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Algeria

# A presidential election to ensure the system's continuity

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**In the days leading up to 12 December 2019 in Paris, New York and even Montreal in a temperature of -13°C, Algerians organized themselves in front of the polling stations to put the case for voters not to endorse the electoral masquerade. They wanted to set an example from the outside to the Algerian people. This gave confidence to the people to contest the presidential election called by the de facto regime in order to ensure its continuity.**

The 22nd of February 2019 was the first time that the people had mobilized across the country since independence. It was an uprising against the humiliation of being ruled by a "living dead" president, "a frame". [1] Bouteflika's candidacy was the straw that broke the camel's back after 20 years of monarchical drift, policies of impoverishment of the broad masses and a regression of all fundamental freedoms. He attacked trade unions and associations, which have been swallowed up by the government. All mediations were broken, in favour of a royal consensus.

Many state-owned enterprises were sold to the nouveaux riches. Bouteflika tried to emancipate himself from the army, accelerating the clan war which seeks to define the clan who will redistribute the oil rent, and for whose benefit. The civil war produced a deep political crisis, with the impossibility of practicing politics. Regions have resisted, particularly in Kabylia in 2001, but the process has not spread. The current situation is the product of these elements.

## A movement that never stops

In early March, the people became aware of their strength, especially around the day of March 8 and the general strike that led to a crack in the regime which resulted in the sacrifice of Bouteflika, who embodies the new financial bourgeoisie. Bouteflika's departure strengthened the people's confidence. This led to the failure of the July 2019 election, as the people believed that rupture with the regime could not go through a presidential election.

During the summer there was an attempt at recomposition within the regime. On 12 September 2019 the military chief of staff decided to call elections, and the frontman president, Bensalah, called them for December. Meanwhile, we demonstrated in Biskra at 50°C, in Algiers every week despite the heat. The people formulated their demands: "that they all leave", "el Blad Bladna N'dirou raina" ("the country is ours, we do what we want with it" and "independence". Behind this slogan is the understanding that independence was confiscated by the border army, the only political force organized at the time. It is said that while the entire population was thin, these "*djoundis* (combatants) from the borders" were fat. The people have never been consulted on how to build Algeria. Attempts to draft a constitution in 1963 were imposed on the people.

On 13 October 2019, the day the hydrocarbons bill was presented, the mobilization was significant and the slogan "they sold the country" gained even more force. The social question had been posed. On November 1, 2019, the anniversary of the start of the War of Independence, the people came out to say "we want to continue our revolution", "we want to take power", denouncing the regime as an agent of French colonialism, of Macron and Total. The law was written by an American research consultancy! There were also mobilizations against the finance law. A slogan expresses the situation well: "shale gas for the Americans, natural gas for France, and for the Algerians, tear gas".

## An illegitimate election

On Thursday 12 December, election day, we had immense mobilizations, among the largest since the beginning of the movement. But nobody talked about it in France, because the only allies of the regime are France, the United States, China, the Emirates and Saudi Arabia. It has no popular support.

There was a co-optation: the Constitutional Council, appointed by Bouteflika, made a *fatwa* to extend the mandate of Bensalah and the government, to change the composition of the government. The election of 12 December was organized by an illegitimate government, by an illegitimate president, including from the point of view of the constitution which is no longer in force since 5 July, convened from a barracks, to co-opt front figures and to ensure the continuity of the neoliberal and undemocratic regime.

The elections in France were protected by the CRS, while Algerians peacefully demonstrated outside the Embassy in Paris. In Algeria we are told that 9 million people voted, or a 39.9% rate of participation. But none of the 8 TV channels has succeeded in broadcasting images of people who voted. We saw soldiers in line, well disciplined, going to vote, but nothing else. In Bejaia, to go to vote, they broke the wall between the barracks and the school, instead of going outside! The Islamist-influenced Al Magharibia channel, which supports the movement and broadcasts from Paris, was suspended last October with the agreement of the French government.

The two weeks before the elections, a bludgeoning took place: we were told to watch out for the Islamists. But they don't represent anything today. We were told that the movement was a Kabyle disorder, but arrests were made everywhere ... and the Kabyle flag was waved all over the country. The government denounced a supposed foreign intervention, but everyone remembers that the French ministers came for years to explain to us that our president was lucid, intelligent, and had a great culture when he was a vegetable! They also relied on a resolution of the European parliament demanding "the immediate and unconditional release of all those accused of having exercised their right to freedom of expression" to incite nationalism and organize demonstrations for the regime... while the government has unfair agreements with the European Union, for example the establishment of the LMD system in higher education, which contributes to blocking the future of Algerian youth.

Tebboune, in his inaugural address, praised businessmen. He did not salute the struggling people, the workers, the unemployed, women, or even his voters. On the other hand, he tried to appeal to nationalist sentiment. The night of the election, while Macron noted "the election of Mr. Tebboune" the latter replied "I will not answer to him [...] I was elected by the Algerian people and I only recognize the Algerian people"... then they spent an hour on the phone. As Mohammed Harbi says, France did not leave Algeria, it came with capitalism, and left capitalism behind it.

## A politicization without alternative, without political program

On 12 December the government co-opted a president, Tebboune, who embodies the continuity of the system and the depths of the Algerian bureaucracy, a former minister of the interior, a former housing minister, and a former prime minister under Bouteflika. The people do not accept this president. On Friday the 13th, demonstrators came with bags of flour, and put flour on their faces, because Tebboune's son was involved in a cocaine trafficking case... The central slogans concern the illegitimacy of the president. But the dominant discourse spread, notably in the media, is the relief of finally having a president. There will be a reflux from the mobilization. This already happened at the time when Bouteflika resigned, because part of the people rose up only against humiliation, and it was the youth who imposed the continuation of the movement. In March, April and May, clandestine emigration ("Harraga") virtually disappeared from the statistics, as the hope for change emerged, and then resumed during the summer.

The movement is peaceful because the people know that it has no relationship of military forces with the regime. The

strength of the mobilization is the huge size of the Friday rallies. On 12 December 450 young people were arrested in Oran. In Bejaïa, a general strike was organized, with the participation of the unions, before December 12. This department, which has accumulated organizational traditions since the 1980s, with self-organization, demonstrations on May 1, and martyrs from the mobilizations of the 1980s, has the role of paving the way for the whole of the country.

The movement is fundamentally democratic. But there is not a gap between democratic and social issues. In February, the PST (Parti socialiste des travailleurs – Socialist Workers' Party) was the only organization to advance the question of the Constituent Assembly. One of the roles of the Pact for the Democratic Alternative in which we participate is to structure the debate, not to leave it to experts and technocrats. Some PAD organizations consider that the transition can go through a presidential election, but the movement has forced them to evolve. Others want to negotiate with Tebboune but so far the strength of the movement has prevented such negotiation, since the starting point is the end of the system, and the only possible negotiation is the modality of that end, the transition.

## A new Algeria has been revealed

Regarding the perspectives, there was a battle, a first half, which is over. We are going to enter a second battle, to clear out the system. The movement is producing its own alternatives. This alternative we call the sovereign constituent assembly, that is to say, redefining the Algeria of tomorrow, as young people see it today. To settle all democratic and social questions: the situation of women, which is a very important question, the place of religion, the right to work, the distribution of wealth. We are talking about a sovereign constituent process because it must take place under popular control, rather than being drawn up by experts. It should be drawn up by the organised people. They begin to self-organise, at their own rhythm, with political debates in many towns.

Whatever the outcome of the movement, there will be a new way of organizing, of doing politics. People do not organize themselves from a concept, but from the reality of the situation, of needs. In 2001, the movement started on 18 April and on 25 April came the first call for self-organization. It organized itself to face the killings of young people and stop the riots by transforming them into conscious action. The first popular committees organized the recovery of tires and tobacco looted during the riots. And more fundamentally to deal with repression. But it is also the product of the experience of the activist generation of the 1980s which is found in Bejaïa. The current movement will not follow this path. Self-organization exists today on democratic issues, in particular the release of detainees, solidarity with families who are in need, paying and transporting lawyers and demonstrators for trials and to debate. It has been also embryonic but very effective in trying to prevent the December 12 election.

If there is a constituent process, self-organization will also take its place because it is not for the state apparatus to organize elections, it is for the people to do it, because that is the only guarantee to prevent fraud and impose popular control on elected officials. Today, the level of awareness has not been seen since independence.

10 January 2020

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[1] At official events, Bouteflika was represented by his photo in a frame.