

Coronavirus Will Change Both Algeria's Political System and Its Opposition

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Brief Analysis

As U.S. President Donald Trump announced a state of emergency and France's Macron declared that his country "is at war," Algerians were still waiting for an address from the recently inaugurated President Abdelmadjid Tebboune. The delay was indicative of Algeria's particular challenges when dealing with the virus—the North African country has already faced uncharted waters over the past year as millions of Algerians have repeatedly taken the streets to demand radical political change, and the societal and political fissures are further complicating the country's ability to respond effectively to the threat.

The outbreak of this pandemic has peeled back the different, complex layers of Algeria's wide range of challenges, serving as a test to Algeria's social and political elite in their response to the first major crisis of the post-Bouteflika political system (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/the-uncertain-future-of-algerias-anti-corruption-battles>). With this new disaster, there is no doubt that Algeria will again be changed by its dealings with the pandemic, just as the county was changed by the Hirak movement (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/algeria-one-year-into-the-hirak-successes-and-setbacks>).

Coronavirus: The Political System's Sudden Enemy

Coronavirus has arrived in Algeria at a time when the Algerian political system is already unstable and vulnerable, proving unable to quell a protest movement that is now spanning into its fourteenth month. And though the system has attempted to reassert stability with the recent presidential inauguration of Abdelmadjid Tebboune, these same authorities have been struggling with the opposition Hirak's "all out" slogan, calling for the departure of all system figures.

In Algeria's political system, the president is presented as "the father of the nation," imagery intended to provide him with the necessary popular legitimacy to make difficult and unpopular decisions. However, the massive boycotts of the most recent elections show Tebboune represents just 20 percent of the Algerian electorate. With such weak support and a large opposition movement continuing to reject him as a political leader, Tebboune cannot believably embody this ideal; he lacks the legitimacy necessary to take on such a role.

Moreover, many Algerians see the state's response to coronavirus as a test of the system's policies from the past five decades rather than as just a contemporary issue. The state response to the coronavirus is presenting a microcosm for the budgetary policies, economic model, development priorities, efficacy, and political will.

What is clear is that the state is failing to mount an effective defense against the virus. These failures were already evident when the government announced Algeria's first coronavirus cases. Average citizens and even 'opposition figures' who supported the Hirak believed that the announcement was part of a hoax designed by the system to either end the protest movement or achieve another political aim.

The president's absence in the public sphere (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/algerias-legitimacy-crisis-path-towards-an-impasse>) during this key time compounded popular frustration with the government, and the lack of communication undermined the real weight of the outbreak. When the threat became increasingly apparent, Algerians were both at a loss as to how to respond and in denial as to the real nature of the threat.

The public only reassessed the situation when the government suspended certain flights from specific locations such as Rome; even then, flights from the severely affected France continued to arrive in Algeria, suggesting that the measure will not prove particularly effective in preventing the spread of the virus.

Of those who now see the virus as a threat, many don't trust the government's reports on its medical preparedness to handle the crisis. Tebboune has said that Algeria has 2500 ICU beds, but many assume that the true capacity was much lower than that stated by the government—medical sources have independently stated there are only 200 ICUs in Algeria. This episode further demonstrated the lack of trust between people and government, notwithstanding the country's recent elections.

Just as concerning is the outbreak's likely impact on Algeria's already shaky economic model. A deadly combination of severely limited global travel along with an ill-timed price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia has pushed oil prices to a seventeen year low. Algeria, highly dependent on the oil and gas industry, is surely one of the countries that will suffer the most. Compounding the issue of low revenue are the years-long state budgetary policies that have prioritized the the country's defense sector over health, education, and scientific research. As such, many Algerians are faced with the impossible choice to either self-isolate or risk infection to make ends meet, with little expectation that they will be helped by the government.

The poor handling of communication between the state and the public about the outbreak and the appropriate measures against it has proved, once again, the incapacity of Algerian authorities to act when needed and the president's hesitance to take drastic measures—even when needed—because of the severity of public distrust of the state. Such measures could have major potential consequences for the most vulnerable in society. And while Algeria has mounted a major opposition movement—the Hirak—these protesters have also struggled with providing a cogent alternative response to the virus.

When In-Person Protests Are No Longer Possible

Over the past year, the Algerian protest movement has become one of the few examples globally of millions of protesters taking to the streets against an authoritarian system without mass casualties. Now a movement broader than its weekly protests held on Tuesdays and Fridays, the Hirak has distinguished itself through its evolving, heterogeneous atypical 'leadership' structure. The self-isolation necessary to combat coronavirus is providing the largest test of the movement since its early days protesting against Bouteflika. Of course, protesters have maintained unity and persistence, but the pandemic has forced the movement into a dilemma, where defending their country means suspending their demonstrations.

The movement has already faced criticism for its leaderless nature, where actors respected by the Hirak represent

different ideological strains of the movement but do not form a single governing body. Some have argued that the Hirak cannot engage in successful negotiations with the Algerian system without a clear and coherent leadership structure. But efforts to find a representative voice are complicated by the fact that the movement does not represent a specific ideological wave, instead drawing from multiple ideologies, ranging from the most conservative elements of Algerian society to centrist and progressist ones.

Still, the Hirak's response to the crisis suggests that Algeria's protest movement is organizing in its own way. A number of actors respected by the Hirak, each from a specific background, have each raised awareness about the risk of continuing the protests within their ideological circles. Subsequently, some key social and political actors of the movement—including Karim Tabbou, Mostefa Bouchachi, Abdelaziz Rahabi, the RCD, and student organizations—have called for the Hirak's suspension in response to the virus.

With this shift away from in-person protests after over a year of sustained efforts, social media has become even more key. Whereas traditional media in Algeria is government-controlled, platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram act as alternative media and tools with which activists spread the word. Of course, this is not a new tactic—much has been written about the role of social media during the 2011 Arab Spring.

Social media has now demonstrated its effectiveness in halting the protests as a safety measure in response to the coronavirus outbreak. Social media campaigns to temporarily suspend the Hirak led to a wide consensus over the necessity of such a move. Facebook streams, rather than traditional media sources, became the go-to medium to discuss ways to confront the virus.

The Hirak's response to the outbreak suggests that Algeria's movement is congealing around a larger drive than its weekly demonstrations. The Hirak's ability to take quick and pragmatic decisions during a pandemic show that the demonstrations are in fact a tool of a broader societal impulse—an awakening of collective consciousness and a shifting of the paradigms that shape Algeria.

Prior to the threat of coronavirus, the movement operated more as a reactive force to government proposals and demands. Now, the severity of the threat is pushing the movement to play a leading role alongside the government. The Hirak is developing several solidarity initiatives, providing financial assistantship to the most vulnerable and opting for voluntary confinement measures. Indeed, the Hirak has reshaped a country-wide narrative dating from the country's independence in 1962, one where the citizen waits for the state. Today, the opposite feels true: the citizen plays the role of leading the country. In that sense, the Hirak has appeared to be not only a political force but also a tool of social engagement, shifting the very notions of what it means to be an Algerian citizen.

Societal Divisions Rising to the Surface

Just as coronavirus is bringing aspects of both the Algerian system and opposition to the fore, coronavirus is also laying bare many of the societal divisions that have characterized Algeria for decades. Despite awareness campaigns, strict confinement measures will ultimately be needed to control the situation. And as the state has developed a pattern of paternalistic behavior, Algerian society has shown itself to need constant guidance on the threat and unable to take its own initiatives.

Government efforts to enforce social distancing have been met with resistance by some of Algeria's religious conservatives. When the government decided to finally close the mosques, some Algerians, including certain 'celebrities,' felt the obligation to oppose such a move out of claims of religious morality. Though conversations about the role of religion in the state are deeply complicated in Algeria due to the role of Islamist movements in its longstanding civil war in the 1990s, this pushback suggests that Algerians are still attached to a traditional religious conservatism. This instance also raises the potential that Algerians—were they to vote freely—might again bring to power a moderate Islamist party less violent but perhaps not less radical than the old FIS.

Moreover, class divisions in Algerian society have also complicated the response to the virus. One of the factors that caused the government to delay the implementation of restrictive measures was the major economic repercussions for Algerians, especially as the country has lost much of its middle class. While Algeria's upper class could manage with the restrictive measures necessary to halt the virus, Algeria's large lower class cannot survive a lock-down without financial help—a warning for the future that such a stark division exists.

Yet the crisis has demonstrated one positive trend in Algerian society: the engagement of the nation's youth. While the virus certainly affects the elderly more, Algerian youth are actively engaged in many initiatives such as producing masks and sanitizing the streets to help their fellow citizens, demonstrating that the country's real resource is its youth rather than its hydrocarbons sector.

Coronavirus Is Algeria's Last Warning Sign

Each state is responding to the coronavirus outbreak in its own way. But for Algeria, the threat—along with the political and societal challenges and vulnerabilities made evident in the attempts to mount a response, are the canary in the coal-mine for understanding what lies ahead if the state's political crisis is not soon resolved. Tebboune is demonstrating that he lacks the popular mandate to effectively manage this health crisis, and the economic one after it. It would not be surprising for coronavirus to trigger the end of his mandate after, or even during, the outbreak.

And while the Hirak's ability to suspend its protests is notable, the movement's next test will be whether it can effectively return to the streets once the threat has passed. It is now clear that the biweekly protests will not be sufficient—a further Saturday protest right before the suspension, subject to unusually stark repression measures, suggests that the Hirak is adapting its strategies.

Even when it is again safe to protest, the movement cannot return to the pre-coronavirus status-quo. The Hirak can either escalate and put more pressure on the government or de-escalate, in which case it will slowly vanish. Which direction the movement will move in will depend on its capacity to self-organize and serve as the alternative to the system's unsatisfactory response to the outbreak. If its atypical methods of heterogenous leadership are successful in maintaining support from Algeria's various ideological streams, the movement could gain ground and return to the streets with greater strength. As the current system's flaws become increasingly evident when placed under the pressure of the pandemic, Algeria's future will increasingly lie in whether the Hirak can rise to the occasion and provide a viable alternative. ♦

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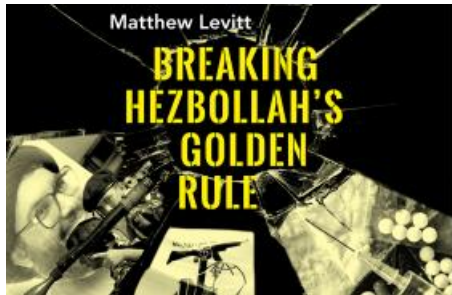
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