

Protest, Reforms and Stability in the Arab World: The case of Algeria



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Abstract:

On February 22, 2019, Algerians took to the streets to voice their discontent with President Bouteflika's regime held responsible for the deteriorating socio-economic conditions, the extreme levels of corruption and a political elite that is completely out of touch with the people. This protest, dubbed the Hirak, was sparked by the announcement that the President would seek a fifth term in office. The Hirak became a nationwide weekly event calling for the end of Bouteflika's reign and the establishment of a new democratic political system. This article concentrates on the slogans protestors held and the responses/tactics used by the Algerian authorities. It argues that the Constitution is at the heart of the Hirak. By taking to the streets, protestors were defending the Constitution the authorities were breaching. By tracing the evolution of the Hirak, protestors "abandoned" the moral high and their demands seem to be in contrast with the provisions of the Constitution they sought to uphold. This void was filled by the military and from there, the Hirak started to gradually lose its appeal. The outbreak of the Coronavirus in March 2020 brought the Hirak to an abrupt halt.

Keywords: Algeria; protest; Hirak; reforms.

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Introduction:

Protests are instruments of political participation. They are means whereby dissatisfied people voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo and seek change. Indeed, throughout history protest movements have been the driving force behind change. A close look at the achievements of the 20th Century reveal that they owed their success to protest. The advancements of the political rights and civil liberties for women and black people are just two examples of this. In other words, power holders do not grant rights to the politically excluded or disadvantaged unless the people concerned rally to demand those rights. These protests have generally been associated with the "Square" and Friedman refers to the new wave of protestors as the "Square People". Indeed, Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Tahrir Square in Cairo, and Independence Square in Kyiv have become household names synonymous with protest. The protestors

"are mostly young, aspiring to a higher standard of living and more liberty, seeking either reform or revolution ... , connected to one another either by massing in squares or through virtual squares or both, and united less by a common program and more by a shared direction they want their societies to go." (Friedman, 2014)

When the Arab Spring erupted in 2011, the Arab World saw an unprecedented wave of protests that shook the foundations of several regimes. Algeria seemed to be the perfect candidate to follow suit. Nonetheless, in spite of sharing the same characteristics as protest prone countries such as corruption, unemployment and poverty, Algeria remained stable. (Bouandel, 2011) However, almost a decade later, in February 2019, Algerians started a wave of protests, known as the Hirak, which differed from anything experienced before. We will argue the Constitution was at the centre of the Hirak; Algerians took to the streets to uphold the Constitution that Bouteflika and his retinue were clearly violating. Almost two months later, protestors' demands run contrary to the provisions of the Constitution.. Therefore, after a discussion of the politics of protest, the paper discusses the characteristics of the Algerian Hirak: slogans, organization, demography, geography and longevity. The Constitution took centre stage in the protest. Initially, upholding its provisions was central to protestors' demands, which in turn helped them to hold the moral high ground. Nonetheless, as the protest gained momentum, protestors' demands and actions were nothing less than a rejection of the Constitution. The regime capitalized on this and ensured that protestors' defeat by sticking to its provisions.

1. The Politics of Protest:

We perceive protest as a movement of people to express their views in public over a particular issue that affects them. The objectives of protests are multifaceted; they influence public opinion and compel power-holders to change

direction. Protests can take many forms: marches, sit-ins, music, chanting, and speeches, holding placards with slogans, gathering in symbolic places or occupying symbolic buildings, strikes, civil disobedience and violent acts. In other words, we perceive protest as a form of political participation that goes beyond “the legal acts by private citizens that are more or less directly aimed at influencing the selection of governmental personnel and/or the actions they take.” (Verba et al. 1978, 1). Indeed, political participation can involve some unlawful actions, including the use of violence in order to bring about the desired change. (Huntington and Nelson, 1976). These actions are bound to attract media, which gives impetus to protestors. Whilst the ultimate goal of any protest is to compel governments to rethink its legislation, not achieving that objective does not necessarily mean that a protest has failed. On the contrary, protest raises people awareness and acts as a warning system that things need to change.

Whenever a protest takes place, first questions that spring to mind are: why are people demonstrating? What triggered these protests? The reasons that lead people to protest vary from one country to another (Ianchovichina et al., 2020) or as Carothers and Youngs put it, “[d]ifferent protests have been propelled by very different drivers and no single causal factors dominates.”: (2015, 22)

Literature on social movements offers a number of theories that explain why people protest. The first argues that economic disparity is venomous to social unity, which in turn could result in political instability. Indeed, two centuries ago, De Tocqueville argued that, “[a]lmost all the revolutions which have changed the aspects of nations have been made to consolidate or to destroy social inequality.” (1835 [1961] 302). Furthermore, one cannot talk about economic disparities without invoking the work of Marx. He provided one of the most authoritative account of social conflict: a class struggle between the working class (proletariat) and those who own the means of production (bourgeoisie). The notion that a group dominates another is a recipe for conflict. The second is the political-opportunity theory. According to it, the outcome of a social movement depends on political opportunities. Changes in government policies or political alignments present social movements with an opportunity to take advantage of these changes. Moreover, countries that are not able to suppress or channel political mobilization are more likely to experience social disorder. (Meyer, and Minkoff, 2004). In other words, institutions influence the methods of protest. In a country where a fragile and non-representative party system exists, hostile, aggressive and militant approaches and tactics are used. Thus, in the absence of conventional channels of political participation, the street and/or the “square” become the protestors’ main tool for expressing their demands. At the opposite end of the spectrum, in countries where the party system is strong, more responsive to the needs of the people, it provides protestors with the opportunity to seek change through more peaceful means within the existing structure of the system. Therefore, a more representative system is much more apt to absorb social protest and popular

discontent, especially when protestors are open to discussions with those institutions. (Huntington, 1968; Arce and Rice, 2019)

The resource-mobilization theory emphasises the context in which protests occur. In other words, the ability to mobilize people depends on the availability of the resources needed: money, time, skills, numbers, etc. There is a correlation between the availability of resources and the ability to mobilize. (Jenkins, 1983) For instance, with today's technology, information has become more democratized and people more empowered. At a click of button, Facebook, iPhone, Samsung, etc. people have access to information. They can organize themselves, physically or virtually, more quickly and debate the strategies to adopt to achieve particular objectives. In a context where these resources are not available or scarce, it can be difficult to mobilize the masses.

Lipset (1963) argues that economic development together with the overwhelming social change that results from it, lead to democracy. With wealth comes higher levels of education and urbanization, larger middle classes, greater social mobility and erudite and diverse means of communication. These lead not only to the emergence, but also the proper functioning of democratic institutions. In other words, as countries become more developed and urbanized and their citizens more educated and affluent, peoples' values change and they start placing greater emphasis on political participation and civil rights. However, both de Tocqueville and Huntington agree that economic development can increase the probability of protest in this process of social change. Huntington (1968) disagrees with modernization theorists who assume that those changes would be linear and progressive. These societies undergoing deep social transformation are usually unstable and even violent. Similarly, de Tocqueville stressed the close relationship between reform and rebellion, known as "de Tocqueville Paradox". He argues that experiences teaches us "the most dangerous time for a bad government is usually when it begins to reform." (Tocqueville, [1856] 2011), 157). This paradox stems from the fact that reforms are usually introduced to appease the people and respond to their demands and, in theory, result in stability. The likelihood of rebellion diminishes with reforms. Nonetheless, de Tocqueville stresses that with reforms come great expectations. When these reforms are not up to expectation, people are more likely to rebel. This is what Ted Gurr called "relative deprivation." The theory suggests that people are more likely to participate in collective action when they feel that their group is experiencing a relative disadvantage or injustice compared to other groups. This feeling of relative deprivation creates a sense of grievance or injustice that motivates individuals to join social movements or engage in collective action. In other words, Gurr, argues a close relation between expectations (what reforms should result in) and what has been achieved in reality (actual results). The gap between expectations and achievements determines the extent to which people are more likely to revolt. The larger the gap, the more likely people are going to revolt. (Gurr, 1970)

It is interesting to note that the wave of protests that swept the MENA region in 2011, known as the Arab Spring, not only succeeded in energizing anti-governments feelings they have also presented government with the perfect opportunity to stimulate peoples' fear. Arab leaders were not only trying to defend themselves and their "achievements", but they have also used these protests in order to divide society into two opposing factions. On the one hand, you have the responsible, patriotic and far-sighted citizens who cannot be manipulated. On the other hand, you have those whose aim is to instigate anarchy and chaos. Leaders in Arab Spring countries were in agreements that protestors were agents of foreign powers, acting irresponsibly, and their actions would result in mayhem. They have been steadfast in accentuating the role of foreign powers because they would neither admit nor understand why their own people turn against them. Despots, who have been in power for years, rely heavily on the security services, the mass media and the administration. The security services install an atmosphere of terror and intimidation, the mass media becomes an instrument of propaganda that exaggerates the leader's achievement and the administration rigs elections, and silences opponents. This nearly total control over almost every aspects of people lives, detaches those despots from the realities of their countries. Conversely, protests affect a country's leadership and can split it into two camps. The first camp consists of those who wish to engage in negotiations with the protestors in the hope of achieving a compromise. Those who prefer the use of force to create an atmosphere of fear and intimidation to subdue protests, make the second camp.

Furthermore, protests have the capacity to dent a country's image at the international level. International solidarity/reputation is at risk when heavy-handed strategies are used. In the age of the social media where the flow of information is no longer in the hands of governments, western allies, are much more likely to accept, or at least to turn a blind eye to, a rigged election than to see protestors being crushed. Hence, power holders, where protests are held, may opt for holding elections, however, rigged, in order to defeat protestors and preserve the status quo.

2. The Algerian Hirak and its Characteristics

Since the turn of the century, protest has been a "hobby" for Algerians. Hardly a week goes by without a protest being recorded in one part of the country. Algerians have used street protest to voice their discontent with government policy and push for change. Until February 2019, Algerian protests were confined either to a particular geographical area or led by a particular segment of society. For example, the protests in Kabylia in 1980, known as the "Berber Spring" and the October 1988 riots, which were mainly in Algiers, marked the end of one party rule and paved the way to further political reforms. After the jolt of the Arab Spring in Tunisia in December 2010, Algeria was relatively immune from these developments. Whilst demonstrations were recorded, mainly in the capital city, Algiers, a combination of popular apathy, and adoption of excessive security measures by the regime, as well as making some minor concessions, such as lifting

the state of emergency in place since February 1992, ensured that these demonstrations were quickly subdued. Other demonstrations, by specific fractions of the society such as the unemployed youth, doctors, teachers, etc., to demand better wages and working conditions have also been recorded. These protests did not necessarily represent a challenge to the Algerian regime. Unlike previous protests, the Hirak captured both national and global attention. These protests have been different from anything Algerians have experienced before. What distinguishes the Hirak from previous protests are its slogans, organization, demography, geography, and endurance.

A close look at the slogans chanted during the protests are not only indicators of popular feeling, but they are also a reflection of the broad popular demands. These slogans can be divided into two categories. The first consists of protestors taking the moral high ground by making it clear they uphold the Constitution. The second consists of ambiguous demands, which go against the provisions of the very same Constitution protestors sought to uphold.

President Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term in office served as the ignition for the protest. One of the first slogans chanted by protestors was Ya Bouteflika, Ya el Marouqui, Makanche Ou3hda Khamssa (Hey Bouteflika, Hey Moroccan, there will be no fifth mandate). In response, Bouteflika's entourage proposed postponing the presidential election by a year. In the meantime, a national conference would be set up to consider constitutional changes. The postponement of the presidential election is in effect the extension of Bouteflika's fourth term, which, from the protestors' perspective, defeats the *raison d'être* of the Hirak – to uphold the Constitution. In other words, as paradoxical as it might seem, when the Algerian people rose against Bouteflika, they did so in order to uphold the Constitution. They saw themselves as dedicated patriots. In their mind, not only the competent institutions were not able to uphold the Constitution; they were breaching its provisions. The Constitution, adopted in November 1996, limited the presidency to two terms of five years each. Bouteflika, who came to power in April 1999, amended the article that limited the presidency and opened the way for president for life. The amendment in November 2008 was carried out with the support of the military, the Parliament, and the Constitutional Council. Furthermore, Bouteflika, who has been suffering from ill health, was scarcely seen in public since 2013. Indeed, at his last public address on 8th of May 2012 in the city of Setif, he alluded that his time was up. In his quest for a fourth term in office in 2014, he did not attend any meetings or rallies. His ministers took care of the "electoral campaign". Once his fourth term secured, images of a wholly incapacitated president taking the oath shocked audiences. It was clear that his speech has deteriorated to the point of incoherence. This provided ample evidence that Bouteflika was not fit to run the country. For the following years, he spent most of his time in hospitals in Europe and his medicalized residence in Zeralda. Whenever he appeared in public, the totally crippled President was on a wheelchair, did not say anything and looked as if he did not know what was going

around him. His brother, Said, officially his special advisor, was the de facto president. Protestors seized the opportunity to remind Said that Al Jazair Jumhuriyya, machi mamlaka (Algeria is a Republic, not a Monarchy). This slogan reinforced the burgeoning popular discontent and effectively killed any ambitions Said harbored to take over from his older brother.

Given Bouteflika's poor health, the thought of him running for a fifth term in office, repulsed Algerians and run contrary to the provisions of the Constitution. Indeed, According to Article 102, "whenever the President of the Republic, ..., finds himself in a total incapacity to exercise his functions, the Constitutional Council shall meet de jure and, after having verified the reality of the impediment by all appropriate means, it unanimously shall propose to Parliament to declare the state of impediment. Parliament, convened in a joint session of both Chambers, shall declare the state of impediment of the President of the Republic, by a majority of two-thirds (2/3) of its members and assign, as an acting Head of State, for a maximum period of forty-five (45) days, the President of the Council of the Nation If the impediment continues at the expiry of the period of forty-five (45) days, there shall be a declaration of vacancy by a resignation de jure." If the President and his entourage, with the support of both the Constitutional Council and the military, were willing to violate the Constitution, the people were not going to let it happen. Bouteflika would not have declared his intention to run for a fifth term, if he did not have the support of the military. Indeed, since its independence from France in 1962, the military has been the pillar of the regime. To be sure, every president either had a military background or brought into office by the military. Since 1995, plural presidential elections were held at regular intervals and the winner, the military backed candidate, was known in advance. (Bouandel, 1997; 2001; 2004; 2009) Consequently, protestors shouted another slogan, Dawla madaniya machi a3sskariya (civilian government, not a military one). Whilst using this slogan, protestors were, in theory, still upholding the Constitution by calling for the military to end its meddling in internal politics and concentrate on its constitutional duties, which is to protect the country. Indeed, the Constitution's preamble provides that "...the National Liberation Army ... protect[s] the country from any foreign threat ... [and] to preserve national independence, defend Algeria's national sovereignty ...". In practice, however, protestors were not only rejecting Bouteflika's quest for power, they were also, by default, rejecting the military. To be sure, the then Chief of Staff and Vice Minister of defense, Gaid Salah, in his first declaration following the first nationwide protest, described the protestors as Shirdima (people whose aim is to fragment the country). Given the fact that the Algerian regime has always relied on its security services to intimidate demonstrators, protestors stressed the peaceful nature of their protest. Silmyya (peaceful) was one of the most used slogans. Demonstrators behaved impeccably. They either shouted or held billboards that read, Djeich, Chaab, Khawa, Khawa (the people and the army are brothers). At times, the demonstrations were more of a party, a celebration of collective awareness than a serious attempt to uproot the regime. The demonstrators adhered to their cherished Silmyya, offered riot police

flowers and water. At the end of each protest, demonstrators would clean up the streets and squares of any rubbish that they helped create.

By using the above slogans, protestors managed to win the moral battleground and gained more sympathizers. The protests were peaceful and their demands constitutional. This helped to compel the military to come out in support of the people's right to protest, to acknowledge their legitimate demands and to commit itself to protecting the demonstrators. This "success" created an inflated sense of accomplishment and led demonstrators to call for demands that were clearly unrealistic or illegal within the purview of the Constitution they were attempting to protect. The longer the protest went on, the roles of the main protagonists, the people and the military have changed. The protestors started to lose the moral high ground by deviating from the provisions of the Constitution. The military, on the other hand, filled the void and insisted that the only way forward is the constitutional path.

Ytnahaw ga3a (all must go) is a slogan that showed the chasm between "us", the people, and "them", those who govern. Whilst the call for all to go shows the intensity of public hostility towards the elite, achieving this is simply impossible. By calling for "all to go", the protestors were targeting all power holders, including the military. There was no answer to the questions of who would compel them, especially the military, to leave? How will "all" be replaced and how long does it take to do so? It soon became apparent that not only this demand was unrealistic but was also potentially the first step towards instability and chaos. Another slogan despite its appeal, contributed to the Hirak losing its appeal further. When Bouteflika finally conceded defeat and made clear he was not going to seek a fifth mandate, the authorities were planning for presidential election. Indeed, according to Article 102, when the position of Head of State become vacant, "the President of the Council of the Nation shall assume the function of the Head of State for a maximum period of ninety days, during which presidential elections shall be organised." Protestors met these moves with the slogan Makanche Intikhabate ma3 el e3issabate (there will be no elections with the gangs). This two diametrically opposed positions marked the start of the Hirak's decline and the beginning of the application of the military's road map. Gaid Salah was unequivocal about sticking to the provision of the Constitution by holding presidential elections. It is customary for elites in authoritarian regimes to consider elections as an opportunity to manipulate the people. They use them as a tool to divide protestors. In other words, when presented with the chance to hold elections, some protestors might embrace the process. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who see elections as nothing more than a strategy to ensure the survival of the regime. They see elections as an opportunity to show their frustration and work towards defeating it. This objective can only be achieved through ensuring the lowest possible turnout.

The impact of the protest and its slogans were exacerbated by both the geography, demography and longevity. The Hirak was distinct from previous

protests. It had a wider geographic spread. Not only people took to the streets of the cities in the four corners of the country, it also had a greater level of penetration of the country's smaller towns. The Hirak had also an international dimension to it. The Algerian diaspora also protested against the regime. The cities of Paris (France), London, (the United Kingdom) and Montreal (Canada), to name just a few, took centre stage to mirror what was happening within the country. A close look at the protestors, whether inside the country or abroad, shows that the Hirak has transcended generations. Protestors ranged from babies and toddlers, with their parents, to old age pensioners. For over a year, these demonstrators, rain or shine, every Friday took to the streets to voice their anger towards regime. Protests have followed the same pattern. After Friday prayers, protestors meet in their usual places of protest. They hold slogans, flags, pictures, sing patriotic songs, etc... Despite the heavy presence of police, hardly any incident of ill-treatment was reported. Volunteers distributed water and food to protestors. At the end of each protest, protestors cleaned the streets and squares and left the premises as they found them. Protestors chose Friday, a weekend in Algeria, to minimize disruption of peoples' daily lives.

Indeed, the Algerian national football team aside, nothing, since its independence in 1962, has united Algerians more than these protests. They have put aside their ideological, regional, generational differences and concentrated on what unites them: their Algerianess, their frustration, anger and the realization of their main objective; the establishment of rights-protective regime. . On any protest day throughout the country, one could see Islamists, liberals, "Berbers", "Arabs" standing shoulder to shoulder directing their anger towards the system and its symbols. Furthermore, the Hirak had shown that the Algerian regime had lost its credibility and legitimacy. To be sure, on protest days when an estimated 20 million people, 45 per cent of the population, take to the streets to demonstrate against the regime, (Ibrahimi, 2023) it is clear that this regime has lost its popular base. Of those, who took to the streets, are historic figures and war veterans such as the legendary Djamilia Bouhired, politicians such as former Prime Minister Ali Benflis (2001-2003) and Abdelrazzak Mokri, leader of the Islamist party, Movement of Society and Peace (MSP). Finally, l'Organisation Nationale des Moudjahidines (ONM), the organization of war veterans, hitherto one of the most important pillars of the Algerian regime, pledged its support for the Hirak. (Makedhi, 2019)

3. The Reaction of the Authorities

Despite the Hirak being the best organized, geographically spread and generationally and ideologically inclusive, the authorities' initial reaction was "business as usual". Both civilian and military authorities were united in their attitude towards the protest and protestors. They adopted the same narrative, discredited the popular movement as nothing more than a group of adventurers, most likely manipulated by foreign powers, whose aim is to destabilize and create chaos in the country. In addition to Gaid Ahmed describing protestors as Shirdima, as stated above, the then Prime Minister, Ahmed Ouyahia, reminded Algerians of

the atrocities of the 1990s, known as the black decade, and that peace was restored after a decade long of instability. He warned that these demonstrations would automatically result in chaos and pointed to the destructions of Syria, Yemen, and in particular, the neighbouring country of Libya. Protestors were quick to remind him that “Algeria and is not Syria” and “the black decade has ended; we build a white decade.” (Zeraoulia, 2020) Nonetheless, a few weeks after the beginning of the Hirak, the authorities realized that it “was not business as usual”; a protest of this magnitude and characteristics needs to be taken more seriously. Hence, they embarked on a simultaneous two-pronged process of (a) appeasing the protestors by giving in to some of their demands, in itself a tactic to absorb some of the popular discontent, and (b) employing different means to split protestors and weaken the protest. Undoubtedly, the protest’s biggest achievement was forcing Bouteflika to resign on April 2nd, 2019, two weeks before the date initially set for presidential elections. This resignation ensured that there would be no fifth mandate and no extension to the fourth. Furthermore, the protest brought to the surface the unprecedented depths/levels of corruption in the country. Gaid Saleh, called the ruling elite *el 3issaba* (the gang) and warned Algerians not to be shocked when levels of corruption are made public. To be sure, the events that followed showed that corruption has been widespread and high-level officials, civilians and military alike, have been involved in it. Said Bouteflika, the *de facto* president of the country since - 2013, was jailed on corruption charges and for plotting against the state. Furthermore, three former prime ministers, Ahmed Ouyahia, Abdelmalek Sellal and Noureddine Bedoui, a horde of ministers, such as Ammar Ghoul former minister of public works, Tayeb Louh, former minister of Justice and Youcef Youssefi, former Minister of Energy, have been jailed on corruption charges. Particularly troubling is the implication of a number of the highest-ranking officers in the Algerian army/security. General Abdelghani Al Hamal, former Director-General of the Police, was jailed on corruption charges. General Belkssir, former Director of the Gendarmerie Nationale fled the country before his trial on corruption. Retired general Khaled Nezzar, former Minister of Defense, fled to Spain and was sentenced to 20 years in jail in absentia (he subsequently returned to Algeria and the charges were dropped). Both Generals Mohammed Mediene, alias Toufik, former head of the security services (1990-2015) and his successor Athmane Sahraoui, alias Bachir Tartag, for plotting against the regime. General Mediene’s conviction was quashed and he was released. General Wassini Bouazza, former head of internal security, was brought before a military tribunal on corruption charges. A number of businesspeople, such as Ali Heddad, Yssad Rebrab and Mohieddine Tahkout, closely associated with the *nonemklatura*, were jailed.

Not only these measures helped in appeasing protestors, they also incentivize the protesters to petition for further concessions. At this point, the authorities embarked on a process to weaken the protest. Using the carrot and the stick. A series of meetings were held in El Aurassi Hotel in the heart of Algiers between representatives of the regime, including the veteran Algerian diplomat

Lakhder Ibrahimi, and a number of activists. These activists were carefully chosen and were among the most visible and vocal protestors. In these meetings, “representatives of the regime wanted to bribe us. They offered us positions and the privileges that come with them if we gave up taking part in the protest.” (First Author Interview, 1). Incidents of harassments, intimidations and arrests of protestors were recorded in different parts of the country. However, perhaps the most divisive instrument the regime has used “the constitutional path”. Whilst the Hirak managed to defeat two proposed presidential elections scheduled for April and July 2019, despite the fact that, as stated above, the constitution demands elections. The protestors insistence on *Makanche Intikhabate ma3 el e3issabate* without proposing any concrete alternatives put them at loggerheads with the military. Hence, the second battle for the moral high ground began in earnest. In a speech in the city of Oran, western Algeria, Gaid Salah rejected the protestors’ demand for a transition period and urged for the organization of presidential elections at the earliest opportunity. (Akef, 2009)

The military commanders had the upper hand and successfully managed to hold presidential elections on December 12, 2019 in which five candidates. Apart from Benflis, Bouteflika’s prime minister from 2001 to 2003 and presidential candidate 2004 and again in 2014, the remaining four candidates were closely associated with the Bouteflika’s regime. In fact, three candidates (Tebboune, Bengrina and Mihoubi) served as ministers in successive Bouteflika’s administrations. Tebboune, who also served as prime minister for three months in 2017 “won” the presidential race in the first round in arguably the most controversial presidential elections in Algeria that saw the lowest turnout in Algerian history (Kennedy, 2019). The holding of these elections, despite the controversies associated with it, went a long way in splitting the protestors; it helped to distinguish between the responsible citizen and those who threaten the stability of the country. To be sure, Benflis, who marched with the protestors, stood as a candidate in the presidential race, strengthened the hands of the regime and gave the whole process a shinier veneer of legitimacy. Almost three months after Tebboune came to power, the protest came to an abrupt halt after the outbreak of the Coronavirus that helped him proceed with the re-writing the rules of the game without any input from the protestors. Hence, a new constitution was adopted after it was approved by the November 1, 2020 referendum. The new Constitution limited the president’s term to two five-year terms, prohibited him from dissolving parliament and his appointment of the prime minister must be approved by parliament. Furthermore, military interventions require a two-thirds majority in parliament and must be carried out under the supervision of the United Nations, the African Union, and the Arab League. However, the Hirak movement has rejected the constitution, arguing that it does not go far enough in reforming the Algerian political system. After changes to the electoral law were introduced, Tebboune cut the National Assembly’s mandate short and on, June 12, 2021, legislative elections were held (Ourabah, 2021). Nonetheless, on the second anniversary of the Hirak, February 22, 2021, despite some of the social restrictions,

protestors, albeit in lower numbers, returned to several cities throughout the country to voice their discontent with the regime and continue their quest for the establishment of a “Second Republic”. These protests were short lived and did not have the same impact and the pre-coronavirus era. The regime has not only completed its constitutional/institutional process for “new Algeria,” but it has also placed further restrictions on civil and political liberties and targeted several critics of the regime.

Conclusion:

Since the start of the Arab Spring, Algeria seemed to be the perfect candidate for similar protests that occurred in the vast majority of MENA countries. The authorities in Algiers successfully navigated that period and sparring the country violent protests. Almost a decade later, Algeria experienced a wave of protest that differed from anything that the country witnessed before. For over a year, Algerians have continuously voiced their anger towards the regime. At first, protestors had the upper hand with their legitimate demands and the protest signaled trouble for the regime in Algiers. As time passed, the protestors seemed to have lost the moral high ground. The Algerian authorities followed the development of the protest very closely and embarked on a process of cooptation and concessions to appease protestors. However, they refrained from using violence, which has hitherto been the whole mark of dealing with protestors. In other words, in order to project an image of a regime that respects human rights, the authorities in Algiers allowed the society a breathing space where rising temperature of political pressure can be cooled without a complete overhaul of the system. However, when the regime gained the moral high ground by completing the process of constitutional/institutional change, it reverted to the pre-protest era by compressing the expanded space for political dissent. Therefore, the Algerian Hirak proved successful in compelling despotic leaders to resign, but not at, or at least contribute to, the redrawing the road map and redefining the rules of the game.

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