

Algeria's Political Change Offers Hope for Peace with Morocco and North African Prosperity

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Dec 4, 2019

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Brief Analysis

Since the beginning of the year, Algerians have repeatedly come to the streets to challenge their political system. Some have used these ongoing protests, also known as Smile Revolution or Hirak, to celebrate their current victories while others have used the occasion to call for a complete change in the political system. With the question of political uncertainty surrounding the presidential election in the coming weeks, demonstrators show no signs of abating.

These demonstrators are fearful the authorities will simply reshuffle the leadership in order to avoid making any substantive change. Algeria's populace is understandably frustrated with pervasive corruption and state repression—and the largely leaderless protests are consistent in their call for a transparent democracy, sweeping government reforms, and political self-determination. With the protests already starting to alter the political landscape of Algeria, this movement is giving hope to outside observers for broader regional changes, from potential rapprochement between Algeria and its neighbor and bitter rival Morocco to expanding regional dialogue between neighbors—which has been withered by a legacy of colonial rule and the differences in subsequent state-building practices.

Morocco's Historical Advantages

As Algeria searches for a new structure for its political system, the Moroccan model can potentially provide new insights for Algerians. In many respects, the histories of these two countries show two parallel models for North African states. Both were once united under the banner of Islam and the unique context of the North African-Arab world, and both faced the grip of colonialism. However, the two then branched out in the post-colonial period and developed notably different political models.

First and foremost, it is imperative to understand the major advantage Morocco possessed over Algeria in the post-colonial period. Though both subject to colonial rule, Morocco and Algeria set out on opposing political trajectories during the post-colonial period as a result of certain state-development techniques utilized during the struggle for independence. On the one hand, Morocco emerged gradually from colonial rule within a framework of French-

Moroccan interdependence and emphasized unification during its transitional period while still preserving aspects of Moroccan identity.

In contrast, the period of brutal colonial subjugation in Algeria came to an abrupt end in 1962. In the wake of unified opposition to the French, the various Algerian independence movements did not consolidate themselves into one cohesive effort. While the King in Morocco positioned himself as an Islamic leader and rallied both Islamists and Nationalists alike, Algeria fell into a period characterized by political infighting. The leaders of the revolution fought amongst themselves and legitimated political violence in a desperate attempt to hold onto power. The political history of Algeria has since been defined by various factions vying for power, economic isolation, and failed socialist policies—permeating into the political culture that exists in Algeria today.

This is not to say that the Moroccan monarchy has always held unassailable sway over the Moroccan populace. At several points in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, public opinion regarding the King of Morocco was overwhelmingly negative. Yet when we compare the recent political histories of Morocco and Algeria, we see just how critical the authority of the monarchy has been in developing civil societies and promoting the general liberalization of political affairs. Without a strong authority figure, it is not inconceivable that Morocco would be where Algeria is today. It is therefore imperative to pay attention to the ongoing protests, their level of support among the populace, and the government's reaction. Not only must Algeria listen to the demands of its protesters, but the upcoming elections must help establish an inspiring political leadership that can bring together Algeria's fractured political scene.

A Window for Economic Rapprochement

Such a shift would also present a unique opportunity to heal the longstanding animosity between the two states. Post-colonial Moroccan-Algerian relations have been characterized by tense, antagonistic exchanges and even all-out conflict—including the Sand War of 1963 and the Western Sahara War from 1975-1991—with said conflict often centering around the contested territory of the Western Sahara. Yet even with government repression, Algerians continued to visit Morocco to buy western consumer goods and enjoy comforts not available in their so-called socialist state until Morocco imposed temporary visa restrictions on Algerian citizens after a 1994 terrorist attack on a hotel in Marrakesh. In response, the Algerian government officially closed off its land borders with Morocco, which are still unopened to this day.

The current peaceful uprisings in Algeria have gained momentum over the past few months and have already pushed the army to make several concessions. Yet army forces still retain control of the country, including over Algeria's scheduled December elections, indicating that they have not given up power. Even so, the popular revolution has considerable leverage as the government is on the verge of economic bankruptcy—it has already resorted to and subsequently abandoned the mass printing of paper money to pay functionaries. Soon the government will realize that they must adhere to the protesters' demands or risk international isolation.

While political change is difficult and fraught, Algeria's regional neighbors have reason for cautious optimism. If Algeria can obtain democratic rule, it would be greatly beneficial for the country to re-open its borders for regional and global investors alike. Such a move will be of mutual benefit for both Algeria and Morocco's economy. Moroccan businesses would jump at the chance to partake in the lucrative market of 40 million avid consumers, and economic partnership, once the last remaining aspect of cordial Moroccan-Algerian relations, could pave the way for greater social exchange and cooperation between peoples.

The foreseeable political change in leadership in Algeria should also not be discounted as an opportunity to bring about the gradual end to animosity with Morocco and the beginning of regional cooperation within the Maghreb. Reports suggest that Hirak protestors have, among other things, called for the future Algerian government to open the borders with Morocco in order to receive political, economic and social benefits—especially now that Algeria's oil

bonanza has come to an end and oil subsidies have ceased. More surprisingly, the presidential candidate [Ali Benflis \(https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2019/11/286497/algerian-presidential-candidate-rapprochement-morocco/\)](https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2019/11/286497/algerian-presidential-candidate-rapprochement-morocco/), ex-prime minister and surely one of the favorites of the military establishment, has advocated for the opening of the borders with Morocco and stressed that Moroccans are brothers to Algerians rather than enemies.

More overtly, the ex-secretary general of the state-supported historical party Front de Libération Nationale (FLN), Amar Saadani, has openly stated that he believed the contested Western Sahara is historically Moroccan territory—taken away from Morocco by the European colonial powers at the Berlin Colonial Conference in 1884. Moreover, he also commented that “Algeria has supplied the [Western Saharan] Polisario for fifty years with huge sums [but] this organization has accomplished nothing.” Though such a position was officially rejected by the current Algerian government, these statements from major Algerian political actors suggest that movement on the issue of Western Sahara may be possible in the coming years.

Given the economic opportunities at stake, it may be that if a democratic leadership comes to power in Algeria during the upcoming elections, Algeria may pressure the Polisario to accept the Moroccan autonomy plan to allow the construction of the Great Maghreb.

Algeria as a Positive Example

This Hirak will undoubtedly change the landscape of Algeria, but it is important to also look for ways in which it can have positive political implications within Morocco and the greater Maghreb. The mutually reinforcing aspects of the Sudanese and Algerian revolutions, along with the more recent efforts in Iraq and Lebanon, demonstrate the powerful inspiration successful protests can provide to neighboring countries.

In fact, a functional democracy in Algeria would also be of great political benefit for the region, helping to positively influence its neighboring countries. A democratic Algeria, for instance, could help inspire incremental democratization in Morocco, hopefully leading to a constitutional monarchy where parliament has real political power. For Algeria’s other border, a functional democracy could help inspire Libyans to reunite and re-establish a civilian state based on power-sharing and the rule of law.

Moreover, the spirit of the Algerian Hirak has the potential to unite the people of the greater Maghreb region. While this is perhaps the most difficult outcome to achieve, it is also bears the greatest potential fruits. If the Maghreb region can resolve its infighting, it can potentially develop a unified position in regards to Europe and America—in turn evolving into a better partner for the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa.

An integrated Maghreb also has the potential to act as a force of stability throughout Africa and the Mediterranean to fight illegal immigration, violent religious extremism, corruption, nepotism, embezzlement, abuse of power, and gender inequality. Similarly, regional stability is in the interest of Western countries, as stable countries with governments that represent their people are more likely to effectively thwart the activities of extremists such as Boko Haram in sub-Saharan Africa.

The spirit of the Algerian uprising has the potential to inspire a broader movement of ongoing democratic and economic development. The uprising’s inclusive nature may also open a window to promoting social equality across the region—most notably the ongoing efforts to fully recognize Arab, Amazigh, Jewish, African, and Christian ethnic groups in the region, as well as other minorities. Long separated by political ideology, a new Algeria and Morocco have the opportunity to, God willing, become responsible partners in democracy. These two major regional actors may then be able to lead the greater Maghreb region into an era characterized by solidarity rather than division. ❖

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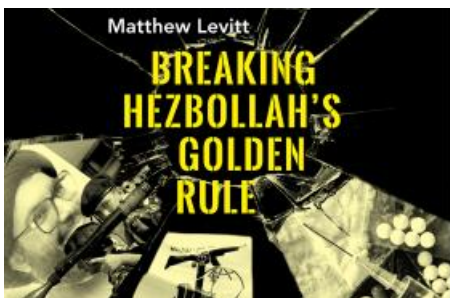
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