Two years after Algeria’s rebellion

Did the protests gain anything?

On 22 February 2019, hundreds of thousands of Algerian citizens poured into the streets. For the first time in 30 years Algerians engaged in large-scale political protests. They demanded that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika step down and asked for fundamental changes in the political system of the country. Over the next months, the protests became more and more fierce.

More than three years have passed since then. Because of Covid-19, protesters stopped congregating in the streets. Algeria is still ruled by the same political elite, and on the surface it may seem as if not much has changed. But is this view correct? No. In this essay I will argue that the protests have in fact led to some important changes in Algerian society. The essay is informed by my personal observations over the last two years, and also by the largely Francophone research that has been done on Algerian history. Nobody can predict the future, but it is possible that these changes have laid the groundwork for fundamental reforms down the road.

Brief background on the hirak

The immediate reason for the protests was that then-president Bouteflika had announced that he would seek a fifth term as a president. Bouteflika had been in power since 1999, when he was chosen as a compromise candidate to end the civil war of the 1990s. Since 2013, though, he had been completely absent from public life, following a...
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stroke which left him physically paralyzed and unable to speak. When it was announced that he would run for a fifth term, most Algerians perceived this as a humiliating insult. Most Algerians believed that the conditions in their country were bad and getting worse, due to endemic corruption, nepotism, lack of opportunities for young people and a deteriorating economy. The announcement that Bouteflika, wheelchair-bound and mute, would run again became a symbol for everything which was wrong in the country.

This led to mass protests around the country from 22 February onwards. Every Friday hundreds of thousands of Algerians from all over the country took to the streets, even in the parts of the country which had traditionally supported Bouteflika. They demanded that Bouteflika resign, that everybody who had been involved in ruling the country during the Bouteflika era step down, and that the military remove themselves from politics. The protests were called *hirak*, which means «popular movement» in Arabic.

As a means to calm the protests and keep their power, the military withdrew their support from Bouteflika. Instead of influencing politics behind the scenes – which they had been doing until then – they took on a more direct political role. They appointed a transitional government, and the chief of the army made public speeches almost every week. Finally they announced new elections on 12 December, in which the only five candidates allowed to stand were all pro-Bouteflika. These elections were boycotted by most Algerians, but a new president – Abdelmadjid Tebboune – was nevertheless elected. The protests continued, but when Covid-19 emerged in March 2020, protesters decided to cease the demonstrations until the pandemic passed. It might seem on the surface as if not much has changed in Algeria. Below the surface, though, many changes have indeed taken place.

**Protesters found new forms of civil resistance**

Since 1954, Algeria had been marked by violent political conflicts. Algeria had been colonized by France since 1830. For many years, Algerians resisted this colonization with non-violent means. When this did not work, and following violent French repression, the national struggle of Algerians became armed in 1954. When Algeria became an independent state in 1962, after a brutal war, it had therefore become militarized, and the army was from the very beginning the strongest player in the country. Like other countries at the end of the 1980s, Algeria experienced protests demanding political and socio-economic change in the country. This led to the adoption of some political and socio-economic reforms, and the organization of the first free elections in the country’s history. The Islamist party, the Islamic Salvation Front, won the 1990 elections, which were then canceled by the army. The army’s crackdown on the party and its sympathizers escalated into a conflict between the two that led to a bloody civil war.

When protests erupted in 2019, there was therefore a widespread fear that they would once again turn violent. But this did not happen. From the very beginning, protesters made a conscious choice to remain non-violent at all costs. They were aware that if violence were used, they would be severely repressed by the police forces or the army. On many occasions, protesters who were victims of police violence avoided responding, to avoid any
collective repression. When protesters were confronted by police forces, they often put up their hands and chanted *silmiya, silmiya* – «peaceful, peaceful».

Furthermore, the protesters did not want to appoint any leaders, and decisions were largely made in a non-centralized way, using networks based on social media. This was partly so that leaders would not be targeted for imprisonment, and partly so that they would not get co-opted by the ruling elite. Many Algerians remembered the protests that occurred in 2001, when Berbers from the Kabylie region engaged in widespread civil protests, asking for cultural recognition. At that time, leaders and spokespersons were appointed who were to advance their claims. These leaders were, however, co-opted by the regime, and the protesters at that time did not achieve many of their goals. This time around, protesters are attempting to maintain the horizontal nature of the movement. The idea is that the movement’s strength comes from its numbers, and that appointing leaders could undermine its collective nature.

**A new common identity**

For the last several decades, Algeria has been marked by many fairly deep social and political cleavages. Some are out in the open and noted by most people, whereas others have been more hidden. One of the most important cleavages that emerged in the late 1980s and the ’90s was between the Islamists and the non-Islamists. The Islamists were a strong social force in the 1980s and early ’90s, but became less popular during and after the civil war. Even though this cleavage became less pronounced during the Bouteflika era, the collective memory about the civil war means that it is still present in people’s minds.

In addition, the country has seen a cleavage between the Arab and Berber populations. This cleavage emerged to a certain extent during the period of French colonization, when the French attempted a divide-and-rule strategy. But after independence it didn’t go away. Algeria has also had political conflicts related to the center and the periphery, because many peripheral areas have been left behind and not developed by the authorities. Even within the central cities there have been strong geographical cleavages, where some poor areas have been much less developed than others.

Algeria has also seen political conflicts concerning the roles and rights of men and women. Algeria’s legal code is in many areas discriminatory towards women, and this has been heavily debated for the last couple of decades.

During these protests, however, it seems as though a new common identity has emerged, where the main cleavage is between the people and the elite, which the protesters usually refer to as the *clan of Bouteflika*. The protests have been cross-generational, and all the major streams in Algerian society have been present – Islamists, liberals, Arabs and Berbers. It has been cross-regional – people have participated from North to South and from East to West. Men and women have participated as equals. Even though the regime has at times attempted to create division by painting the protests as backed by external powers, these attempts have been rejected by the protesters.

**Politicization of the public space**

During the last few decades the public space in Algeria has been non-political. Demonstrations and collective political gatherings in the open space have been forbidden in the country since 2001, when the aforementioned revolts took place in the Kabylie region. After the civil war, Algeria did not become a police state like Syria, Libya or East Germany, where people were afraid of voicing their opinions even in private. Privately, it was
quite common for Algerians to complain about the system, and the print media had much leeway to criticize the regime. But this freedom of speech had clear limitations. On the TV stations there was no criticism of the regime, and one could not gather publicly to protest.

Among the few large arenas where Algerians could gather publicly and express dissatisfaction with the regime were football stadiums. Football fans usually sang songs which were not only about their team, but also about the state of the country. The seeds of the current protests can therefore be found among football fans, who were among the first to launch protests against Bouteflika. The fact that the protesters overcame the ban on public protests, and brought their dissatisfaction out of the stadiums and onto the streets, was widely perceived as a large symbolic victory. On social media, many people wrote that «the wall of fear was torn down».

For Algerian women, this occupation of the public space has been particularly important. The Algerian football stadiums were male-dominated. They were not formally closed to women, but in practice football games were only attended by men. When protests reached the streets, it was a double victory for Algerian women. Women have played an important role during the protests, alongside men. For instance, they have helped keep the protests non-violent. Several protesters have told me that there have been many occasions where male protesters were getting provoked and were tempted to respond violently, and the female protesters at their side played an important role in intervening peacefully between them and the police. This seems to have given many women an increased political confidence. Some female protesters have combined the popular demand for the removal of Bouteflika's clan with a demand for stronger women’s rights, and a revision of the family code.

These processes seem to have led to a larger politicization of the Algerian people. In the last few decades, involvement in political parties, labor unions and civil society organizations has not been common among Algerians. The closed political environment has kept people away from politics. Bouteflika tried with some success to weaken and undermine opposition parties, which led people to distrust politicians. Politics was often considered a dirty game for people who wanted to advance their own interests. This also applied to civil society organizations and labor unions, which were mostly controlled by the regime. The regaining of the public space and the political discussions on social media platforms seem to have given lots of ordinary Algerians a renewed interest in politics and getting involved.

Citizen journalism and the use of social media

Finally, the protests have opened up social media as an important platform for political discussion and involvement. As mentioned above, the Algerian media did enjoy a limited freedom of speech during the Bouteflika era. The print media could criticize the regime to a certain extent, whereas the TV and radio stations – owned by the state or owners who were co-opted by the state – did not. When the protests erupted, the TV and radio stations did not report what was happening. Many Algerians also noted that international media displayed very little interest in the protests in Algeria, compared to uprisings in many other countries, or compared to the Arab uprisings in 2011. This led some of the protesters to accuse international media of turning a blind eye to what was happening in Algeria for political reasons. It may have been a factor, however, that the authorities attempted to keep international journalists out.

When they saw that the protests were not being covered by other established outlets, many
Algerians began to engage in citizen journalism. They created online platforms where they covered the protests and mobilized protesters. The regime has attempted to crack down on some of this dissent, for example by jailing some bloggers and citizen journalists. Nevertheless, so far it seems as though many Algerians have been undeterred and are continuing to share their opinions on social media.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit Algeria, the use of social media became even more important. Initially, some protesters wanted to keep on demonstrating in the streets, as they thought the continued regime repression was a worse fate than getting sick from Covid. After prolonged discussions in these horizontal networks, however, there emerged a consensus that Algerians needed to protect each other, and therefore avoid too much close contact. It was decided that the physical demonstrations would resume when it was deemed safe. In the meantime, many protesters are reaching out to each other on social media, and there are lively discussions on what strategies the movement should pursue in the future.

What lies ahead?
When the Covid pandemic recedes, the public protests will probably start once again—depending, of course, on the response of the regime. It is difficult to know what form they will take, and how the regime will respond. It is also impossible to know whether the protesters will achieve more of their goals, and succeed in creating a more democratic and just Algeria. Due to the deteriorating economic situation in the country, and the corruption which is seemingly worse than ever, it is nevertheless highly likely that protests and social unrest will continue to be a part of the Algerian social landscape.

The protest movement faces several dilemmas in deciding how to proceed. The fact that the protests have been leaderless may in fact have created broader involvement from more groups in society, and even though the regime jailed some key figures in the movement it did not impact the movement as a whole. At the same time, it becomes more difficult to negotiate a transition when there are no leaders who can speak on behalf of the protesters. At some point, when protesters deem the time to be right, there will probably emerge leaders and representatives who can negotiate for solutions with the army and the regime.

It may also be argued that some of the protesters’ demands have been too vague and utopian. A common slogan in the protests have been yetnahaw ga3 – «they all must go» in the Algerian dialect. Algeria is presently ruled by a complex patron-client network which encompasses the army, the political elite and the economic elite. It is very difficult to imagine that all of this network will just disappear. Transitions to democracy in other countries have usually been more gradual, without the complete removal of the old elite. What may be hoped for is rather a period of transition, where the old elite makes some concessions, and Algeria gradually becomes more democratic and inclusive.

My personal conviction is that such a process will become more likely if the protest movement attempts to formalize and organize itself. If they appoint branches and leaders across the country who represent their different milieus, it may be easier to apply formal pressure on the current power-holders. At the moment, the protest movement has attempted to stay out of political life, because they do not trust that any political process will be fair. But without engaging with the political sphere, it will probably be difficult to get any real concessions.

Sources
This essay draws on a variety of sources. The claims in the essay are not sourced throughout, but it does
not contain any factual information which is controversial or historically disputed. For the Algerian war of independence, a standard work is *Histoire de la guerre d’algérie (1954–1962)* by Benjamin Storra (2004), or *Algeria, 1830–2000: A Short History* (2004) by the same author, which is available in English. For the civil war in the '90s, one may look at *La guerre civile en Algérie, 1990–1998* by Luis Martinez (1998). For the Bouteflika era, the hirak and the recent protests, the most thorough book is probably *Algérie, la nouvelle indépendence* by Jean-Pierre Filiu (2019). Yahia Zoubir’s short report «The Algerian Crisis: Origins and Prospects for a Second Republic» (2019) is available online, as is the recent book chapter «The Algerian Hirak» (2021) by Jessica Northey. I have also followed the protest movement closely online and through acquaintances in Algeria, and the analysis of the protest movement is informed by these personal observations as well.

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