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Algeria at Fifty and the Regime's Successful Fiascos

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Three major developments marked Algerian affairs in 2011. First, former minister of defence General Khaled Nezzar was arrested in Geneva, in September 2011, to answer human rights and torture charges pressed by TRIAL (Track Impunity Always), an NGO best known for tracking down dictators like Pinochet. Second, Rachad Movement, an Algerian opposition group in exile, launched Rachad TV making it Algeria's first opposition channel to broadcast to Algerians over the crucial Nilesat satellite, which carries most of the Arab world channels. Rachad TV was soon joined by Al Magharibia TV, a London-based TV focussed on North African affairs, but mainly on the political situation in Algeria. Third, General Bachir Tartag, a retired Algerian intelligence officer, was called back to head the interior security branch DSI, within the regime's intelligence services DRS. Each of those three developments is a reminder in itself of the reality on the ground and the nature of the daily regime –society interaction in Algeria.



Despite the geopolitical earthquake which has struck its immediate and regional neighbourhood the Algerian regime was thinking by the end of last summer that it had managed to survive the waves of the Arab Spring; in that the Algerian protests never reached a tipping point. In private, the regime's figures have declared victory over the opposition. The regime managed to use the divisive issue of the military intervention in Libya to discredit any calls for change in Algeria. It worked. But before the regime could declare victory in public, having re-invented its utility now (just as it did following 9/11) as a stabilising force in the face of the uncontrolled circulation of heavy weapons and even anti-aircraft missiles which might fall in the hands of the trans-Sahel terrorist groups, a very bad piece of news came around the same time that the world was glued to TV screens learning of the breaking news of the capture of Qaddafi. In Algeria, it was not the capture of Qaddafi that afternoon which was going viral in the activists' blog-sphere but rather the arrest of General Nezzar. In April 2001, a similar move was attempted by families of Algerian victims but somehow Nezzar was tipped off and he was hurriedly flown from Paris to Algiers in the middle of the night. This time, it seems that an intelligence failure or non-cooperation on the Swiss authorities side, unlike with the French in 2001, meant that TRIAL managed to track him down. General Nezzar was heard for around ten continuous hours by a Swiss judge. He was released but the case is open, witnesses are being heard by the judge. General Nezzar returned home but this means that his travel options are very restricted now. More importantly, the Nezzar episode reminded the whole world about what the Algerian regime has been trying to convince the world to forget, i.e. the fact that exactly twenty years this month there was a coup d'etat after the Islamist FIS party won the first round of Algeria's first plural parliamentary elections, in December 1991. General Nezzar, then minister of defence, ousted President Chadli Benjedid, set up a military council to run the country, suspended the constitution, declared a state of emergency, opened detention camps in the regions where France conducted its first nuclear tests in 1960, in the south of Algeria, and started hunting down any one who opposed the coup — Islamist or otherwise. Soon Algeria plunged in its bloody conflict that claimed over 200,000 dead, and over 10,000 disappeared. It was done, General Nezzar and his supporters claimed, in order to save the republican values of Algeria. Now Nezzar's victims are asking for justice.

For the last twenty years the Algerian regime had managed to force its agenda. Internationally, it managed to lock itself in the global war on terror campaign after 9/11 and had since then used it to justify the coup and what followed it of human rights abuses. Domestically, it decreed a national reconciliation law, passed by referendum, which granted amnesty to all military or regime figures involved in the "National Tragedy" as it is officially called. The reconciliation law offered financial compensation to the victims of the National Tragedy, but no truth or justice. Article 46 stipulates a 3-5 year prison sentence to any Algerian who questions the amnesty clause. The fact that the regime has total control over TV, radio and the newspapers meant that it has the monopoly of all the propaganda tools, which shape public opinion. Blogs and websites of opposition activists in exile were not deemed a big threat by the regime because it made sure they are censored. Besides, internet connectivity rates are very low compared to its neighbours, including Libya. When Rachad Movement announced the launch of Algeria's first opposition (and indeed first non-state owned TV outlet, ever since independence in 1962), the news had the equivalent impact of a liberation movement obtaining a radio station in the decolonisation years of the 1950s to 1970s. The regime's response was two-fold. First it exerted pressure on the French Eutelsat company which owns the satellites fleet and forced it to pull the plug on Rachad TV half an hour before its first launch. Second, the regime hurriedly bought, through its crony businessmen, a bankrupt TV station in France and got it on air in the matter of few weeks. The purpose is to offer Algerians the same propaganda but packaged in more modern design, exactly like what Mubarak did through satellite channels launched by his party's businessmen in the late 1990s, or Alassad in mid-2000. It did not work. Eutelsat came under criticism by activists and

NGOs which derided it for favouring its financial interests in the midst of historic times in the Arab world. The resurrected TV station was not even noticed by Algerians who were overwhelmed by the changes around them. Thus, Rachad TV made a triumphant come back in October where the arrest of General Nezzar was its first breaking news. It was historic in Algerian affairs. Had it not been for Rachad TV the whole news would have been contained to the Algerian papers which, when it comes to serious matters like this one, would not publish anything, *"until they receive the fax"* (from the DRS that is), as it is said in Algeria.

The only way to stop an opposition TV offering Algerians alternative perspective on Algerian politics and affairs is to jam its signals as Quaddafi did or Assad of Syria is doing with Aljazeera. Rachad's message of non-violent radical change in Algeria was consolidated by the launch of Al Magharibia TV, which is based in London. Both channels have become very popular among Algerians at home and abroad. "Echo of the Street" a very popular call-in show on Al Magharibia is giving real headaches to the DRS. However, it is the programmes of Rachad TV consisting mainly of debate talks which host activists, academics, intellectuals, etc from all the political spectrum that are the source of grave concern for the regime. The TVs are giving Algerians a voice and a platform to air their views, frustration and aspiration for real, not facade, democracy in Algeria. Easy access to mobile phones and Skype means that protests or issues in the most remote corners in Algeria no longer go unheard of. What the state TV ignores in its daily main news-hour, is aired exactly at the same time on Rachad and Al Magharibia TVs. The fact that the scale of protests has been expanding in geography and time means that the advent of free TVs might yield something unwelcome for the regime. It is in this context that we understand the removal of the director of interior security and his replacement by General Bachir Tartag, who was called back from retirement, in order to help turn around the situation.

In the past, such changes and nominations were treated as national security issues that were top secret. However, this time the DRS made it known that Bachir Tartag is back, through one of its online news outlets. The news was even reported in the regime's papers then picked up by Aljazeera. Human rights groups received the news with grave concern. The new head of the DSI made his name in the years which followed the coup. According to military and intelligence ranking officers who defected in the 1990s General Tartag prefers hands-on coercion tactics so to speak.

The Algerian regime's current challenge is two-fold. First find an antidote to the ongoing protests, which have not spared any sector or segment of society. Indeed, we have made the point last spring that by pumping financial incentives (pay-raises, generous loans, etc) to the protesters in order to win them away of fuelling any political initiative for change, the regime would be opening the floodgates of the protests to Algerians who now perceive the regime in a time of unprecedented weakness. We have also argued that even assuming that the regime would be able to satisfy all the pay-raise demands of the active work force, it will at the end of the day have to face the unemployed and disillusioned youth to whom the regime cannot offer jobs any time soon. The concessions the regime made have on one hand encouraged the rest to protest and on the other hand is pushing the unemployed to more radical forms of protest; where clashes, self-immolations (over 100 attempts around 20 of which were fatal), and riots have become a normal scene across Algeria. The regime's second challenge now is to on one hand convince Algerians to go to vote in the upcoming legislative elections in May, and on the other hand come up with a formula that would both give the illusion of change; to be in tune with the Arab Spring, but on the other hand keep the same structures in place, i.e. a cosmetic change, but a convincing one nonetheless. At stake is the succession of the Abdelaziz Bouteflika, 75 years old and in power since 1999, in the next presidential elections in 2014 (or before that given his frail and ailing health) is at the heart of all these parameters. There is also the issue of the succession of the Toufik, 74 years old and head of the DRS since 1990, whose health is a matter of speculations.

General Tartag's mission, the de facto No. 2 in DRS now, would be to tackle both challenges, i.e. put down the protests before it is late. There has already been a worrying development (for the regime that is) this month where a housing distribution corruption case in Laghouat, 400 km south of Algiers, developed into a two-week dead-town protest and sit-in where the removal of province governor was demanded by the protesters who camped over several nights. The regime bowed to public pressure and negotiated! General Tartag has also the formidable task of convincing Algerians of the utility and credibility of the upcoming elections. Boycott is already the mood among Algerians as it can be felt from the calls to the opposition TV programmes. Hence, the regime has already started its campaign by sending SMS messages calling on Algerians to vote in the upcoming elections in May, even though the election date has not been fixed yet! Imams in the mosques have been instructed to preach in the Friday sermons the need to vote in order to preserve stability and security in that boycott would be a recipe for chaos, goes the rhetoric.

What the regime wants is long queues at the polling stations like the scenes the world witnessed in Tunisia and Egypt. It needs the credibility of the turn-out for the results would be agreed in a quota system where the regime's ten new co-opted parties allowed this Tuesday Jan. 24th, after ten years of a political, not constitutional ban, just a couple of months before the elections. Now that the current co-opted opposition parties' utility has expired prematurely, thanks to the Arab Spring, the regime is busy fabricating new facade parties to animate the upcoming elections. Thus, there will be two Islamist parties winning 40% of the seats (since that is the trend in the region) and the elections would be free and fair. The regime, which has always refused international observers, has taken the initiative this time to call on the European Union to send observers to monitor elections in May. But for this scenario to work the regime needs an acceptable turn-out. In the last 2007 elections turn-out was officially 34%, observers and Wikileaks talk of 10%. The aim then becomes, for the DRS, to maximise all chances to ensure a good turn-out while removing any factors which might organise a boycott campaign. One factor has been already identified and is being dealt with: The Rachad Movement.

Ever since it was set up in April 2007 by a group of activists, academics and former diplomat and intelligence defectors, the Rachad Movement has maintained one single message which boils down to the urgent need for non-violent but radical change of the Algerian regime. The movement's public founding figures have been active in the media and online trying to unify opposition activists and groups in Algeria and exile. Thus Rachad joined efforts with the other Algerian main opposition movement: the Front for National Change (FCN), based in Paris, as well as key outspoken activists in order to bring about a coordinated strategy in the changed context made possible by the Arab Spring. Their most recent initiative was the holding of a

protest outside the Algerian embassy in Paris in order to mark the 20th anniversary of the coup of 11 January 1992. This was a first in Paris. The regime understood that the protest marked the launch of a boycott campaign or worse. On 16th January, five days after the protest, Dr. Mourad Dhina, MIT PhD in Nuclear Physics, co-founder of Rachad Mouvement and Executive Director of Al Karama Foundation, a Geneva-based human rights defence NGO, was arrested in the Orly airport shortly before flying back to Geneva. The French authorities said that Dr. Dhina was arrested on the Algerian government's request and that his extradition would depend on the credibility of the dossier the regime would present. The French authorities say they have nothing against Dr. Dhina. For the Rachad Movement, the FCN and many activists Dhina's arrest marks the inauguration of General Tartag's come back. Worse is feared. Observers of Algerian affairs believe that the timing of the regime's move meant that the aim is to restrict Rachad's activity until the elections are over. An extradition would be difficult to obtain, observers believe, first because the charges themselves passed by an Algerian court in the mid 1990s are unfounded and second because of the nature of the regime itself to whom international law prohibits extradition of political activists.

There is a campaign underway to free Dr. Dhina, but the whole episode has brought the issue of the West's governments support for autocratic regimes to the fore yet again. Hilary Clinton has already blessed the so-called political reforms passed by the rubber-stamp parliament; and is visiting Algiers next month. I have stopped counting the number of visits by U.S. top brass to Algiers. Catherine Ashton has already answered favourably the regime's request of election observers. As for the U.K. whose strategic and economic interests are nothing like the U.S. or France's has surprisingly been offering free and generous support to the autocratic regime. On four instances, UK ministers and the ambassador offered obliging comments which the regime's propaganda machine used to convince the disfranchised Algerians of the West's support for their way of rule. All this happens while everyone knows that the whole thing is just ACT 2 of the political circus whose ACT1 started by the dramatic opening of the coup of 1992 and ended in early 2011 just around the time neighbouring Ben Ali fled to Riyadh. 2012 was meant to prepare ACT3 noted in the calendar for 2014 when Bouteflika's term comes to end. But it seems the regime is having trouble running Act 2. There must be something magic with 2012; it marks 50years since the independence. The generation of those who were born then, like Dr.Dhina, should be like their peers in the UK, France, and the U.S. running the affairs of Algeria. Instead, Algeria is run by those who were already in power before even Cameron and Obama, to name two only, were born. Something is bound to change in Algeria at fifty. It is the logic of history. What is more worrying is that some elements in the regime and its clients in society think the regime succeeded in defeating the Arab Spring. In fact, the Algerian regime at fifty has succeeded in producing fiascos.

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