

Have the Algerian Protests Achieved their Goals?

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Brief Analysis

The seven-weeks-long wave of protests in Algeria against the candidacy of Abdelaziz Bouteflika has successfully ended the former president's bid for a fifth term and forced him to resign without finishing his fourth. But now that the dust has settled, Algerians are questioning the achievements of the protests and remain apprehensive about the future. Unsurprisingly, concerns about the aftermath of the demonstrations have increased even further when Abdelkader Bensaleh, Bouteflika loyalist and president of the Council of the Nation—the upper house of Algeria's parliament—was appointed interim president for a 90-day period in accordance with the constitution. In light of this development, it is clear that the protestors' work has yet to be completed. To reach their objectives, protestors must call for constitutional changes, refrain from partisanship, and remain engaged. But while such efforts could go far, they alone will not determine Algeria's future. Indeed, the action or inaction of Algeria's military is bound to play a great role in the wake of Algeria's historical protests.

Since February 22, Algeria's major cities have felt the impact of massive protests attended by millions who took to the streets to express their objection to Bouteflika's fifth presidential bid. With the planned date of the election—originally scheduled for April 18th—less than two months away, protesters demanded regime change and the removal of all figures associated with Bouteflika. After considerable engagement between the government and the public, and following the military's intervention on behalf of the Algerian people, Bouteflika formally announced his resignation before the Algerian Constitutional Council on April 2.

A week later, on the morning of April 9, Bensaleh was appointed interim president by a parliamentary vote that included members of parliament and the Council of the Nation, and which took place in accordance with Article 102 of the constitution. Subsequently, the formation of a new government was announced. This development sparked outrage among the Algerian public, as it was determined that Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui, Bouteflika's former interior minister whose involvement in numerous scandals has earned him the nickname "the master of fraud," will continue overseeing the new government. Algerians have thus realized that the era of Bouteflika-style politics is not yet over: even though Bouteflika himself has yielded, the old regime's power structures are still in place. In fact, it is those at the top of these power structures who are now making arrangements for the next presidential election—scheduled to be held three months from now—and laying the groundwork for a post-Bouteflika Algeria.

Against this backdrop, some are wondering whether and how the protests have changed Algeria, whether this

popular mobilization would help Algerians achieve their goals in the long run, and whether the movement could pave the way for the constitutional measures necessary to overhaul the government. The answers to these questions are not immediately clear considering the secretive nature of the Algeria regime. Nevertheless, its reaction to the protests since their inception does make it clear that the regime is interested in containing the public's mobilization. Surprised by the force, scale, and popularity of the protests, Bouteflika's regime attempted to mitigate their effect through preemptive measures such as the removal of all ministers who became objects of public resentment, including former Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia. The regime also issued statements against corruption and tried to convince the public of the sincerity of these statements by arresting several prominent businesspersons with ties to Bouteflika, while banning dozens of others from traveling outside the country. Yet none of these superficial changes were truly intended to revolutionize the nature of the regime and were insufficient by themselves satisfy the people's demands.

The current regime has justified its response to the protests by invoking the constraints of the constitution, but the current constitution has itself become a stumbling block for the Algerian people's demands. As such, some have called for the issuance of a constitutional decree that would lead to the removal of Interim President Bensaleh, the dissolution of the Council of the Nation and the parliament, and the formation of a presidential commission that would include two or three individuals with public credibility and no presidential ambitions. Former President Liamine Zéroual, former head of government Ahmed Ben Bitur, and former foreign Minister Ahmed Taleb Brahimi are all suitable candidates for this role. This commission would oversee the transitional period and prepare for presidential election after an independent authority that would monitor the election is formed.

Any constitutional measures, however, would have to be backed and overseen by a devoted and effective civic movement. The success of the unprecedented February 22 movement in Algeria stemmed from its grassroots, non-partisan nature. These characteristics, along with the legitimacy of the protesters' demands, were the secret to its power. But while Bouteflika's resignation was an impressive achievement that opened the door for the democratization that Algerians are calling for, it was only the first step in a long road. In order to keep Algeria in the path towards democracy, protesters will have to continue exercising pressure while maintaining a united front and avoiding divisions among their ranks.

Of course, as with most protests movements, the success or failure of the Algerian movement does not rest solely on the shoulders of its members. Having played a major role in Algerian politics for decades, the Algerian military is bound to have a great impact on the course of events to come. Since the early days of the protests, the military has endeavored to maintain a neutral position as guardian of the constitution, stressing on several occasions that the time of coups has passed. But as the situation developed, the army became the facilitator of the people's demands. The key question now is how to enable the military to oversee the process of democratic transition without assuming excess control or continuing in its traditional role as kingmaker. This remains a very high-stakes matter because if the military does intervene, Bouteflika's resignation would be only a soft coup with the people's blessing. ❖

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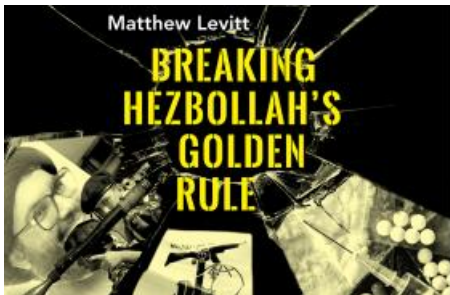
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