

The Uncertain Future of Algeria's Anti-Corruption Battles

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Jul 8, 2019

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Brief Analysis

In Algeria, a recent crackdown by Algeria's transitional government has caused a number of prominent senior officials from the Bouteflika era to face charges from the Sidi M'hamed central court in Algiers, mostly related to corruption. While systemic corruption was one of the issues that fueled Algeria's recent protest movement, questions regarding the motivation behind these cases have weakened the public's trust in an already uncertain political and economic system. Concerns over the politicization of anti-corruption efforts have the potential to feed the worst elements of Algeria's shadow economy while sacrificing long term investment and sustained growth.

Uncertainty regarding the country's future political leadership has only prolonged Algeria's economic crisis and has significantly limited economic growth, development, and foreign investment. Although Algeria was among the oil-rich countries bringing in billions of dollars of revenue, this wealth has not been sufficiently distributed throughout the economy and the country has seen a continual negative growth cycle. Algeria's economic isolation and oil dependency has hindered the government's ability to provide necessary services to citizens, thereby lowering the standard of living and resulting in widespread distrust in governmental institutions.

International reports suggest that Algerians have reason to distrust the government on economic and corruption issues; the 2018 [report \(https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/2018-transparency-international-corruption-perceptions-index/\)](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/2018-transparency-international-corruption-perceptions-index/) from Transparency International on levels of global corruption ranked Algeria a low 105 out of 180 countries. The Arab Barometer, a research project organized by through a partnership with Princeton University, the University of Michigan, and the Arab Reform Initiative, confirmed that many Algerians do not trust state institutions. The [survey \(https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-downloads/\)](https://www.arabbarometer.org/survey-data/data-downloads/) found that only a little over 30 percent of Algerians polled trust the government as a whole, while an even smaller 17 percent express trust in the country's parliament. Civil government fared much worse than Algeria's military, which is the only institution where a majority of respondents expressed trust in the institution (around 74 percent).

The loss of trust in public institutions and widespread corruption helped motivate Algerians to participate in the mass protests that led to the resignation of Bouteflika, also known as 'the February 22 Movement.' Algerian authorities during Bouteflika's time had been quick to cast doubt on the accuracy of international reports

highlighting rampant corruption in the country. Nevertheless, the army's April 2 announcement that finally triggered Bouteflika's immediate resignation reflected Algerians' concerns regarding corruption. The army issued a strong statement describing those close to Bouteflika as a "gang (<https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/2019/4/2/قائد-الجيش-الجزائري-يصف-مجموعة-بوتفليقة-بالعصابة-حان-رحيلها>)" that had illegally made a fortune with complete impunity by exploiting their dubious proximity to decision-makers with complete impunity. It indicated that this "gang" was currently trying to smuggle illicit money out of the country and flee abroad.

The army's statement was followed by a far-reaching campaign of arrests of those close to Bouteflika. Since former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's reign in 1999, Algeria has seen the rise of thousands of millionaires, many of whom are widely suspected of having made their wealth through dubious methods. The crackdown targeted some of the most well-known Algerian wealthy businessmen, including the president of the Forum des Chefs d'Entreprises, **Ali Haddad** (<https://www.france24.com/ar/20190617-محكمة-السجن-رجل-أعمال-الجزائر-علي-حداد-بوتفليقة>). Haddad was the president one of the largest business organization in Algeria—the main source of funds for Bouteflika's election campaigns.

Other businessmen were also arrested, most notably **Isaad Rebrab** (<https://www.sarayanews.com/article/544072>). Rebrab, whose net worth exceeds three billion dollars, is the richest man in Algeria and was a critic of the Bouteflika government, making his arrest particularly remarkable. Members of the '**Kouninef brothers** (<https://horrya.net/archives/101607>)' family, which has close ties to president Bouteflika and has been accused of being given governmental concessions and huge unsecured loans, have also been arrested. They are also suspected of transferring money and smuggling considerable sums of hard currency abroad through illegal means, such as over-billing.

Aside from businessmen, a number of high ranking politicians have also been targeted. The Sidi M'hamed courthouse has recently seen a number of ministers and prominent figures referred to the court for corruption—most notably the former prime ministers **Abdelmalek Sellal and Ahmed Ouyahia** (<https://aljazair1.com/-/الطبيب-ياعين>), the latter of whom was summoned along with the current finance minister Mohamed Loukal to be questioned regarding corruption cases.

Algerians have welcomed these trials of corrupt figures from the Bouteflika era, as they are seen as aligning with a movement that demanded anti-corruption and smuggled money recovery efforts. However, there are also fears that this campaign will become a means of settling accounts inside the ruling regime through mechanisms of selective justice that will target some but not all corrupt entities in order to shift attention from Algerians' fundamental demand—radical change away from the regime of former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Anti-corruption efforts in Algeria have a history of being mostly for show. Although the state previously set up several agencies to fight corruption, they were unable to alleviate the situation and became mere window dressing, lacking any supervisory ability or legal capacity. Furthermore, the government's anti-corruption campaign, "**Clean Hands** (<https://www.alquds.co.uk/حملة-الأبادي-النظيفة-ثورة-على-الفساد>)", failed even before it began, primarily due to the lack of an independent judiciary and its consequent inability to move forward with anti-corruption cases without a directive from the executive authority. This by default cushioned supporters of the president and members of his government.

The popular movement has called for a shift on some of the basic barriers to anti-corruption efforts enshrined in the country's judicial system, including the transfer of some prominent regime officials to the judiciary and charging the army with liberating the judiciary from 'Telephone Justice' driven by directives 'from above.' However, new individuals have been referred to the judiciary only on a selective basis since some regime figures have remained in power. These referrals have increased concern among the Algerian public regarding the actual effectiveness of the

anti-corruption campaign.

In order for Algeria's anti-corruption campaign to be seen as successful by Algerians, there must be a total removal of the regime officials close to Bouteflika. This includes interim president Abdelkader Bensalah, Mouad Bouchareb, and current president Nouredine Bedoui. Algerians will not be able to trust the government's anti-corruption efforts until a truly new political regime that is viewed as legitimate by the people takes power. This cannot happen without an independent commission to run elections and monitor election law, ensuring a respected outcome. Once the federal government is trusted, it must work to overhaul the different local and state councils and help Algerians elect new local politicians who have the people's support.

Algeria's current political atmosphere has promise—through truly independent elections, the country can achieve justice and legislative bodies can finally hold the government accountable. Yet if a new government does not materialize, Algerians will remain unconvinced that a democratic transition will end the long era of corruption in Algerian politics. ❖

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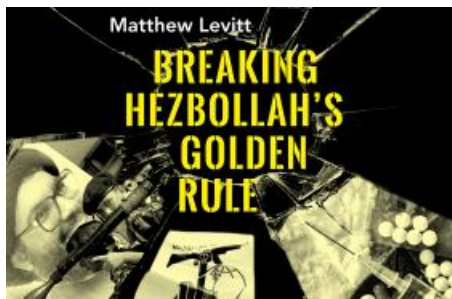
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