

A Future and a Role for Algerian Youth after the Hirak Movement

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Brief Analysis

While plagued by difficulties and divisions, the hope created by the Hirak movement is still alive, and Algerians should work to cultivate it.

In the last two years, Algeria's Hirak movement has instigated a radical development in the political culture of Algerian youth. And while some critics may correctly argue that the movement has become frayed, or that the Algerian political system remains exclusive to young people, the impact of the movement is still significant. Hirak has instilled a sense of hope in young people that did not exist before, and if Algerians properly care for that hope, it still may produce real change. In order to understand the meaning of that change, it may be necessary to understand the story of the movement and its successive challenges since its beginning in 2019.

“They Should All Go”

While the Hirak movement may have begun in protest to the continued rule of former Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, it ultimately instigated the birth of a new political class.

March 11, 2019 marks the day when Bouteflika, whose 20-year rule was rife with corruption and institutional decay, announced he would not seek a fifth term in office after millions of Algerians went to the streets to reject his candidacy, launching the popular Hirak movement.

However, Bouteflika's announcement proved almost meaningless; while a Sky News Arabia broadcaster claimed that Algerians in central Algiers were celebrating the resignation, Sofiane Bakir Turki, a 33-year old Algerian man, suddenly interrupted the live broadcast to proclaim, “We are not happy...They should all go.”

Sofiane's phrase, “*Yetnahaw gaa* (they should all go),”—calling for the removal of Algeria's political elites who had likewise controlled the country for decades—would become the main slogan of the Hirak movement. These emphatic words went viral as a hashtag on social media, and the spread of the phrase marked a dramatic turn of events

for Hirak. Bouteflika's departure had previously been the most prominent slogan of Hirak, but the primary demand then shifted to a call for all the major figures of Bouteflika's regime to be removed, Sofiane becoming an undisputed icon of the movement.

The popularity of Sofiane's words is unsurprising—he represented scores of youths in the capital's old, working-class neighborhoods and in the cities of Algeria's interior who came to the fore as the movement progressed. For years prior, the Algerian youth, who account for 70% of the country's population, had largely turned away from politics. This demographic had often been too preoccupied with unemployment, the social ills associated with drug-use, and plans to escape via illegal migration. As a result, older politicians dominated the political landscape in a country where a large majority of citizens were young.

For that reason, the incredible feats and imagery produced by the Algerian youth during the Friday marches marked a pivotal moment in Algerian history and initiated a new era for Algerian youth involvement in politics, general political change, and a call for democracy. More significantly, those who created the movement—leaders of change who stood up against government harassment—came from the marginalized youth populations who had been suffering silently in Algeria's cities for years. This new young class of political leaders emerged as an exciting alternative to the traditional political elite.

Divisions among Hirak Activists

This new young class, however, did not retain the perceived unity that had defined the beginning of the Hirak. In fact, ultimately, it would split into several organizations, all with competing views of Algeria's political future.

After Bouteflika's announcement, youth activists and the opposing political elite erupted into a heated debate on social media regarding their positions on subsequent elections. Whereas establishment politicians and the army supported a path based on amending the existing constitution, Hirak activists rejected this proposal. Some of the movement's figures advocated for the implementation of a transitional phase and a constituent assembly to found a new republic altogether. This subject of whether to initiate a transitional period and found a new republic, true to the spirit of "They should all go," became a divisive question even between youth activists. Faced with such discord, the young new political elite emerged with conflicting views and ideas.

In addition to the debate over the transitional period, following Bouteflika's announcement, young Algerians began to present contrasting slogans about the nature of the new state and its political system and identity. One group demanded the establishment of a modern democratic republic, whereas others demanded a so-called "Novembrist-Badisian" state, harking back to the principles of the revolutionary declaration of November 1954 and the approach of Islamic scholar Abdelhamid Ben Badis, who advocated for a government in an Arab-Islamic spirit. In this context, Algerian Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Ahmed Gaid Salah announced the new leadership's adherence to the Novembrist state.

As these divisions grew, they then began to manifest into organized institutions. Youth associations appeared that focused on influencing Hirak youth towards their preferred political models at the newly initiated Tuesday marches, which replaced the Friday marches. Despite the lack of political parties, youth associations presented slogans to the crowds in an attempt to influence them.

At present, the most prominent of these associations is the Youth Action Rally (RAJ). RAJ presents itself as a sociocultural Algerian association whose goal is awareness and mobilization of young people on social issues, as well as the promotion of cultural activities and human rights. Because of its clear influence and established place among the youth participating in Hirak, its members have been arrested multiple times, and Algerian authorities may ban the organization, especially as some claim the RAJ is linked to "foreign agendas." In contrast, other youth blocs—

most notably AZM—back the now-deceased Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaid Salah’s constitutional course, which the regime is currently pursuing.

Exclusion from the Political Arena

Yet even youth blocs that support the regime’s current transition strategy ultimately remain on the sidelines, and they are unable to achieve political influence they desire within formal government structures. This lack of political power is due in large part to the exclusive behavior of existing government officials.

AZM and related blocs made real efforts to join the country’s formal political scene, rushing to submit requests to set up political parties to participate in the country’s recent elections. However, the Ministry of Interior has rejected about 20 applications to establish parties since the Hirak period. In addition to denying such applications, the government also attempted to contain these groups in the June 2021 elections rather than work to include them. The political establishment set up two blocs of its own headed by establishment figures—the first: “Nida El Watan” led by Nazih Berramdane, advisor to President Tebboune; and the second: “El Massar El Djadid” headed by Mondher Bouden, a man close to former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, who remains in prison on corruption charges.

Both blocs include dozens of associations and activists loyal to the government, and they aimed at mobilizing voters for the previous parliamentary elections. Yet even these parties failed to gain a foothold in the government—while they participated in these elections on independent lists, they failed to take parliament because of the power of the traditional parties, as well as their inability to mobilize eligible voters who chose not to vote, or who actively boycotted the elections, representing more than 70% of the electorate.

Seeds of Hope

Internal division and political exclusion have certainly taken a serious toll on the dream of the Hirak movement. Yet even though the course of events following Bouteflika’s departure did not match activists’ aspirations for real and fundamental change, what is more important is that the Algerian youth have torn down the wall of fear. They have become convinced today, more so than at any time before, that watching events from the sidelines only complicates matters. Now, they believe that they must take an active part in politics.

This new hope, however, is like a seed, and it requires nurturing and the right conditions for it to grow and flourish. In this sense, youth organizations or active neighborhood committees far removed from the government’s agenda could prove critical in the future. These groups should operate in such a way that they can impose a new balance of power in the country, serving the state and society simultaneously. In the end, these groups could achieve the establishment of youth political parties that provide an alternative to traditional parties, which have failed to change even themselves in the wake of so much popular pressure. Perhaps the coming local elections, expected in October of this year, will act as a gateway for youth to win seats in municipal councils as a first step towards changing Algeria and building their political path. ❖

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