 News Websites and Criminalizes False News*, 22 April 2020, <https://cpj.org/?p=37342>.

The government presented the new provisions as a “radical change in the system of governance” aimed at preventing corruption, reinforcing both transparency in the management of public funds and separation of powers, and giving social justice and freedom of the press a solid legal basis.²⁴ Yet, these changes did not go so far. For instance, while the president can stay in office for two terms maximum, he retains considerable influence over the judiciary.²⁵ In addition, widespread repression against activists confirms that the guarantees around the freedom of the press remain on paper only. Interestingly, however, as had already happened in 2012 following internal turmoil, the Algerian government opened up to women’s rights. The November 2020 constitution contains provisions to improve women’s protection as well as women’s political participation. Experts note, however, that these steps are more smokescreen than anything else considering that the constitutional reform was approved in a repressive context and that the regressive Family Code – which reduces women’s social status to the one of minors – is still in force.²⁶

As for the commitment to transparency, the fact that the health status of Tebboune, who contracted covid-19 at the end of October 2020, was not made public brought back memories of the concealment of Bouteflika’s illness.²⁷ After two months of treatment in Germany, President Tebboune announced his recovery on Twitter and ordered the preparation of a new election law “to begin the post constitution phase”.²⁸ At the end of February 2021, Tebboune called for the dissolution of the parliament, early legislative elections and a government reshuffle while announcing a pardon for dozens of jailed Hirak activists.²⁹ These provisions, however, seemed just a tool to undermine renewed Hirak street protests. In the same period an attempt was also made to target the Algerian diaspora, which has played an important role in maintaining the “flame of the Hirak”³⁰ particularly during the pandemic. A draft law was announced at the beginning of March 2021 that would have revoked the citizenship of Algerians if found perpetrating, outside the national territory, acts against state interests and national security.³¹ The draft law was then withdrawn, due to widespread criticism from civil society organisations.³² Ahead of the legislative elections, crackdown measures on the Hirak continued and validated concerns about the untrustworthiness of the government. The decision taken by the authorities in May to obtain prior authorisation for demonstrations³³ as well as the mounting repression that followed confirm that the government has undertaken more efforts to undermine the movement and its marches than to meet its demands.

²⁴ “Algerian Parliament Adopts Draft of Constitutional Reforms”, in *Al Jazeera*, 10 September 2020, <https://aje.io/txpdx>.

²⁵ Sofian Philip Naceur, “Call for Genuine Democracy”, in *D+C*, December 2020, p. 16-17, <https://www.dandc.eu/en/node/4516>.

²⁶ Tin Hinane el Kadi, “Women’s Role in Algerian Pro-Democracy Movement”, cit.

²⁷ Dalia Ghanem, “‘New Algeria’ Same as the Old Algeria”, cit.

²⁸ Abd al-Razzaq bin Abdullah, “Algeria: President Announces Recovery, New Election Law”, in *Anadolu Agency*, 13 December 2020, <http://v.aa.com.tr/2075649>.

²⁹ “Algeria’s President Calls for Dissolution of Parliament, Elections”, in *Arab News*, 18 February 2021, <https://arab.news/467np>.

³⁰ “In France the Algerian Diaspora Maintains ‘the Hirak Flame’”, in *The Maghreb Times*, 24 October 2020, <https://themaghrebtimes.com/?p=20743>.

³¹ “Draft Law on Forfeiture of Citizenship Presented”, in *Algeria Press Service*, 4 March 2021, <https://www.aps.dz/en/algeria/38333>.

³² Layne Emery, “Algeria’s Multiprolonged Crackdown on the Hirak”, in *Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy Explainers*, 17 August 2021, <https://timep.org/explainers/algerias-multipronged-crackdown-on-the-hirak>.

³³ “Algeria to Ban Unauthorised Protests”, in *Al Jazeera*, 9 May 2021, <https://aje.io/xm64j>.

Following the largely successful boycott of both the elections and the constitutional referendum, the “New Algeria” promised by the government is hardly in line with the Hirak’s requests and, most importantly, does not break with the past. The constitutional amendments as well as the early legislative elections seem to be perceived by the movement as “adjustments” for maintaining the status quo.

A predominant question about whether this impasse may be overcome relates to the actions the Hirak will undertake to make its requests heard. Over the last months there has been a kind of divide between those who consider negotiations with authorities without preconditions and “within the pre-existing institutional framework”³⁴ as the expected solution to the current stalemate, and those who think that the only way to establish the rule of law is “a consensual yet radical institutional makeover”. Another interesting issue regards the position of the Islamists within the Hirak. Some actors call for a depoliticised approach to facilitate dialogue among the different souls of the movement and avoid fragmentation.³⁵ Others are worried about the endorsement of the protests by Rachad, an exile group of Islamist militants,³⁶ fearing a potential Islamist takeover. But this appears more like a “threat” fuelled by those in power³⁷ rather than a real risk in Algeria today. This is due both to the fact that Rachad “has no monopoly on Islamic discourse in Algeria”³⁸ and that Islamists, in general terms, are far from being the unanimous emblem of political opposition. During the last twenty years, although strongly present culturally and socially, at least moderate Islamists have been politically co-opted by the government, becoming in some cases part of it, even if relegated to a marginal role. This has caused these parties to lose mass public support and to be considered as part of the corrupt system.³⁹

To conclude, in an echo of earlier events the government has tried to present itself in a renewed version open to elections and reforms, including constitutional amendments and improvements in women’s rights protection. However, the Hirak’s calls for boycotting the various election rounds suggest the movement cannot be co-opted with ambivalent openings made “from the top”, while its activists remain major targets of arrests and repression.

3. Continuity for stability

While the military has engaged in unfounded charges of foreign-backed support for the movement, the predominant tendency of the Hirak has been, in fact, that of rejecting rather than embracing contributions from abroad.

³⁴ Thomas Serres, “Is Algeria’s Hirak Dead?”, in *Al Jazeera*, 22 February 2021, <https://aje.io/hab5h>.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ Rachad is charged by the Algerian government with gathering former militants from the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) to infiltrate the Hirak and to harm national unity. See “Algeria Issues ‘Terrorism’ Warrants for Islamist Activists”, in *The Arab Weekly*, 22 March 2021, <https://theArabweekly.com/node/52044>.

³⁷ In May 2021 both Rachad and the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabile (MAK) were labelled as terrorist organisations by the Algerian authorities. See “Algeria Labels Opposition Movements As Terrorist Groups”, in *Africa News*, 20 May 2021, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/05/19/algeria-labells-opposition-movements-as-terrorist-groups>.

³⁸ Moussa Acherchour, “Algeria’s Hirak: Between Concerns of Division and Betting on Unity”, in *Bawader*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.arab-reform.net/?p=19508>.

³⁹ For a broader analysis see Dalia Ghanem, “The Shifting Foundations of Political Islam in Algeria”, in *Carnegie Papers*, April 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/publications/79047>.

Indeed, foreign powers seem to look favourably to the Tebboune government. The intensification of the president's diplomatic activity towards his foreign partners suggests Algerian willingness to demonstrate his reliability as well as the international partners' apparent preference for maintaining (or improving) ties with the country's existing leadership. While showing solidarity with the Hirak and its demands for democracy, economic and security interests linked to Algeria's stability prevail in foreign actors' calculations.

The position of the European Union is emblematic in this sense. In a November 2019 resolution, the European Parliament called for a solution to the crisis in Algeria "based on a peaceful and inclusive political process", while condemning "the arbitrary and unlawful arrests, detainment and intimidation of and attacks on journalists, trade unionists, lawyers, students, human rights defenders and civil society and all peaceful protesters taking part in the peaceful Hirak demonstrations".⁴⁰ Again, in November 2020 the European Parliament condemned the deteriorating situation of human rights in the country expressing its "full solidarity" with the Hirak's demands and calling on the Algerian government to release the detainees sentenced for "exercising their right to freedom of expression".⁴¹ However, the EU's general policy position on Algeria seems to be that of subordinating democratic values to economic and security interests.

The EU is Algeria's biggest trading partner, with total bilateral trade in goods amounting to 24.9 billion euro in 2020.⁴² Last December, the EU-Algeria Association Council pledged 75 million euros to Algeria to reduce the economic impact of the pandemic crisis.⁴³ On the same occasion, members of the Association Council discussed "how to strengthen stability in the region and reviewed important issues in their relations such as governance and human rights, economic cooperation and trade, the environment, energy and migration". The EU also supports the implementation of the peace agreement in Mali signed in Algiers in 2015 following an Algerian-led mediation effort, and is aligned with Algerian diplomatic support for a UN-brokered national reconciliation process in Libya. Indeed, in January 2020 Tebboune took part in the Berlin Conference over the future of Libya and after a few days gathered the foreign ministers of Chad, Egypt, Mali, Niger, Sudan and Tunisia in Algiers to discuss a settlement of the crisis.⁴⁴ A series of high-level meetings with key Libyan leaders indicated Algeria's support for a UN-backed solution that would involve all warring camps. After the approval of the new Libyan government in March 2021, Tebboune expressed full support to the transition process.⁴⁵

⁴⁰ European Parliament, *Resolution on the Situation of Freedoms in Algeria* (P9_TA(2019)0072), 28 November 2019, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2019-0072_EN.html.

⁴¹ European Parliament, *Resolution on the Deteriorating Situation of Human Rights in Algeria, in Particular the Case of Journalist Khaled Drareni* (P9_TA(2020)0329), 26 November 2020, https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2020-0329_EN.html.

⁴² European Commission, *European Union, Trade in Goods with Algeria*, 2 June 2021, https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/isdb_results/factsheets/country/details_algeria_en.pdf.

⁴³ Council of the European Union, *Press Release on the Occasion of the Video Conference of the Members of the EU-Algeria Association Council*, 7 December 2020, <https://europa.eu/!Yk37mH>.

⁴⁴ "Libya's Neighbours Meet in Algiers in Bid to Diffuse Crisis" in *France 24*, 23 January 2020, <https://www.france24.com/en/20200123-libya-s-neighbours-meet-in-algiers-in-bid-to-diffuse-crisis>.

⁴⁵ Omar Al-Othmani, "Arab States Welcome Approval of the New Libyan Government", in *Anadolu Agency*, 11 March 2021, <http://v.aa.com.tr/2171937>.

The positive role of Algeria for regional stability is also appreciated not just by the EU but by the United States too. In spite of US decreasing attention to North Africa, Washington's economic and security relations with the region have not diminished. Algeria has for years played an important, even critical role in counter-terrorism, especially since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In addition, the US is one of the top trading partners of Algeria and conversely Algeria is one of the top US trading partners in the MENA region, with the hydrocarbon sector being the main target of US direct investment.⁴⁶ The visit of the head of Africom, the Africa Command of the US Armed Forces, to Algeria in September 2020⁴⁷ can be seen as a commitment to strengthening relations, especially in the fight against radical, armed Islamist groups and the pursuit of stability in Libya and the Sahel, the latter also recalled by the new US Secretary of State.⁴⁸

France, the European country with which Algeria has the deepest, but also the most complex, relationship due to legacy of French colonial rule, has also opted to support Tebboune's government. President Emmanuel Macron expressed the hope for a successful political transition after the November 2020 constitutional referendum,⁴⁹ a position that has remained unchanged after Algeria's complaints about the so-called Stora report, a study on France's rule in Algeria commissioned by Macron and released at the beginning of 2021.⁵⁰ Macron has accepted the report's recommendation to establish a "reconciliation and truth commission" but refrained from apologising for French colonial past, whereas Tebboune has said the Algerian government expects nothing short of a "total recognition of all crimes" committed by France.

Months before, at the end of May 2020, the airing by French public television of two documentaries on the Hirak protests resulted in a kind of diplomatic crisis, as Algeria recalled its ambassador to France for consultation, arguing that documentaries were attacks on the Algerian people and institutions.⁵¹ The crisis was however resolved a week later thanks to a call between the two presidents, in which they agreed to coordinate efforts in restoring security and stability in the region.⁵²

Macron's stance after the November referendum has led some members of the Hirak to come out with harsh statements against France. As an example, Karim Tabbou, a prominent Hirak

⁴⁶ US Department of State, *U.S. Relations with Algeria*, 20 January 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-relations-with-algeria>.

⁴⁷ "Le Soudan et l'Algérie, nouveaux centres d'intérêt de la diplomatie américaine en Afrique", in *Le Monde*, 24 September 2020, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2020/09/24/le-soudan-et-l-algerie-nouveaux-centres-d-interet-de-la-diplomatie-americaine-en-afrique_6053411_3212.html.

⁴⁸ "US Secretary of State: Washington and Algeria Hope to See Stability in Libya", in *The Libya Observer*, 2 May 2021, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/node/18440>.

⁴⁹ "Macron Backs Algeria's Tebboune for a Successful Political Transition", in *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 21 November 2020, <https://english.aawsat.com/node/2637976>.

⁵⁰ In 2020, French President Macron tasked historian Benjamin Stora to write a report aimed at reconciling memories between France and Algeria in an attempt to help the two countries coming to terms with the legacy of French colonisation in Algeria and of the war that ended it.

⁵¹ "Algeria Recalls France Envoy after Protest Films, Rejects Journalist's Bail Plea", in *Arab News*, 27 May 2020, <https://arab.news/guh3a>.

⁵² "France, Algeria Pledge to Relaunch Relations after Rift over Hirak Protest Movement", in *The New Arab*, 3 June 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/node/133425>.

figure, has contended that Macron's backing of his Algerian counterpart was "in defiance of all the values of justice, freedom and democracy" France claims to represent and support.⁵³

Hence, the attitude of foreign powers towards Algeria seems to be that of preferring continuity to avoid instability. This is due to many strategic interests, including the need to manage migration, fend off terrorist threats and preserve economic exchanges. In recent years, the Mediterranean has become a stage for shifting geopolitical balances, with Russia, Turkey, the Arab Gulf states and even China all taking steps to penetrate the area. China's presence in Algeria, in particular, has been gradually growing thanks to investments, such as the port of El-Hamdania in the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Furthermore, during the covid-19 crisis China has been carrying out soft power measures to further expand its influence through vaccine diplomacy and offers of health and infrastructure assistance, including the construction of a covid hospital in Algeria.⁵⁴

Conclusion

The Hirak mobilisation represented an unprecedented event in Algeria's recent history. Neither the fear of violent spillovers from Libya nor the legacy of the bloody civil war have smothered the spread of this mobilisation. Inclusiveness, unity, peacefulness and the absence of an established leadership have been the key features of this mass popular movement that demanded regime change in February 2019. As usually happens to rentier states facing economic crises, the inability to buy social peace has increased the saliency of paying (façade) attention to popular demands to avoid undermining internal stability.

The regime's roadmap out of the political impasse – made up of presidential elections, constitutional amendments and early legislative elections – has resulted in a failed attempt to restore the legitimacy of a political system discredited in the eyes of society.⁵⁵ "Adjustments" that do not fulfil the Hirak's demands for meaningful political change and that are made in parallel with a repressive campaign targeting the movement's activists will make it harder for those in power to gain popular recognition. This is evident considering both the massive boycott of the various election rounds and the restored street modality of the protests in February 2021. Since then, the authorities have escalated their crackdown on the Hirak through many actions including the requirement of prior authorisation for marches, the deployment of police in the streets and the arrest of civil society activists, reporters, students and members of political parties.⁵⁶

While external players have shown some solidarity towards the Hirak (most notably the European Parliament), foreign powers are likely to keep supporting the Algerian government for both economic and security reasons. Thus, the outcome of the game is in the hands of

⁵³ Madjid Makedhi, "Karim Tabbou répond au président français Emmanuel Macron: 'Votre soutien au pouvoir algérien est une insupportable moquerie'", in *El Watan*, 25 November 2020, <https://www.elwatan.com/?p=687028>.

⁵⁴ "Coronavirus, China to Build Hospital in Algeria", in *The North African Post*, 31 March 2020, <https://northafricapost.com/?p=39508>.

⁵⁵ Saïd Djafer, "Un Hirak résilient, un régime autiste: pourquoi il faut urgemment changer de paradigme", in *24H Algerie*, 23 February 2021, <https://www.24hdz.com/?p=16966>.

⁵⁶ See Ilhem Rachidi, "Repression in Algeria Could It End the Hirak Movement?", in *Sada*, 29 July 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/85060>.

internal actors. To date, the prospect for a regime change in Algeria remains distant. Amidst repression and the challenges related to the pandemic, it is to be seen what strategies the Hirak will put forward to carry its activism on. Indeed, the road towards a real transition to democracy and the establishment of the rule of law also runs through the Hirak, if the movement ever manages to build an organisational structure and put forward a detailed programme to implement its requests without falling into the trap of divisions.

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