

Algeria's Bouteflika Is on His Way Out. Here's What's Next.

The longtime president may depart as soon as this week, but the country's growing protest movement has not yet united behind one leader or policy platform.

BY SABINA HENNEBERG | APRIL 2, 2019, 12:12 PM

In a victory for millions of Algerians, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika **declared** his intention on Monday to resign before the end of April. Privately owned television stations **report** he could resign as soon as this week. The announcement comes after 21 of the country's 27 ministers were **reportedly replaced** and Army Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaid Salah **called** on the Constitutional Court to declare Bouteflika unfit to rule. Demonstrators, who have been staging protests every Friday since mid-February, initially opposed Bouteflika's candidacy in presidential elections then scheduled for April. They gained momentum after the president canceled the elections entirely, pledging to hold a national conference instead. Protesters rejected this proposal, as it implied an indefinite extension of Bouteflika's fourth term. The army's announcement meant that it, too, had rejected the plan. These developments are a win for the protest movement, but significant challenges remain. Any potential successor will immediately face widespread economic challenges, and the lack of an obvious leader or unified policy platform going forward could stymie the protest movement. And Russia, one of the country's biggest allies and arms suppliers, appears to back a transition brokered by established powers.

Salah's announcement is a highly significant move: The military has been a central actor in Algerian politics since independence in 1962. During the revolutionary war of 1954 to 1962, when the country shed itself of French colonial rule, the Armée de Liberation Nationale (which would later transform into a modern army, the Armée Nationale Populaire) was instrumental in defeating the French. Due to this historical role as a symbol and driver of national identity, the army has **remained closely involved** in civilian affairs. It has chosen, approved, or removed every president since 1962. Its generals even stepped in to cancel the legislative elections of 1992, after sweeping victories in regional and municipal elections by the leading Islamist party, the Front Islamique du Salut. This move set off a devastating civil war between the government (including the military) and armed Islamist actors that lasted nearly a decade and took an estimated **150,000 to**

200,000 lives. The memory of this war is thought to be a principal reason the protests have been peaceful so far.

Before Bouteflika's announcement, the army had called for the application of Article 102 of the constitution, which would mandate the current head of Parliament's upper house to **take over** from Bouteflika for a minimum of 45 and no more than 135 days, until new elections are held. The article would take effect provided the Constitutional Court and the Parliament confirm Bouteflika's incapacity as president. But much of the opposition **rejected** this road map, calling instead for a government made up of people with no prior involvement in politics to organize new elections, instead of allowing established power players to dictate the transition.

The insistence of thousands of protesters seeking real representation and a sustained peaceful response from the government (human rights groups have called on state security to **refrain from arbitrary arrests** or **excessive use of force**) signal potential for real reform in Algeria's government. But several long-term impediments and risks may still prevent meaningful change, even if the army stands aside and Bouteflika steps down as he has promised.

The first hurdle is the precarious state of the economy. **One-third of Algeria's** GDP is derived from hydrocarbons, and oil and gas account for more than 90 percent of its **exports**. Despite acknowledgement by authorities in recent years of the **need** to diversify, especially since the global downturn in oil prices in 2014 (in part caused by a significant increase in U.S. oil production, which led the United States to drastically cut its imports from Algeria), efforts to follow through have met several obstacles. Although the government has **tried to encourage** foreign investment, the business environment remains uninviting for new companies and international workers, particularly since an attack by armed extremists on the **In Amenas** natural gas field killed more than 30 foreign workers in 2013. Initiatives to begin fracking for shale gas have been met with **protests**, leading the government to put its first shale gas development program on hold. The state energy company, Sonatrach, has also suffered a crisis of legitimacy due to several corruption scandals, which has led to several **turnovers in its leadership**. Now, a new hydrocarbons law introduced as part of a strategy to enhance productivity and investment in the sector will **likely be delayed** due to the ongoing political crisis.

The International Monetary Fund has also expressed other concerns about the economy. Foreign reserves have dwindled, public **debt** has increased, and unemployment remains persistently high. There are signs of low efficiency in public investment; meanwhile, public spending policies have hampered private sector investment. Despite continued

promises that certain programs would not be touched, government spending cuts have led to protests.

The economic downturn has also hit vulnerable populations hardest. Despite massive government investment in public housing, heavy urban migration (in part a result of rural displacement during the civil war) has led to a housing shortage. The health and education sectors are also severely under-resourced—reflected in the **presence of doctors and students** protesting on the streets. Declining living conditions have led to a growing flux of migration from the country, especially among youth, while the country also struggles with a growing number of asylum-seekers from neighboring countries. Tackling economic reforms will require firm leadership and is unlikely to occur as these issues take a backseat to growing political uncertainty.

Another potential risk for the protest movement is the difficulty of remaining unified in a power vacuum. There have been **signs of disagreement** within the movement over a proper transition road map. When an umbrella group of activists calling themselves the National Coordination for Change issued a statement in late March titled “Platform of Change,” it was disavowed by several signatories and rejected by some protesters, who were suspicious of signatories with alleged Islamist affiliations.

The movement also lacks an obvious leader. Lakhdar Brahimi, the Algerian diplomat who served as the United Nations mediator in Syria between 2012 and 2014, was **put forth** by Bouteflika to lead a national conference, but he is regarded by many as part of the presidential clique. The human rights lawyer and activist Mustapha Bouchachi is a prominent figure who has credibility with the protest movement, but he **wants** the new leadership to come from the country’s youth. The leaderless quality of the movement does not necessarily constitute a disadvantage; Tunisia’s 2011 revolution was described in the same way. But the fracturing of the traditional leadership, reflected in defections by **business leaders**, the **president’s party**, and other once-loyal groups such as the country’s largest **labor union**, as well as unrest among opposition parties, makes the country vulnerable to jockeying and power-grabbing, perhaps by the military. And although several of the movement’s leaders have **called** for the army to refrain from intervening in the crisis, some have **asked** for it to do so, given the high respect the institution still commands.

Another risk, albeit a smaller one, is outside interference. Russia has been **gradually reasserting** influence in North Africa and has specifically sought to strengthen its economic ties with Algeria, including cooperation in the energy sector and the arms trade. Normally this would imply an interest in maintaining the status quo under

Bouteflika and the army. Russia has reacted **cautiously** to developments in Algeria, **calling for noninterference** by other countries while also **linking the opposition** to Islamist movements. In March, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov **said** Russia was concerned by the protests in Algeria and what he called attempts to destabilize the country. In a meeting with then-newly appointed Algerian Deputy Prime Minister Ramtane Lamamra, Lavrov had **endorsed** the Bouteflika government's proposal to delay new elections. However, **Lamamra is reportedly among the ministers** fired on Monday. As power brokers in Algeria continue to shift and more clarity emerges on a possible transition, it's worth keeping an eye on Russia's reaction.

Meanwhile, extremist groups, including al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and Islamic State-affiliated groups, continue to operate near Algeria's borders. Although Algeria has increased defense spending in recent years and engaged in **numerous military activities** to combat this threat, the uncertainty facing the armed forces' role in the country's leadership could embolden extremist groups.

As **one analyst**, adopting the language of the protesters, noted: "In Algeria we are witnessing nothing less than the 'widening of the domain of the possible.'" But the aftermath of the Arab Spring in the region demonstrated how difficult it is to achieve real reform, and in Algeria, a unique combination of factors may stymie the democratic goals of protesters yet again.

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