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Algeria

Algeria: Popular mobilizations impose first setbacks to regime

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In memory of comrade Achour Idir. Tireless trade union and political activist who passed away on the night of April 3-4, 2019.

The political crisis that engulfs Algeria today did not fall from the sky. It is part of the continuity of a crisis of the regime, which it has deepened.

Crisis of the regime

Already long standing, the crisis of the regime was manifested by a crisis of representation concretized by mass popular disaffection at the electoral level. According to the official participation figures (which are systematically inflated) only 50.7% voted in the last presidential election of 2014 against 74.56% in 2009. Between the two elections, the successful candidate Abdelaziz Bouteflika had lost 4.5 million votes.

However, through the presidential coalition (National Liberation Front-FLN, National Democratic Rally-RND, Algerian People's Movement-MPA and Tadjamoue Amal Al Djazair-TAJ) and its employer (Forum of CEOs-FCE) and employee (Union General Government of Algerian Workers-UGTA) satellites, the government and administration monopolized, especially through public and private television, a sluggish political life in which all opposition was marginalized. Outside the regime's clientele, most Algerians do not vote. Many millions, especially young people, who make up 70% of the population, are not registered on the electoral lists.

The main "elected" institutions did not reflect the election results. The presidency of the Council of the Nation (Senate) and the post of Prime Minister were held by two leaders of a minority party, the RND. These were Abdelkader Bensalah, who has been acting President of the Republic since 9 April, following the resignation of Abdelaziz Bouteflika, and Ahmed Ouyahia, whose government was dissolved on March 31. The senatorial elections of December 2018 were the scene of a massive fraud between parties "allied" to the "presidential majority" in favour of the FLN.

The coup against the president of the National People's Congress (NPC), Said Bouhadja, in October 2018, confirmed the lack of institutional credibility. He was illegally ejected from his post and his office by members of his own party (FLN) and those of the formations of the "presidential coalition". Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia said of this: "Strength is more important than the Constitution".

But the crisis eventually caught up with the main party of the regime, the FLN. And it was in the utmost opacity that, in November 2018, the Secretary General and the leadership of the putschists were removed, not by a vote of the "leaders", but by a decision from the Presidency of the Republic. The party has since been in full "reorganization".

The disaffection did not spare the opposition parties that struggled to convince and mobilize, all tendencies combined, and who have experienced recurring organic crises. The same goes for the employers' and workers' organizations.

Most Algerians no longer believe in the possibility of political alternation under the current regime. Radical Islamists, who had captured the hearts of many citizens in the 1980s and 1990s, were no longer politically credible, but no

other force had managed to occupy the space thus freed up.

Beginning twenty years ago, the reign of Bouteflika was punctuated by an impressive and incessant series of scandals: cocaine trafficking, corruption cases involving land, large public projects (the East-West highway) and procurement with foreign multinationals (multiple Sonatrach-ENI-Saipem cases), the Khalifa affair involving squandering public funds for a company set up by a golden boy, privatizations using symbolic dinar. The list of scandals would be too long to pursue, but all have in common the involvement of members of the nomenklatura (ministers, police and army and so on) and/or their children and the new bourgeois business class.

Many Algerians consider corruption a mere drift from an abstract norm, religious or secular, which commands not stealing. The phenomenon is thus grasped in its purely moral dimension. This spontaneous moralistic vision is consolidated by the conscious discourse of the ultra-neoliberals in the opposition, which tells us the fable of a capitalism without corruption where each would have what they deserve, a good capitalism that allegedly exists elsewhere.

However, it is enough to follow the world news to realize that corruption spares no country and that some “respectable” states even specialize in the recycling of sums that originate from it. Corruption is not a deviation. On the contrary, it represents an objective necessity for the wealthy, condemned to fight in perpetuity against each other to preserve their market share, to acquire new ones, to fill their order books, to oust their competitors and to escape from the taxman who takes their money to build roads, schools, and hospitals. It is an integral part of the capitalist system.

In Algeria, corruption has played a particular historical role over the last forty years. It has contributed, along with the laws dismantling the public sector, to dispossessing the Algerian people of what formally belonged to them through public legal property: companies, agricultural and urban land, movable and immovable assets and so on. It has contributed to the regulation of foreign trade to replace the former public monopoly with a private monopoly. It is not an accident of course, much less an error or a deviation, but a process necessary to allowing an illegitimate minority to accumulate. This dimension of corruption has not escaped the people, who have grasped the relationship between power and wealth.

There has been a concentration of powers and a concomitant rise in authoritarianism. The executive has been considerably strengthened during Bouteflika's various terms of office. The hyper-presidential nature of the Constitution and the appearance of a cult of personality, outrageous and grotesque, express the objective necessity of concentrating powers around a person to unify the different factions and impose policies that do not necessarily enjoy consensus.

This was the case on the Amazigh question, with the recognition of the Amazigh language (Berber) as a national and official language and the establishment of a National Academy of the Amazigh language. Under the pressure of the masses, Bouteflika decided this, even though there is no consensus within the regime. The same goes for certain economic and social issues: privatization, subsidizing the prices of consumer products, the price of gas and electricity, water and so on. The other side of the coin lies in the fact that this hyper-concentration of powers made it difficult to reach consensus on the name of a successor.

The internal settlements of accounts and contradictory decisions that have multiplied in recent years confirmed the cracks in the regime. The irremovable security services boss, General Mohamed Mediène, known as “Toufik”, was sacked a year after Bouteflika's re-election to a fourth term in 2014, and the Intelligence and Security Department (DRS) he led has been restructured.

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In 2018, the arrest of a vessel containing 701 kg of cocaine resulted in the dismissal of the head of the National Security Directorate (DGSN). His successor only lasted a few months, and several measures including changes that he had made within the police were frozen by the Minister of the Interior. Senior officers of the National People's Army (ANP) were banned from leaving the country and their bank accounts frozen before they were arrested. Their unexplained release came shortly afterwards. Seven former police officers accused of undermining state security following police protests against difficult working conditions in 2014 were acquitted on 26 February 2019.

One of the main signs of the regime's crisis is its inability to complete the process of structural economic reforms that began forty years ago. The path has been set towards deregulation since 1980, but the state continues to direct the economy. Energy (hydrocarbons) and mining remain in the public domain to the chagrin of the ultra-neoliberals of the regime and the opposition, as well as the imperialist powers (G7) and their financial institutions (IMF, World Bank and so on). Large public companies that had been privatized (Sider El Hadjar in favour of Arcelor-Mittal, Asmidal which became Fertial after the Spanish group Grupo Villar Mir became majority shareholder and so on) have returned to the fold of the state.

The attempt by Ali Haddad, former leader of the Forum of Business Leaders-FCE (the main employers' organisation) arrested last March 31, to buy the shares of the Spanish group, was foiled thanks to the mobilization of workers of the complex. The Presidency forced the executive to exercise the right of pre-emption of the state, which has regained control of the company. The law on cutting hydrocarbon prices passed in 2005 was not promulgated by the President and was eventually amended a year later. The investment law – which stipulates that Algerian companies associating with foreign partners must hold the majority of shares (51/49) – has been maintained. Imports are falling sharply as a result of government measures (quotas, prohibitions, heavy taxes and so on). The government is also continuing to build social housing, subsidize prices, maintain free public health and education and reject foreign indebtedness.

This contradiction between, on the one hand, the course clearly set towards neoliberalism and the breaks, U-turns and permanent setbacks has for many years fuelled tensions within the regime. It has also fuelled an ultra-neoliberal democratic opposition and growing popular discontent. Unemployment affects 11.7% of the active population and rises to 28.3% among young people aged 16 to 24. Graduates cannot find employment opportunities, while 43% of employees are not declared to social security. The purchasing power of workers, the unemployed, landless peasants and poor peasants, small artisans and traders is falling under the triple effect of rising prices, the depreciation of the dinar and a stagnation of wages and pensions. The reduction of the state's commitment to education and health severely penalizes the underprivileged classes. The regime is challenging what remains of the social state.

This policy, on the other hand, favours the ruling classes (Algerian and foreign capitalists, landowners, importers, big traders, the higher liberal professions and so on) who profit from the illegitimate dispossession of the Algerian people (privatization, public-private "partnership" and so on), and the generous help that the regime gives them. Multinational companies that boast of exporting fertilizers or cement (Fertial, Lafarge and so on) do so thanks to gas subsidized by the state. Cement is exported at half price and the public group Sonelgaz has a deficit of 23 billion dollars!

Faced with the legitimate resistance of the masses, the only answer is repression: recourse to justice to hinder the right to strike, transformation of the Labour Code into the Capital Code, arbitrary arrests of officials, bloggers and journalists, bans on demonstrations and the questioning of activists, the beating of football fans and so on. The bosses of the private and the public spheres are directly attacking trade unionists. The regime defends the interests of the dominant comprador classes which constitute the true Trojan horse of imperialism more and more clearly.

One of the last, and not the least, signs of the crisis of the regime appears precisely in its difficulty in resisting imperialist pressure. The government still supports the cause of the Saharawi and Palestinian peoples, and refused to endorse the imperialist interventions in Libya, Syria and Yemen. It rejects any participation of the National People's

Army (ANP) in operations outside its borders as well as the installation of foreign military bases in Algeria and does not accept the installation of transit centres for migrants. But it has signed an “exceptional partnership” with French imperialism and maintains excellent relations with the United States.

From February 18th to March 1st, the ANP participated, in Burkina Faso then in Mauritania, in large-scale military manoeuvres called “Flintlock 2019”, placed under the supervision of the US Armed Forces Command for Africa (Africom). The “Phoenix Express” manoeuvres organized by Africom in Greece in May 2018 saw the participation of the Algerian navy. There is therefore an undoubted shift in foreign policy that can only feed contradictions within a regime traditionally oriented to the USSR, then to Russia (especially in military matters) and which, above all, was oriented to non-alignment.

We can conclude that the Algerian regime is neither monarchist nor truly republican. It is neither a dictatorship nor a democracy. It is neither a theocracy nor a secular regime. It is not pro-imperialist but is no longer anti-imperialist. It is not ultra-neoliberal but is not anti-neoliberal. Its inability to resolve the contradictions of the Algerian society as well as its own permanently renews the conditions of crisis. This immobility is indicative of its inability to reform.

Crisis of hegemony

Contrary to the discourse asserted by the ultra-neoliberals, the crisis of the regime refers to the issues and class struggles that traverse Algerian society. It derives in particular from the hegemonic incapacity of the dominant classes.

The policy of liberalization is led by the inner bourgeoisie. This class fraction is not national in that it no longer has a sovereign project and refuses to confront the imperialist world order economically, politically and diplomatically. But it often depends on public orders and still needs the protection of the state to accumulate in the face of the international market.

This faction comes up against two pitfalls. The first is the active and passive resistance of the masses and a part of the state apparatus. To pass its reforms, this faction led by the regime is forced to constantly tack, advance, retreat. To date, it has not succeeded in completing its structural economic reforms and has not fully integrated into the imperialist order. But it does not want, conversely, to return to a national development policy and resistance to the imperialist order as some states still do, totally or partially and with more or less consistency and determination.

The application of its neoliberal economic and social policy (blocking wages and pensions, calling into question the employment code, unemployment) compels it to tack, but it does not hesitate to use force against the masses of workers and the popular classes who refuse to see their conquests go up in smoke. This fraction of the bourgeoisie thus turns out to be incapable of obtaining the consent of the exploited and dominated.

The second pitfall facing the inner faction lies in its inability to obtain the support of the other faction of the bourgeoisie, the comprador faction which defends an ultra-neoliberal conception of integration/submission to the world market and the imperialist order. It has been considerably strengthened over the past three decades as a result of the civil war that facilitated the destruction and plundering of public enterprises ordered by the IMF (with the Structural Adjustment Plan signed in 1994) and the transformation of an Algerian economy that wanted to be productive and industrial into a bazaar economy based on “import-import”. This comprador faction continues to emphasize the lack of will power in terms of structural reforms and integration into the global market. The faction of the inner bourgeoisie is thus caught between the popular masses on one side and the comprador faction supported by imperialism on the other.

The comprador faction has aimed at the conquest of power for several years. It has traditional formal parties, the main ones being the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) of Muslim Brotherhood orientation, the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) of secular tendency, the Talaie El Houriat party of the former Prime Minister Ali Benflis, and some parties and personalities grouped in the movement Mouwatana (Fatherland). But it relies especially on a real, organic, party consisting of traditional and electronic media, think tanks, movements like the one that supports the country's first oligarch, Issad Rebrab, who was arrested on April 22 for "economic and financial crimes", and personalities who form a group that is often more dynamic than the formal parties. This comprador faction has the support of the imperialist centres (the Western powers, IMF, World Bank and so on) which exert constant pressures on the Algerian regime.

This faction influences a large part of people and groups of the opposition who basically share its vision of the need for structural economic and social reforms, but who dare not openly take a stand in its favour, for fear of the reactions of the regime. In general, the integration of the *nouveaux riches* into the regime through parties, elected institutions and the direct or indirect presence of soldiers or their relatives in the business community contributes significantly to changing the balance of power to its benefit. Because its rival who currently runs the country works for it. This inconsistency renders it incapable of returning to a national and social development policy. It would have to rely on the masses.

The comprador fraction thus experiences an ascendant dynamic. It works to conquer hegemony within the ruling classes. But its acquaintance with the world's capitalist forces and the imperialist states alienates it from part of the deep Algerian state with its roots in the war of national liberation and the development policies of the first two decades of independence. These sectors are very cautious in terms of national independence and security.

The comprador faction also has the greatest difficulty in obtaining the consent of the exploited and oppressed because its ultra-neoliberal economic and social project is tougher and more relentless. Can it, under these conditions, gain power through the ballot box? And if it succeeds in the current crisis or because it is currently the only political alternative to the regime, what would be the reaction of the masses? Since the workers, the unemployed and the youth are not ready to accept this policy, this faction is likely, while it claims to be democratic, to govern undemocratically to pass its ultra-neoliberal potion.

It is this hegemonic incapacity of the two fractions of the bourgeoisie which is at the origin of the crisis of the regime, its incapacity to govern by being united and obtaining the consent of the exploited and dominated. The regime cannot be democratized. This crisis has lasted for years and deepened. It has accelerated during the year 2018.

Popular mobilization and open political crisis

The crisis of hegemony could have continued for a few months or years. But the presidential election originally scheduled for April 18, 2019 was the trigger for the political crisis. The announcement of the candidacy of Bouteflika for a fifth term and, illustrative of the cynicism and contempt of the rulers towards the people, the assertion that citizens were happy with this candidacy, indeed had eagerly sought it, broke the camel's back. Neither the masses nor the different oppositions could tolerate it.

Until February 21, 2019, no political or social force threatened the regime. The latter was contested only in words by impotent and marginalized opponents. Even the strikes of workers which tended to multiply did not really worry it. So, it was about to renew the outgoing president or, more precisely, his framed photo exhibited on all occasions (official ceremonies, meetings and so on) by his zealous supporters. The status quo seemed to be the country's unsurpassed horizon.

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But February 22 was the breaking point with, following anonymous calls on social networks, the spectacular appearance of the masses on the political scene, followed, a week later, by a historically unprecedented popular surge in the 48 wilayas (departments) of the country.

This mobilization changed the political situation. It broke the wall of fear and allowed the reconquest of the right to demonstrate throughout the country, particularly in Algiers where it had been banned since 2001. It forced the public media, under the pressure of their own staff (journalists, technicians and so on), to report on the situation in the country more equitably. It freed speech and initiative and opened the way for protests and demonstrations by multiple social groups: students, lawyers, journalists, teachers, doctors and paramedics, artists and writers, high school students and so on. This culminated in the historic marches of March 1 which demanded the departure of the whole regime and no longer that of Bouteflika alone.

These demonstrations led the regime to launch a last manoeuvre to try to keep the upper hand even though it had lost the initiative. In a letter purporting to emanate from Bouteflika and read on television, the candidate proposed, if he were re-elected, the holding of an open and inclusive National Conference in the wake of the elections in order to define political reforms, but also economic reforms which the citizens had not demanded during the demonstrations. This conference was to set the date for an early presidential election in which Bouteflika pledged not to participate.

But on the very evening of the announcement, youth demonstrations broke out spontaneously in many cities, relayed the next day by new student marches across the country and the anonymous announcement of a general strike. More than ever, the popular movement was united around the slogan of "No to the fifth term" and the departure of the whole regime.

The camp of the people has since multiplied its actions: big demonstrations on Fridays in the 48 wilayas of the country, permanent demonstrations of students and high school students, lawyers, artists, health staff and so on. It is on the offensive.

Having re-imposed its right to protest, it moved on to a higher stage, that of strikes. Local and/or sectoral strikes first and then a general strike with anonymous calls or emanating from an old structure resuscitated, in the greatest opacity it is true: the Trade Union Confederation of Productive Forces (COSYFOP). The entry into the movement of the local UGTA branch in the historic workers' stronghold of Rouiba-Reghaïa east of Algiers clarified the stakes by showing what the working class expects: "Unable to stay on the margins of the profound popular aspirations being expressed, we join our voices to say yes to a change of system. A system that preserves the inalienable property of the people over the natural wealth of the nation, rehabilitates the role of the state in economic and social development and the fight against poverty and inequality. A system that stands out from oligarchies and enhances the value of work and puts people at the centre of development. A system that guarantees individual and collective freedoms and the free exercise of the right to organize." This is the exact opposite of the project of the ultra-neoliberal wing. This is why the latter, who is in favour of a much more radical economic course than that of the regime, is advancing the prospect of a transition leading to a presidential election.

This offensive dynamic of the popular movement has enabled it to garner support from trade unions, associations and movements. It has received support from members of the FCE employers federation (which supported Bouteflika), mayors and militants of the FLN, and the politically significant association of the National Organization of Mojahedin (veterans) which formed the backbone of the "revolutionary family" on which the regime was based and which, in addition to the support it gave to the protesters, denounced "collusion between influential parties within the regime and corrupt businessmen who benefited illegally from public money." The same goes for the Association of Alumni of the MALG (Ministry of Armaments and General Liaisons during the war of liberation) which is none other than the ancestor of the Algerian secret service, headed by the former minister of the Interior, Dahou Ould Kablia.

This strength of movement has several consequences. Those putting themselves forward as candidates retreated one after the other from the electoral masquerade of April 18, like the President of the MSP. Others, generally representing parties (FFS, RCD and so on), had already announced their refusal to take part in the ballot. Mokrane AÃt-Larbi, a respected lawyer, human rights defender, and veteran democratic activist, has left the leadership of the campaign for the candidate Ali Ghediri, a dissident military figure, as well as the electoral process. Despite the incomprehensible persistence of the regime to maintain it, the presidential election had lost its credibility.

Oppositions of right and left have radicalized. The symbolic figure of the ultra-neoliberal democratic camp, the boss of the Cevital group, Issad Rebrab, who mobilized his workers and employees for several months with the support of ultra-neoliberal opposition parties to protest against the "blocking of its investments" by the authorities, cancelled the march of March 5 initially planned in Tizi Ouzou (Kabylie). But he explained his gesture by the fact that it was not the time for "sectoral demands", but a "change of regime". The time has long gone when he maintained that industrialists did not have to concern themselves with politics.

Regime forced to retreat

Massive popular demonstrations on Fridays, February 22, March 1 and 8, 2019, culminating in a general strike that began on March 10, eventually forced the regime back. On March 11, Bouteflika announced by letter his decision not to seek a fifth term, the cancellation of the presidential election of April 18 and "significant changes within the government." This announcement was followed by the sacking of Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, replaced by his Minister of the Interior, Noureddine Bedoui, the same man who threatened the people just a few weeks ago.

But Bouteflika's promise of change came too late and was too limited. The Algerian people expressed themselves: they did not want Bouteflika to remain in place and rejected the maintenance of the current rulers and institutions. That's why the demonstrations continued the day after the announcement by Bouteflika. The protesters rejected the extension of the fourth term beyond April 18 and demanded the departure of the President. The general strike launched on March 10 continued as a process of re-appropriation of the UGTA by its members and its grassroots structures started. The left-wing political parties refused to join the presidential initiative.

The mobilization of the Algerian people finally paid off. A month and a half after the irruption of the popular masses on the political scene, Abdelaziz Bouteflika finally resigned on April 2. He will not have finished his term and will exit by the side door of History. The demonstrations of the entire population every Friday and those of workers, students, lawyers, magistrates, architects, doctors, pensioners during the weekdays, as well as local strikes and sectoral general strikes overcame the will of the presidential clan to maintain itself.

The resignation of Bouteflika was a huge political victory, won despite a final manoeuvre of the resigning president who, in exchange for his renunciation of a fifth term, sought to pilot a controlled transition to ensure the perpetuation of the authoritarian-liberal democratic façade regime in place for three decades. Indeed, in his letter of March 11 to the Algerian people, Bouteflika, taking note of his failure to go for a fifth term:

- formally and officially renounced running for president,
- cancelled, in violation of his own laws, the presidential election on 18 April and announced the opening of a transition that was not limited in time at the end of his fourth term,
- remained, just as illegally, in office until the end of the announced transition,

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– fired Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia and instructed Interior Minister Noureddine Bedoui to form a new, open government, including the opposition,

– announced his intention of convening as soon as possible an inclusive National Conference composed of representatives of political parties of power and opposition, “elites” and other “independent personalities” of “civil society”.

The former Algerian and UN diplomat Lakhdar Brahimi was recalled to informally pilot the preparation of this National Conference. The manoeuvre was rejected by the Algerians who multiplied marches, sit-ins and strikes throughout the week. This mobilization exacerbated dissensions within the government. Ahmed GaÃd Salah, Deputy Prime Minister and Chief of Staff of the Army, who had been one of the most determined supporters of the President, no longer mentioned his name in his speeches and insisted on the privileged links between the people and the ANP. The two main parties of the presidential coalition, the RND and the FLN, experienced individual and collective resignations of activists and elected officials and requests for the dismissal of their respective leaders, Ahmed Ouyahia and Moad Bouchareb.

Popular determination seriously affected the internal cohesion of the regime. As the new government was slow to emerge, the rank and file of the RND and the FLN stirred. Many activists and elected officials and even the most hated leaders, like their respective Secretaries General Ahmed Ouyahia and Moad Bouchareb, rallied shamelessly to the movement. The General Secretary of the UGTA (General Union of Algerian Workers) was not long in lining up behind them. The most opportunist people who had supported the President until then now publicly called for his departure at the end of his fourth term.

They were finally joined on March 26 by the strongman of the regime. Ahmed GaÃd Salah argued that the only solution now lay in the application of article 102 of the Constitution which provides for the resignation of the President of the Republic or his dismissal because of impediment or death. The demonstration of Friday 29th which put in the same bag the different clans of the regime pushed GaÃd Salah to accentuate the pressure on Bouteflika so that he resigned.

Today, the chief of staff presents himself as the defender, not of the President whom he stabbed in the back, but of the popular movement. He affects to discover the endemic corruption that plagues the country. He seeks to reap the benefits of Bouteflika's resignation.

But until March 26, the departure of the head of state was not on his personal agenda, or that of Ahmed GaÃd Salah, nor that of any leader. Everyone wanted to impose the Bouteflika option, first as a candidate for a 5th term, then as the one steering a controlled transition. The millions of demonstrators on Fridays dissuaded them. This victory is therefore that of the people who defied the prohibitions of power by organizing daily demonstrations without asking for administrative authorization or even declaring them.

The joy and pride of forcing Bouteflika to abdicate should not, however, obscure the fact that the authoritarian-liberal regime with a democratic facade remains in place. The Algerian people have not yet, by far, recovered their scorned sovereignty.

The “constitutional solution” of the Chief of Staff is a political manoeuvre to patch up the regime. It sacrifices the President in order to abort any prospect of democratic transition and constitutional change. Article 102 implies the maintenance of the current Constitution, the Government, the Constitutional Council, the two Houses of Parliament and all the institutions of the authoritarian regime. Some rights are already conceded, provisionally, with regard to the creation of associations, unions and parties, but the regime could be maintained as after October 1988 because it will be its responsibility to organize future presidential elections which will undoubtedly be won by the regime's candidate.

Such an outcome would even represent a regression in relation to Bouteflika's manoeuvre on March 11, since it would exclude his puppet inclusive National Conference. With article 102, we would move from the controlled Bouteflikian transition piloted by the regime to the absence of transition. It would basically be a return to February 21st! This is why many protesters put forward the slogan of application of articles 7 to 12 which restore to the people its full sovereignty, in place of article 102.

Act 2 of the struggle: “The constituent power belongs to the people”

All indications are that the popular movement has not experienced the downswing that RND number two Chihab Seddik wants. On April 5, it again overwhelmingly rejected the option of maintenance of the regime represented by the application of section 102.

The spontaneous demonstrations that have succeeded each other since March 31st across the whole country (students, lawyers, pensioners and so on), the call of the Confederation of Autonomous Trade Unions (CSA) for a general strike and a demonstration held in Algiers on April 10 despite police opposition, a strike supported by judges and justice sector officials, and the night marches that followed the announcement of the President's resignation on April 2 proved that the popular movement demands a complete change and does not fall for the line that presents Bouteflika as a scapegoat for the entire regime.

The resignation of the President has brought the real power, the hard core of the regime to the fore. This real power is not that of the ANP. The National People's Army is made up of *djounoud* (soldiers), non-commissioned officers and officers. But the real power is that of the very high military hierarchy which constitutes the armed wing of the regime. From 1962 to the present day, it has continuously created and defeated Presidents, and since 1980 it has supported an anti-national, anti-social and undemocratic neoliberal policy.

It is this armed wing that has brought back and perpetuated Bouteflika's reign for twenty long years, in violation of their own constitution imposed by force on the Algerian people. And while the latter is fighting to assert its citizenship, they want the people to recognize themselves in this Constitution which has kept citizens in a state of political subordination.

In attempting to mislead the popular mobilization by a legal device (Article 102) in order to save a corrupt authoritarian regime, the hard core took on the heavy responsibility and risk of bringing the people and the army face to face, thus endangering the Algerian state faced with the appetites of imperialism (G7, NATO, Israel and so on), regional reaction (Arab monarchies, Turkey and so on) and their internal relays.

The popular movement has not been mistaken. It did not turn against the ANP whose function is to defend the people, their achievements and their social welfare, their national sovereignty over their wealth, their borders and their political sovereignty. They chanted by millions: “Djeich-chaab, khawa khawa” (“the army and the people are brothers”). They did the same with the elements of the police that they refrained from confronting during the demonstrations.

On the other hand, they oppose the project of the top military hierarchy to maintain the regime. Recourse to Articles 7 to 12 of the current Constitution may constitute a window leading to the free expression of popular sovereignty, too long violated. But the solution to the present crisis can only be political and unconstitutional. It involves setting up a provisional government to defend national sovereignty, to satisfy popular demands and to organize a wide-ranging debate throughout the country, a debate crowned by the election of a sovereign Constituent Assembly.

Two undemocratic projects or a Constituent Assembly?

Three projects are emerging today, only one of which corresponds to popular interests.

The first, defended by the regime, intends to maintain the unfair constitutional order in force.

The second is a short, top-down transition that would maintain or reorganize some aspects of the current Constitution. It is the project of the ultra-neoliberal opposition, of all tendencies (secular, nationalist, Islamist). It expresses the interests of the comprador fraction of the bourgeoisie.

Under the pretext of urgency, it aims at the election of a President who would have, finally, the “legitimacy” to impose on the people the “sacrifices necessary for its happiness”: an end to price subsidies for products of primary necessity, of electricity, water, gas, gasoline and conquests in health, education. Transformation of the Labour Code into the Code of Capital, extension of the retirement age, blockage of wages, obstruction of the right to strike and trade union organization. Opening of the Algerian economy to the world capitalist economy by the return to foreign indebtedness, the convertibility of the dinar, the total lowering of customs barriers.

The insistence of the ultra-neoliberal current on putting the UGTA in the museum is as revealing as it is suspicious. While trade unionists and conscious workers are fighting to reclaim this organization that has fallen under the thumb of an anti-labour bureaucracy, the ultra-neoliberals want to dissolve this strategic tool for the defence of workers' interests. A strategic tool in the perspective of a national (anti-imperialist), democratic (anti-authoritarian) and social (anti-neoliberal) alternative.

The third project is supported, with nuances, by the parties, movements and personalities who defend the election of a Constituent Assembly. The people, and they alone, must choose under which type of regime they intend to live parliamentary, presidential or otherwise.

It is up to them to decide whether they want to maintain the monarchical presidential office or whether Parliament, elected by a fully proportional system, elects a presiding government, whether or not they want a Senate to control and counter the will of the National People's Congress, or they prefer to elect representatives for one or more terms. If they introduce a right of revocation against any elected official who betrays his constituents, affirm respect for the independence of justice and control of the government. If they introduce, along with the dusty old representative democracy, forms of direct democracy: committees of neighbourhoods and villages, businesses, educational institutions and so on.

In the current climate of mass politicization, the idea of the constituent assembly is making its way into consciousness, against the advice of the ultra-neoliberals in the regime and the opposition. Opponents of the return to the true sovereignty of the people advance miserable quibbles.

The first is that of the “constitutional void”. They dramatize things on purpose, to frighten the people. They warn that the institutions will collapse if we leave the framework of the current Constitution. They forget that, from 1965 to 1976, Algeria lived without a Constitution. This did not prevent the state from functioning, placing the country among the main leaders of non-alignment, recovering the natural riches of the soil and subsoil, improving the condition of the popular masses in terms of education, health and work, and laying the foundations of an industrial development which contrasts with the miserable bazaar economy of today. The mobilized people can devise a transitional framework to go to a constituent assembly responsible for developing a new institutional architecture.

The second quibble is that of “urgency”. However, the transition from a dictatorial or authoritarian regime to a

democratic one cannot take place in the blink of an eye. Ensuring the real and massive participation of the people is essential if we intend to lay solid foundations for the future democratic regime.

Finally, the third quibble is a totally exaggerated “Islamist danger” that trivializes the victory of the Algerian people over armed Islamism. This position ignores the evolution of a society deeply imbued with religious culture but absolutely not won to the theocratic state project as evidenced by the slogans chanted during the demonstrations, the huge presence of women in the movement and the widespread deployment of the national emblem which means that the Algerian identity is political and non-cultural (religious, linguistic and so on). Islamism must continue to be fought politically and not by the introduction of a regime based on a selective suffrage or a new façade of democracy.

The conditions for the establishment of a democratic regime are undeniably maturing, even if the road is full of pitfalls. To refrain from fighting under the pretext of a lack of safeguards is tantamount to advocating the maintenance of the status quo.

Destabilized for a moment by the suddenness and magnitude of the popular movement, the regime, through the Chief of Staff, intends to regain control by forcing the Constitutional Council to initiate the implementation of Article 102, presented as the appropriate response to popular demands, although the liberal authoritarian regime of which it is a part did not depart with Bouteflika.

But the people do not see it that way. The popular demonstrations of joy that immediately followed the announcement of the resignation of the President made it clear that the people would not be satisfied with a half-victory. The regime is thus directly confronted with the challenge of the masses and will have to choose between a coup d'état or retreating again to abdicate in the face of the popular will.

To achieve its ends, the popular movement must redouble its efforts and mobilization. But to produce their full effects, these efforts and mobilization will have to be integrated into a correct tactic based on an objective assessment of the balance of power between the camps present and its evolution and a clear awareness of the real political stakes that flow from it.

A revolutionary situation?

Despite appearances, we are not in a revolutionary situation even if the moment undoubtedly possesses potentialities in this sense. Things could obviously change, more or less quickly, but at the time when these lines are written, we are not there.

Characterized by a duality of power in which those at the bottom no longer want and those at the top no longer can, a revolutionary situation inevitably leads, at a given moment, to a direct confrontation between the former ruling regime and the new one, which involves making a revolution during which the new regime must overthrow the old one and take its place. In such a situation, the revolutionaries and the most determined sectors of the popular movement must take the offensive to seize power.

However, conscious of its strength but also of its limits, the popular movement has not, so far, opted for the tactic of the buffalo rushing on its target, but for the boa constrictor who grips its prey and slowly tightens its rings on her.

Algerians demonstrate, demand and gather on weekdays and Fridays. Workers and students resort to strike action many times. But they do not occupy the squares permanently and do not adhere to the slogan of civil disobedience,

as did the FIS in 1991 during its insurrectional strike. They do not seek direct confrontation with the police, but rather avoid it carefully. They do not march on the Presidency in Algiers or on the wilaya (prefecture) headquarters to seize them. They have not yet created popular committees that would replicate the basic official structures of the state (town halls) as was the case in Kabylia in 2001.

They occupy the street every Friday to show their strength, point the way out for the regime's supporters, lobby the regime to exacerbate its contradictions and make the leaders understand that they must all leave. Then they go home, go back to work and go about their business while waiting to measure the real political effect of their action on the regime and prepare for the next rounds. The millions of Algerians who have demonstrated so far are in a dynamic of pressure on the regime and not its overthrow. This may change in the future, but this is not the case now.

The regime, for its part, cannot do everything. From February 22 to April 2, the date of Bouteflika's resignation, it was on the defensive. But it is not totally helpless and tries to regain the political initiative through the application of Article 102 to bring the river of popular protest back on course. It also has forces (army, gendarmerie, police) which it can use when needed. The police, gendarmes and soldiers have not fraternized with the people. If they did not repress the protesters, it was because they had not received the orders and not because they had already passed onto the side of the popular movement.

All these objective elements lead us to conclude that we remain in a pre-revolutionary situation characterized by the fact that those below no longer wish, but that those above, although weakened, still can. The popular movement can therefore be defined as a movement of radical reform. Reform, insofar as it wants to change the regime by exerting pressure on it without trying to overthrow it by means of a direct confrontation. Radical, because it is not content with cosmetic modifications and acts without weakness and by extra-institutional ways to reach its objective.

The political challenge of the moment

In such conditions, what is the main political issue of the moment? This issue lies in the ability or not of the power to impose its solution plastering regime. The movement must, on the contrary, prevent it from achieving this goal.

No one will be surprised by the fact that the strongman of the regime is not the acting president, but the army chief of staff and deputy minister of defence. He is the only one to speak publicly every week and set directions for the regime. President Bensalah has failed to create a political momentum for the presidential election scheduled to take place on July 4, under the current Constitution. His Prime Minister Nouredine Bedoui no longer expresses himself publicly and has become invisible. His ministers are pursued by the population when they go on work visits (meetings, inaugurations and so on). He was forced to sack the *wali* (Prefect) of Algiers following the collapse of a house in the Casbah (historic city) that killed five people and after the leader was pursued by the population. More and more local elected officials (mayors) and magistrates announce their refusal to organize the presidential elections on 4 July. A process of civil disobedience is on the horizon.

The majority of political parties (including TAJ and the MPA), unions, associations and personalities boycotted Bensalah's invitation to a national dialogue meeting to prepare the presidential election. This meeting was a fiasco and the interim president did not participate. However, the regime has not given up and reiterates firmly and unanimously (Bensalah/GaÃnd Salah) its will to hold the poll on July 4th.

The camp of the regime continues to weaken. It has lost his grip on the justice sector, as magistrates and lawyers join the movement. The two parties on which its democratic facade was based (RND and FLN) are in full disarray. Their leaders are challenged, including physically, by a good part of their rank and file and their cadres. And their

respective general secretaries are in trouble with the law. Ahmed Ouyahia is under investigation along with the current Minister of the Economy, as will be Djamel Ould Abbas once his immunity as a senator is lifted.

In an attempt to calm the people, but also to settle scores with other rival factions, Gaid Salah urged that the legal system reopen all corruption cases. The main oligarchs of the country (Ali Haddad, Isad Rebrab, the Kouninef brothers) were thrown in prison. Others are summoned by the courts and should join them as well as several accomplices. With the same aim of winning the population, Gaid Salah has lent his support to the popular movement and warned those who would try to repress it. This was aimed directly at the police forces that gassed and beat protesters during a Friday march in Algiers, and who tried to prevent students and trade unionists in the capital from marching on weekdays.

But he has been intractable so far on the July 4 presidential election and has launched, once again, accusations against forces who want to harm the country, without specifying their identity.

There is therefore a secondary battle, internal to the regime, and a main battle, which opposes the latter to the population.

Under what conditions can the current popular movement triumph? That is the question we are facing. This movement has strengths. It is massive, national, unifying (inter-class, intergenerational, mixed, all the opposition currents). It proved his determination for six weeks and achieved important political results, including the resignation of Bouteflika. It lifted the burden which weighed on the political life of the country and thus opened the way to a dynamic of expression (demonstrations, strikes) and mass self-organization. It has unexploited potentialities within the working class and the peasantry.

But it is traversed by secondary contradictions (social, political, ideological) that can at any time become major and divide or even explode. We can measure this risk by seeing the content of the reactions to the attacks against feminist groups during the March 29 demonstration in Algiers. Because if the movement is united to end the regime, it is not agreed on the tactics to implement to achieve it. Nor is it united on the perspective: what alternative? What should replace the current regime?

These questions are not settled. The absence of internal organization and the initially understandable rejection of the presence of political forces inside the movement are likely to prevent it from developing effective tactics. For all these reasons, the movement needs time.

A strategic question

For this reason, considering the strengths and weaknesses of the movement, it is appropriate to inscribe it in the long term and not to seek an immediate political outcome. Popular mobilization needs time to expand further, to organize itself at the base, to have a leadership that is understood first and foremost as a consistent orientation and not an improbable governing structure. It will not happen in a day.

On the other hand, a strategy that combines “war of movement” and “war of position” should be pursued in a thoughtful and active way, and not unconsciously and passively. The “war of movement” mainly takes the form of major Friday demonstrations that must be reinforced or, at the very least, remain at the current level of mobilization and remain as united as possible. It must also take the form of sectoral and/or general ad hoc strikes, like the one called for by the Confédération des syndicats autonomes (CSA) on April 10th. This “war of movement” aims to exert

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increasing pressure on the current regime to exacerbate its contradictions, to isolate its most repressive supporters and force it, finally, to retreat and to accede to the demands of the movement.

The “war of position” aims to seize strongholds. Access to public media and the effective enjoyment of freedom of expression, demonstration, assembly and association, trade union and political organization and the right to strike ... constituting strongholds to conquer or reconquer, expand and defend. This has begun to be done through local demonstrations and strikes.

The re-appropriation of the UGTA by workers and trade unionists represents another strategic position. The process has begun but has not yet reached a sufficient size to bring down the bureaucratic leadership of the federation. The Secretary General of the UGTA was however forced to announce that he would not be a candidate for his succession to the 13th congress of the federation set for June 21 and 22, a congress that had been announced for January 2020. He is thus trying to speed up the coordination of the wilayas (departmental unions) of Tlemcen, Tizi-Ouzou, Bejaia, Saida and Ouargla to which the local unions of Hassi Messaoud (an important oil field) and Rouiba (the main industrial area of the capital) are attached, as well the National Federation of Mechanical, Metallurgy, Electricity and Electronics Workers (FNTMMEE) and the members of the National Executive Committee (CEN) which is the union leadership of more than 21 wilayas, who gathered on April 15 in Bejaia and organized a large rally in front of the UGTA headquarters in Algiers on April 17 to demand, among other things, the departure of Abdelmajid Sidi Said. This coordination, which has continued to grow since then, encourages workers to renew their union bodies everywhere.

Things will not be easy because, alongside sincere trades unionists, there are many bureaucrats who are turning their coats and who will necessarily be part of the process of re-appropriating the UGTA. To prevent it from being reduced to a mere replacement of the most discredited heads of the federation, it is essential to clarify the basic principles of union renewal (democratic, mass, anti-imperialist and class) and methods of organization and functioning (limitation of terms and alternation). It is also necessary that the “refounders” develop a trade union orientation and platform.

The re-appropriation of the UGTA must be coupled with the construction of a united front with the autonomous unions to work to rebuild the unity of the workers’ camp. This involves helping self-governing unions, who have the merit of having raised demands consistently and who have supported the popular movement from the beginning, to overcome their divisions, their fragmentation and a certain corporatism towards a union that defends workers as a class. The CSA called for a national march of the workers in Algiers on May 1, 2019. It is the occasion to gather in unity members of the UGTA, the CSA and the General Autonomous Confederation of Workers in Algeria (CGATA) and thus give all active, retired and unemployed workers the opportunity to finally celebrate in the street the international day of struggle of the proletariat.

It is fitting, as has begun, to rebuild an autonomous and democratic student movement and a women’s movement, while waiting to make a breakthrough in the peasant world. One of the objectives could be to work for the reintegration within the UGTA of the former National Federation of Land Workers (FNLT) whose members had been arbitrarily and authoritatively transferred to the National Union of Algerian Peasants (UNPA), an organization of landowners. Another task is to support, strengthen and expand the camp of associations, unions and movements that define themselves as “civil society” and win them over to the perspective of the Constituent Assembly.

It is also possible that a process of self-organization in the city and village neighbourhoods starts and that popular committees emerge. But no one can decree it. Nevertheless, it is important to remain attentive to this possibility which could be realized at a certain degree of development of the movement.

Building a consistent political leadership

In the face of the regime and the unavoidable inconsistencies and betrayals of the ultra-neoliberal opposition forces, we need to build a political leadership, i.e. a political orientation capable of endowing the movement with the means to realize its ambitions and to experience a qualitative development.

This leadership can only be created by a pole of the supporters of the Constituent Assembly. The political struggle, distinct from the ideological struggle, aims above all to add strength to strength and to influence the balance of power and win the game, totally or partially. It does not, therefore, require that the aggregating forces possess the same ideology, defend the same historical program, or even agree with every comma on the definition of the Constituent Assembly. It simply asks that these forces agree, at some point, to strike together.

In the face of the regime and ultra-neoliberal forces, the formation of such a pole is an urgent task. The movement can only move forward and make a qualitative leap if it moves from a legitimate position of rejection to a position of proposal and implementation of a solid and credible political alternative. Now, the only slogan that allows the people to regain full and complete sovereignty is that of the Sovereign Constituent Assembly. The formation of this pole is possible because parties defending this slogan begins to make their way into the popular consciousness. The PT, the FFS and the PST are thus placed before a historic responsibility. In no case should the work of building/rebuilding grassroots movement be opposed to the joint action of political forces at the top.

Collective groups for a sovereign Constituent Assembly could thus be built jointly in the neighbourhoods by the militants of these different parties and by all those who share this idea without being a party member. It is more important than ever to strike together, even if everyone is marching separately.

24 April 2019

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