



Why Algeria's Protests Are Different This Time

By Haim Malka

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Protests are part of Algerian political culture. Thousands of small protests erupt every year and are generally settled by government concessions. The last two weeks of protests in Algeria are different. Hundreds of thousands of people have flooded into the streets, calling for ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika not to run for a fifth term. Algeria's decisionmakers are now debating how to respond to people's demands.

Q1: WHY ARE PEOPLE PROTESTING?

A1: The main demand of the protestors is for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika not to run for a fifth term. Bouteflika has been largely incapacitated since a stroke in 2013 and has not spoken in public since. He campaigned for a fourth term and won reelection in 2014 without giving a single campaign speech. Protestors argue that the president is merely a front for powerful elites who are using his legitimacy to advance their own economic and political interests. Most Algerians have become accustomed to an opaque political system, but many have come to feel it is an insult to reelect a president who is so ill.

Q2: HOW ARE ALGERIA'S POWERBROKERS RESPONDING?

A2: A coalition of military leaders, the president's office, and powerful businessmen constitute Algeria's powerbrokers. They have a hard choice ahead of them: to confront the protestors or to make concessions. Each runs the risk of energizing the crowds in the streets.

Pushing forward with Bouteflika's candidacy despite these protests risks sparking larger and more sustained demonstrations that could accelerate defections from the government, the resignation of top officials, public sector strikes, and more demands to dismantle Algeria's opaque system of decisionmaking and distribution of resources. It opens a host of unknowns, which is inherently destabilizing for a system that has prioritized and valued stability and predictability above all else. Larger and sustained protests increase the risk of violence between police and protestors, and once violence starts, it will be difficult to contain.

Postponing the April 18 elections could persuade protestors that Algeria's political-economic model is crumbling and that they should push for bold reforms. That would mean calls to fight corruption, reform economic laws that stifle opportunity, and establish greater transparency and accountability. While postponement would allow powerbrokers to negotiate a replacement candidate with whom they can work, the environment that candidate will be confronted with may be even more insistent on transforming the way Algeria works, threatening the powerbrokers' grip on power.

Q3: WILL THE MILITARY INTERVENE?

A3: Algeria's military is one of the country's most powerful political forces. The military sees itself as the protector of the nation and guarantor of stability. In early 1992, it was the military that nullified election results that Islamists were poised to win, declared a state of emergency, and created a military-led ruling council. In the ensuing

violence, which lasted a decade, between 100,000 and 200,000 Algerians were killed.

Although the military appears united at the moment, a decade of purges of the officer corps, the forced retirement of powerful commanders, and the promotion of officers loyal to Bouteflika may have created unseen fissures.

Direct intervention in politics, similar to the Egyptian military's 2013 ousting of the Muslim Brotherhood, is unlikely unless Algeria's security environment deteriorates dramatically. Instead, the military will seek to remain heavily involved in decisionmaking behind the scenes, including choosing Bouteflika's successor. The decisions of the army, the chief of staff, and senior commanders will be the single most important factor determining whether Bouteflika actually runs, whether elections are held in April or postponed, and ultimately the direction of the country in the weeks and months ahead.

Q4: WHAT POSITION SHOULD THE U.S. GOVERNMENT TAKE?

A4: The United States has a very limited ability to influence decisionmaking in Algeria. While the United States and Algeria cooperate on counterterrorism, the United States does not have deep ties to Algerian powerbrokers or much economic leverage to employ. For their part, Algerians are fiercely independent and resent external interference in their affairs. U.S. pronouncements are more likely to undermine U.S. objectives than advance them.

The United States should be concerned that sustained political uncertainty could distract Algeria's military from its counterterrorism and border security mission. Algeria shares long borders with Libya and Mali, two divided countries that have active al Qaeda and Islamic State group cells. Furthermore, Algeria is an important energy supplier to Europe. While oil and gas exports are secure and largely isolated from areas of protest, political machinations at the top could further politicize the energy sector, creating uncertainty for oil and gas customers and Algeria's commercial partners. Greater instability could also create opportunities for Russia and China, two countries with deep ties in Algeria, to expand their influence and presence.

Q5: WHAT SHOULD WE EXPECT NEXT?

A5: Algeria's protests are historic, but they are unlikely to bring the system down in the short term. Algeria's leadership is likely to sacrifice Bouteflika's fifth term in hopes of preserving the system that keeps them in power. Even so, efforts to preserve the system will be messy and uncertain. Once the decision on April's elections is made, it will not mark the end of Algeria's political conflict but merely its transition to a new phase.

Haim Malka is a senior fellow and deputy director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

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