

GLOBAL

A Strongman Falls, and a Post-Colonial Era Ends

Hundreds of thousands of Algerians have been protesting “to prove to the world and to the regime that they could move without destroying the country,” says the Algerian writer Kamel Daoud.

RACHEL DONADIO MAR 29, 2019



Hundreds of thousands of people protest in Paris against Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. (PHILIPPE WOJAZER / REUTERS)

In a matter of weeks, Algerian politics have been upended.

Hundreds of thousands of Algerians—including university students, doctors, and lawyers—began taking to the streets in February, calling for the end of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s rule. Now 82, Bouteflika has appeared in public only a handful of times since suffering a series of strokes six years ago, but he still planned to run for a fifth term as president in national elections scheduled for April 18.

Bowing to public pressure, Bouteflika’s government canceled the polls and

installed a new prime minister. The ailing ruler will not run in any future elections. But many Algerians don't believe the words of officials who for years have effectively been puppets of Bouteflika and his loyalists.

The question now is whether Algeria will undergo a genuine transition of power, Bouteflika and his minions will maintain their grip, or Islamist political factions will strengthen their authority in a country where secularism is strong.

[*Read: A chronology of the Algerian war of independence*]

I asked the Algerian novelist and journalist Kamel Daoud about what has been unfolding. Daoud is best known for his novel *The Meursault Investigation*, a retelling of Albert Camus's *The Stranger* told from the perspective of the brother of the unnamed Arab killed by the protagonist of Camus's 1942 novel.

An outspoken free spirit and a columnist for *Le Quotidien d'Oran*, an Algerian daily, Daoud has long written that his country deserves better than a choice between military dictatorship and Islamists. A former Islamist himself, Daoud, now 48, has been harshly critical of how conservative religious forces in Algeria have tried to suppress individual liberties and the rights of women—views that are progressive at home but that have also won him fans on the right in Europe.

Daoud lives in Oran, Algeria, but was in Paris when we spoke by telephone. I translated our conversation from French and edited it for length and clarity.

Rachel Donadio: What do you think happens next in Algeria?

Kamel Daoud: It's hard to know what will happen, because for the moment, the regime isn't doing much and is trying to buy time. But on the other hand, the Algerians are keeping up the pressure. There are still bigger and bigger demonstrations. For now there's status quo. The regime is going to try to anticipate things by saying they'll change the government and carry out reforms and start a national dialogue.

But I think this is the usual strategy that dictatorships turn to when they're forced to. They try to start a dialogue and reforms, which is what I'd call the first phase. That's what's happening now in Algeria. I think the regime pushed Algerians' sense

of humiliation too far. We reached a point of electing a photo, which Algerians can't tolerate.

There's an even deeper force: demographics. Half of the Algerian population is under 30. The entire regime is old. The people of the regime are all 85 years old, and sooner or later this generational rupture was bound to cause a crisis. I also think that the generation of the decolonizers has come to an end all over Africa, but it arrived quite late in Algeria. And that was going to have consequences sooner or later.

Donadio: So is this moment of transition also important as a sign of how anti-colonialism has become less strong of a force in Algeria?

Daoud: Yes. For several years now, I've tried to write about how to get out of the post-colonial mentality. A lot of people reproached me for this—a lot of people in France and in the United States and elsewhere—because post-colonialism has become a comfort. For years, I've been writing about how we need to stop using post-colonialism as a complete and total explanation of reality. I think now we've reached a sort of political expression that's very clear: People want to get out of the post-colonial era. They want to be done with that generation.

[*Hassan Hassan: The Arab winter is coming*]

Donadio: How is what's happening in Algeria different from what happened in the Arab Spring in 2011?

Daoud: Because what happened in the Arab Spring in 2011 already happened in Algeria around 1990. In 1988, thousands of young Algerians took to the streets. The army shot on the crowds and killed hundreds of people, and then there was a democratic opening, which the Islamists took advantage of. After that, the military came and took control of everything. So what the rest of the Arab world has been living since 2011, we've seen in Algeria since 1988, 1990. That's why Algeria didn't follow the wave, because after 1990 we had a very painful civil war and were left on our own, in solitude.

Before the attacks of September 11 in America, few people in the world understood

what a jihadist was, what an Islamist was. Now the difference between what's happening in the rest of the world is that in Algeria, there's a very clear understanding of the risks of the moment being co-opted by Islamists or the military.

The second thing is that for years, the regime offered us a very clear choice that's blackmail: Security or democracy? If you want democracy, you're going to get what happened in Libya and in Syria. And I think that explains why the marches and demonstrations have been so peaceful in Algeria. They wanted to prove to the world and to the regime that they could move without destroying the country. The examples of Syria or Yemen have weighed heavily on the conscience of Algerians. They want change, but they want change without destroying the country.

Donadio: You've written for a long time that Algeria deserves better choices than the one between military dictatorship and Islamism. And you recently wrote in *Le Monde* that the Algerian senate is a "Club Med without an ocean view," that is, a comfortable spot for Bouteflika's cronies. What do you think of the possibility of a technocratic government? Could that be a viable option, or is it a bit of a joke?

Daoud: Unless the regime really does something, it's a joke. Because we're accustomed to fake national dialogues. We're accustomed to fake oppositions. The regime has a habit of taking us for fools. That's why Algerians don't trust the regime. What Algerians want is a guarantee of change and of transition. They don't want to negotiate with the regime if it's going to stay in power. They want to negotiate the exit of the regime. Unless you install a real national transitional council with a leadership that isn't that of the regime, and unless Bouteflika and especially his men leave, a technocratic government will be absolutely useless.

Donadio: What kinds of figures would you want to see on such a national council?

Daoud: Anyone who represents the currents in Algeria. If the Islamists want to participate to save the republic, they're welcome, but if they want a caliphate, they're not welcome. We can have secular people and progressives and conservatives and Islamists and modernists—that's not a problem. Algeria is a country with a lot of differences, and I think we'd gain a lot if we accepted our differences and tried to find a consensus.

[*Read: The museum of colonialism*]

Donadio: What would be the most difficult issues on the table? Individual liberties? The rights of women? Religion?

Daoud: I think there are two major factors. First, to declare the end of the FLN, the old party [of Bouteflika] that won the war of liberation. This party must be defeated because it should no longer continue to be business as usual. And the second is the status of religion. Religion must respect secularism in the country. We need to separate the political from the religious. I think those are the two most important things. The third thing is to repair Algerian identity. Arab culture is a beautiful culture, but it's not an identity; it's a culture. We need to return to our real identity.

Donadio: What about the economy? The unemployment rate is high. Is the discontent of the people taking to the streets also motivated by economics? Is it the economy or ideology?

Daoud: Both. Because the bulk of the country's wealth is held by a political class, apparatchiks who take all the country's money, and there's enormous corruption. So it's true that there are economic concerns, but Algeria isn't a poor country; it's a rich country. The problem is that the money is poorly distributed.

Donadio: What are the implications of this complicated moment in Algeria for the Maghreb, for Europe, and for the world?

Daoud: Maybe that we can find a world in which we can demonstrate without destruction. That would be a giant step. Millions of Algerians have taken to the streets and there hasn't been any violence. That's something very important to convey to the rest of the world. But also that the short circuit between the military and the Islamists maybe doesn't have to be inevitable.

Donadio: What are your hopes and fears for Algeria in this moment?

Daoud: I have a lot of hope as an Algerian. I'm also very worried that the Islamists might steal our revolution, but I think we still need to try.

Donadio: So you think there's a risk the Islamists will take the opportunity to

reinforce their power?

Daoud: If you're afraid you might get hit by a car when you walk out of the door of your house, you'd never leave the house. So I think we need to take the risk.



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