

After Two Years of Algeria's Hirak, What Has Been Accomplished?

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Mar 31, 2021

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Brief Analysis

Algeria's divided Hirak movement needs greater unity in order to strengthen real, democratic institutions.

Two years ago, Algeria's Hirak movement ended former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's plans for a fifth presidential term after 20 years of his rule. The Hirak movement, a popular uprising that shook Algiers and drove thousands to the streets in protest, was unprecedented in Algerian history. Today, however, Algerians are wondering what their country has accomplished in the two years since the movement. Have Algerians realized their dreams of fundamental change to the regime? Have they broken, in word and deed, with the practices of the previous, corrupt regime? What are the chances of the movement's success in achieving all its demands? These questions have driven wedges into the movement, which suffers from internal debates and doubts. As protests resume this year, it is more important than ever to preserve the popular, unified nature of the movement.

As expected, Algiers and various other major cities saw massive demonstrations on February 22, 2021, the second anniversary of the beginning of the Hirak. Beyond those protests, there are several indicators suggesting a strong return of the movement, which paused for nine months because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the government used the occasion to celebrate what it called "the anniversary of cohesion between the people and the army for democracy," delivering a clear message on the role of the military establishment during the period following the overthrow of former President Bouteflika.

Despite the military establishment's pro-democracy stance in the past two years, large sectors of Algerians still feel dissatisfaction with the political reforms undertaken by the Algerian government. This dissatisfaction manifested in the low participation rate (39.8%) in the presidential elections held on December 12, 2019. After that, many Algerians boycotted the national process for writing the new constitution, which saw a voting rate of only 23.7 percent, of whom a third voted against the proposed constitution. This lack of popular participation raises doubts about the legitimacy of the constitution and the elected president.

In addition, the lack of participation illustrates that, try as it may, the government has not succeeded in appeasing protesters. After the Hirak movement successfully resulted in Bouteflika's resignation, Algerian authorities initiated an effort to satisfy the demands of the millions of people protesting every Friday in the country's major cities. This effort included several decisions, most notably the launch of a broad campaign to prosecute corrupt regime figures, including Ahmed Ouyahia, Abdelmalek Sellal, and Lieutenant General Mohamed Mediène—known as General Toufik—as well as General Tartag. The campaign also included Said Bouteflika, brother of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was accused of exploiting his brother's illness and his own position as advisor to the president of the republic to issue illegal decisions and appointments in the name of his ailing brother.

Naturally, Algerians widely welcomed these measures. However, the anti-corruption campaign also came as a shock, revealing the horrible scale of the corruption rampant in the country's halls of power. This revelation drove Algerians to demand more than just a rejection of Bouteflika's fifth term, and Hirak participants began calling for a fundamental and total change in the regime, demanding the departure of all Bouteflika regime figures, which protesters considered to be corrupt. And because they desired more drastic change, Hirak participants rejected the government's proposed roadmap towards reform.

Nonetheless, the exposure of rampant corruption and the increasingly broad demands of Hirak participants did not result in drastic change. The COVID-19 pandemic gave the government time to contain the scale of the movement's demands, and authorities took several steps to alleviate the unexpected shock of the anti-corruption campaign. Over the past nine months, authorities have been able to approve the new constitution and put a new elections law in place. Current President Abdelmajid Tebboune also preempted the Hirak's second anniversary with a decision to dissolve the parliament—MPs had come under major accusations of bribery and corruption regarding the lists of nominations for representatives during elections. President Tebboune also announced a **partial modification to the government** and announced a presidential pardon for several prisoners of conscience.

Because these measures were not sufficient to satisfy Hirak activists' demands, Hirak activists accused the government of exploiting the pause of peaceful marches to advance its projects and circumvent the people's demands. Moreover, since the fall of 2019, the government has conducted a broad campaign of arresting activists. The number of detainees has reached more than 65 people, according to the National Coordination to Defend Prisoners of Conscience. Authorities have used the charge of insulting a regime institution to pursue every activist who criticized the government on social media networks.

This campaign has become one of the most important issues damaging trust between the government and the movement. Moreover, restrictions on the media have left Hirak activists unconvinced of authorities' intentions to respond to their demands. These issues have poisoned the opportunity for the government to open a real and serious dialogue on political reform that includes political class and the opposition in future actions. Although the regime did announce political consultations, the organizing method and involvement of previous regime figures in these discussions discredited them.

As a result of this tug-of-war between activists and government officials, a wide-reaching debate has taken place over the course of the past few weeks concerning the feasibility of returning to the marches. One side of this debate argues that Algerians should be careful not to further complicate the economic and social challenges currently facing the country. Any further unrest, they claim, might threaten Algeria's already fragile security and peace. On the contrary, figures on the other side of this debate believe the current government is using the boogeyman of violence and external threats to circumvent the movement's demands for a real break with the previous regime. Members of this group note that the government continues to swap out government officials while ignoring democratic demands, pushing forward with a media blackout, restrictions on freedoms, and the continued rule of individuals at the expense of institutions.

This debate exposes the fractured nature of the Hirak movement. In addition to the debate over resumed marches, Hirak activists also disagree on the rhetoric used in their messaging and demands. For instance, while some activists have described some state institutions as terrorist institutions due to their practice of repression and torture against activists, other Hirak figures have criticized such language, which they consider to be incompatible with the movement's heavy emphasis on pacifism. Contributing to such divides are clear attempts by a number of extremist Islamist forces, represented by figures living outside Algeria, to control and influence the Hirak movement. Secular forces inside Algeria have spoken out about attempts by Islamist leaders to lead and direct the movement for the sake of their agendas, also expressing concerns about a similar effort by Berber elements.

Regardless of these divisions, however, it is important to recognize the Hirak movement's general success in remaining a peaceful, popular movement. It is a rare event for millions of people to gather and demonstrate in a small geographical area at the same time without a single incident of recorded violence. Over the past two years, Algerians have expressed unprecedented political consciousness. Algerians came out two years ago for a democratic state, one in which they would enjoy a large margin of media and political freedoms, and in which they would have full freedom to choose their representatives in state institutions with transparency and impartiality.

To preserve the power and inclusivity of the Hirak movement, influential people in the movement should not attempt to settle old conflicts at the expense of unity. For the movement to succeed, it must overcome the narrow calculations of politicians and avoid becoming fragmented by the ideological projects of writers and thinkers. What matters now is finding ways to choose legitimate state institutions and establishing laws that open the media and political spheres. At the same time, it is critical to find economic alternatives that enable Algerians to overcome the shock of low oil prices and improve social conditions. Open debate and pressure on the current regime are critical in achieving economic goals. Exclusionary slogans that target institutions are detrimental to those efforts—it is not possible to generalize the practices of corrupt individuals to the entirety of current institutions.

At the same time, President Abdelmajid Tebboune and the current Algerian government now have a great opportunity to effect a real and smooth democratic transition by lifting restrictions on freedoms and opening the media and political spheres so that society can organize in a space that is safe from the hegemony of the regime. Openness in the national dialogue will inevitably push towards the emergence of consensual alternatives to current laws and policies that stem from the will of the people and derive from the views of real, liberated elites. In this environment, all Algerians can contribute to restoring the prestige and legitimacy of national institutions through fair elections, transparency, and strong public participation. ❖

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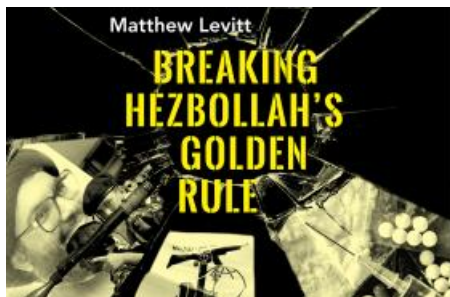
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