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Algiers Came Out Ahead—But the Good Times Could Be Over

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In early 2011, most pundits expected that [Algeria](#) <sup>[1]</sup>—plagued by corruption, nepotism, deteriorating socioeconomic conditions, restricted freedoms, housing shortages, and bad governance—would be the next country to face an [Arab Spring](#) <sup>[2]</sup> uprising. And although riots did shake the country, they were contained swiftly (and without bloodshed) by a large, well trained, well equipped, and well paid police force.

To this day, sporadic and localized strikes, protests, and riots are routine. There are sometimes as many as 500 a month. But, generally speaking, the regime has been able to address them through payoffs in the form of higher salaries or housing vouchers. Protests, in other words, are kept localized and opposition groups have little popular support. Besides, many of them have been co-opted by the government, with leaders of most of the opposition parties having participated in one way or another in successive governments.

Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been able to succeed in co-opting the public and the opposition where other governments in the region have failed because Algerians still remember the brutal conflict throughout the 1990s, when government forces faced off against various Islamist groups. The Islamic Salvation Front had been poised to win the 1992 legislative elections, which were abruptly cancelled, provoking widespread violence. Likewise, the government still has plenty of cash from oil and gas reserves to buy loyalty. The only question, though, is whether the regime's resilience will last in the face of new challenges.

## THE PROBLEM OF SUCCESSION

After watching Tunisian dictator [Zine el Abidine Ben Ali flee his country](#) <sup>[3]</sup> in January 2011, Bouteflika promised that he would introduce reforms aimed at what he termed “deepening the democratic process” in Algeria. He lifted the state of emergency that had been in place since 1992 and presented in April of that year a roadmap for reform. It included unspecific promises to amend the constitution and revise the laws governing elections, political parties and associations, women's participation in public life, and the media.

The reform package, including the bill on women's political representation, was approved in August 2011 by the cabinet, which was dominated by Bouteflika's National Liberation Front. The bill then passed congress. Soon after, Bouteflika called legislative and municipal elections, and authorized scores of small opposition parties after years of lockdown. Because the opposition

was so atomized, the National Liberation Front and its allies won easily. From the regime's perspective, then, the vote handed Bouteflika a public mandate to pursue his own preferred democratization process—one that is gradual and is ostensibly not imposed by foreign powers.

In reality, Bouteflika has used the period since then to consolidate his power. In spite of his poor health (he suffered a stroke in April 2013), Bouteflika was re-elected for a fourth term in April 2014, campaigning through proxies since he cannot walk or give speeches. Through his powerful brother Saïd Bouteflika, who is part of the so-call presidential clan that runs the country, the president forced the retirement, in November 2015, of the head of intelligence Mohamed "Toufik" Mediène. They replaced him with Toufik's closest associate, Athmane "Bachir" Tartag. The government also dissolved the quasi-autonomous bureau over which Toufik had presided and replaced it in January 2016 with an even more powerful agency, the Direction des Services de Sécurité, which reports to the president and has some functions within the military.

The Bouteflikas were able to push through these changes by exploiting divisions within the military over the role of intelligence services and the leadership of the Armed Forces. The regime argues that restructuring the military and intelligence services is proof that the state is evolving and reforming; under this system, the military and the intelligence services will no longer be the backbone of the political system; rather, they will be a professional institution operating within a civilian state. Bouteflika's claims are dubious, though, since the new constitution, which was approved with no opposition by parliament on February 7, 2016, does not offer such direction. In fact, even if the military's prerogatives are constitutionally limited to national defense and protection of the territory's integrity, it will remain the cornerstone of the Algerian state after Bouteflika is gone.

The latest constitution limits the number of presidential terms to two. But the main problem in Algeria is not the constitution—there have been plenty of those since independence in 1962—but that the laws are not respected. Debating the merits of a particular bill or revision is thus futile. The real question nowadays is who will succeed Bouteflika. Rumors abound, but given the opacity of the political system, it isn't wise to make predictions (Bouteflika even refused to introduce into the new constitution the position of a vice-president who could have succeeded him in case of severe illness or death). It is likely that competing groups at the heights of power will try to find a consensus pick who will accommodate the interests they have accumulated under Bouteflika's rule. At this stage, it doesn't seem like they have found that person, but should rumors that Bouteflika's brother will succeed him prove credible, the transition will be fraught and complicated. Saïd would not have risen to power without his brother's help. He is accountable to no one but himself and is responsible for creating what outspoken opposition leaders call "the oligarchy."

## ECONOMIC BREAKDOWN

Revenue from hydrocarbons account for about 60 percent of Algeria's GDP and 97 percent of foreign earnings. When the proceeds from oil and gas sales were high, the government could buy social peace. It could also invest heavily in infrastructure. Although such projects contributed to much-needed new housing and other infrastructure, they also resulted in the creation of a new and corrupt business class.

The fall in the price of oil has worried the regime—and the new business caste whose survival is dependent on government contracts. So far, the regime has relied on the \$200 billion in reserves that it accumulated when the price of oil was high. After just two years of spending, today, this account is down by half. There is just enough left to cover about two more years of imports.

In December 2015, the government passed the 2016 Finance Law to address the economic crisis. The law, which introduced some austerity measures, is controversial because the government failed to address the issue of subsidies on basic staples, medical care, and housing. Undoubtedly, officials fear that the removal of subsidies could rally a quiet opposition. But the situation is so dire that the government needs to take seriously the possibility of phasing out the subsidies while providing cash to needy Algerians instead. Algiers may now have to resort, albeit reluctantly, to borrowing in international markets.

In short, the regime's unwillingness all these years to transform a rentier economy into a productive one has come back to haunt it in exactly the way experts would predict. The government has no other choice but to cut budgets, increase the prices of some goods, and reduce imports. The challenges are made even worse by other factors, particularly corruption. Indeed, Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index 2015 ranks Algeria in 88th place out of 167 countries, and the World Bank's Doing Business 2016 puts Algeria at 163 out of 189.

## INSECURE

Algeria shares borders with Libya [4] in the east and Mali [5] in the south. Spillover from both countries, which are wracked by war, is the main threat to Algeria's continued stability. The country has already deployed 75,000 troops to those borders. There, Algeria's security forces have proved quite adept at combating terrorism. In December 2014, they took out a jihadist cell, Jund al-Khilafa (Soldiers of the Caliphate), based in northern Algeria, that had pledged allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) [6]. They have also prevented al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) from threatening the regime.

Even as officials pay lip service to the idea that the wars in the Middle East are a ploy orchestrated by Western powers to destabilize the region, the government has continued to deepen the bilateral security ties it has built with EU countries and the United States since 9/11. For example, Algeria provided logistical support to France [7] during France's intervention in northern Mali [8] in January 2013. It also shares valuable counterterrorism intelligence with Western counterparts. Although Algeria doesn't receive military assistance from Western countries, its hydrocarbon revenue has enabled it to revamp its military equipment. It purchases billions of dollars' worth of sophisticated hardware from Russia, its traditional supplier, but also from France [7], Italy [9], Germany [10], and the United States. [11]

For all that, the conflicts in Libya and Mali have caused great concern to the authorities in Algeria; in fact, the recent restructuring of the intelligence services can be partially attributed to such worries. Improved coordination among the various branches of intelligence as well as with the military forces is meant to better prepare the security forces for the potential spillover of the conflict in Libya. Algerians are truly concerned that a new Western intervention in Libya [12], which seems increasingly plausible, will spell disaster for the North Africa region as thousands of refugees flee the violence. The authorities have made clear their opposition to such intervention, but Algeria's voice is no longer what it used to be on the international scene, not least because of the uncertainties generated by Bouteflika's quasi paralysis and the doubts as to who has been ruling Algeria.

## SPRINGTIME

Five years after the Arab Spring, Algeria, Africa's biggest country, has maintained some semblance of stability. The absence of Bouteflika for eight months to receive treatment in France following his stroke in 2013 did not threaten his regime. If anything, Bouteflika returned with a vengeance; although partially incapacitated, failing to address his people since 2012, and rarely appearing on television, he managed to remove some of his most potent opponents and consolidate his dictatorial rule. Oil and gas revenue—and abundant rain—have provided him with the resources to keep social peace, and he has succeeded in co-opting friends and foes through a redistribution of the gifts from nature.

But oil prices keep falling, and Bouteflika won't last forever. In other words, Algeria could soon be facing a Spring of its own.

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