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Algeria

# Political rupture or revolution as a project- notes and reflections on the protest movement

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**On its 13th Friday of mobilization, the popular movement that Algeria has been witnessing since February 22, 2019 confirmed its serene and peaceful demand for a fundamental and radical change in the system of political governance. This demand is accompanied by questions of a theoretical and methodological order, until now forgotten and repressed by the Algerian political and intellectual universe. These questions range from legal processes to economic mechanisms, from sociological logic to historical dynamics, which affect the past and the future of the country. These are questions that do not have a mere academic value. They structure thought but also political practice.**

In order to grasp the analytic aspects conveyed by the movement that is in the process of structuring itself and politically maturing, let us start from the stakes of the historical moment that we are living through.

## **The military institution and the dynamics of the movement**

The current moment in the protest movement is dominated by the spectacular arrests of Said Bouteflika, brother and special advisor to the ousted president, ex-generals Athmane Tertag and Mohamed Mediène, former chiefs of the security services, followed by the summoning of Louisa Hanoun of the PT [\[1\]](#) for a hearing in the same investigation and her incarceration.

What do these incarcerations mean? "It is not illegitimate," says journalist and essayist Yassine Tamlali "to think that the involvement of military justice in this case is intended to prevent the possible trial of the accused revealing too many embarrassing elements concerning the operation of the regime of Abdelaziz Bouteflika for the de facto regime in place since his dismissal. Nor is it illegitimate to believe that a "controlled" trial before a court martial avoids two former powerful generals, Mohamed Mediène and Athmane Tartag, undergoing a public humiliation that can cause disturbances within the army".

The arrest of Louisa Hanoun, on the other hand, seems to serve a double purpose. First, on the politico-legal terrain, the president of the PT is slightly at odds vis-à-vis the popular movement. Because she stuck to Bouteflika throughout his reign, under the pretext of the defence of the nation-state against imperialist plots and strayed too much in the vicinity of the security services. Postures she has never hidden. This does not make her a criminal or a "conspirator" It depends on her opinions and her political line. However, it is easy to offer her to popular "vengeance" as an accomplice of the "plot against the army" and the mismanagement of the regime, providing a solid argument on ideological and symbolic grounds for Gaid Salah, the chief of staff who seeks to pose as Bonaparte, to attack "mafia oligarchs", the former "corrupt" regime and finally those who "represent the workers". So, above ideologies, he avoids the artificial "Arab/Kabyle" contradiction into which, for a time, some of the opposition wanted to lead him.

But a military institution that is trying to gain popularity by bringing these personalities, who are not moreover devoid of accusations, before military justice may be the prelude to something more politically serious. Seeing in Gaid Salah's attitude a rapprochement with the people, and a response to the movement demanding action, while remaining blind to the intimidations that are looming over the movement itself, is tantamount to pure and simple support for the military institution.

## The political alternative the movement needs

This institution is today the only organized structure, as was the case for the general staff, its ancestor, in relation to the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic in 1962. It tries to ensure a transition without confronting protest. It tries to fill a gap opened by the movement itself and considers itself legitimate in imposing its roadmap which is considered constitutional, with the risks that this involves for democratic liberties and popular sovereignty.

This current political schedule is not the initiative of representative political forces. It is introduced and imposed by the movement without completely controlling the schedules or their future. The outcome of elections as a solution to every phase of protest is also not a strategic choice. It is an obligation imposed by this constitutional schedule. It was first reviewed and corrected by the movement by cancelling the election scheduled for April 19. It was then postponed by the heirs and supporters of this constitution to July 4. A date that the protesters refuse and that responds to three issues. Because we can no longer take for granted the homogeneity between the different protagonists of the events we are experiencing. There is the beginning of a decantation.

Faced with the military institution that claims its constitutionality in order to consolidate its power, the first issue is introduced by politicians of neoliberal persuasion who make offers of services to the "oligarchic" system that is emerging. Because, once rid of Bouteflika who had the monopoly of initiative, these oligarchs want to quickly move to a new presidential regime, which, if necessary, would initiate reforms. A presidential regime they aspire to control by demanding a transitional body co-opted by the de facto regime, that is, the military! Because that's what it's all about, since none of the candidates running this transition are the emanation of the movement. The different service offers are only supported by the press. And it is enough to look at who runs this press to understand this issue. The population in movement, however, remains deaf to any political representation.

The second issue is underlined by the proposal to convene a sovereign constituent assembly. This is the only approach, in the current state of affairs, which ensures a break with the "system" so much decried by the demonstrators and which allows the beginning the construction of a political and social project which is legitimate and representative of the aspirations of the majority of the people in movement. It is a question of common sense or mathematical logic: either to accept the current constitutional order and avoid a clash with the regime. Then to go to the presidential elections of July 4 relying on popular mobilization to make them honest and transparent. This is rejected by people in movement because they do not trust the old and are wary of the new. Or to abandon this constitution and go to a new one. But how? It will require a personality who can build or a representative and legitimate structure that will guide this process.

These few examples can help us understand this equation: When in 1958, the French state in full "Algerian crisis" appealed to General De Gaulle, the latter, with his symbolic legitimacy and the hegemony of the French bourgeoisie, which he represented, agreed to lead a transition from the 4th to the 5th republic through a referendum on a new constitution he himself established to the extent of his power and what he represented; it took May 68 to question that legitimacy, but not the constitution that is still in force. When Boumedienne, in another context, took power in 1965 in Algeria, he waited until 1976, the time it took to build a hegemony and a legitimacy to pass his constitution. Similarly, Boudiaf in 1992, in another context, also had the symbolic legitimacy to initiate a re-founding of the republic, without prejudging the content of what he could have done. But, his romantic and nationalist ambition prevailed, leaving Algeria in turmoil. It is this Bonapartist tradition that explains the use of General Zeroual by Bouteflika as soon as crisis engulfed the Algerian regime. And since then, the supporters of a continuity of the system seek a "providential person". That is what Gaid Salah seems to understand by relying on the legality that is granted to him the current constitution. That's why he does not want to leave this framework. He sees himself perhaps as embodying this character!

On the third issue there is a nebula that wants to be "revolutionary", but an abstract revolution, postponed

indefinitely. Considering that “conditions are not right for such a break”, it refuses to engage in a laborious confrontation with concrete politics. It is a mode of thought that is doomed to constantly turn around the problem without addressing it.

The rejection of the deadline of July 4 without offering a feasible prospect within reasonable deadlines places the movement in a perspective of a political and institutional vacuum. These protagonists who reject the constituent solution are objectively aligned to give way to Gaid Salah who is preparing to fill this void!

## The constitutional battle is not enough

The stakes are high. It is now imperative to support this new Algeria born on February 22, to be up to the measure of these exceptional moments in the history of a country. This is not just a legal and constitutional impasse. Whatever the immediate outcome, the path of emancipation is now open. It must be occupied before it is closed.

However, it is not a question of starting from a critique or a revolutionary program outside of time and real history, hence abstract. It is a question of starting from the contradictions introduced by the movement itself.

The need to resort to the Sovereign Constituent Assembly is not, from this point of view, a mere tactical subterfuge. It is fundamental and strategic for the workers, the poor, that is to say the majority of people to access their emancipation and the defence of their projects in a free and democratic way. For it is in these historical moments of great mobilization that a truly democratic advance can be imposed on the dominant and the authoritarian regimes. It is for this reason that the defenders of the oligarchic minority reject this path.

Obviously, this solution through the Constituent Assembly will be the result of a process of national debate under the leadership of a civilian Provisional Government, of a reasonable duration to give the opportunity to all forces to prepare themselves and to conduct a substantive debate on the desired constitution, a debate essential to situating issues and clarifying elections. The quality and independence of this temporary structure thus plays a large role, as does true freedom of information of expression and demonstration, insofar as it allows all parts of the people, under the control of the movement, to weigh in the debate on the nature of the principles from which it is not permissible to derogate.

This recourse to a constituting democratic renewal is also valid, at the beginning of the 21st century, for the great capitalist economic powers that made their democratic revolution. To return to the French example cited above, the arrival of De Gaulle in 1958 is a challenge to the democratic equilibrium introduced by the Constituent Assembly after the war of 1939-45. But as the French bourgeoisie is unable to share power democratically, it managed the tour de force through de Gaulle, amid a crisis facing the progress of the Algerian independence movement, to shape an ultra-presidential constitution. A bit like Bouteflika in 2009, all proportion kept on form. Today again the recourse to a constituting process for a 6th republic is possible and necessary for a power like France. It is also valid for another power like the United States of America which still functions on the constitution of Abraham Lincoln where power is structurally shared between the great financial clans called pompously “Democrats” and “Republicans”. We can of course broaden this strategy of a democratic renewal for the new oligarchies represented by Russia or China.

## Combining the political perspective with a transitional socio-economic program

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But this constitutional necessity, which fundamentally raises the question of political power, opens the door to the question of its content, that is, the development project that concerns Algerians as it does all human societies. From this point of view, what people demand is a profound change in the system, a renewal of Algeria so that the country can advance as expected. Through the denunciation of the “system” it is, for the moment, bureaucratic and oligarchic control of the economy that is aimed at, a sort of “connivance capitalism”. But this capitalism of connivance simply hides another world capitalism which is more voracious and in full crisis.

These are questions that must accompany the issues related to the probable immediate rendezvous of July 4th and even after that.

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[1] Parti des Travailleurs, a far left political organisation