

"No to the Fifth Term": Algeria's New Protest Movement

A Conversation with Isabelle Werenfels

March 2019

*Over the last few weeks, large and highly unusual protests have been taking place in Algeria, organized around a demand that the president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, not run for a fifth five-year term in the election scheduled for April 18. Following the February 10 announcement that he would stand for another term, popular protests broke out in several cities and have grown dramatically. Since February 24, Bouteflika has been in Geneva receiving medical treatment; he has been in extremely poor health since suffering a stroke in 2013 and only rarely has been seen in public. The unfolding demonstrations represent the largest popular mobilization against Bouteflika's rule since he became president in 1999. Algeria's Ministry of Interior *estimated* that 800,000 people marched in the capital Algiers on Friday, March 1; informal estimates are even higher. More demonstrations are expected for this Friday, March 8.*

POMED's Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne talked with Algeria expert Dr. Isabelle Werenfels, senior fellow in the Middle East and Africa Division at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin, about what is happening inside the country.

POMED: Let's start with the basics. When did the protests begin, and why? Who is participating? What are the demands? And how have those things changed over the past 10 days?

Isabelle Werenfels: Actually, we have seen protests against Bouteflika and his entourage taking place in Algerian **soccer stadiums** for months, if not years. Then, a bit over a week after Bouteflika's candidacy was announced on February 10, we saw a **spontaneous protest** in Khenchela, in eastern Algeria, when a popular presidential candidate, Rachid Nekkaz, was not allowed to hold a rally (he reportedly has been taken in by the police since). During that protest people tore down a portrait of the president—an extremely rare occurrence in Algeria. The successful defiance of local authorities fed into widespread calls on social media for demonstrations across the country after the Friday prayer on February 22. The original source of these calls is difficult to identify. But after people

marched in unexpectedly large numbers on February 22 and security forces did not intervene, images of the peaceful protests inspired Algerians, creating a snowball effect.

Over the past ten days, the scale of the protests has grown. The demands of the protesters and the mode of the marches have been consistent, however. The primary slogan has remained “no to the fifth term” for Bouteflika, and the demonstrations have remained peaceful. Rappers were calling for the protests and posting **videos** showing people how to behave during demonstrations. Huge efforts were made over social media to alert protesters to the importance of not provoking security forces, to not give them a pretext to attack. Also noteworthy is that protesters cleaned up after the marches, at least in some places. As for the slogans, aside from the main one—for Bouteflika to step down—we see a broad spectrum, including those calling for the demise of the FLN (National Liberation Front) party, the main party of the regime, or for the demise of the entire political establishment. There are also calls for regime change—there is a slogan about creating a “second republic,” to replace the **first republic**, the largely authoritarian system created after the 1962 independence from France—and for a transitional government and transition to democracy.

When was the last time that Algeria saw protests on this scale, or close to it? Are these demonstrations different from earlier ones?

We do not have accurate figures of protest size, so this is difficult to say. In June 2001, there was a **huge march** toward the capital during protests in Kabylie, a region east of Algiers where most of Algeria’s Amazigh (Berber) population lives. But that was a march by a certain part of the population. What we see now is cross-sectoral mobilization cutting through social classes, ethnic groups, and regional loyalties. For instance, we saw a large protest in Algeria’s second city Oran in the west, a region that is considered the home turf of the president and of many members in the Bouteflika camp. The protests have included women and families. The last time we saw a similar level of popular mobilization across the country was during the 1991 parliamentary election campaign, when the Islamist *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS, or Islamic Salvation Front) party mobilized and went on to win the first round of free and fair elections, after which the military stepped in. What followed was the “**black decade**” of violence in which 150,000-200,000 civilians were killed.

What makes this round of protest different from other recent ones in Algeria is that they are primarily political. In past years, we have seen much mobilization by different professional groups such as doctors and teachers over socio-economic issues, including demands for better work conditions or higher salaries. We have seen protests from army veterans and pensioners, demonstrations by marginalized ethnic groups, and a large movement of unemployed Algerians in the south of the country. In 2015 we saw how that movement merged with **protests** over shale gas exploration in the south.

A second notable characteristic of the current events is that the marches are peaceful and fearless at the same time. In the past, many Algerians hesitated to protest because of the fear of violence and chaos returning—a fear of a reprise of the 1992-2000 **civil war**, a fear that the regime knew how to exploit to keep people off the streets. The fact that the fear of marching has disappeared for now, however, does not mean that the civil war is not still in the collective memory of all Algerians.

“WHAT MAKES THIS ROUND OF PROTEST DIFFERENT FROM OTHER RECENT ONES IN ALGERIA IS THAT THEY ARE PRIMARILY POLITICAL.”

Third, these protests symbolize citizens re-appropriating the language of national pride and emphasize the idea that citizens are the nation. The many Algerian flags displayed at the marches were an expression of this. And in the demonstrations, we see a euphoria that the people may again change the course of history—“again” in reference to the Algerian revolution, the war of independence. It was highly symbolic and widely publicized that the well-known *moujahida* (resistance fighter) **Djamila Bouhired**, a historic figure from the independence struggle, participated in the March 1 protest.

Knowing that the inner workings of the Algerian regime are famously opaque, what do you read from the protests—and the regime’s reaction—about dynamics within the centers of power?

First, we must understand that the Algerian system is one of competing clientelist networks consisting of military figures, politicians, bureaucrats, and, increasingly, economic elites. When Bouteflika was first elected in 1999 it was a clique of generals who paved the way for him. In the 2000s the president expanded his powers by building his own network, which had a strong regional dimension in that it recruited many regime members in the western part of the country. And in 2004, he gained more influence over the military by **firing** the army head, Mohamed Lamari. But the system remained one of multiple, competing power centers. In the past five years, however, Bouteflika has increased his control over the entire security apparatus by restructuring the intelligence service and by, many believe, forcing its head General Mohamed Mediène (known as Toufik) to retire. Analysts continue to debate the degree to which Bouteflika and his entourage have full control. Some believe that Mediène and his networks still hold substantial power and some candidates in the presidential race are seen to have ties to those networks.

Second, the events of recent weeks have shown us the depth of the cleavages within the establishment—among political and military elites, elites in the state bureaucracy, and elites in the private sector—regarding Bouteflika’s candidacy. Divergences now seem to exist over how to handle the protests. It was telling of conflicts on strategy within the regime last week that Algerian websites were asked to remove a video showing an **aggressive speech** against the protestors by the army chief of staff, **Ahmed Gaid Saleh**, only an hour after the video had been released. And if we take the number of rumors coming from usually well-connected sources as an indicator, there are also growing divergences within the Bouteflika camp regarding a Plan B. Among figures close to Bouteflika, there is obstinance that he must run, presumably because they are not sure who they would send into the race instead. Only a few months ago, they could have proposed the fairly popular Ramtane Lamamra, who served as minister of foreign affairs from 2013 to 2017 and who was appointed to the post of diplomatic adviser to Bouteflika in mid-February 2019. But today everyone from the Bouteflika camp appears to be discredited with the protestors, and this camp may not have an alternative plan. Last but not least, recent days saw **important defections** from Bouteflika’s camp, including by members of the state media, pro-regime political parties, and the *Forum des chefs d’entreprises* (FCE), a lobby organization of many of Algeria’s big businesses.

Third, we must keep in mind that given the competing clientelist networks that constitute the Algerian regime, being against Bouteflika does not automatically imply that one is against the political system. I would be surprised if the figures who have left the FCE would want a complete change of the very system that has allowed them to flourish. Bouteflika and his entourage do not

“THE EVENTS OF RECENT WEEKS HAVE SHOWN US THE DEPTH OF THE CLEAVAGES WITHIN THE ESTABLISHMENT REGARDING BOUTEFLIKA’S CANDIDACY.”

have a monopoly on shady economic dealings. Lack of transparency and corruption are part of the nature of the system, and many in the elite benefit from this.

Finally, the role of the army in the unfolding events remains key, even though since 2004 it has claimed it is not involved in politics. Interestingly, during the protests there were slogans chanted against Chief of Staff Ahmed Gaid Saleh, who still openly backs Bouteflika, but none against the army per se. On the contrary, protesters chanted, “The army and the people are brothers.” In the elections of 2014, some opposition actors had called for the army to intervene and lead a democratic transition. In the current demonstrations, such calls have become quite loud by some protesters, while others see it as problematic to ask the army to step in. It is not clear what are the views within the military; there may be dissent, but a reluctance to move against Saleh, Bouteflika’s main ally.

On Sunday evening, March 3, a letter in Bouteflika’s name was released, confirming that he will stand for re-election, but promising that after the vote there will be a national conference, a new constitution, and early elections in which he will not run. How have Algerians reacted to this latest “road map” for reform?

First of all, many Algerians question whether Bouteflika himself wrote this letter. He is so incapacitated, he has not even left his Geneva hospital. Moreover, anything coming from Bouteflika’s camp at this point has no credibility with those protesting. Second, Bouteflika announced similar “reform” initiatives in 2011, when the Arab uprisings swept the region and overthrew the president of Algeria’s neighbor, Tunisia. These initiatives, which involved reform of the media, association, and political party laws, brought some modest political steps forward, but also some backward steps. For instance, ambiguous language in the media law opened new doors for legal proceedings against journalists with regard to reporting on security issues, foreign policy, or economic strategy. Then there was the constitutional reform of 2016, which did not bring substantial change, and introduced new restrictions on who can hold certain positions. For instance, it excludes Algerians with a foreign spouse from running for president. Third and most important, the perception in Algiers to the March 3 letter was that the Bouteflika camp is trying to buy time and that this whole move amounts to a fifth mandate for him, which is exactly what many Algerians do not want. A national conference run by the very personnel who are now in charge would lack credibility and legitimacy.

What has been the role of opposition figures or movements during these protests?

The Algerian opposition is very fragmented. Partly this is a result of successful regime policies of dividing them by co-optation, by creating competition among them, and by playing on existing social, regional, and political cleavages. But the opposition itself also suffers from the phenomenon of *zaimisme*—traditional leaders who do not tolerate any others at their level. Recent efforts by some opposition actors to agree on one presidential candidate all failed. Over the past decade the traditional opposition parties have lost credibility with those Algerians who are now demonstrating. These parties are not in the lead, they have not managed to come up with a convincing alternative vision, they have no charismatic leaders, and they are largely present only in urban settings and in Kabylie. Their mobilizing potential is low, and so what they have done in the past ten days is to try to jump on

“OVER THE PAST DECADE THE TRADITIONAL OPPOSITION PARTIES HAVE LOST CREDIBILITY WITH THOSE ALGERIANS WHO ARE NOW DEMONSTRATING.”

the bandwagon. The exception is the citizen movement *Mouwatana* (citizenship), founded in 2018 with a main goal of blocking Bouteflika's candidacy. The movement called for an election boycott and issued a call to mobilize and several opposition party leaders are participating in it. But *Mouwatana's* call to the streets was not as successful as the informal social media rallying call.

It feels like a precarious and potentially dangerous moment in Algeria as the regime resists protestors' demands. If these protests were to lead to open conflict or violent confrontation, what would the potential fault lines be?

The moment is precarious, but the protesters appear to be determined not to resort to any violence. So far, the security forces have shown a certain restraint. I believe that the collective memory of the mass violence in the 1990s has meant that all sides are trying to refrain from violence. As for the fault lines, at the moment the main one is between the Bouteflika camp and the protesters. New fault lines could emerge within the population between those who are ready to give Bouteflika's reform proposals a chance, and those who deeply mistrust him and want him to leave power immediately. One thing we do not know is how the silent majority—the many Algerians who have not left their homes to march—feels. Does the silent majority tend toward a change of president, or a regime change? And is there still support for the president and his camp? Certain segments of society have profited over decades from the regime's strategic distribution of rents and privileges through clientelist networks, including those of the FLN and its satellite organizations. It is plausible that some of these actors will try to resist profound change.

Also, if we look at social media discussions regarding Islamist parties in the past weeks, we see a cleavage between the more secular protesters and Islamists. The former profoundly distrusts the latter, and the latter is trying to keep a fairly low profile, as it has done since the 2013 Egyptian coup against the Muslim Brotherhood government and the subsequent anti-Brotherhood climate that has taken hold across the region. Salafi movements, which have become more visible in the past decade, are a great unknown. So far, they have not yet openly positioned themselves on one side or the other.

Finally, fault lines within the ruling establishment are likely to deepen as popular resistance grows. What effect the army chief of staff's continuing support for Bouteflika will have, we can only speculate. But this certainly will affect the inner coherence of an already non-homogeneous regime apparatus.

How should Europe and the United States respond to what is happening in Algeria?

Algerians, both the elite and the broader population, have a deep, historically rooted sense of sovereignty. For this reason, the threshold for what is perceived as interference in domestic affairs is very low. There is a tendency to perceive foreign meddling, particularly by France, in many places. French media coverage of events in Algeria is a huge subject inside the country. When French media play down the numbers of demonstrators, or evoke chaos scenarios, Algerians are up in arms. In the past two weeks there were many posts on Algerian social media, particularly on Twitter, asking foreigners to keep out.

Given the deep suspicion about foreign interference, it is best for Western governments to take a hands-off approach. Governments should remain as neutral as possible, while conveying strong messages about the need for both sides to refrain from violence. Western powers should convey

GIVEN THE DEEP SUSPICION ABOUT FOREIGN INTERFERENCE, IT IS BEST FOR WESTERN GOVERNMENTS TO TAKE A HANDS-OFF APPROACH.

the message that Algerians must choose their own way forward. But they should think ahead about what their response will be and how they will react should the situation shift into violence and repression. Of course, there is also a chance for a positive scenario to unfold. This is a chance for an Arab nation to develop its own model of democratic change. In this regard, Algeria's relative reclusiveness and isolation has its positive side. Due to foreign media generally not being allowed into the country, we have seen a rare sight in recent days: the story of protests in the Arab world unfolding primarily through the eyes of those protesting. Algeria's particularity should caution observers from viewing the protests simply as a reprise of the 2011 Arab uprisings, as this would obscure more than it illuminates about this historic moment.



ISABELLE WERENFELS is a Senior Fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in Berlin. From 2014 to mid-2018 she headed the SWP's Middle East and Africa Research Division. She has broadly published on political transformation and authoritarian resilience in the Maghreb as well as on German and European policies towards the European Union's Southern Neighborhood. Her publications include *Managing Instability in Algeria: Elites and Political Change since 1995* (Routledge). She holds a PhD in Political Science from Humboldt Universität zu Berlin. She is on Twitter as @iswerenfelsi.

THE PROJECT ON MIDDLE EAST DEMOCRACY is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization based in Washington, DC, that is dedicated to examining how genuine democracies can develop in the Middle East and how the United States can best support that process. Through dialogue, research, and advocacy, POMED works to strengthen the constituency for U.S. policies that peacefully support reform in the Middle East. POMED research publications offer in-depth, original expert analysis of political developments in the Middle East as they relate to the prospects for genuine democracy in the region and to U.S. policy on democracy and human rights. The views expressed in POMED publications are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of POMED. For more information, please contact Deputy Director for Research Amy Hawthorne at amy.hawthorne@pomed.org.

