

THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN ALGERIA; WHY WAS THE “ARAB SPRING” STUMBLER THERE?

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Introduction

One year has remained to the forthcoming presidential elections in Algeria, and the Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika is still the candidate of the “majority of political elites” in the country, as his supporters claim, those who are still nominate the same man for taking the fifth consecutive presidential mandate in spite of his severe illness which threw him on his wheelchair since five years ago. In contrast, the current Algerian political arena is unable to find an alternative consensus candidate, the case that raises many

questions about the democratic future of a country with the characteristics of an entire continent.

This article discusses the underlying causes behind the democratic deficit in Algeria, which political regime remains firmly in place despite all the waves of “democratic chaos” sweeping its regional sphere since 2011 or the so-called “Arab spring revolutions”. So, we would like to ask the following questions: What prevents the political change in Algeria towards democracy? How did the political regime in Algeria prevent the arrival

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of democratic waves of change to the borders of Algeria?

This article is divided into two parts, the first part provides a brief story of the historical path that democracy has taken in Algeria since independence, explaining the effective actors in the Algerian political regime, while the second part is trying to identify the most important factors that cause the continuation of the democratic deficit in Algeria until now, wondering about the future of democracy in this country rich in natural wealth, people capacities and great history.

1. A Brief Story of Democracy in Algeria

Before we identify the causes of the democratic deficit in Algeria in general and the factors that caused the failure of the “Arab Spring” in the country in particular, it is better to give the reader a brief history of the democratic experiment in Algeria. After gaining independence from the French occupiers in 1962, Algeria took a socialist way for the economy and policy of state under the leadership of the late revolutionary leader Houari Boumediene, who came to power after a coup d'état on his friend in revolution the late Ahmed Ben Bella in 1965, or what so-called by “revolutionary correction”. Algeria was governed by Boumediene until his death in December 1978, during his period, the country had a very good reputation on the international level, Algeria was a leading voice of the national liberation movements and an influential leader in the non-aligned movement in the Third World, and its diplomacy was characterized by unprecedented activity with its repeated successes in the mediation process among disputed parties.

At the domestic level, Boumediene devoted national reforms of a socialist nature, such as the nationalization of fuel, the agricultural revolution that succeeded to some extent in pushing this young country economy forward, but its policies failed miserably to construct a state with strong institutions which its continuity not dependent on the presence and continuity of any leader in ruling

as he used to say. Boumediene is also blamed on integrating some Algerian officers in the national military who had fought against the Algerian liberation revolution alongside with France and joined the revolution later which so-called “Lacoste promotion”. He did not know in that time that this military group would shape the future of Algeria after him later.

After the death of President Boumediene in 1978, political influence of the military establishment was grew, this establishment brought the late Shadli Ben Jadid as a new president of Algeria, with marginalizing other political figures were more experience and famous than Ben Jadid like Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who was the Algerian foreign minister during the days of Boumediene and was close to him or Mr. Mohamed Saleh Yahiaoui, which was a very revolutionary charismatic personality. The days of Shadli Ben Jedid (1979-1992) were characterized by numerous political and social disturbances, the most important were the events of “the Amazigh Spring” in 1980, which the Amazigh demanded during it some political and social rights which were denied them during Boumediene days. The country also witnessed a growing wave of Islamic trends and movements, which influenced by The Muslim Brotherhood ideas in Egypt, the Islamic revolution ideas in Iran, the Wahhabi trend of Saudi Arabia, the jihadist ideas of Afghanistan and others. Also, the Algerian economy has been known severely a deterioration by the collapse of oil prices which attainment of \$ 8 per barrel. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the triumph of Western liberalism, there was no longer any justification for the ruling elite in Algeria to continue adopting the socialist system in economy and governance. The new international circumstances have led Algeria toward liberalism and democratic openness. Despite all the political and social problems that the country was experiencing at that time, but it did not shake the confidence of the Algerian ruling party (FLN) in itself, nor the confidence of ruling Generals from behind the curtain in opening the country over the political pluralism and allowing other



new formed parties to compete for power. So, the 1992 legislative elections were a decisive turning point in Algeria's modern history.

In 1992, an Islamist-oriented political front called "The Islamic Salvation Front" (FIS) was able to defeat the ruling party in a legislative election that everyone saw as fair. At that time, President Shadli announced his acceptance with respect for the results of the fund. However, this was not accepted by "Les décideurs" (The main decision-makers) in Algeria, as they were named. They pushed Shadli to resign and the tank came to the street to restore the situation to what it was before, that caused the failure of the first democratic experience in Algeria and plunging the country into a period of terrible violence and terrorism. The Algerian Generals sought refuge in the revolutionary leader Mohamed Boudiaf, who has enjoyed of revolutionary legitimacy and was well accepted by the Algerian political community. He was pushed to power, but Boudiaf did not rule for more than five months (January-June 1992) to be assassinated while addressing the Algerian people in a live broadcast, and until now the circumstances of his assassination remain ambiguous. Many analysts say that the man was a victim of his attempts to restore power and put it in the hands of civilians rather than military. After this assassination, Algeria entered terrible years of randomly violence and terrorism throughout the 1990s or what the Algerians know of the era of "black decade". At that time, Algeria was ruled by two successive presidents, namely Ali Kafi (1992-1994) and Liamine Zeroual (1994-1999). Both were candidates for the military establishment; the first one recognized his inability to challenge the army, while the second (Zeroual) tried hard to challenge the army, and restore the power to the presidential establishment, but he failed at the end and did not even complete his presidential mandate under the pressure of military in 1999, the same year Bouteflika returned to the Algerian political arena as the candidate of military also, to begin a new era in Algeria's contemporary political history.

President Bouteflika started his era with the project of civil accord and national reconciliation, ending a decade of massacres and crimes that killed more than 200,000 Algerians, according to official statistics. Although the military establishment stood behind Bouteflika's arrival in Algeria in 1999, the man followed a long-term strategy to restore the power of the presidency and to determine the strength of the military establishment. When we talk about the military establishment we are actually talking about two main bodies that the balance of power and interest between them had made the Algerian presidents since the death of President Boumediene in 1978, they are, the Army's General Staff, led now by General Al-Kayed Saleh, and the Intelligence Agency, which was led by General Mohamed Madin, who is called General Toufik about 25 years ago.

We can say that Bouteflika succeeded to some extent in exploiting this competition between the two bodies so as to increase the power and influence of the presidency, and after benefiting from its support together during the mantades of his reign from 1999 to 2009, the man wanted after the end of his second mandate to amend the Algerian constitution to become more than two mandates, The intelligence sevice refused to do so, but he was supported by the army's chief of staff. From that period on, Bouteflika's struggle with the intelligence service, supported by the army's chief of staff, began until he was able to dismiss many generals, including the director of intelligence himself, General Al-Tawfik, in 2015, and he appointed another who is close to him, benefiting from the support of the two bodies together. Also, he made some generals close to him and promoted many military leaders to "the rank of General" so as to weakness this rank and break the monopoly of generals opposing him which enjoyed many powers alone.

Bouteflika ended his third mandate in 2014, to re-run for a fourth mandate and win despite his severe illness. Since then, his eloquent speeches and media presence have disappeared due to illness, giving way to an old-new figure who

runs the country behind the scenes, his brother Said Bouteflika. Many observers argue that Said Bouteflika is considered the most powerful person in the presidency today, running his brother's functions informally and effectively, relying on the support of the army's chief of staff on the one hand and some of businessmen who are working under the umbrella of the Forum of Heads of Algerian Institutions led by Algerian businessman Ali Haddad, the biggest supporter of Bouteflika's brother, until the cocaine incident occurred, where the balances and alliances within the Algerian regime changed again.

If we would like to shorten the nature of the Algerian political system in one term, the term oligarchy will seem to be the closest term to the content. The country is not driven by a single power but by a group of powers or balances or wings, so, the political decision is ultimately an outcome of the struggle and clash among these interests, a game in which each party has relied on an external support. France and the United States stand at the head of these supporters.

One year before the next election, and the current president Abdelaziz Bouteflika is still a candidate for most of these forces, despite the regime figure out that Bouteflika is unable to perform his duties naturally because of his disease, and no one knows until now what the conflict of interests and wings within the Algerian regime will produce, especially after the cocaine issue.

2. The Roots of Democratic Deficit in Algeria, Why the Arab Spring Stopped at the Border?

In 2011, the first waves of the so-called "Arab Spring" exploded in Tunisia, followed by a major crisis in Libya, in which the ruling regime fell. Libya became a failing state, exporting many security problems to its regional environment. Thus, Algeria's borders became surrounded by a fence of crises (Tunisian revolution, a failing state in Libya, security problems coming from Mali, and then the political crisis with Morocco because of

the Western Sahara dilemma). However, despite this security-strained regional environment, the Algerian regime has managed to overcome the "chaos of the Arab Spring" and thereby maintain itself adapting to the status quo, and also was able to silence popular political and social demands. Therefore, many have asked the same question: Why did the "Arab Spring Wave" stop on the Algerian borders? And why Algeria continues to live a democratic deficit, despite all the human and material potential which possesses as a rich country.

We argue here that the factors of the "Arab Spring" failure in Algeria and the reasons of the democratic deficit in the country are considered compound reasons and factors, some of them are related to the people, some of them to the political regime and some of them to the main external factors. In the following, we will explain all of these factors one by one.

The Political Culture of Algerian people

We mean by the political culture of people, a set of values, perceptions, feelings and ideas accumulated throughout history that the individuals of society believe about the prevailing political concepts, such as their perception of state, the political system, the ruling, political parties and the like so, these perceptions and ideas guiding their political behaviors, especially in the country's major political events. As for the democratic political culture of the Algerian people, we can say that is a very modern culture. This country has not seen the wave of democracy until the end of the last century. The culture of power rotation is a culture that is not deeply rooted in the general public, the general public still believes in "the right man in the right place", and until now, a large group of Algerians is still nostalgic for the days of the late President Houari Boumediene as a purely patriotic man who died and had nothing in his bank account from the people's money than those who came after him "as they think." The Algerian people still believe in the idea of "the

savior man” and it has not yet a serious sense of the importance of institutions, and of course, we are not talking about the political elites who already believe in democracy even in term of form only.

The Historical Memory of “The Black Decade”

The painful memory of “the black decade” is still present in the collective imagination of the Algerian people. Human rights agencies have recorded more than 200,000 deaths, according to official statistics, and about 500,000 deaths, according to unofficial statistics. There are many shocking stories of bloody nights in many villages over Algeria, as in the case of “Ben Talha” village, where unknown gunmen have destroyed an entire village in few hours, leaving about 400 dead. With the outbreak of the “Arab Spring uprisings,” the political regime deliberately broadcasted horrible scenes of that era on public television provoking widespread discontent among the Algerians who accused the regime of trying to terrorize the Algerians so that no one would dare to “rebel” again, and support for this “chaos movement” which called “Arab spring.” As if the political regime is addressing the people saying: Either we or bloody chaos.

The Military Nature of the Algerian Regime

The Algerian political regime is characterized by its military nature in essence. The Generals who took part in the 1991 coup were the ones who ruled Algeria behind the scenes and made its presidents since that period. It is true, there are institutions of a civil state, democracy, and elections, but they are all formality and does not participate at all in the fateful decisions of the country. When we talk about the military establishment, we are talking about two main bodies: the intelligence and the military staff. The competition between these two bodies and the sharing of interests among its major figures have shaped always the content of the decision in Algeria. Even the president himself is a product of the balance between these two

bodies. However, although the current Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was a product of these existing balances, as we have said before, the president has succeeded this time in taking power from this establishment to the presidency. One of the most famous statements of Bouteflika, when he came to power, was: “I would not like to be a three-quarters of a president”, calling the Algerian people to stand with him until he restores the full authority, in reference to his desire to neutralize the military establishment and keep it away from the political decision. We have already mentioned briefly the features of the wings struggle within the Algerian regime, which continues to this day, and has recently exploded because of the cocaine issue. The Spanish border police have informed the Algerian intelligence service (and not the police) that a huge quantity of cocaine (701 kg) will enter Algeria via the sea, it is coming from Brazil. The army has moved to confiscate it and impede the operation. This case revealed later the involvement of many political and military leaders and police leaders as well. As a result of the story, the military led by General Al-Gaid Al-Saleh took advantage of the case to strongly strike some influential figures, especially who have the ambition to be the next president of Algeria (Like Abdulghani Al-Hamel the General Director of Police) and keeping them away from the political game, because they can use this position later against its interests. So, this is the nature of the Algerian political regime, divided into wings struggling for power away from the will of people who never possess his sovereignty at all.

The Weakness of Civil Society and its Containment by the Regime

Civil society plays an important role in any process of democratic transition. Civil society plays the role of mediator between people and authority. It is formed by a group of voluntary organizations which have an independent will from the state institutions such as student unions, Worker syndicates, trade unions, free economic institutions and others. The largest part of these organizations

in Algeria, which was created to express the voice of the Authority, it is funded by the Authority, because it is difficult in Algeria to establish a civil organization with an independent will and funding. With the approaching of any election date, these organizations support the candidate of regime, here, we can refer to the positions of Mr. Abdel Majid Sidi El-Said, president of the General Union of Algerian Workers, which is always with the desires of the presidency. Today he is a strong supporter of the president's brother, El-Said Bouteflika. The same is true of Mr. Ali Haddad, director-general of the Forum of Algerian Enterprise Heads, the largest gathering of Algerian businessmen in the country. The man strongly supports the presidential wing (Which created him), and no one in Algeria does not know his close personal relationship with the brother of President Bouteflika. Meanwhile, the regime keeps other businessmen away, just because they have opposition voices like Mr. Saad Rabrab, one of the richest businessman in the Arab world in general, and he is the head of the industrial group Civital, one of the world's largest sugar refineries.

Therefore, the inability of the society to establish independent civil society organizations which are not contained by the Authority is an additional factor in the democratic deficit phenomenon that has been in place for decades. It is also a sign of the impossibility of a democratic change led by civil society figures in Algeria.

The Rising Prices of Rent and the Low Taxes Imposed on People

In 2012, The American scholar Michael Ross wrote his most famous book entitled, "The Oil Curse: How Petroleum Wealth Shapes the Development of Nations". This book is the most important theoretical contribution which related the problem of democratic deficit with oil wealth. The more the state - in the third world - possesses a great oil wealth, the more it gets suffered in its transition to democracy. It seems that this theory has a tremendous explanatory power with regard to the

state of democracy in Algeria, as Algeria is one of the richest countries with natural resources, especially oil and natural gas.

Since President Bouteflika came to power in 1999, oil prices have continued to rise. Since 2001, the world has known two major wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which have caused an increase in the price of oil. Also, some International crises (such as the Syrian war, Ukrainian war, Yemen war, and others) effectively contributed to saving Bouteflika mandates later. These wars and crises were in favor of all rentier states such as Algeria, with oil representing about 97% of the national income of Algeria, which was able to sell huge quantities of oil. So, the Algerian regime benefited from rent income to employ it in the so-called "buy social peace" policy. In addition to the policy of tax cuts on people, the Algerian government has spent large sums to contain the growing anger of people because of many social problems, as well as the limitation of the horizon of democracy and freedoms in the country. These include, for example, facilitating the extraction of bank loans for young people to open profitable projects or small economic institutions, or the like. This policy has proved its relative success, especially with the increase of "the Arab Spring waves" in Tunisia and Egypt and the war in Syria, but it is a long-term failed policy that will not absorb the discontent of people in all sectors. The government announced almost a year ago that it will be entering a stage of austerity, so we can say, it would not be in its favor at all.

The External Factor

Since Algeria's independence in 1962, France, remains the most influential external actor in Algeria, It was said that Generals who ruling now the country behind the curtain were elements within the French army (Promotion de LACOSTE) then, they left it and joined the revolution before it finished in 1958. It is still a big controversy about those Generals and causes of their inclusion by the previous President Houari Boumediene in

the army on the pretext of benefiting from their military experience. Today, there is a list of influential names in the country takes its support from France, including politicians, civilians, Generals or ministers, and many of them personally benefit from their relationships with France, such as get facilities to buy expensive residences in Paris, or smuggling money or the like.

More than half a century after the independence of Algeria, observers see a significant decline of France's influence in the country in favor of other competing foreign powers in North Africa, led by the United States. Today, there is a talk about a "US wing" as a strong rival to the French wing inside the Algerian regime. Let us clarify this issue with two examples. The first example relates to General Toufik, whom Bouteflika removed from the arena, but his shadow remains strong. Many wonder how the man who ruled Algeria from behind the curtain for 25 years could disappear so easily, at the time when he named himself "Lord of Algeria"? According to a report published in the French website "Monde d'Afrique" in 2017, Trump's current administration consider the General Toufik as an important man, especially since the man was at the head of Algeria's intelligence for the past 25 years, where he built strong information networks in Mali, Libya, and even Syria which can be useful for the United States in its policy towards North African and Mediterranean region. Among what the website quoted, that the General Tawfik still working silently, he is making his home as a place for secret meetings. Also, the website said that the General Tawfik was able to gather a lot of information thanks to the penetrating of his intelligence establishment to many terrorist groups, which he transferred to the US intelligence in his visit to the USA in summer of 2001. The information said that there were possible terrorist attacks on the United States territory soon, but the US intelli-

gence did not take this information seriously than, the September 11 tragedy was happening. Since then General Tawfik has become a very important man for the Americans.¹ The second example is related to a character named Mr. Abdelmoumen Ould Kaddour, who has been the General Manager of Sonatrach Oil Company since 2017, which is considered the company number one for Algeria with excellence and represents 97% of the country's income. The case of the appointment of Mr. Ould Kaddour at the head of this company has caused a great deal of confusion among the Algerians. In 2007, he was convicted of treason and conspiracy with a foreign country (The USA) after finding sophisticated listening devices in his office and home when he was a director of an Algerian-American company called Brown & Root-Condor. No one knows until now whether his appointment means that he did not any such mistake or reflects the US pressure to keep its ally there after the scandal involving their former ally Chakib Khelil? No one from outside closed circles of power knows yet, what is now known to all Algerians is the political relations with France contributed to the country's backwardness more, so, they do not want other similar relations with any other foreign power at the expense of their development and civilizational progress.

It should be noted at the end of this section that, despite the rivalry between France and the United States in Algeria, both have a common interest in keeping Algeria as a stable state in the security level, and therefore, preventing it from the Libyan example, as it turns into a failed state that exports many forms of security threats and risks toward Europe (such as illegal immigration, terrorism, smuggling of drugs, weapons, etc). Geopolitically, Algeria is a "buffer state" for the national security

¹ Louise Dimitrakis, **La main tendue de Washington au général Toufik**, Mondafrique, 06/02/2017.
<https://mondafrique.com/main-tendue-de-washington-general-toufik/>

of the Northern Mediterranean countries side. For this reason, the Western powers, especially the United States and France, will be keen to stabilize Algeria in terms of security, and preventing it from chaos (Such as Arab Spring Uprisings) through the support of the stronger internal side (currently the Army Chief of Staff) so as to avoid unnecessary security problems in the whole region.

Conclusion

Based on the foregoing, we see that the factors of the democratic deficit in Algeria are compound factors, not limited to one reason, although its different in their impact levels. In our perspective, the military nature of the political regime is the most important factor in the democratic deficit experienced by the country, and there is no hope of a change toward democracy - without blood - unless the influential characters in the regime decide this matter or they disappear for some reason. However, we believe that the first rational

step towards a proper democratic transition is linked to the role of educated and intellectual elites in consolidating the values of democracy in the minds of people, educated them and contributing to awareness of their rights, and eliminating their negative and wrong political culture through an active involvement in the society and state affairs, or to be an organic intellectuals as Gramsci said. The process of proper change we believe in is a mission of the intellectual class par excellence. It is the only party that can take people out of their state of “anesthetization” they are living since decades, on the other hand, exerting pressure on the authoritarian regime through the means of education and awareness. One of the main reasons for the continuation of the political corruption phenomenon in Algeria is the resignation of the intellectual class from its historical mission, so, the end of this political corruption in Algeria is linked to the return of this class strongly to the educational and cultural struggle again.

