



Algeria's Turbulent Path to Democracy: Missed Chances and The Fall of Abdelaziz Bouteflika

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Abstract

The disastrous consequences some Middle East and North African countries experienced as a result of the Arab Spring diluted any hopes that another wave of people driven demands for democracy would be on the horizon in the region. Therefore, when protestors poured on the streets of major cities in Algeria demanding an end to the reign of president Bouteflika, who was contesting the presidency for a fifth term, many remained sceptical that this would result to a now familiar case of bloodshed and destruction as being witnessed in Yemen, Syria and Libya. This article seeks to examine Algeria's turbulent journey in search of democracy, the missed opportunities and the bloodless fall of Bouteflika. It argues that the involvement of the military in Algeria's politics has been the biggest obstacle to democracy, and the recent events that led to the fall of the military supported regime of Bouteflika could mark the beginning of a hopeful path to political reforms.

Key Words: *Algeria, Democracy, Bouteflika, Army, Revolution*

1. Introduction

Compared to the other regional neighbours, since the early 1990s, Algeria has been in a status of relatively 'stable instability'. Subsequent regimes after independence prior to the 1990s experienced domestic political challenges from time to time in the form of extensive economic crisis in the mid-1990s with the situation deteriorating to a near state bankruptcy in the early 1990s. Additionally, there were serious instances of severe armed conflicts between security forces and Islamist insurgents due to the interruptions on parliamentary elections by the army in January 1992. However, from 1995, the government of the day took measures to restore and redress the economic situation supported by the structural adjustment programmes under the guidance of the International Monetary Fund and the United States as well as obtaining economic life-lease from the rescheduled debt repayments. These developments enabled the regime to maintain command and secure firmly urban centres within the country as well as maintain Western support for the government.

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The critical moment in Algeria's domestic situation was marked by the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1989 as the first civilian president. His successful election to the presidency came at the backdrop of his domestic political popularity founded on his experiences in public career as a foreign minister in the periods between the 1960s-1970s. Moreover, his election campaign was premised on his promise to re-establish peace, rebuild the economy and bring to an end the isolation of Algeria at the international system. Indeed, the first decade of his administration witnessed appreciable developments. However, collectively in his 3 decades at the helm of political leadership of Algeria, these reforms seemed to have halted and did not reflect changes in the structure of socio-political and economic affairs of Algeria that continue to persist today. Continuous decline in democratic practices and the rule of law has alienated the masses and deepened tensions in relations between the state and the society and this has been vividly expressed in a series of riots within the last three decades and currently, the revolution against the Bouteflika regime as will be discussed in the later sections of this article. The Algerian state dynamics represents a heavy dependence on hydrocarbon industries as source of employment especially those under the age of 30 years who also happen to constitute the largest share of the population. Previously, even though violence subsided during the 1990s with the election of Bouteflika, terrorist groups were still active both in the north and south posing real threats to Algerian national and foreign interests.

As such, despite experiencing relatively stable political environment since the election of Bouteflika, a majority of the Algerian population have continued to suffer from the long-term effects of underlying currents of poor economic environment that at different stages has threatened the survival of the state. Despite having experienced the same political change in 2011 that was characterised by the emergence of the Arab springs in the Middle East and in the North African countries, Algerian polity became more conscious about governance and the possibility of standing up to authoritarian regimes in the quest for change. For three decades Algeria remained isolated from the revolutionary political developments that was being experienced in the neighbouring countries.

This paper will therefore identify the key factors that have continuously threatened the Algerian polity relative to the failed political transition and democratic reforms as well as analyse Algeria's immediate post-independence socio-political developments and the condition of the 'stable instability' that prevailed for the closed to three decades period since 1995 through



constant aversion of severe political conflict and radical changes. Additionally, the paper will focus on periods during the accession of Bouteflika to power, his political reforms through the restoration of presidential authority at the expense of military command which has characterised the region by their influence on media, parliament and political parties. Lastly the paper will address the impact of the Arab springs on Algeria and the path that has led to the resignation of Bouteflika from political power after mass protests.

2. Post -Independence Algeria

Algeria was a French colony and attained independence in 1962 becoming a major regional power in the North African region. However, just like a majority of other independent African countries, Algeria has gone through a myriad of political challenges that present an interesting analysis for political developments and democratization. Historically, the French invaded Algeria in 1830¹ and was integrated as an integral part of the French provinces after 1848 therefore transforming the country into socio-economic, intellectual and administrative region. However, this colonial rule came to an end following an 8-year independence war leading to the death of approximately one million people. During this period, the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) which was established in 1954, emerged as the leading front for the liberation struggle and was constituted of different clusters of the society from secular groups, socialists, Islamists and nationalists. At independence, the new republic established under the FLN leadership began a 3-decade single party rule under military influence on the republic. During the leadership of Colonel Houari Boumediene between 1965 and 1978, the party developed its identity around Arab nationalism and socialism.

Upon Boumediene's death in 1979, Colonel Chadli Bendjedid took over the leadership of Algeria and continued his rule under political party authority but with a strong military support. In as much as the early socialist economic policies benefited the Algerian society in the early years of independence, the political incompetency of this regime coupled with a declining economy in the 1980s resulted in discontent with the Bendjedid regime leading to widespread riots in 1988 and constitutional reforms in 1989 as the regime resort to adopt

¹ Halaçoğlu, Canan C. Occupation and the Colonization Of Algeria From 1830 To 1870: A Struggle For Dominance, Doctoral Dissertation, Middle East Technical University (2013).



strategies that can ensure its continued political survival.² The result of these constitutional reforms was the introduction of a multiparty system with more than 20 political parties registered within the first year of this legislative reform with key parties such as the Islamist Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) that was constituted of both hardliner and soft-liner Islamist factions.³ With the FIS developing into a major leading political party in Algeria, they advanced for a sharia-based regime while deconstructing democracy as a Western invention and promising major political transformations in the Algerian political system.

The first ever multi-party elections in Algeria were held in 1990 in what was understood as the first steps towards democratic transition in the republic. The independence ruling party backed by the state military support lost to the newly established and popular FIS who won with a majority vote of 55% of the votes. In 1991, the legislative elections were held and again the FIS party won with a 47% of all the votes representing 188 elected legislative seats.⁴ The huge loss on the FLN alarmed the army who responded by executing a coup d'état which cancelled the election outcomes, banned the FIS and forced Bendjedid to resign bring to an end the democratization process and the beginning of authoritarian regime that culminated into an 8-year long civil war between the army and the various Islamic forces. This civil war claimed around 100,000 lives and despite the surrender of the country leadership by the army back to the civilian rule, authoritarian regime dominated the domestic politics.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika vied for the presidency in 1999 with the military support and won the elections following the withdrawal of the other candidates who cited plans of systematic rigging. However, following his election, Bouteflika embarked on systematic actions for the purposes of national reconciliation with the opposition parties and pardoning of some Islamist insurgents putting to an end a decade of vicious civil war. By consolidating power, order and unity after the civil war, Bouteflika went on to win four consecutive presidential elections between 1999 and 2014 in multiparty elections. However, the democratic space continued to be very limited under Bouteflika as the military continued have an influential role in domestic politics. This limitation however was an upgrade in comparison to the decades before

² Dessi, Andrea. *Algeria at the Crossroads: Between Continuity and Change*. Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt, (2011).

³ Addi, Lahouari. "Political Islam and democracy: the case of Algeria." (1997).

⁴ Brumberg, Daniel. "Islam, elections, and reform in Algeria." *Journal of democracy* 2, no. 1 (1991): 58-71.



Bouteflika came to power. There were elements of civil society participation, political parties and electoral democracy.

The earlier struggles for democracy in Algeria was not only relevant for the country but also for the North African region and the Middle East in extension which only had Lebanon as the only country with multi-party democracy even though one complicated by the concessional system and long civil wars⁵. As such, the constitutional reforms witnessed in Algeria became a source of hope for political transformation not only within North Africa but also in the Middle East. However, ultimately, the challenges and failure of the democratization processes equally had an influence in the region. For example, the success of FIS illustrated concerns of authoritarian regimes of Islamist political takeover were not baseless. Consequently, authoritarian leaders became more occupied with ensuring the political survival of their regimes and secular factions became even wearier of working with the Islamist groups. Secondly, the coup d'état was a clear message to other opposition groups within the region of the difficulties in democratization and this was demonstrated with a decline in democratization struggle by opposition groups in the region for close to two decades until the onset of the Arab springs in 2011. Thirdly, lessons learnt during the past civil wars became arguably a deciding factor on whether or not Algeria would be involved in the Arab springs like other countries within the region.⁶ The regime also understood the cost of another civil war and therefore, through the previous gains made in constitutional reforms that were still preserved, the regime was able to compromise with the demands of the people by agreeing to concessions in order to alleviate demonstrations.

3. Democratic Efforts and Military Intervention

The democratic wave that had wrapped the country in 1989 with the introduction of multiparty politics were quickly eroded following the coup d'état by the army in 1992 who intervened to prevent the *Front Islamique fu Salut* (FIS) from winning the majority seats in the first ever free legislative elections during the 1991 elections held in Algeria. In as much the army was not the only actor in the Algerian political system opposed to the establishment of an Islamic state, the army acted outside the constitutional mandate and continued to dominate the

⁵ Sutton, Keith. "Political changes in Algeria: an emerging electoral geography." *Maghreb Review* 17, no. 1-2 (1992): 3-27.

⁶ Volpi, Frédéric. "Algeria versus the Arab spring." *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013): 104-115



political scene as the arbiter of power in Algeria until 1999 when a civilian regime of Bouteflika came to power. The reputation damage by the coup d'état orchestrated by the army in 1992 led to change of position within the army high command structures in favour of a subtler and less visible role in Algerian politics.

Bouteflika's ascension to political power after elections as the first democratically elected president following 8 years of civil war in Algeria was with the support of the army. However, in his agenda he had also promised to bring about reforms and restore and re-establish civil peace and open a new chapter in the history of Algeria that would lead to prosperity. This agenda provided a reconciliatory platform between the FIS Islamists and the military bureaucracy who equally supported his new policies such as on the Law on Civil Concord of 1999 and the Charter for National Peace and Reconciliation that was introduced in 2005. These two initiatives provided amnesty to several members of the insurgent groups in exchange for the acknowledgement and submission to state authority. Also, the two initiatives partially acknowledged the role played by these insurgents in the violence by compensating families of those who had 'disappeared'.⁷ Notably, these two initiatives were subjected to referendum and passed with overwhelming support of the Algerian polity. Having come to power based on his agenda for reconciliation and peace, these two initiatives were central to Bouteflika during his first two terms in presidential office between 1999-2004, and 2004-2009.⁸

These initiatives spearheaded by Bouteflika to a large extent were successful in consolidating the gains made by the military in taming the radical political wing under the Islamists into accepting a truce leading to substantive decline in political violence and conflict. But these policies also had a number of shortcomings. For example, neither of the two initiatives were hatched from a true and genuine desire for the search of truth and reconciliation that would ensure justice is served by establishing the responsibilities of various factions in the Algerian civil war. According to the International Crisis Group the major reason for this shortcoming was due to the nature of the Algerian political system and that the truce though holding at the time, left different sides of the political divides bitterly dissatisfied.⁹ Secondly, the policies

⁷ Tlemçani, Rachid. *Algeria under Bouteflika: Civil strife and national reconciliation*. Vol. 7. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2008.

⁸ Joffé, George. "National reconciliation and general amnesty in Algeria." *Mediterranean Politics* 13, no. 2 (2008): 213-228.

⁹ International Crisis Group, *The Algerian Crisis: Not Over Yet*, Africa Report No. 24, Algiers/Paris/London/Brussels (2000)



failed to account for a process of rehabilitation of the outlawed FIS party, thereby failing to provide a political solution to the crisis. The consequence of this failure was seen in part of the regime failing to recognise the political nature of the crisis and therefore failing to gain the support of the Islamist movement who were main actors in the civil war. Finally, the two initiatives failed to completely bring an end to the violence with as weekly attacks targeting security forces were witnessed especially during the early months of the year 2000. Moreover, with the integration of the splinter groups, such as the Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat (GSPC) into al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), there was an increase in terroristic violence in Algeria due to increased global influence of jihadist networks that was manifested in the style of terrorist attacks in the use of suicide bombings.¹⁰

However, despite the mixed results experienced in implementation, Bouteflika came out with more political authority in domestic politics as well as in diplomatic spheres and was widely considered as the right man to provide the urgently needed political stability and peace to Algeria. Additionally, his regime's decision to subject these two initiatives to popular vote on a referendum, provided him with a much more founded legitimacy that allowed him to have a stringer bargaining power with the military bureaucracy and a more credible interlocutor with foreign partners. This was a key step towards restoring civilian rule in Algerian politics through the office of the presidency at the expense of military rule and power structure. According to Roberts Bouteflika stressed the importance of him having the full prerogative of the constitutional authority of the presidency in exercising his power¹¹. Additionally, Mortimer, argues that Bouteflika would not have succeeded in changing the distribution of power away from the military leadership absent persuasion that the interests of the military and the military leadership both in the future and that moment would be better served by imposing himself as the reliable choice and partner of the West in issues of security and economic cooperation¹².

Indeed, in consolidating democratization processes in any country, the importance of having proper check and balances on the military cannot be emphasized enough. However, in the Algerian case, Bouteflika's political endeavours towards reestablishment and consolidation of civilian rule came with extensive consequences on democratic rule. Some of these

¹⁰ Filiu, Jean-Pierre. "Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib: Algerian Challenge or Global Threat?." (2009).

¹¹ Roberts, Hugh. *Demilitarizing Algeria*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007.

¹² Mortimer, Robert. "State and army in Algeria: the 'Bouteflika effect'." *Journal of North African Studies* 11, no. (2006): 155-171.



consequences were directly linked with Bouteflika's actions in rationalisation of political authority in Algeria such that platforms for political expressions such as political parties, civil societies and media became part and parcel of factions that characterised and previously encouraged by the military dominance in Algerian politics. Bouteflika's take on these organisations was that they represented and, or, acted as pawns in military leadership and therefore had to be dealt with as such leading to side-lining of political parties, closure of certain media outlets and the jailing of journalists on claims of defamation under very tough defamation laws as he attempted to manoeuvre against military grip on Algerian politics.¹³ However, despite these actions, the French press continued to advocate vote media freedoms and rights and indeed, made gains to develop as one of the most diversified and independent in North Africa and Middle East.

Another cause for the lack of democratic space under Bouteflika was his populist and paternalistic political outlook¹⁴. Despite his campaign promises for extensive socio political and economic reforms in Algeria, it soon became clear that much of these liberal thoughts were only directed to the West purposely to attract support of Western powers which he desperately needed to stamp his domestic political authority. The political reality was that Bouteflika was not contented with the political structure as institutionalised and provided for in the Algerian constitution as he had very little space for political tolerance for critics and embarked on a political process to consolidate his power and take over the absolute control of decision-making process in several key policy areas. Consequently, this path led to the marginalization of parliament as presidential decrees became the new means of legislation including on important aspects of national interest such as economic and fiscal policies. There was no space for debate.

Despite several applications for establishment of political parties between 1999 and 2011, only one political party; the nationalist Front National Algérien (FNA) headed by Moussa Touati, a former military officer was approved in September 1999. Additionally, audio-visual media services for a long time remained under the tight grip of absolute state control and the state of emergency introduced in 1992 remaining in effect until February 2011 in what was

¹³ Darbouche, Hakim. "Algeria's chequered democracy experiment." *Struggling Transitions and Proliferating Dynasties: Democratisation's Trials in the European Neighbourhood*, Centre for European Policy Studies, Brussels (2009).

¹⁴ Evans, M., & Phillips, J. (2007). *Algeria: Anger of the dispossessed*. Yale University Press.



viewed as a government contradiction of its claim of victory over the defeat of Islamist splinter military groups by the state forces¹⁵

4. Consolidation Of Power Under President Bouteflika

These calculated actions by Bouteflika enabled him to consolidate power and by the end of 2005, he had successfully secured his ascendancy over top military leadership in policy decisions and debates as well as successfully winning a re-election in 2004 despite facing a fierce opposition in the campaign trails which was composed of influential figures from the military. His re-election however, provided him with the best opportunity to send this crop of military leaders into retirement as well as enabled him to regain control of the FLN party into his fold after it had slipped into the hands of his opponents. These brought with it a wide network of trade unions and local religious organisations stretching his administrative influence. This influence manifested itself when despite his failing health since 2005 through to the Arab springs and into early 2008, Bouteflika managed to maintain a strong influence in the face of emboldened opponents and even succeeding in amending the constitution in 2008 to pave his way for his 3rd term re-election bid which he still won.

Bouteflika's health continued to be an issue of concern especially after 2005 as he was reduced to making very few public appearances. Political debate was therefore reduced to succession politics because in as much as he succeeded in dismantling the military system of the political structure he inherited when he ascended to the presidential position, Bouteflika did not formulate a clear and visible alternative to himself. Even though he made it clear through actions on his preference for a presidential system of governance as was expressed in the presidential term limit amendments in 2008, this has proved not to be ideal to the long-term needs of Algeria. Instead of pursuing an agenda that would enhance smooth power transition, he emphasized on concentrating political power and failed to prepare a guideline that would prepare for any even of political succession. Instead, the opposition and legislature continued to stand-by and watch or participate in corruption in catastrophic levels than ever experienced before. These setbacks in the democratization of Algeria have cast shadows on any past achievements made by Bouteflika and reduced any enthusiasm for another 5th term of Bouteflika rule in the country¹⁶. A majority of the Algerian polity who had conceived short-

¹⁵ Aghrout, Ahmed, and Yahia H. Zoubir. "Introducing Algeria's President-for-life." *Middle East Report* (2009).

¹⁶ *Ibid* (2009).



term authoritarian rule a small price to pay for reducing military influence in political, social and economic spheres of the country began questioning whether it was really worth it.

With Arab springs wave sweeping hastily across the Arabian world, Bouteflika took swift actions to announce raft measures by his regime towards constitutional and political reforms in 2012. These reforms however did not convince the larger section of the Algerian polity who continued to remain sceptical of the implementation processes and whether the reforms would be inclusive and transparent. With an authoritarian political outlook both in the government and opposition, coupled with relatively good financial standing of Algeria at the time, the Algerian polity averted the Arab springs even though a false sense of security was perceived within the political administration in Algeria. Moreover, Bouteflika's political influence and international support continued wade of in comparison to his earlier years when he took helm of Algerian political leadership. His shaky health conditions also rendered unable to sum up his previous drive and energy to lobby for new political support and establish stronger political alliances.

In all the three decades of Bouteflika's leadership, the Algerian polity continue to experience systematic economic decline and became even much less able to identify themselves with the decision-makers and the decision-making processes at all levels of government. This made citizens to be constantly suspicious of the state and very sceptical of state agendas as expressed in previous regular protests and low participation in electoral process such as voting during national elections that continue to characterise the Algerian political landscape. The grievances and low legitimacy claim on the regime gradually accumulated over the years of Bouteflika's rule to spark a final protest over his regime in 2019 leading to his resignation from the presidency. This had been further compounded by persistent microeconomic failures of development policies of Algeria.

5. The Arab Spring and Algeria

The Arab springs contend as the most significant development in the first quarter of the 21st century in North Africa and the Middle East regions. Founded on small but rather spontaneous domestic grass-root coalitions by younger populations fed up with poor



governance that has been characterised by corruption and runaway impunity, these movements spread like bush fires across the North Africa and Middle East regions to achieve success where traditional opposition groups have time and again failed to register success. The Arab springs highlighted a new sense of political agency for the general masses who have been chocked in oppression and succeeded in forcing out traditional political despots out of leadership and one again challenged the perceived perception of political conduct and philosophy in the Arabian world. In as much as the political foundations of the Arabian world has been shaken, the extent of success on Arabian polity can only be comprehensively measured on long-term basis.

However, in all the uncertainty that has consume the long-term impact of the Arab springs on the general masses, a short-term pattern has emerged relative to their transformative effects. Foremost, those that experienced the Arab Springs phenomena were those with nominal republican political systems and leaders who had continued to stay in power for more than a decade or two and who were allegedly involved in acts of nepotism, tribalism and a propensity for dynastic succession at the expense of political and economic inclusivity. Indeed, this political environment was found in abundance in countries such as Libya, Syria, Yemen, Tunisia, and Egypt. It is no coincidence however, that Algeria, Iraq and Lebanon previously saw little or no unrest. Besides having some degree of effective political pluralism, all the three had suffered from very traumatic domestic conflicts in the recent past. In other countries such as Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, the contagion effect of the Arab springs manifested through emboldened demands for political reforms some of which were based on sectarian grievances.

In the North African and Middle East region, Algeria had the highest ranking of a revolution risk assessment before the outbreak of the Arab springs. This is because protests or demonstrations were a key element of the political system in Algeria and this was expounded further by the political tensions created with the re-election of Bouteflika for a third term in office in 2009 following the 2008 presidential term constitutional amendment¹⁷. The outbreak of revolts in Tunisia put Algeria top on the risk assessment list especially following another widespread demonstration not witnessed since the October 1988 protests. These protests shared the similarity of both being spearheaded by the young generations. But on the contrary too, the state of government preparedness between the 1988 protests and the 2011 demonstrations were different. The government in 2011 was well experienced in dealing with protests in terms of

¹⁷ Volpi, Frédéric. "Algeria versus the Arab spring." *Journal of Democracy* 24, no. 3 (2013): 104-115.



policy and government response and used a lot of money and economic reforms¹⁸. Additionally, the government has enough financial resources to spend and buy itself out of trouble with the masses. The protesters also lacked formal channels such as the Islamist networks or civil society organizations to facilitate the protesters in channelling their grievances and articulating clear political demands¹⁹. As a result, the riots only lasted for four days and achieved very little except remind the Algerian authorities that the young generation were still as discontented as those who took part in the 1988 protests.

The ouster of presidents Ben Ali of Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak of Egypt sent chilling shockwaves to the Algerian political elites who were surprised by the resolutions of these relatively two powerful Arabic countries²⁰. These events emboldened the opposition groups and organisations led by the secular *Berberist Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Democratie*, RCD party and the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights established the National Coordination for Change and Democracy purposely to channel the drive witnessed during the previous protests in Algeria to oust the government just like it had happened in both Egypt and Tunisia. However, these efforts were received with a surprisingly muted response from the masses only attracting a few thousand protesters. This can however be attributed to the large mobilisation of police forces by the regime and the lack of credibility among some of the leading figures in the National Coordination for Change and Democracy which failed to attract a majority of the Algerians²¹.

Even more conspicuously, as the protest were spreading in neighbouring Tunisia and other Arabic countries, despite Algerians clearly sharing a lot of the grievances and aspirations of the masses of other Arabic countries, they were not ready to participate or engage in another cycle of mass protests and violence. 50 years since independence, Algerians had lived through two major cycles of violence that included the war for independence and the war on Islamic insurgency confrontation which rendered the country in a psychological mood of revolutionary fatigue. As such, it was to a greater extent the common and shared assumption of aversion to

¹⁸ Ross, Michael L. "Will oil drown the Arab Spring: Democracy and the resource curse." *Foreign Aff.* 90 (2011):

¹⁹ Lorch, J., & Bunk, B. (2017). Using civil society as an authoritarian legitimation strategy: Algeria and Mozambique in comparative perspective. *Democratization*, 24(6), 987-1005.

²⁰ Syed, Maria. "Egypt and Tunisia: Testing Grounds for Goldstone's Assertions on the Revolutionary Process." *Security Strategies Journal* 9, no. 18 (2013).

²¹ Parks, Robert P. "Algeria and the Arab uprisings." In *The Arab Spring*, pp. 101-125. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012.



political violence and any further instability among a large section of the Algerian polity that mitigated the spread of Arab springs in Algeria at the time. In as much as the younger generations could have been susceptible to these inhibitions, the absence of credible civil society organizations left them handicapped in as far as articulating political demands is concerned.

Formulating demands during the 2011 Arab springs wave was a difficult task for the Algerian society as there was no clear figure to whom all the blames in the society could be put on the same way it was witnessed in Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya were. The key issues pertaining to the quality of governance which was the basis of the Algerian polity grievances was spread across all the institutions and at different levels. As such, despite all his shortcomings, Bouteflika was still accredited for his role in restoring peace and some elements of relative political stability in Algeria as well as minor gains in the investments on socio-economic development²². This was a key reason for his continued stay in power during his 3rd and 4th quests for presidential elections even though he had previously failed to deal with issues of fighting corruption within his government and becoming increasingly withdrawn from the masses majorly due to his deteriorating health conditions. Even the newly formed opposition group; the National Coordination for Change and Democracy perceived it as not practical as his departure at the time could have severely worsened Algeria's political stability²³. Therefore, Bouteflika was comparatively not extremely resented as did his neighbouring counterparts in Tunisia or Egypt and did not also have any hidden agenda regarding a dynastic succession plans despite suggestions to the contrary by his political detractors.

Having remained the only North African country to escape the Arab Springs wave in 2011 by avoiding long periods of mass demonstrations, the regime embarked on making a few political concessions such as lifting a 19-year old ban on state of emergency. Additionally, the government made concessions to increase budgetary expenditures for the financial year 2011/12 by \$25 billion distributed across projects for increased social housing, increased public service salaries, increased subsidies on basic commodities such as food items and easier access to credit facilities by the younger generations²⁴. In what was seen as a major step in recognising

²² Silverstein, Paul. "States of fragmentation in North Africa." *Middle East Report* (2005): 26-33.

²³ Entelis, John P. "Algeria: democracy denied, and revived?." *The Journal of North African Studies* 16, no. 4 (2011): 653-678.

²⁴ Aghrout, Ahmed, and Yahia H. Zoubir. "Algeria: reforms without change?." *North African Politics: Change and Continuity*. Londres: Routledge (2015): 145-155.



the Arab springs that had consumed the region, Bouteflika made a public televised address to the nation on 15th April 2011, in which he acknowledged the significance of the unfolding events in the region and promised constitutional and political reforms²⁵. Interestingly, rather than stimulate a public debate on the nature of the reforms to be undertaken, his televised public address sparked debate about his status of health because of his condition in which he appeared during the address.

These counteractions by the Algerian state reflected a sense of security from the face value. However, beneath the straight face worn by the government existed a deeply rooted concerns, sense of confusion and apprehension²⁶. The uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt did not steer much concern to the regime. However, when both Ben Ali and Hosni Mubarak were ousted, it is when the government clearly appreciated the significance and scale of the Arab springs and immediately responded by offering support and acknowledged the choice of the Egyptian and Tunisian citizens pledging to respect their decisions. The Algerian government gave \$100 million to the Tunisian interim government with further pledge of support during the transition phase²⁷. Regarding the Libyan case, the conflict that ensued caused a lot of controversy as the Algerian regime was apprehensive of the violent nature of the uprising from the beginnings. The Libyan uprising had a very strong presence of Islamist insurgents and the involvement of foreign powers did not attract the support of the Algerian regime to the insurgency. However, Algeria in all, did not vote against the Arab League resolution that opened path to the passing of the UN Resolution of 1973 that provided for NATO intervention in Libya as was purported to have been wrongly reported by the media²⁸. Due to this, the Algerian regime stood accused of providing support to the Muammar Gaddafi regime by the Libyan National Transitional Council. As a consequence of these allegations, the relationship between the Algerian government and the National Transitional Council drastically declined and thus was epitomised when the Algerian government offered refuge to members of the Gaddafi family refuge in the wake of government collapse in Tripoli.

²⁵ Darbouche, Hakim. "Algeria's failed transitions to a sustainable polity: Coming to yet another crossroads." *MEDPRO Technical Paper 7* (2011).

²⁶ Zoubir, Yahia H., and Ahmed Aghrout. "Algeria's Path to Reform: Authentic Change?." *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (2012): 66.

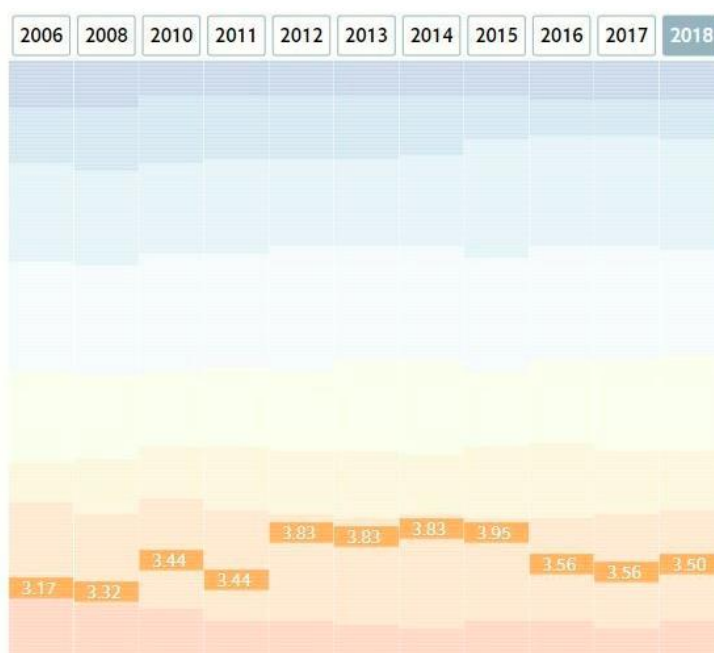
²⁷ Darbouche, Hakim. "Algeria's Failed Transitions to a Sustainable Polity: Coming to yet another crossroads. MEDPRO Technical Report No. 8/October 2011." (2011).

²⁸ Rousseau, Richard. "Why Germany Abstained on UN Resolution 1973 on Libya." *Foreign Policy Journal* 22 (2011).



5.1. Algeria's Democratic Trend

In the previous years, Algeria has been leading in the measurement of democratic index in the North African region comparatively to Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco and Libya in the early 1990 before drastically dropping to lower levels in 1992 before experiencing another cycle of democratic space in the 2000s after the election of Bouteflika. The decline in Algerian democracy was first experienced in the mid-1960s when president Boumediene was consolidating the FNL rule after successfully carrying out a coup d'état against President Ben Bella in 1965²⁹. This decline was further experienced between 2015 and 2019 if figures compiled by the Economist Intelligence Unit are anything to go by. The democracy index report of January 2019 showed that Algeria had fallen back other regional countries to be ranked 126 out of the 167 countries examined. Other countries in the region registered 63rd for Tunisia and 100th for Morocco. Out of a scale of 9-10 for full democracies and 0-3.99 for authoritarian regimes, Algeria declined from 3.95 in 2015 to 3.5 in 2018 as seen below;



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit democracy index (January 2019)

Boumediene governed the country under the title of "Chairman of the Revolutionary Council." The measure of democracy can be captured through the electoral cycle and system.

²⁹ Sivan, Emmanuel. "Constraints & Opportunities in the Arab World." *Journal of Democracy* 8, no. 2 (1997): 103-113.



In as much as there were elections conducted during the one-party rule of FLN, this could not pass for democratic elections. Additionally, the introduction of the multiparty politics and the subsequent parliamentary elections in 1991, to a small extent, increased the democratic space of Algeria. However, as discussed in earlier sections herein, this was short-lived because of the coup d'état in 1992 that marked the beginning of authoritarian leadership in Algeria all through to 1999 in which all opposition presidential candidates boycotted the elections citing fraud in the electoral process.

a. Civil Liberties in Algeria

Relative to the question on civil liberties, Algeria has had a poor record of civil liberties. This is fundamentally due to the absence of liberal democracy that stresses the significance of individual rights, minority rights, rule of law and a system of effective checks and balances. In as much minor improvement in civil liberties was witnessed with end of Boumediene's rule in the mid-1970s, the constitutional reforms in 1989 eroded what was left of civil liberties³⁰. The coup d'état experience resulted in decline of liberal democracy both during the military regime and post-coup era which witnessed less protection of human rights, political assassinations, personal integrity, persecution of FIS activists and use of torture by the military in Algeria. However, these improved during the early years of Bouteflika's regime but steadily declined over time.

b. Civil Societies

On civil societies, since the independence of Algeria in 1962, the civil society presence has been very weak in Algeria³¹. The absence of a vibrant and effective civil society sector was deeply entrenched into the political system of Algeria more so during the one-party rule system of the FLN. However, notable developments in the civil society sector was first experienced during Bendjedid regime in which protests through labour unions became common through to 1988³². But after the coup, the civil society was crushed, and Algeria witnessed occasional protest movements such as the Black Spring spearheaded by the Berber minorities in 2001 in

³⁰ Testas, Abdelaziz. "Political repression, democratization and civil conflict in post-independence Algeria." *Democratization* 9, no. 4 (2002): 106-121.

³¹ Liverani, Andrea. *Civil society in Algeria: the political functions of associational life*. Routledge, 2008.

³² Cheriet, Boutheina. "Gender, civil society and citizenship in Algeria." *Middle East Report* (1996): 22-26.



the Kabylie region³³. By late 2018, the role of civil society was considered to be weak and incapable of holding the government accountable. The government used fear as a tool to silence civil society groups and activists until the protests broke out in March 2019 that we see the civil society revive itself to being a key player in organising street protest that brought down the regime of Bouteflika.

c. Political Party System

Regarding the political party system, one of the significant developments in post-independence Algeria was witnessed in the party system whereby for three decades after independence, Algeria continued to be a de jure single party state³⁴. The 1989 constitutional reforms however, transformed this single party system into a multiparty system that allowed for opposition participation in politics as well as created the platform for the high-level institutionalization of political parties which sustained multiparty politics through the 8-year civil war³⁵. Although the authoritarian political system did not provide any opportunity for the opposition to attain political leadership, there still existed a vibrant system of multiparty politics under the authoritarian system.

5.2. 2019 Elections and the Fall of Bouteflika

The rise to power of Abdelaziz Bouteflika occurred at a time Algeria was facing severe economic and political crisis characterised by constant interventions of the military and failed economic policies³⁶. The former foreign minister was however able to quickly consolidate power and gain control of both the military and the ruling part which helped him become president in 1999. Nonetheless, it is the events that begun in February 2019 when president Bouteflika declared his candidature for the forthcoming presidential elections that marked a critical turning point in the politics of the North African country. Should Bouteflika have contested and won the elections, it would have been the fifth term in power for the ailing 82-year-old.

³³ Lorch, Jasmin, and Bettina Bunk. "Using civil society as an authoritarian legitimation strategy: Algeria and Mozambique in comparative perspective." *Democratization* 24, no. 6 (2017): 987-1005.

³⁴ Bouandel, Youcef. "Reforming the Algerian electoral system." *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 43, no. 3 (2005): 393-415.

³⁵ Bouandel, Youcef, and Yahia H. Zoubir. "Algeria's elections: The prelude to democratisation." *Third World Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1998): 177-190.

³⁶ Mortimer, Robert. "State and army in Algeria: the 'Bouteflika effect'." *Journal of North African Studies* 11, no. 2 (2006): 155-171.



Having maintained office despite being diagnosed with stomach cancer in 2008 and later suffering from stroke 2013 as well as little political resistance during the Arab spring at a time Algeria was facing high levels of corruption, nepotism and socio-economic explosion means it was not easy to remove him.³⁷ Indeed Bouteflika enjoyed significant electoral success clinching during his tenure, for example he won the seat with over 81% of the votes in 1999–2004, 85% in 2004–09, 90.24% in 2009–14 despite him starting to develop health complications and the most recently in 2014–2019 where he got 81%.³⁸ Nonetheless, a new wave of bloodless protests proved too strong not only for president Bouteflika but also for his close political allies.

The protests begun on 22 February 2019 when thousands of youths marched into the streets to express anger and disappointment over the attempts by Bouteflika to be a candidate in the 28th April 2019 presidential elections³⁹. Despite an existing ban on demonstration in Algeria dating back to 2001, the "No fifth mandate!" movement spread fast into various social media platforms which became effective avenues of mobilisation.⁴⁰ As the crowds begun to grow bigger in various cities across the country, earlier response by the security forces was to use teargas to disperse the protesters but the people proved resilient. The Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia of Algeria in referring to the protesters made a comparison with what transpired in Syria in 2011. By 26th of February, students and other civilian organisations were actively involved in the protests demanding, initially, that the president shelve his political ambitions⁴¹.

In an attempt to please the protesters, President Bouteflika on the 2nd March 2019 while in Switzerland sent a letter to the news rooms stating that he was running for presidency for the last time and that even if he won, he would not complete the fifth term. At the same time, he dismissed Mr. Abdelmalek Sellal as his campaign manager. The new campaign manager then submitted Bouteflika's nomination papers for candidacy in the election few hours before the deadline of the exercise. The formal application by Bouteflika's campaign team sparked more

³⁷ Zoubir, Yahia H., and Ahmed Aghrout. "Algeria's Path to Reform: Authentic Change?." *Middle East Policy* 19, no. 2 (2012): 66.

³⁸ Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, Encyclopædia Britannica Encyclopædia Britannica, inc. (April 2, 2019) <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Abdelaziz-Bouteflika>

³⁹ Holm, Ulla. "Algeria: President Bouteflika's Second Term." *Mediterranean Politics* 10, no. 1 (2005): 117-122.

⁴⁰ Amir A., Charlotte B., & Madjid Z., (23 February 2019). "Algérie:révolte inédite contre le pouvoir". *Le Monde*

⁴¹ Guliyev, Farid. "End of term limits: Monarchical presidencies on the rise." *Harvard International Review*, February 28 (2009).



protests between the 5th and 8th February 2019 with the president warning of possible 'chaos' sentiments that were echoed by the head of the army General Ahmed Gaid Salah who criticised an unidentified individual for wanting to return the country back to the "painful years" in reference to the civil war of 1992-2002.

March 11th, 2019 a day after he returned from Switzerland was a significant date for the protesters as Bouteflika accepted their demands for him to withdraw from the elections. However, the president announced that the elections slated for 18th April 2019 were suspended for an unidentified date and that he would remain as president until the country got a new constitution. Major reshuffles also took place as Noureddine Bedoui the then interior minister was appointed the new prime minister. The protesters who were now protesting every Friday of the week changed their demands and wanted Bouteflika to step down immediately as protests engulfed major cities. The ruling party National Liberation Front (FLN) on 20th March threw its support to the protesters and called for an inclusive dialogue to end the crisis.

Nearly a month later, Ahmed Gaid Salah the Army chief read a statement on the 28th of March declaring president Bouteflika unfit to hold office calling upon the constitutional council to invoke Article 102 of the constitution that gives the organ power to remove a president. This pronouncement got support from unlikely sources such as the National Rally for Democracy (RND) and Mr. Abdelmadjid Sidi the head of the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGTA). Further calls for Bouteflika to resign came from business leaders and civil societies. The statements from these important and influential figures and organisations previously allied to the president gave protesters more hope in keep demanding the resignation of the president. On the contrary, some of the protesters rejected the Army's so called 'constitutional path' to solving the Algerian crisis.

Many critics termed the declaration by General Ahmed Gaid Salah that the president was unfit based on health reasons hypocritical since the president was already incapacitated since 2013 after he suffered from the stroke but instead of asking him to step aside then, the regime was still fronting him for a fifth term in 2019. Protestors therefore declared that their goal is to end *le système*, meaning the system. The president responded by making further reforms in government by overhauling the executive and naming Noureddine Bedoui as the new head of government. This did not convince the protesters and finally President Bouteflika resigned on the 1st April 2019 marking an end to 20 years of his rule.



6. Conclusion

Algeria has gone through turbulent events in its political spheres, partly due to acts of authoritarianism which were being supported by security agencies and in part the absence or existence of weak institutions. The government of Bouteflika may have brought about stability to the country following a series of civil wars and political crises in the past. However, growing dictatorial tendencies and health conditions of Bouteflika made many to believe that the country was headed towards the wrong direction. The believe that a shadow group was running the government behind the ailing president was strengthened when the ruling party fronted the president as the party's candidate for the fifth time despite his worsening condition. The people responded with unending calls for the president and his entire government to resign and demanded that the government be handed over to a civilian lead transitional authority. This bloodless overthrow of president Bouteflika has brought back hope that revolutions can work without necessarily threatening human security. More importantly is the patience the protestors have shown and the nature of response by the security forces has helped avert a major crisis in the North African countries. This paper concludes with the believe that the aspirations of the people of Algeria to finally enjoy the elusive fruits of democracy will come to pass.

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