



Language

Algeria's experience of being a French colony, which was seen by the French and French settlers in the colony as being especially close to metropolitan France, resulted in a bitter war of national liberation. The French military, just defeated in the colonial war in Indo-China, tried to repress the uprising ruthlessly, including widespread use of torture. The independence struggle of 1954-62, which mobilized many sectors of Algerian society, including women, became a model for guerrilla warfare and inspired the writings of Frantz Fanon on the role of revolutionary violence. The organization that led this struggle, the FLN (National Liberation Front), became the government after the French withdrew. After a period of military rule between 1965 and 1976, the FLN was formally restored to its leading role and remained in power until 1988. That year thousands of Algerians took to the streets in protest against their economic conditions (exacerbated by a recession) and against one-party rule. The 1988 uprising led to a new constitution and multi-party elections. However, after the Islamic Salvation Front won the first round of elections in 1991, this precipitated an army coup in 1992, a state of emergency and a decade of brutal civil war between Islamists and the military, in which about 200,000 people died.

President Abdelaziz Boutefleka came to power in 1999 representing the FLN, and in 2002 he responded to popular protests by amending the existing constitution. He was re-elected for a second term in 2004. The constitutional limit of two terms in office was suspended in 2008 to allow Boutefleka two further terms. When the Tunisian uprising began in December 2010 it inspired riots across Algeria against economic deprivation; several rioters were killed, hundred wounded and about 1,000 arrested. Over 30 people also tried to immolate themselves in January 2011, and six died. However, when leading civil society representatives and political figures organized a rally in Algiers to demand fundamental political change, only a few thousand attended. People were perhaps deterred by the military show of strength with riot police and helicopters in the capital, and impeded by controls over transport into the city. Algeria was still under a state of emergency which had existed for 19 years. There were further significant protests within various sectors of the economy and society in 2011, including sit-in strikes by students and teachers and a hunger strike by gas production workers, but they did not directly threaten the regime. The government tried with apparent success to buy off major political dissent through subsidies on basic consumer goods, and raised the salaries of civil servants. To damp down popular unrest Boutefleka also promised to amend the constitution. Commentators argued that fear of civil war (exacerbated by events in Libya) was also a major factor that deterred people from trying to overthrow the regime.

The widespread popular protests and strikes that began in February 2019 and led to a mass movement were unexpected. One cause was the worsening economic and social conditions of most Algerians. Algeria is rich in oil and gas, much of which has been exported, but the regime had notably failed to use this wealth to diversify the economy, reduce reliance on imports or improve the lot of most of the people. Instead, an economic and military elite linked to the political regime have been enriched. But even the wealth accruing from oil and gas has declined, and the government in 2019 could no longer resort to financial handouts to stave off political demands. Secondly, since 2011 the political facade for the controlling elite had become increasingly illegitimate. Boutefleka suffered a serious stroke in 2013, shortly before he was re-elected to a fourth term as president, and had been ailing since with many of his duties performed by the head of the upper house of parliament. Secondly, in 2016 a further constitutional amendment yet again formally suspended the two-term limit on the presidency.

Therefore, the prospect in 2019 of a fifth term for an incapacitated figurehead president was insulting, and prompted mass rejection of the proposed April presidential election and Boutefleka's candidacy. The movement prevented the April election and could also claim that it forced Boutefleka to stand down. But the military stepped in to take control, and the chief of staff, General Ahmed Gaid Salah, pressurized Boutefleka to go. Salah continued to play a leading role in politics, ensuring arrests of many prominent activists, until his sudden death in December 2019.

The mass movement (the 'Hirak') also prevented a new presidential election in July, maintaining its demand that the existing political elite step down and there should be a fundamental political change. But the presidential election was finally held in December 2019, in the context of widespread arrests of protesters, and was only contested by a number of representatives of the old regime. Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a former prime minister backed by General Salah, was elected. The Hirak boycotted the election. Tebboune sought legitimacy by promising



constitutional change during the election, and after a period allowing for public debate a referendum was held on proposed constitutional amendments in November 2020. The Hirak refused to take part in prior discussions or in the vote, both because of the timing during the Covid-19 pandemic and its associated restrictions, and because they viewed the process with distrust. The amendments in fact increased the president's already considerable powers in relation to the political and judicial processes, although they reinstated the two-term presidency limit. Under 24 per cent of the electorate voted, the lowest poll in independent Algeria's history, but the amendments passed with a 67 per cent yes vote.

The movement continued to maintain its weekly protests demanding fundamental political change up to March 2020. Then the Covid-19 pandemic provided the regime with the opportunity to prevent all travel, forbid all public gatherings and marches and impose severe penalties on those who defied the ruling. The regime also arrested journalists supportive of the Hirak and tried to shut down parts of social media. The movement responded to Covid largely by converting itself into civic networks to provide medical assistance, food distribution and other forms of practical aid to the population. But it still claimed to be ready to resume regular protests for fundamental change.

Commentators agree that the Hirak has proved to be an impressive mass movement, staging a general strike in its early weeks, and maintaining weekly Friday demonstrations, supplemented by weekly student protests on Tuesdays, for over a year until suspended by the Covid pandemic and official restrictions. It has also managed to unite a very wide range of the population. Whilst the young have been at the forefront - young workers and the unemployed as well as students - veterans of the war of liberation have given support. Official trade unions tend to support the regime - although members of the General Union of Algerian Workers managed to force a change of leadership in 2019 they did not achieve a change of policy. But unofficial unions have participated to some extent, and many professional associations including those in health and education, have joined in, as have members of the judiciary. The movement has also united Arabs and Berbers. There is general agreement that women, despite their inferior legal status and social conventions discriminating against them, have often been to the fore in demonstrations and played a significant role. The Hirak has also maintained a strong emphasis on remaining a nonviolent resistance movement, avoiding provocation that could 'justify' the military opening fire on demonstrators. Like many other popular uprisings today, it is also highly decentralized, accommodating diverse ideological strands (Islamists and liberals), and organized horizontally with the help of social media. The absence of any central political leadership is seen by many commentators as a problem for developing a strategy to achieve the movement's goals, as some of the references below indicate.

Addi, Lahouari, [Algeria's Joyful Revolution](#) [1], The Nation, 28/03/2019,

This article by a professor of sociology, written a month after the outbreak of the revolution on 22 February, stresses that the 'gigantic rallies are peaceful and socially mixed'. The article traces the background of the uprising since 1988, claimed by many Algerians as their 'Arab Spring', since it ended one party rule. Addi explains why this democratic experiment failed and led to a decade of civil war - the context in which Boutifeka came to power in 1999 promising to bring peace

Akrouf, Sanhaja, [Yetnahaw Gaa - They All have to Go!](#) [2], Red Pepper, 2020, pp. 20-21

This article by an Algerian feminist activist explains how the 2019 movement, triggered by rejection of Boutifeka being nominated (despite his physical incapacity) to run for the presidency for a fifth term, began in the city of Kherrata on 16 February. It then spread to other cities, and became a rejection of the whole regime. She sets the movement in its historical context, noting how the success of the movement in forcing Boutifeka's resignation from the presidency was used by the army to take over. She concludes by stressing the resilience of the movement, despite the impact of Covid-19 in 2020 which enabled a 'political lockdown'. But she also argues that the lack of a political leadership able to draw the ideological strands of the movement together is its chief weakness.

Anser, Rayane, [How Algeria's New Regime Won a Referendum but Lost Legitimacy](#) [3], Open Democracy, 13/11/2020,

Discusses how Tebboune, the president elected in December 2019, had campaigned during the referendum on an



amendment the constitution drafted to increase its democratic content, hoping to shore up his legitimacy. But Anser notes that under 24 per cent of the electorate turned out to vote in 2020, though the amendment passed by 66.8 per cent of those voting. The article also looks at the earlier history of constitutional amendments in Algeria.

Entelis, John, [Algeria: Democracy Denied, and Revived?](#) [4], Journal of North African Studies, Vol. 16, issue 4, 2011, pp. 653-676

This article (written in 2011) starts from the 1988 achievement of a new democratic constitution, soon subverted by a military take-over leading to a decade of civil war. Entelis stresses the growing frustration among many sections of Algerian society - the young, workers, women, the middle class, Berbers and Islamists - who were all demanding economic opportunity, political freedom and social justice. He examines how the FLN regime established after 1999 has so far managed to control this growing dissent at a time of revolutionary upsurge in the Arab world.

Grewal, Sharon ; Kilavuz, Tahir ; Kubinec, Robert, [Algeria's Uprising: A Survey of Protesters and the Military](#) [5], Brookings Foreign Policy Institution, 2019, pp. 41

Report on an online survey of over 9,000 Algerians, including 4,200 who identified as protesters, and 1,700 who stated they were military personnel. The survey therefore drew out how the military attitudes compare with those of the protesters. The authors found 'very high support' for Boutflekka's resignation and the protest movement, including among those not involved in the protests and among soldiers and junior officers in the military. Senior officers were much more critical of both democracy and popular revolution. But even junior officers and soldiers believed there was a role for the military to 'referee the political arena' and were opposed to investigation of military excesses during the 1990s.

Haleh, Muriam ; Kasmi, Salma, [Voices from the Middle East: The Future of the Hirak Movement in Algeria](#) [6], Middle East Report Online, MERIP (Middle East Research and Information Project), 2020

Discusses the dilemma posed by Covid, which arrived in Algeria in February 2020, for the year-long movement of regular protests against the regime, and the shift by movement networks towards promoting local assistance during the pandemic. But the authors note that activists are still offering legal help to those arrested and put on trial, and maintain an online presence for the movement.

See also: Parks, Robert, 'From Protest to Hirak to Algeria's New Revolutionary Moment', *Middle East Report*, vol. 292, no.3 (Fall/Winter2019).

Hamouchene, Hamza, [The People Want Independence!](#) [7], New Internationalist, 2020

The author notes that Covid brought a halt in March 2020 to the weekly Friday demonstrations since February 2019, and the parallel student protests every Tuesday. She notes the Hirak's achievements: forcing the Military High Command to distance itself from Boutflekka's political power centre and preventing presidential elections in both April and July 2019, because they were seen as a means to provide legitimacy for military control. The article also comments on the very broad social base of the movement, primarily led by the young, but including 'the working poor', independent trade unions, professional bodies and a prominent role for women. It then assesses the 'counter-revolution' involving repression of the media and arrests of activists.

Hussein, Eblisam, [The 2019 Algerian Protests: A Belated Spring?](#) [8], Middle East Policy, Vol. 25, issue 4, 2019

Hussein argues that although many aspects of Algerian politics combined to prevent a major uprising in 2011, subsequent developments such as Boutflekka's 2013 stroke and the constitutional amendment of 2016 (lifting again the two term limit on holding the presidency) heightened opposition to the regime by 2019. The article starts by contrasting 'oil rich Algeria' with 'poor Algerians'.

Serres, Thomas, [Understanding Algeria's 2019 Revolutionary Movement](#) [9], Middle East Brief, Brandeis University, issue 129, 2019



The article argues that the Hirak is a revolutionary movement that connects with the 1954-62 independence struggle, uniting diverse social groups in a movement seen as 'the People' versus 'the System'. It also combines nationalist themes with the strategy of nonviolent resistance. The analysis draws parallels with 2011 in Tunisia, and notes the attempts to launch a similar nonviolent resistance movement in Algeria in January 2011 were successfully deflected by the regime. It then examines the record of the Boutefleka government over 20 years, which led to the Hirak.

Thieux, Laurence, [Algerian Youth and the Political Struggle for Dignity: Evolution, Trends and New Forms of Mobilisation](#) [10], Journal of North African Studies, Vol. 26, issue 2, 2021, pp. 294-310

The article explores why young people generally are turning away from political parties, civil society bodies and trade unions as channels for their frustrations and a means of defending human rights. It then examines the new methods and forms of mobilization specifically within the Algerian context.

Volpi, Frederic, [Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy](#) [11], Journal of Democracy, Vol. 31, issue 2, 2020, pp. 152-165

Volpi explores the advantages and disadvantages of leaderless mass movements such as the Hirak. Their ability to challenge the 'pseudodemocratic' mechanisms used by authoritarian elites is a strong point, but a key weakness is inability to create alternative institutional approaches. He also argues that the December 2019 election ensured the ruling elite remained in power, but undermined their legitimacy.

Wolf, Anne, [The Myth of Stability in Algeria](#) [12], The Journal of North African Studies, Vol. 24, issue 5, 2019, pp. 702-712

Notes that the official Algerian claims to be a model of political stability in the region - partly corroborated by the regime's ability to prevent unrest in 2011 turning into a revolution - have been proved illusory by the mass movement that erupted in Algeria in February 2019, and by the breath of its support.

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