Algeria: A Historic and Ambivalent Movement

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translated by Janet Koenig

The popular uprising in Algiers on Friday, February 22 surprised most observers, starting with those who had rhapsodized over the regime’s stability since the emergence of the “Arab Spring,” or who had emphasized the passivity of a people traumatized by colonial violence, by authoritarian rule, by the civil war in the 1990s. But Algerian society was not cut off from international capitalism or from its regional environment. Momentous in size and intensity, this protest has also taken aback people, myself included, who hoped the “Algerian Spring” would happen sooner or later, without being able to predict what forms it would take.

After two decades of rule, the resignation of Abdelaziz Bouteflika on April 2 constitutes a first victory. And it would be wrong to minimize the importance of this as a setback for the regime’s supporters. They intended that the outgoing president should serve a fifth term, something which constituted an insupportable affront to the public.

That being said, it would also be wrong to consider that the “system” against which millions of Algerians are rising up could have disappeared as if by magic after a only few weeks of peaceful demonstrations that were above all colored by a powerful patriotism, no doubt expressing the desire to reclaim an independence confiscated in 1962.

In fact, the bourgeoisie, the state, and the security forces have never completely lost control. Despite the internal tensions, they have been looking for a transition that would not jeopardize their vital interests, to ensure compliance with an undemocratic constitution, which even some of the opposing “democrats” also claim to support. Thus, pursuant to Article 102, as “suggested” on March 26th by the chief of staff of the Algerian Army, Ahmed Gaid Salah, the President of the Council of the Nation, Abdelkader Bensalah, became interim president, charged with organizing new elections in ninety days. Elections are duly set for July 4, the day before the national holiday, an anniversary as much about the French conquest of 1830 as about Algerian independence.

For now the overwhelming majority of demonstrators are refusing any scenario imposed from above or that aims to confiscate their revolution. This is why they express a lot of distrust towards any self-proclaimed representatives of the movement, starting with the political class tied to the administration, both near and far. Organizations embedded in the regime—like the National Liberation Front (FLN), the sole political party from 1963 – 1989, or the National Democratic Assembly, created in 1997—are jeered at by the demonstrators, who shout at them to “leave.” Residents of the Es Sebt commune near Skikda walled up the local FLN headquarters on April 14.

The government measures its unpopularity every day. On April 13th, crowds forced its ministers of the Interior, Water Resources, and Housing to turn back from their visit to Béchar. The next day, in Tébessa, demonstrators surrounded the airport, forcing the Minister of Energy to leave. This hostility, summed up by the slogan “let them all leave!” was also leveled against representatives of opposition parties that have temporarily rejoined the government, such as the Rally for Culture and Democracy, which supported Bouteflika in recent years for the dubious reason of anti-
imperialism, just like the Trotskyist Workers Party (PT, Lambertist). However, it should be noted that there is much ambivalence within this seemingly unanimous opposition. This ambivalence involves, among other things, a great mistrust, if not animosity, concerning the defense of supposedly unequivocal aspirations, I which is likely to break the facade of unity, namely, those of workers and women. In this regard, the aggression, which I witnessed, against the “feminist square” in front of the Central Faculty in Algiers during the Friday, March 29 demonstration, was a reminder not only of the profound resentment towards women but also of the difficulty of reaffirming principled positions when faced with first-time demonstrators who are under the influence of Islamist ideology disseminated by the state. This confusion, which reflects the state of mind of a significant part of the population could be seen in calls to fraternize with the forces of repression, in illusions about representative democracy, as well as in the dismissal among the neoliberals and conservatives of the rallying cries of general strike, civil disobedience, and gender equality.

What counts, from now on, is no longer what happens on the Friday marches, but what does or does not happen on the other days. The challenge is for the movement to mature enough to cross a qualitative threshold, or risk a reversal caused by the lassitude and repression which began in the early days of the hirak (movement). The police, despite their “restraint” (which the media praised for a while), fulfilled their role by preventing young people from reaching the presidential palace, on the heights of Algiers. There have also been reports of police violence against unarmed people, not to mention the very aggressive use of tear gas to push back the marchers.

In at rally against the mistreatment of animals, held on March 30 in front of the main post office of Algiers, there were mostly women demonstrating, under the amused or shocked gaze of the local population. A repetition was prohibited the following week, when I was able to verify that the plainclothes officers did not tolerate even the presence of isolated individuals at this symbolic protest site. On April 9, to the great surprise of citizens just becoming aware of the violence of the state, the police used tear gas, water cannons, and, for the first time, sound cannons in the capital to suppress a student march. On Friday, April 12, they fired rubber bullets in Algiers. How far will this escalation go?

The next day, members of the Democratic and Social Movement and the Youth Action Rally were arrested while they were denouncing the repression in Algiers. Taken to the Baraki police station some fifteen kilometers away, four of the militants were forced to take off their clothes to be whipped, thus suffering a new humiliation. On April 6, the police arrested opponents of they General Secretary of the General Union of Algerian Workers, Abdelmadjid Sidi Said (with whom PT leaders consorted), in front of the headquarters of a power plant historically linked to the regime. A week earlier, union dissidents had encountered an armed gang in the pay of Sidi Said. A movement to liberate this union from state control began in certain sections or federations, whether or not they were under the influence of Trotskyists. At the same time, the autonomous Confederation of Algerian Trade Unions called for a strike in the civil service on April 10 to support “the transition,” but without putting forward any socio-economic demands. However, the time seems more favorable than ever to connect the question of democracy to the social question. This is especially true since employers have given wage increases in order to remove the specter of a general strike; at Algeria Telecom, according to an announcement on March 24, the base salary was increased by 13 percent.
The great majority of Algerians share a desire for social justice and express anger against “the thieves who have looted the country” to cite a very popular slogan. But the “looters,” so vilified in songs, have not had their property expropriated, nor have there been any calls to boycott companies linked to the regime. Apart from numerous housing squats (before their allocation in the wilayas [administrative regions] of Tizi-Ouzou and Boumerdes in early April) or the occupation on April 8 of the steel complex of El Hadjar by hundreds of unemployed people demanding jobs, these kinds of spontaneous actions are hardly reported by the press or by “left” information networks. Similarly, attempts at self-organization in the universities—like at Constantine, where students and teachers launched the idea of a coordination—come up against an interruption in the transmission of practices between generations of students, because the last sizeable movement was back in 2011. And exchanges on social networks—those intoxicating vectors—tend to become substitutes for general assemblies. Thus, in a call by intellectuals on April 13 to form citizen committees “for the construction of a state of law,” social networks were presented as a tool permitting the formation of organizations at the grassroots level.

The popular movement does not lack creativity or energy, but it remains fettered by the nationalism and conservatism that have shaped Algerian society over the last decades. Progressive or revolutionary forces—often influenced more by leninism than by “heterodox” currents—are not well rooted. This explains their being out of step with the highly subversive potential of a birak (movement) which must overcome its own contradictions and go as far as possible in challenging the existing order. For the most determined protesters, it’s about finishing with the “power” in all its forms and inventing new social relations freed from exploitation, alienation, and domination.

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