

Bouteflika forced out, but the regime remains

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On 2 April, six weeks of mass demonstrations, culminating in a general strike, finally forced the resignation of Algeria's 82 year-old president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. He had tried to cling on to power by postponing elections due on 18 April, but the gathering strength of the popular movement convinced the Army to force him out. Its chief, General Ahmed Gaid Salah, had already called for the starting of the formal process to declare him unable to continue in office the previous week. That appears to have been opposed by the clique behind the president, known as "le pouvoir", the power, led by his brother, Said.

However, after a meeting of the key Army leaders, on 1 April, General Salah told a press conference that the Army "supported the demands of the people" and intended to "protect Algerians from the gang that had seized control". The following day, the national News Agency made the formal announcement of his resignation. Abdelkader Bensalah, formerly the Speaker of the upper house of parliament, was duly installed as interim president until a presidential election on 4 July.

Economy

The background to the mass discontent was not simply political resentment at the farce of rule by a man who has not spoken in public since a stroke in 2013. Algeria's economy is in a parlous state. In 2015, an Algerian Human Rights League survey found that 35 percent of the population, 14 million people, lived on less than US\$1.25 per day. Today, overall unemployment is at 11.7 per cent, but among the young it is far greater, 29 per cent, in a country where half the population is under 25. No wonder the youth were in the forefront of the protests.

GDP growth is down to 0.8 per cent according to the latest figures and the fiscal deficit is likely to hit 10 per cent of GDP this year. The Algerian government relies heavily on oil revenue to fund its spending, but the price of benchmark Brent crude has fallen from \$100 a barrel in mid-2014 to around \$66 recently. Pressure has been mounting from Algeria's foreign lenders to impose austerity upon an already impoverished population.

This year has seen a rising tide of strikes by workers protesting at low wages and the high cost of living. These have included port workers, transport workers in the Kabylie region, textile workers at the huge Tayal factory in Sidi Khettab, Relizane, and autoworkers at Hyundai's joint assembly plant in Tiaret. Then oil workers joined the protests; the Hassi Messaoud oil field in eastern Algeria, owned by the state company Sonatrach, as well as oil fields in Hassi R'mel, in Hassi Berkine and in Amenas all came to a halt. The regime knew the game was up.

History

The army is the decisive force within the National Liberation Front, which has ruled Algeria since 1962, though with changes in the inner cliques that control the regime. It was the dominant force in the long war against the French colonialists, which lasted from 1954 to 1962 and cost 1.5 million lives.

In October 1988, a massive youth uprising seeking democratic change erupted, ushered in a turbulent period that left wing forces and the working class proved unable to resolve. This led, in 1992, to an electoral victory for the Islamic Salvation Front, FIS, which, in turn, led to the FLN-dominated military intervening to set aside the results.

There then followed the 'black decade' of repression, guerrilla war and terrorism, in which an estimated 200,000 people died, a conflict unparalleled in its brutality until Syria and Yemen. After the crushing of the Islamists, Bouteflika was brought back from a self-imposed exile to head what was billed as a controlled normalisation process. This has been the 'justification' for his two decades of rule and has restrained oppositionists who obviously did not want any repetition of the atrocities of the 1990s.

Now

The demands raised by the demonstrators have already moved on from the resignation of Bouteflika to the removal of the entire FLN regime. In this situation it is vital to focus the striving for democracy on the call for elections to a sovereign Constituent Assembly. Its tasks should be those needed to complete a thoroughgoing democratic revolution. The elections should be supervised by councils of delegates from workplaces, local communities and the rank and file of the armed forces. The media 'TV stations and newspapers' must be put under their workers' control and the delegates to the Constituent Assembly must be answerable to, and recallable by their voters.

Given the dire economic straits of the country, political democracy alone cannot satisfy the masses' needs; fundamental social and economic tasks must be addressed including social ownership of the means of production. To enact this, a workers' and peasants' government, supported by the Assembly but relying on the democratic organisations of the workers and their allies, will be needed.

As Egypt showed, if the levers of power or the means of communication remain in the hands of elements of the regime or fall into the hands of either the bourgeois or Islamist parties, then the democratic and social demands of the masses will be frustrated and another repressive regime will be installed.

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