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A New Chapter in Algeria's Tumultuous Politics

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The Algerian government's recent referendum on new constitutional amendments was heralded as the start of a new political era. The referendum, symbolically held on November 1, the day Algeria's armed struggle for independence from France commenced in 1954, was publicized under the official slogan "November 1954 Liberation; November 2020 Change".¹ The vote was intended to address the grievances expressed by the *Hirak* protest movement, which throughout 2019 staged swelling weekly protests demanding sweeping changes in the country's political system. But the vote fell far short of the government's expectations. Largely boycotted by *Hirak* supporters, voter turnout was very low (23.4 percent). Overshadowing the referendum was the news that Algeria's president, 'Abd al-Majid Tebboune, had been transferred several days earlier to a hospital in Germany, allegedly for "medical checkups," but was later reported to have been infected with the COVID-19 virus.² At the time of this writing, Tebboune remains in Germany. Although he has reportedly recovered from his illness, looming questions about his condition and ability to resume his duties, along with a potential power vacuum continue to overshadow Algerian politics.

These events have been further compounded by the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on Algeria, and the government's difficulty in responding to the crisis. Algeria's economy has been battered by the outbreak and other factors, including plummeting oil prices, which affect a major export commodity and an important income source. All of these challenges add new features to Algeria's tumultuous

¹ ["Algeria Votes in Referendum Aimed at Ending Protest Movement,"](#) *Al Jazeera*, November 1, 2020.

² ["Algeria's President Transferred to German Hospital Amid Coronavirus Scare,"](#) *DW*, October 28, 2020.

political history, and highlight the growing volatility that could further affect domestic stability.

Since gaining independence in 1962, after a long and violent anti-colonial struggle against French rule, Algerian politics have been marred by turmoil and internal strife. A military takeover in 1965 provided the armed forces and security services with a powerful political position. The country's security establishment, commonly referred to as *Le Pouvoir* [Power], has wielded an informal but decisive grip on political life, even as the veteran Front Libération National (F.L.N.) officially ruled. High oil prices in the 1970s helped the Algerian government cope with the welfare of a growing population, but by the mid-1980s Algeria faced growing difficulties as oil prices fell. Simmering socio-economic discontent erupted into violent protests in 1988, leading the Algerian regime to address some of the public grievances by opening up the political system to all parties. The Islamist F.I.S. party quickly emerged as a viable alternative to the existing political order. Algeria's first open parliamentary election in late 1991 was abruptly cancelled by the military, fearing an Islamist victory. Algeria descended into nearly a decade of internal violence between Islamist groups and the regime, claiming hundreds of thousands of lives, and effectively defeating the Islamists. That conflict receded with the election of 'Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika as the country's president in 1999. Bouteflika, a veteran political figure, promised to restore stability to Algeria, calling on an exhausted public to move beyond the "dark decade" and embrace a new future. He also indicated that he would rein in the military's grip on power, while carefully avoiding alienating the country's elusive *Pouvoir*. Once again, high oil prices helped cushion economic challenges and provide a degree of prosperity while Bouteflika was in power. But by 2013, the tide began to change. Bouteflika suffered a massive stroke, leaving him incapable of carrying out his duties. Growing allegations of high-level corruption, mounting economic difficulties, and the emergence of a restless new generation boiled over in early 2019, leading to a fresh wave of anti-government protests.

The 2019 demonstrations ushered in a new era in Algeria's tormented politics, led by the new *Hirak* movement. The weekly protests, which quickly gained traction, evolved into an unprecedented call for a complete makeover of the country's political system. Moving beyond initial demands for reforms, the protesters called for the removal of the ailing Bouteflika from office. They opposed the notion of him running again for a fifth presidential term, ostensibly as a figurehead for the opaque political system indirectly controlled by the security establishment. But the *Hirak* movement quickly came to represent a broader political current, with its "all out" slogan, calling for the departure of the entire political system's figures. It was lead

by young Algerians fed up with the country's economic woes, high unemployment, and above all, the closed and opaque political system.³ Joining them were older protesters, including veterans of the war of independence who denounced the stagnation that in their opinion had become the defining feature of public life in Algeria. Many of the protesters asserted that Algeria had been "hijacked" by a corrupt regime that had little regard for its citizens and no interest in securing their future. Some even went as far as claiming that Algeria was effectively not an independent country, ruled instead by a "mafia". This is an astounding statement, considering the hallowed nature surrounding the memory of the war of independence. Such an allegation reflected the level of public anger.

The Algerian government, fearing that the demonstrations would spiral out of control and destabilize the country, conceded in April 2019, when it announced that Bouteflika would step down as president. This was the start of a government effort to mollify protesters, and indicated that the regime was concerned about the situation. While this could have further emboldened the Hirak movement, it highlighted the movement's weaknesses. These included a lack of a unified leadership, a cohesive platform, and a clear vision of a new future for Algeria. For all of its success in organizing large scale protests against an unpopular regime, the Hirak movement has not managed to emerge as an alternative to the existing order.

The ruling regime, for its part, was rattled by the crisis of legitimacy it faced following the Hirak protests. While the government rejected any possibility of negotiating with the Hirak movement, authorities acted against several close associates of former president Bouteflika, prosecuting them on charges of corruption. But beyond that, there was no indication that the regime, including the military, gave any consideration to the Hirak's demands, or entertained the notion of reforming the political system. The regime did nevertheless seek to reestablish stability. Presidential elections, held in December, 2019, were viewed by opposition groups as rigged, and failed to impress protesters. The elected president, 'Abd al-Majid Tebboune, was viewed as the military's chosen candidate, and a figurehead for Algeria's true powerbrokers. The sudden death of the military's chief of staff, General Gaid Salah that same month, added further uncertainty to an already volatile situation.⁴

³ Zine Labidine Ghebouli, "[Coronavirus Will Change Both Algeria's Political System and Its Opposition](#)," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute of Near East Policy (WINEP), April 9, 2020; Sarah Feuer, "[Corona in the Casbah: The Pandemic's Destabilizing Impact on Algeria](#)," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), April 22, 2020.

⁴ Sarah Feuer, "[Corona in the Casbah: The Pandemic's Destabilizing Impact on Algeria](#)," Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), April 22, 2020.

The coronavirus outbreak added new layers to Algeria's vulnerability. Algerians were quick to acknowledge the country's weak public health services (another indicator of the regime's neglect, in the eyes of many critics). The state's reaction to the crisis has been largely viewed as a failure, a reflection of longstanding failed budgetary policies and development priorities. Public confidence in the regime was so low that many Algerians initially contended that the virus was a hoax, yet another government ploy to end the protest movement. As the threat became real, the government did indeed clamp down on the protesters, not only banning public gatherings in an effort to avoid widespread infection but also arresting Hirak activists. Over the past months, Hirak has moved its activities to online platforms, developed solidarity initiatives, and has sought to eclipse the state's efforts at social engagement. It's unclear to what extent these efforts will help resolve the ongoing political crisis.⁵

The November 1 referendum, as noted, signaled the regime's only serious effort to address some of the political demands amplified by the Hirak and its supporters. The proposed constitutional amendments included re-imposing a two-term restriction on presidents, and a similar restriction on members of parliament. Another amendment would further guarantee freedom of the press. Critics assailed the government's attempt for a "quick fix" to specific issues that Hirak never formally demanded. They resented the fact that no opposition figures participated in drafting the constitutional amendments, and that they failed to deliver any possibility of real change.⁶ President Tebboune's hospitalization and continued absence add new uncertainty surrounding his legitimacy and ability to lead the country. The prospect of yet another ailing president like Bouteflika has further unsettled Algerians. As things stand now, Algeria's political and economic uncertainty and social unrest remain far from settled.

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⁵ Zine Labidine Ghebouli, "[Coronavirus Will Change Both Algeria's Political System and Its Opposition](#)", Fikra Forum, Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), April 9, 2020.

⁶ Ahmed Rouaba, "[Algeria's Referendum: A Vote to End the 'Years of Deviousness'](#)," *BBC*, November 1, 2020.

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