

Algeria's Legitimacy Crisis: Path Towards an Impasse

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Brief Analysis

In February, millions of Algerians went to the streets to protest against Bouteflika's fifth bid for presidency after ruling the country for twenty years. What started as a spontaneous political movement against Bouteflika quickly transformed into popular demand for a radical political change. Even so, Algerians have been able to keep the ongoing protests peaceful during the past nine months despite the system's provocations, and they have preserved their unity in the face of the many attempts to divide them.

Now, the country is just weeks away from scheduled presidential elections. While the de-facto ruling military junta is committed to pushing for elections to be held on December 12, Algerians continue to return to the streets to reaffirm their rejection of these elections and demand real and structural political change.

In light of the tense political environment and the current popular discontent, the next few weeks are key to ensure the political future of Algeria. The stability of North Africa, and even the broader Mediterranean region, depends on a peaceful and smooth transition of power in Algeria.

An Army Facing the People

While Bouteflika maintained power for over 20 years, his resignation subsequently unmasked the true power-brokers of Algeria—the military junta. Since Algeria's independence in 1962, the army has been regarded as the most important and popular institution. Even when the country was plunged into a bloody armed conflict in the 90s, and despite the army's direct interference in that conflict, Algerians by and large saw the military institution as their sole savior. However, Bouteflika's forced resignation, without a sustainable or pragmatic succession plan, has forced the military institution to play an explicit role in politics and even in the judiciary. Most overtly, chief of staff Ahmed Gaid Salah announced that the presidential elections would be held on December 12 from inside a military barracks.

Since becoming more visible to the public eye, Gaid's often divisive political speeches have resulted in popular discontent and protest slogans that clearly demand civilian state over military rule. Given this dynamic of a more visible military and the resulting popular pushback, the military institution's reputation and its internal cohesion have never been more threatened. Algerians still make a clear distinction between the army as an institution and the military junta as a "ruling elite," but it is only a matter of time before this distinction becomes blurry—especially as Algeria's political situation becomes more complicated.

People are losing patience with the proposed electoral process, especially after seeing the list of official candidates to the presidential elections—which included five figures known to be closely tied to the extant political system. Many of those who previously believed in the possibility of change through these elections now feel betrayed and see these elections as renewing the system rather than ending it. There are also signs of the system's willingness to escalate the situation through violent repression. The military junta sees these elections as the only way forward and its rejection of a real dialogue will only lead to a possible confrontation with the people who remain peaceful.

A Looming Socioeconomic Crisis

On top of the crisis of Algeria's political legitimacy, fears of an economic collapse also loom in the background. Since the oil crisis of 2014 when the price of crude oil dropped precipitously, Algeria—with an economy largely based on the oil and gas industry—has opted for difficult austerity measures. Even so, subsequent governmental efforts to diversify the economy have reached a dead end. With an increasing rate of unemployment and the difficult socioeconomic conditions, the country contains a dangerous mix of potential catalysts.

Algeria's foreign exchange reserves have dropped sharply, from 193.6 billion dollars in 2014 to approximately 65 billion dollars in July 2019. Algerian Minister of Finance Mohamed Lokal has essentially alluded to the possibility of the country's economic collapse by 2022; he made an alarming announcement that by the end of 2020, exchange reserves will only allow for twelve more months of imports.

If demands for political change have been rather peaceful so far, fear of an impending economic collapse could remind Algerians of the 1986 global oil market crisis that resulted in the infamous violent riots of 1988. And although the current political ambiguity is not helping to encourage investments, the more complicated political scene likely to emerge after December's elections also threatens to prevent the country from engaging in deeply needed structural economic reforms.

Regional Consequences: More Instability

The multiple potentials for deep instability in Algeria should also be cause for concern for neighboring countries, as this may impact Algeria's security situation. As the country with the largest landmass of all of the Middle East and North Africa, Algeria has struggled over the past five years to defend its borders in front of an increasingly hostile environment. Between instability in Libya and Mali, and with the undeniable and worrying presence of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Algeria currently serves as an island of stability in the region and an important partner in the international efforts to counter terrorism.

So far, the Algerian army has been able to keep the situation under control, but the military's explicit interference in politics could impact the army's ability to perform its most important duty, preserving the borders. Vulnerabilities in the Algerian security apparatus could allow terrorist and organized crime groups to spread and strengthen their presence in the Algerian Sahara and the region.

Moreover, if Algeria does not reach a political consensus in the next period and if political ambiguity reaches a point of escalation—considering the looming economic crisis—the oil, and gas industry—which is crucial to the EU—could be threatened. An unstable Algeria will present an enticing target for many international powers with interests contrary to the European Union and the United States. Russia will see an opportunity to strengthen its already strong influence in Algeria and correspondingly grow its influence in North Africa in what could constitute a threat to US and EU interests. China may also see an opportunity to provide financial help to Algerians in a way that would put other powers' economic interests at risk.

The Way Forward: Concessions and Mutual Understanding

Any chance of resolving these interlocking issues rests on the ability for Algeria to address its legitimacy crisis. Since

1962, Algeria's various political and social tensions have primarily been a result of this crisis. And while both the system and the opposition have made efforts to address this crisis, these attempts have ultimately proved futile.

Nor will the upcoming elections solve this legitimacy crisis. As they are currently structured, the elections will result in a president who enjoys a sort of "constitutional legitimacy" but lacks a popular one. Moving forward with the elections will most likely trigger another uprising by 2022, and future uprisings may be more violent. Therefore, a national dialogue directly addressing Algeria's legitimacy crisis must occur before any elections. This national dialogue, which could take the form of a national conference, that shall lead a political pact and agreement should include all political and social actors, including the military institution. All powers in Algeria should engage in a frank discussion to agree on a political alternative. However, before any direct engagement with the military institution, it is primordial for all actors to engage with each other in an intra-movement dialogue. Algerians need to reestablish trust with the state's institutions, including the army. This trust is hard to achieve while the system persists in imposing restrictions on freedom of expression, press, and assembly. Fostering an environment that respects citizens' freedoms will allow protesters to openly discuss their visions for Algeria's future, eventually reaching a political consensus and a practical alternative that would make the inevitable political transition smoother and more peaceful.

Given the regional importance of Algeria, the international community, especially Algeria's international security and trade partners, are already concerned by this political ambiguity and the ways in which it can impact the region. While Algerians still, and will likely continue to, reject any sort of foreign interference in the ongoing protests, the international community should be aware that opting for a strategy that indirectly strengthens the extant political system may not be the wisest choice. A stable Algeria is in everyone's interest—acknowledging that Algerians are living in a de-facto military state is the first step to taking a proactive position that would both ensure Algerians' demands and preserve the stability of Algeria.

Regardless of the outcome of the elections, the military junta and protesters must both make some difficult yet necessary concessions moving forward. The military junta must not put itself in a direct line of confrontation with protesters and should start listening to the streets, while protesters should also understand that a total and abrupt military disengagement from politics is simply not possible, cooperating with the military to reach a long-term vision to achieve more freedoms and stability is safer than opting for a quick, yet riskier, road that could eventually result in a direct confrontation against the military. As it is, the country is slowly moving towards a dangerous impasse and the risk of escalation increases by the day. Only mutual understanding and concessions can prevent Algeria from entering another episode of insurgency. ❖

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