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Unrest In Algeria: The Window is Closing Fast

LSE IDEAS

By Lakhdar Ghattas,

“Algeria is ‘sitting on a volcano’.” We will continue to sift for opportunities to support reform, and should be prepared to offer our frank but private opinion of Algeria’s progress along the way”. This was how David Pearce, the former U.S. ambassador to Algiers, concluded his [report to the Department of State](#) four days after the April 2009 presidential elections. An election which paved the way for a third term for Mr. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, following an amendment of the constitution, in November 2008, which removed the restriction on only two consecutive mandates. Algerians and close observers of Algerian affairs did not of course need [Wikileaks cables](#) to know that Algeria has been sitting on a volcano. Algeria has been in a state of paralysis since plans for the third term went ahead two years ago. It was a moment when the Algerian ruling establishment crossed the Rubicon. A general state of government dysfunction manifests in every aspect of Algerian affairs, not least the [SONATRACH scandal](#) and several other corruption affairs in various key sectors. As the ruling establishment struggled to reconcile their entrenched disagreements, a state of paralysis gripped the already blocked channels of communication between state and society. This meant that violent protests and riots have become the only medium of exchange between top and bottom structures of the state. The genuine civil society in Algeria has been decimated and replaced, over the last two decades or so, by a facade, weak and discredited structure of rent distribution and cooptation. Algeria’s return to the World Cup, after twenty years, galvanised the national spirit and delayed the inevitable explosion of frustration fuelled by the lack of opportunity for the youth in a country which struggles to take off economically, despite the unprecedented public investment programmes (\$200 billion for 1999-2008, \$286 billion for 2009-2014) and \$150 billion in reserves. As soon as the World Cup anaesthesia was over, Algerians woke up to the same bitter reality; and as the Tunisian uprising rolled into its third week, Algerian youth were rioting in the streets in early January protesting exclusion and demanding social justice. Those riots were very violent in over 20 provinces and resulted in 5 killed, several hundreds wounded and over 1,000 arrested. The destruction of public property and damage to private businesses was significant. But because this was Algeria, a country that is no stranger to violent protest, the riots were overshadowed by the uprising next door in Tunisia, whose last revolt dated to the early 1980s. By January 10th calm was re-established while the government rushed in to pass an emergency economic incentive package in order to cap tariffs and grant tax breaks on basic foodstuff imports. The government blamed the riots on lobbies’ plotting in an effort to challenge new commercial regulations, and opted to believe that the problem was a mere consumption one fuelled by hikes in foodstuffs. Witnessing the uprising in one of the neighbourhoods of Algiers from its eruption to the return of calm I warned at the time that the issue was primarily political.

The spectacular way in which Ben Ali fled and Mubarak resigned increased panic within the ruling establishment in Algiers. A more comprehensive economic package targeted to the youth was deployed, which included almost interest-free loans and subsidies for housing, among other measures. The news of the uprising coming from neighbouring Libya added to the distress of the establishment, while timid but growing calls for genuine reform started to open the debate on an issue which had until then been ignored. Panic was at its peak. The tragic turn of events which had taken place in Libya was a golden opportunity for the regime in that it could revive the fear of Algerians of returning to the bloody civil conflict 1990s decade should they press further for demands for radical reforms. The regime have come to the charge now that it could play on the difficult memory of the tragic 1990s among Algerians. Nevertheless, what remained of the genuine civil society managed to form a broad coalition head by the respected human rights militant Ali Yahia Abdennour, aged 90; intellectual Dr. Fodil Boumala, and columnist Kamel Daoud to name few. [The National Coordination for Change and Democracy \(CNCD\)](#), led by Dr. Mustapha Bouchachi the president of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights, succeeded in breaking the barrier of fear when it managed to stage a march in Algiers despite the unprecedented and disproportionately heavy riot-police blockade. The 19 year long state of emergency was lifted soon thereafter *de jure* but remains in force *de facto*, in that marches are still banned and a new legal framework of security measures has been put in lieu of the state of emergency.

The escalation of violence in Libya suited the regime’s rhetoric in deterring any peaceful mass mobilisation for fear the country might default back to the instability of the 1990s. The regular Saturday marches organised by the CNCD lost momentum and the regime’s bet on the collective tragic memory and fear seemed winning. The government then geared up its campaign to claim that Mr. Bouteflika has been in office for only 12 years (unlike Ben Ali, Mubarak, Qadhafi, and Abdullah Salah) and that the government has delivered in comparison. In other words, Algeria is not Tunisia, nor for that matter Egypt or Libya. On those two accounts my counter-argument has been the following: the regime would be making a big mistake to exaggerate the impact of the memory of the 1990s on the twenty and thirty year olds. If fear of returning to the violent and tragic 1990s is so deeply instilled among Algerians then how would the regime then explain the fact that Algerians have been protesting violently almost non-stop, especially over the last two years? How would it explain the 11,000 riots and 70 protests registered in 2010 and last March alone respectively? There is no denying the presence of fear but it is not as profound within this disfranchised young generation as its elders. The lack of opportunity has offset fear below the deterrence threshold. On the argument that

the government has delivered then I would say the riots themselves over jobs, public services, housing, etc undermine those claims and anything achieved is dwarfed by the financial means available (\$158 billion in reserves) and the duration (two terms and half). The humiliating way in which the constitution was amended to allow a third term tarnished the little achievements of Mr. Bouteflika's rule.

Meanwhile calls for genuine reform emerged from within the ranks of the regime. Key historic figures like Abdelhamid Mehri and Hocine Ait Ahmed have both addressed open letters to Mr. Bouteflika urging him to execute profound political reforms so as to coincide with Algeria's 50th anniversary of independence next year. There have been similar calls from within the ranks of the military as well as the intelligence services *Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité* (DRS), in the form of articles in *Le Monde Diplomatique* (and the Algerian daily *El Watan*.) This latter's dossier, of 15 March, on the DRS was historic in that for the first time public debate has been opened on the security intelligence services and their role within the affairs of the state. It is clear something is in the making. Now even the coalition parties forming the ruling government have called for profound reforms including amendments to reinstate into the constitution the two-term restriction and dissolving the whole facade democracy structure (parliament, local assemblies, call for anticipated elections, etc).

This has created the perception that the regime is on the defensive and compelled to buy social peace in order to quell any sign of unrest. It is what I call "the now-or-never moment". Over the last two weeks several sectors have staged sit-ins in Algiers, despite the heavy security presence and curtailment. The list is long but four need be examined to elicit the trend. First, the students went on strike and camped outside the ministry of higher education as well as the presidency palace for over a month. Second, para-military communal guards, formed in the 1990s to help combat terrorism alongside the regular military and police forces, managed to march in Algiers, in uniform, to protest plans to disband the corps. Third, teachers on temporary contracts for many years maintained a sit in outside the presidency palace for ten years despite police harassment aimed at breaking up the protest. Fourth, Sonatrach workers in the gas-rich field Hassi R'mel went on hunger strike on socio-economic grievances for few days following which the company's top management has come to meet their demands this week. All four protests managed to have most of their demands satisfied after two weeks of a *bras de fer* with the regime. This has had an instant domino effect on the other sectors, and right now resident doctors (7,500 doctors), and the powerful independent civil servants union which comprises the personnel of Algeria's 1541 municipalities have all gone on strike. Meanwhile protests of neighbourhoods and the jobless have been flaring up here and there more often. This week Mohamed Smani self-immolated his 19 year old body and succumbed to his burn wounds several hours later. Over 30 have now gone down that path, among which 6 have died.

The regime might have perfected tactics of all sorts (media campaigns, heavy security policing, etc) in order to abort the revived civil society mobilisation in the aftermath of the Tunisian uprising, and one might argue it has succeeded in that effort. What we are, however, observing now is that the mass mobilisation the regime feared has gone sector-based, making it impossible to discredit it as Islamist, ethnic, or subversive. The regime was caught off-guard by the impressive march of 3,000 para-military guards, the persistency palace sit-ins of the students, the resilient teachers and the disarming hunger strike of the SONATRACH workers. Each threatened a nightmare scenario: confrontation with elements that fought terrorism, disfranchising the students and risking pushing them to the opposition movement, prolonged strike as high school Baccalaureate exam loomed and finally paralysing the most sensitive energy sector generating the country's hard currency.

Having witnessed the results obtained by their fellow active countrymen in the space of two weeks or so, the 'now-or-never' spirit has been spreading like wildfire, reaching every sector; even the journalists of the state's mouthpiece *EL Moudjahid* and the national radio have staged sit ins. The state apparatus is chronically dysfunctional but now it is being rapidly paralysed. The regime won't be able to satisfy all of the 'now-or-never' protests. The only way out from this deadlock is for the regime to break this cycle by declaring a roadmap for real reform. A few viable projects have been devised by credible figures such as Dr. Ahmed Benbitour's initiative. It is the other 'now-or-never' for timely change, in that the regime might not have another chance to effect profound reforms in the future, should it miss this opportunity

Should the regime fail to seize this opportunity and introduce profound changes which would address the real political problems in Algeria then I am afraid the following scenario will come into play: the fact that some sectors driven by the 'now-or-never' spirit will inevitably be disappointed and not see their demands met; in that the government will not arguably be able to satisfy the socio-economic grievances of protesting workers would prepare them to forge tacit and ad hoc alliances with those outside the active segment of the society i.e. the jobless and disfranchised youth who rioted last January. In other words, the disappointed workers who are on strike now would march behind and support the jobless and marginalised youth who have been in the streets for several years now. This possible scenario would give momentum for another wide-spread uprising, which would in turn focus the minds within the ruling establishment as to the urgency of change. Should things come to this scenario, then I am confident a fraction of the January uprising in terms of intensity would force the way for real change, probably in a more peaceful and less costly way than the Tunisian and Egyptian experiences. There is still time for the regime to end the 'now-or-never' domino effect and go ahead with genuine reforms, but the clock is ticking. Over the next few months new factors will come into play as well: the end-of year exams in high schools and the spectre of a missed year should universities not regain normalcy, followed by summer with Ramadhan in the hottest month this year (August, when domestic demand for electricity because of increased use of air conditioning sets in not only south but also north reaches its peak); either of these factors might become the trigger, especially electricity supply shortages (judging by last summer's experience); where riots flared up in many towns and villages of the southeast over the issue. There was a region-wide violent precedent one to this in the mid-1970s. Let's hope that the ultimate national interest of Algeria focuses minds and rises above all because time is of the essence and the window of opportunity is closing fast. The regime would be making a costly mistake to believe that the chaotic situation in Libya and the fragile one in Tunisia and Egypt would make the west favour stability in Algeria for the simple reason that Algeria cannot escape the ripple effects of the geopolitical earthquakes in the region, two of which on its eastern borders. History is on the march.



Security forces blocked planned anti-government protests in the capital [Source:AFP]

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