

# Algeria's Opaque Transition: The Potential Trap of Upcoming Elections

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Sep 24, 2019

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Brief Analysis

Six months have passed since the beginning of the peaceful protest movement in Algeria, commonly known as the Hirak, which ousted longtime president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The protest movement has also managed to dismantle the clan that surrounded him, as most of its controversial figures are now in jail. However, Algerians' struggle for freedom and democracy is still unfinished as protesters are determined to continue their movement until all their demands are met. With an upcoming election, Algerians are facing a hard choice that will determine their country's fate for decades to come; the choice of elections this time comes with significant consequences.

## The System's Plan: Gradual Escalation

On September 15, Algeria's interim head of state, whose constitutional term expired on July 9, addressed the nation to announce that presidential elections will take place on December 12 after establishing an Independent Electoral Authority and amending the electoral law. This is the third time that Algerian authorities have attempted to organize presidential elections: April's elections were postponed after Bouteflika's resignation and July's elections were canceled due to total boycott and absence of candidates. In fact, the decision to now organize presidential elections was first insisted upon by army chief of staff, Ahmed Gaid Salah, who emphasized that the military institution, the real powerholder in Algeria, rejects all types of concessions and sees the early presidential elections as the only possible way out of the crisis.

The military junta's strong position on elections was to be expected as it is no longer able to control political decisions in Algeria from behind the scenes as it once did. The Algerian protest movement has forced the military junta to openly express its positions and even make decisions outright on political issues, such as elections. However, the military junta has also recently showed its willingness to use repressive measures in order to impose its road map. In the past few days, several opposition leaders such as Karim Tabbou, Samir Ben Larbi, and Fodil Boumala were arrested and put in provisional detention in the past few days. And since the beginning of the Hirak, more than a hundred protesters have been incarcerated for political reasons.

Additionally, the Algerian political leadership has been propagating a threatening and hostile speech against protesters, which labels every political opponent of the military institution's plan as "enemy" of Algeria. Gaid Salah,

today's strongman of the Algerian system, has even ordered the Gendarmerie forces to block all access to the capital on Fridays and seize all vehicles carrying protesters. This decision will result in a de-facto state of siege on Algeria's capital on Friday and represents a violation of the Algerian constitution and international human rights law.

The repressive measures taken by Algerian authorities suggest that the current ruling elite has no intention to enter into negotiations with Algerian protesters or even discuss its roadmap any further. Isolating the capital and limiting freedom of expression are clear and worrying signs that the system is moving towards imposing a state of emergency if protesters remain mobilized.

### **Protesters' Response: Careful, Steady Mobilization**

Despite the system's hostility and oppression, Algerian protesters are determined not to vote as long as the former political leadership that served under Bouteflika's rule is still governing. Therefore, most of the political and social actors engaged in the Hiram contest the project of holding elections. Protesters find the current leadership untrustworthy and unable to deliver real change. They see elections, which currently offer no real guarantees, as an opportunity for system to regenerate itself. In that sense, there is a serious crisis of legitimacy shadowing Algeria's political establishment and threatening its institutions.

After six months, protesters are still managing to protect their unity despite all ideological and political differences. They have also been able to preserve the peaceful nature of their protests even in light of the provocative and intimidating repressive measures against them. For protesters, the most important goal now is dismantling the political system and establishing the foundations of a democratic and just state. Many see the current environment as a major impediment to organizing fair and transparent elections. This means that before heading towards any sort of elections, protesters are demanding serious concessions from the system, including the resignation of current government, the army's genuine political neutrality, and immediate release of all political prisoners.

On the other hand, in spite of protesters' determination to oust the system, there is still a certain incapacity within the movement to provide a consensual alternative. While it is clear that everyone wants the departure of the system, political and social forces are not able to agree on a pragmatic and practical road map once the system departs. The protestors are trapped in a repeating cycle: the system's repressive measures are perceived as preventing Algerians from openly discuss the future of their country, yet the lack of discussion prevents one alternative from becoming widely accepted. This fragmentation is in turn being used by the system to manipulate and further divide protesters. Even so, the system has so far failed to fragment the unified opposition to it remaining in power.

### **The "Trap" of Elections?**

Between the military junta's stagnation and protesters' persistence, the upcoming elections will prove decisive regardless of the circumstances in which they are conducted and outcome, and will be especially so if they get canceled. In fact, even with the Independent Electoral Authority recently established, it is unlikely that protesters will see these elections as "fair" or "democratic." Today, the problem of legitimacy in Algeria is much deeper than simple elections. There is a necessity, admitted even by some circles within the Algerian system, to change the whole political establishment that no longer satisfies Algerians' demands nor can rule the country. It could even be argued that opting for early elections in such a context, with no measures of appeasement and an increasing rate of oppression, will only complicate the situation and worsen the legitimacy crisis. Any future Algerian president will need popular majority in elections to enact the reforms needed in Algeria. Moreover, the authority of any president "elected" under such circumstances will likely be contested.

It is evident that the regional security context, in addition to the troubling economic condition, require an urgent political solution. Algeria is on the verge of economic collapse and will by necessity face a series of difficult economic choices in the near future. Both Algerian and international analysts agree that the country's political ambiguity is

threatening its already worsening economy. Political and social actors must find consensus, and the military leadership needs to start listening to people's demands instead of imposing one view. Continuing in this political ambiguity, especially if elections get canceled again, will result in an unprecedented and dangerous political impasse. The stability of Algeria is contingent upon a quick and peaceful transition of power. It unlikely this will happen without a new understanding of civil military relations, which requires some effort and sacrifices from both sides, the military junta and the protesters.

Unfortunately, Gaid Salah's firm positions and "elections" card could lead to an escalation of the situation in Algeria, especially after his order to block all access to the capital. The junta's cutter plan could even divide the current system, triggering a serious fragmentation of state's institutions. The upcoming weeks will be decisive, and unless serious changes are made to deescalate the tensions, Algeria is entering a risky phase that will constitute a real threat to the region's stability. In this context, December's elections seem more of a "trap" than a real opportunity for democratic change; protesters understand this and are planning to bring down these elections in order to ensure that elections they consider legitimate happen in the future. On the other hand, the system wants ballots at any price, and may potentially risk Algeria's safety and stability in the process. In the meantime, while national and international actors should hope for the best, their calculations should take the country's current trajectory into account and begin preparing for the worst. ❖

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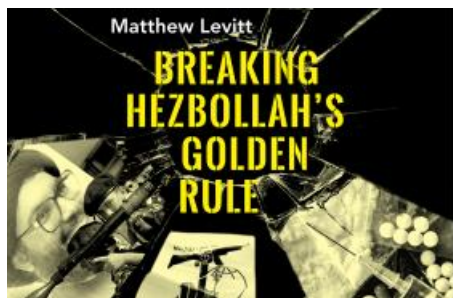
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