

## Football and Regime's Legitimacy in Algeria

Abdel Moumin ALI-GUECHI<sup>1\*</sup>, Malika FRIMECHE<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Constantine3-Salah Bounider,(Algeria),  
abdel-moumen.ali-guechi@univ-constantine3.dz

<sup>2</sup>University of Constantine3-Salah Bounider, (Algeria),  
malika.frimeche@univ-constantine3.dz

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### Abstract :

This study understands legitimacy as what refers to a society-authority relationship where people's beliefs about the right and acceptance of their own authority are a basis for the rule. The study distinguishes between the legitimacy of the state and the legitimacy of the regime. Therefore, our ultimate aim is to answer questions about the political potential of football in supporting the regime's legitimacy in Algeria by employing a historical approach that spans different eras of the country.

With football being more than just a beloved sport for Algerians but also deeply ingrained in politics, the study findings revealed how football has been utilized politically both on the national and international levels.

**Keywords:**Legitimacy; Regime's Legitimacy; Football; Algeria.

\*Corresponding author.

## **1. Introduction**

Legitimacy is vital to the notion of authority; it is understood as the main means by which authority is distinguished from more general notions of power<sup>1</sup>. The meaning of legitimacy could refer to community recognition and support for the authorities; such support and acceptance help to create a stable environment for the authorities to regulate effectively<sup>2</sup> and to maintain public control<sup>3</sup>; additionally to motivate citizens to contribute willingly, actively and mobilize and engage in collective action vis-à-vis the state.<sup>4</sup>

It is particularly important to point out that our focus of attention is not legitimacy interpreted as what fits within the law and is compliant with a legal framework<sup>5</sup>. But rather, our study understands legitimacy as a relationship between people and their authority<sup>6</sup>; in which people's perceptions of legitimacy are central to their willingness to engage with that authority, and that these perceptions can support or oppose an authority, and thus create a stable environment for authorities or contribute to their fragility and therefore hinder their capacity to maintain public order.<sup>7</sup>

Based on this approach, legitimacy has different sources; traditions, political ideologies, religion, and social practices can all be involved in shaping people's political expectations and ideas regarding their authority and how they see this authority as overarching and rightful<sup>8</sup> and therefore legitimate. We believe that such sources of legitimacy play out differently in different social and political context.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, it is important to understand legitimacy in a specific environment. We hereby highlight entanglements between football and politics in Algeria, seeking to address the following question:

**How does football contribute to the legitimacy of the Algerian regime?**

Accordingly, we attempt to trace the evolution of the political role of football through different time periods in Algeria; principally using a historical approach.

## **2. Legitimacy: multiple types and sources**

Gaining legitimacy is considered a basic condition of rule as it describes the acceptability or appropriateness of a ruler or a political regime to its members<sup>10</sup>, and it shows the quality of being reasonable<sup>11</sup>. There are different

ways when it comes to understanding legitimacy; a normative approach to the term, for instance, is concerned with the standards that an actor, institution, or political order must conform to in order to be considered legitimate. Such standards may include the explicit consent of the population through democratic elections. Another way of approaching legitimacy is empirical, and it is not concerned with normative standards as such, but rather with the question of how to accept or reject a particular actor or institution. This means that the focus of attention here is people's beliefs and perceptions, such as trust and satisfaction in an actor, an institution, or political order.

Legitimacy can refer to political leaders, the regime, the government, or the state<sup>12</sup>. It is important to distinguish between a regime's legitimacy and the legitimacy of a state. A state's legitimacy is believed to be in a higher position in comparison to the legitimacy of regimes, in the way that the lack of state legitimacy may contest the very existence of a given state and cause rejection of being governed by a state at all, thus people may seek to establish a new state.

In such a case, what lacks legitimacy is the state itself, not just the ruling regime, government, or leaders. On the other hand, is where what is challenged is not the existence of the state itself, but a given regime; in such a situation, people do not seek to form new states, instead, people reject the existing regime and call for reforms so that the regime meets their expectations, such reforms could be carried out by a political leader; who in case of having a strong legitimacy may contribute to strengthening the legitimacy of the political regime.<sup>13</sup>

Legitimacy could be indicated by its ideals: popular consent; representativeness; elections; rule of the majority; civic liberties and similar privileges available to the people<sup>14</sup>. The literature on the universal sources of legitimacy to support regimes is vast. Many argue that the only true legitimacy comes from a fair democratic process. Others believe that legitimacy is also claimed by regimes in the form of recognition by other states, which is known as external legitimacy. Some others may simply refer to regimes as legitimate because of their citizens' sense of nationalism, which provides explicit or implicit support for their authorities.

Given this debate, legitimacy is a complicated notion. Therefore, the sources of a regime's legitimacy could play out differently in different social and

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political contexts<sup>15</sup>. For this end, our study tackles entanglements between football and politics in Algeria, particularly examining football's political potential and its relation to the regime's legitimacy.

### **3.The evolution of the political role of football**

Sport has been mobilized throughout the history of modern Algeria for different purposes<sup>16</sup>. Football, in particular, was an important political vehicle for Algeria during French colonization and later in post-independence.

#### **A. Football during French colonization: winning the nation's recognition**

The establishment of the FLN Algerian national team of football in exile remains the best-known example of the political mobilization of football<sup>17</sup>.

In fact, France had been benefiting from the footballing skills of Algerians during its colonization. It was something that had been going on for decades and just seemed to be the way things were.

That was until Mohamed Boumezrag<sup>18</sup> (founder of the Algerian national team and his very first coach<sup>19</sup>) decided that his decade spent playing professionally in France paled compared to aiding his country's push for freedom. Boumezrag has coordinated with the head of the Algerian National Liberation Front<sup>20</sup> (The revolutionary body which directed the Algerian war of independence against France from 1954 to 1962<sup>21</sup>) to begin recruiting for what would become known as the Liberation Front's own national football team, or the "Équipe FLN".

There were numerous Algerian players scattered throughout France, two of whom, Mustapha Zitouni and Rachid Mekloufi, were even expected to start for the French national football team at the 1958 World Cup, but Boumezrag was asking them, as well as the rest of the Algerian footballers playing in the French league, to leave France and join in forming an Algerian national team for the purpose of appealing to the world through football.

On the 4th of April 1958, a number of 12 Algerian players left France and headed to Tunisia to reconvene and form the team. The players started to plan their matches, which they hoped would attract international attention and win them as supporters of Algerian independence. However, there were many challenges along the way. For instance, FIFA has announced (after a protest from

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the French Football Federation) that any team that faces disappeared Algerian players from France will be expelled from the World Cup. The French government, on its side, succeeded in arresting other players who tried to leave the country to join the team. France has even pushed for punishments to be doled out to any nation that will face the newly-formed renegade side and sentenced all outcasts who had been serving in the military to 10 years in prison for defection (which was the case of Rachid Mekhloufi, who was carrying out his military duty in the European nation back at the time).

On the other hand, there was only one requirement for opponents wishing to face the FLN team: to play the Algerian national anthem and display the Algerian flag, essentially acknowledging them as a nation.

The first official match of the national team of the FLN was against the Tunisian national team, who were finalists in the Pan-Arab Games in Beirut a year before. The result was an 8-0 in favor of the Algerians, revealing the real potential of Algerian football players.<sup>22</sup> The FLN squad has faced other national teams like the USSR (4 games); Yugoslavia (5 games); Romania (4 games); Hungary (4 games); Bulgaria (6 games); China (5 games); Vietnam (4 games); Morocco (7 games) and Tunisia again (4 games); Libya (2 games); Iraq (6 games), and Jordan (3 games) and some other teams.<sup>23</sup>

When the war ended in March 1962 and Algerian independence was declared on July 5th, 1962, footballers of the FLN team returned to Algeria as players and coaches to serve the development Algerian talents. Others have even returned to playing for their former clubs with no punishments or prison sentences. For instance, "Mekhloufi" returned to "Saint-Étienne" and continued right where he had left off, leading his team to "La Coupe de France" in 1968 and receiving his medal personally from French President Charles de Gaulle.<sup>24</sup>

## **B. Football in the early post-independence: building and reflecting state ideology**

An important result which we can derive from the experience of the FLN football team is that football was seen as an instrument to represent the Algerian nation and their struggle for independence at the international level. Furthermore, sports in general, and football, in particular, were an important part of nation-state

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building and development in the early post-independence. Algeria established a new model for pedagogy and social development to combat the social discrimination inherited from the colonial era. The pedagogy model, known as the "sport-education community model", was working to establish a moral and civic education for both sexes through the practice of sport, as well as to prepare the younger generation for productive work, social discipline, and full integration into the values of the nation. The physical educational system was fully integrated within the national system of education, and the participation in sports within schools for instance, has reached 89 percent according to ministry estimates, stating clear evidence of the huge interest of young Algerians in sports.

Additionally, Algeria has dedicated considerable financial investment to maintaining sports facilities inherited from the colonial era and to developing massive Olympic sports infrastructure, such as the 5 July Stadium in Algiers. Other facilities were also built throughout the country (particularly in big cities) to host major events at the national and international levels, such as the African, Arab, and Mediterranean games, but also in an effort to combat centralism and regionalism within the Algerian society.

In 1977, Algerian football experienced radical reforms which changed the established structures inherited from the French Football Federation. The aim was to establish order in the sports movement, which had previously been characterized by a lack of rational administration and proper financial resourcing. However, it was also to combat regionalism and chauvinism, especially when attaching the names of the clubs to the values and organizational culture of the companies that sponsored these clubs rather than to the old regional identities.

To explain the point further, we state the examples like clubs of Oran Youth Mouloudia (MC Oran) and Algiers Youth Mouloudia (MC Alger). With the reforms; the two clubs were both sponsored by SONATRACH (the national oil company) and became "Mouloudia P of Oran" (MP Oran), and "Mouloudia P of Algiers" (MP Algiers) (P stands for Petrol). Similarly, with ESS (Entente de Setif), sponsored by a petrochemical company, becoming "Entente P (plastic) Setif" and JSK (Jeunesse Sport Kabylie), sponsored by the SONELEC electronics company, becoming "Jeunesse E (electronic) Tizi Ouzou".<sup>25</sup>

During the 1980s, socialism and resistance to western influence were distinctly expressed in the Algerian sports policy.

In this regard, Algeria has developed a strong sporting relationship with the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and similar socialist regimes from the Eastern bloc, which ostensibly shared the same ideals. These relations took the form of receiving Soviet specialists, experts, coaches, doctors, and sports administrators; sending students and athletes to physical education institutes and joint training programs; providing financial aid and sports equipment; and exchanging sports delegations. In 1982, the number of Soviet experts in Algeria had reached 70, which was estimated to have been the largest number in Africa.

Algeria seemed to be seeking to make sports reflective of the regime's ideology of socialism. An illustrative example was the case of the coach of the Algerian national team, Rachid Mekhloufi, who was portrayed during the Algerian struggle for independence as a symbol of patriotism and an ambassador of the Algerian revolution. Nonetheless, state officials criticized him for his coaching methods. His coaching style was seen as being "too French" and was defined, according to state ideology, as neo-colonial. "Mekhloufi" was eventually unable to convince state officials of the appropriateness of his approach and was dismissed and replaced by a Romanian coach regarded as having more realistic and socialist coaching methods.

Ideological and political motives for resisting the westernization of sports in Algeria were also apparent internationally. Such resistance was sometimes in the name of socialism and anti-imperialism but also reflected, at other times, a pan-African (anti-apartheid) coalition and pan-Arab solidarity. An example of that is the decision of FIFA in October 1967 at a congress organized in Mexico to nominate "Jean Crafford" a representative of South Africa as the vice-president of the African zone. This nomination provoked a major campaign of protest by African countries.

Algeria reacted to this decision by publishing a strong statement in the Algerian Press Service, which was reproduced in many African newspapers. The statement considered the FIFA decision as proof of a total disregard for all the independent African states, considering the fact that the vice president of FIFA is a representative of a country estranged from the rest of the African continent by virtue of its politics based on apartheid, as expressed in the statement.<sup>26</sup>

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Since the early 1990s, Algerian football was more exposed to global football cultures, mainly the Europeans. This was due to the increasing time reserved in the Algerian media for live broadcasts, reporting and news coverage from the major European leagues. This influenced the way Algerian supporters expressed themselves, especially in their slogans, songs, and symbols.

For instance, some supporters have nicknamed their favourite clubs with Italian names, like Mouloudia Football Club (MCA) as "Juventus" the famous Italian football club; Algiers Union Football Club (USMA) was given the name of AC Milan, and its stadium the name of "little San Siro" (the name of AC Milan stadium); likewise the case was for the Algerian USMA coach "Ifticene" who was given the name of "Capello" (a famous Italian coach). Young supporters have even turned the club supporters' associations into small enterprises to organize trips to attend away games and sell club souvenirs, which is similar to associations made for the same purpose in Rome and Naples on the black market.

One can argue that such practices were developed by Algerians as a means by which they tried to break down the geographic isolation that Algeria was experiencing during the 1990s, but it is also due to an Algerian's growing interest in satellite channels, which they perceived as another alternative to express their freedom of choice to watch programmes other than those of the Algerian government channel.<sup>27</sup>

### **4. Football in modern Algeria: relation to legitimacy**

As Algeria was struggling through a transition towards post-conflict following the quasi-civil war in the 1990s and re-organizing power relations<sup>28</sup>, Football seemed to be a way to confer legitimacy on the Algerian regime.<sup>29</sup>

#### **A. Modern football in Algeria: international players**

In the 1980s and 1990s, there was an increase in the internationalization of African football due to the migration of African footballers from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe to play in top European leagues. The increasing presence of football academies of top European clubs in Africa, which is attracting young talents to play in Europe, has also contributed to the rising popularity of African football and its competitions.<sup>30</sup>



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The case of Algeria was not very different, in fact; it is rooted back to the 1960s, when France agreed to welcome thousands of foreign workers in order to make up for a labor shortage. Many Algerians back then participated in a migratory flow and reached the French territory<sup>31</sup>. The number of immigrant children in France (among them those who started a football career) has increased in the 70s and 80s with family immigration<sup>32</sup>, followed by the 1990s immigration due to the civil war.<sup>33</sup> These days, there is a third generation of Algerian players born in France and holding dual citizenship, which is the case for many footballers in the Algerian national team, for example "Djamel Belmadi" the current Algerian coach of the team and "Riyad Mahrez" the star and team captain, as well as many other players.<sup>34</sup>

The bi-nationality allows many of these footballers to choose the national colors they want to defend; they can even change their minds as long as they have not played in the national "A" team of their birth country,<sup>35</sup> particularly when FIFA approved in 2009 the enactment of a law that gives a player with more than one nationality the choice to change the team on the condition that he does not play for another team in the senior class. This law, in particular, was largely supported by the former president of the Algerian Football Federation "Mohamed Raouraoua" to allow several players born abroad and have expressed their desire to play for the Algerian national team.<sup>36</sup>

### **B. Football and regime's legitimacy: exploits and challenges**

Algerian international players of dual nationality and those born in Algeria have performed well on the pitch, qualifying for the 2010 and 2014 World Cups, qualifying for the 2010 and 2014 World Cups. These qualifications had a special place within the major Algerian political institutions. An example of that is when the former Algerian President "Abdelaziz Bouteflika" ordered the free of charge transfer of about 10,000 Algerians to Sudan to support the national team in its decisive game against Egypt to qualify for the 2010 World Cup in South Africa.<sup>37</sup> He even declared a paid day-off after the qualification of the team to celebrate this occasion.<sup>38</sup>

Another case was at the 2019 African Cup of Nations in Egypt, which coincided with the year of Bouteflika's resignation on April 2nd 2019. The new ruling elite, represented by the Head of State "Abdelkader Bensalah" took advantage of the national football team's performance during the African

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competition, and were eager to associate the political image with the national team. This association was symbolized by the visit of the acting Head of State to the hotel where the national team was staying the day before the final, where he had photos and videos with the head coach and players.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly was the case with the Algerian's victory in the 2021 FIFA Arab Cup which coincided with the first mandate of the new president of Algeria "Abdelmajid Tebboun". The current president and the new Algerian army chief have welcomed the national football team upon their return from Doha. This was followed by a media-orchestrated parade in the streets of Algiers, where the Algerian national television channel had exclusively broadcast the ceremony and parade.<sup>40</sup>

It is understandable that football has long proven to be more than just a game in Algeria; indeed, Algerian football can boast of several glorious exploits.<sup>41</sup> An early example of that was explained by mentioning the FLN team, which went on football tours to several countries to highlight the Algerian struggle for independence and to win hearts and minds' support.<sup>42</sup> Another example is with the epics of the Algerian national team during the 1982 World Cup in Spain and the famous Algerian victory against West Germany, which has done more for the nation than the work of any Algerian ambassador, as declared then by the Ministry of Youth and Sport.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, during the 2014 World Cup in Brazil, the Fennecs (a nickname of the Algerian national team) were described as "heroes" after they were narrowly eliminated by future World Cup winner Germany in the round of 16.

Algerian international players with dual citizenship have also contributed to proving the high quality of Algerian football across the world. The success of Riyad Mahrez, for instance, has been exceptional in England for several years, both at Manchester City and previously at Leicester City Club. Before Riyad Mahrez, another Algerian, "Rabah Madjer" was sparkling at FC Porto (a football club in Portugal), Madjer was extremely successful at FC Porto. He splashed his class in the Champions League final in 1987 against Bayern Munich with his famous back-heel goal. The exhibition "Foot et Monde Arabe" at the " Institut du Monde Arabe" in Paris paid tribute in 2019 to the back-heel of Rabah Madjer and also to the FLN team on the road to Algerian independence.<sup>44</sup>

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Algerian football has shown a reflection of certain foreign political orientations. To give an idea; the Algerian support for the right to self-determination for Palestinians and for the end of the Israeli occupation was very visible in football, just like it was spotted and praised by the Algerian regime. A chant in stadiums made by Algerians called "Falasteen Chouhada" (Palestinians the Martyrs) is inspired by the chant "Bab El Oued El Chouhada" (The Martyrs of Bab El Oued), which refers to the incidents of 1988 when more than 500 Algerians were killed in riots after protests in the Bab El Oued neighborhood in the capital Algiers.<sup>45</sup> On the February 17, 2016, the Palestinian Olympic team beat Algeria 1-0 at a friendly match held in Algiers. Algerian fans at the game took the opportunity to cheer for Palestinians, filling the "5 Juillet 1962" stadium with Palestinian flags. Video clips of the solidarity gestures were widely shared online by Algerians and Palestinians alike.<sup>46</sup> Another example of the Algerian solidarity with Palestine was during Manchester City's Premier League title celebration for 2020/21 season. The Algerian and Manchester City player, "Riyad Mahrez", draped himself in his national colors and waved the Palestinian flag during the presentation ceremony to show support for Palestine. The celebration came just days after the latest Sheikh Jarrh incidents.<sup>47</sup> Likewise, in the case after the final match against Tunisia, the Algerian coach, "Majid Bougherra", dedicated his team's victory to Palestine and the Gaza Strip. "Houcine Benayada", a national team player, also draped the Algerian and Palestinian flags over his body during the celebration and expressed that Algerian players do not play for any bonus but for the two flags of Algeria and Palestine."<sup>48</sup>

Although football has been matching certain regime's political orientations, it has also shown the other half of the cup, where a fracture between Algerians and their regime was clearly expressed.

As a point of fact, Algerian youth have been using football stadiums as a space to make chants that describe their sense of engagement with the political and socio-economic conditions, and replicate the political situation of the country as well as decode the perplexing situations of youth's daily lives; these situations are characterized in their chants by injustice and marginalization.<sup>49</sup> It is important to remember that some of these chants were adopted by protesters during the Algerian "Hirak" starting on February 22nd, 2019, as the slogans in these chants seemed to express a rejection and opposition to the regime and matched certain Algerian political ambitions.<sup>50</sup>

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Football was also at the center of the diplomatic crisis between Algeria and other countries. An example is when the Iraqi side erupted due to what it has called "sectarian chants" from Algerian supporters during a match on September 10th 2018 between the Algiers Capital Union team "USMA" and the "Iraqi Air Force team". It was in the 72nd minute when the Iraqi team withdrew<sup>51</sup> after hearing some expressions on terraces glorifying Iraq's former president "Saddam Hussein" and shouting certain insults against "Shia". The Iraqi Ministry of Foreign Affairs back then summoned Algeria's ambassador in Baghdad over "sectarian chants" and for glorifying the deadly dictatorial regime of Saddam Hussein.

On the other hand, the Algerian side, represented by the Minister of Youth and Sports, has described this issue as an "isolated act" which cannot alter the Algerian people's reputation for hospitality and cannot influence relations with the Iraqi people, who are considered by Algerians as brothers. As it was the case in December, Algeria had to apologize to Riyadh after the unfurling of a banner accusing the king of Saudi Arabia of supporting US former president Donald Trump's decision to unilaterally recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.<sup>52</sup>

There are other examples when football has stepped up amid rising political tensions and helped settle things down. When the Algerian authorities cut their diplomatic relations with Morocco on August 24th, 2021,<sup>53</sup> a match between Algeria and Burkina Faso, part of the second round of the World Cup qualifiers, was meant to be played in Morocco in September 2021, as Burkina Faso's stadium does not comply with FIFA standards. Regarding this issue, "Djamel Belmadi" the head coach of Algeria's national football team, has described Morocco as a neighboring country and said political tensions between the two countries will not affect the game as there are people who will have to be diligent and take control.<sup>54</sup>

Another case in point was at the celebrations of Algeria's second African Cup of Nations in 2019 especially the one of the Algerian community worldwide. In France, for instance, tens of thousands of Algerian fans came out onto the streets to celebrate after beating Senegal 1-0 in Cairo. Huge street parties took place in several French cities like Paris, Marseille, and Lyon,<sup>55</sup> where Algerians raised their national flags when celebrating. This event has fueled the debate on French identity and the question of alliance with Algeria's former colonizers. For instance, the far-right politician "Nicolas Dupont-Aignan" described the Algerian celebrations in France as "shocking"; he even called on young Algerian supporters

to return to their country. "Sebastien Chenu" from the Le Pen's National Rally party has described the Algerian team's victories as a "French nightmare" and said there will be problems in the streets every time the Algerian football team wins a match.<sup>56</sup> On the other hand, the team's captain, "Riyad Mahrez" after scoring a winning free kick against Nigeria to qualify for the final, tweeted: "the free-kick was for you; we are together" with the Algerian and French flags' emojis next to each other, referring to the fact that there are many French-Algerian dual nationals in France living together with no problems. The tweet was in response to a far-right tweet by "Julian O'Doul" who had expressed his support for the Nigerian team against the Algerians in order to preserve the national holiday of France on July 14th, which coincided with the Algerian team's games.<sup>57</sup>

## **5. Conclusion**

The idea of legitimacy as described in our study refers to a society-authority interaction in which people's perceptions of what is right and their acceptance of their own authority serve as the foundation for the rule. Numerous variables, or "sources of legitimacy," as referred to in our study, have an impact on these beliefs and perceptions. Within this context, the study discussed football's significance during the experience of the "Equipe FLN", which revealed that an "international level" of legitimacy was a central point. The football of FLN has contributed to drawing international attention to the Algerian struggle for independence. This pursuit of attention was a significant factor in gaining heart and mind support for the Algerian liberation revolution and, ultimately, achieving widespread national recognition.

In early post-independence, the political potential of football encouraged the Algerian regime to mobilize this sport, in particular, with the aim of combating inherited social discrimination and establishing a moral and civic education characterized by social discipline and full integration into the values of socialism shared by the Algerian regime. Later then, as football boasted of several glorious exploits for Algerians, the examples mentioned demonstrated a direct interest in football from major political institutions. This interest was symbolized by attempts to associate the image of the ruling elites with the national football team's performances.

While football has been associated with certain regimes' orientations, such as socialist values during the 80s or self-determination rights and solidarity with

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Palestine, football stadiums stepped in to become a forum for promoting the expression of political criticism and grievances, notably in fans' chants. Protesters adopted these chants during the Algerian "Hirak" starting on February 22nd, 2019; the lyrics and slogans in these chants seemed to express a rejection and opposition to the regime and match particular Algerian political ambitions. Such football chants could mirror the struggle to achieve a regime's legitimacy based on moral acceptance and encouragement of civic engagement.

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