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Algerian government uses Covid-19 lockdown to increase repression

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Secret trials, disappearances and threats to activists are increasing. Special powers introduced during the Covid-19 pandemic are being misused against regime opponents.

Human rights activists have accused Algeria of exploiting the coronavirus outbreak to crack down on opponents who have been at the forefront of more than a year of mass anti-regime protests.

While weekly demonstrations have all but ended as people are prevented from gathering and also fearful of contracting Covid-19, the authorities have extended the imprisonment of an opposition leader, arrested a prominent journalist and summoned dozens of activists for questioning, civil society groups say.

“The authorities are taking advantage of the fact that the international community has something else to focus on now and are distracted by the coronavirus,” said Ahmed Benchemsi, north Africa researcher at Human Rights Watch.

The north African state has witnessed huge protests since February 2019, with hundreds of thousands of Algerians taking to the streets at least twice a week to demand the departure of the military-backed regime.

Last week, Karim Tabbou, an imprisoned opposition leader, was hauled before a judge to face a sudden trial the day before he was due to be released.

He was handed a one-year sentence, which means he will spend at least another six months behind bars. Neither he nor his lawyers knew about the court appearance in advance.

The charges related to “incitement to violence” and “harming national security” and refer to speeches he made criticising the role of the army in politics.

The authorities also detained Khaled Drareni, a journalist who has covered the protests extensively, on similar charges a week ago. Mr Drareni, who publishes a website covering opposition news, has more than 140,000 followers on Twitter.

He is also the Algeria correspondent for Reporters Sans Frontiers, the international press advocacy group.

Daikha Dridi, an Algerian journalist and colleague of Mr Drareni on Radio M, an independent internet broadcaster, said his arrest was unexpected.

Mr Drareni was previously detained for three days last month after he filmed police at a demonstration arresting a well-known opposition activist.

“Khaled is being made to pay for his stubbornness,” Ms Dridi said. “He was called in several times over the past year and once the military police asked him to stop covering the protests and to stop referring to them as a revolution.”

The arrests appear to be part of a larger campaign against dissent, Ms Dridi and others said.

The National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees, an Algerian civil society group, said dozens of activists across the country have been summoned to appear at police stations in recent days.

After the coronavirus pandemic spread to Algeria, prominent figures within the opposition movement, including Mr Drareni, called for a suspension of the anti-government demonstrations.

The protests erupted after Abdelaziz Bouteflika, announced his intention to extend his 20 presidency by contesting elections, despite him being incapacitated by a stroke.

In a bid to quell the demonstrations, the military forced Mr Bouteflika to resign, but the leaderless protest movement managed to maintain its momentum and continued to press for a complete overhaul of the regime.

The military-backed authorities held a presidential election in December in which five pro-regime figures competed. Amid calls for a boycott, there was a low-turnout on polling day, but Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a former prime minister was announced the winner.

The protests continued until last month. Algeria, Africa’s biggest gas exporter, faces mounting economic challenges as grapples with the double blow of the coronavirus outbreak and plunging oil prices.

The government announced it was cutting spending by 30 per cent in a bid to manage its diminishing resources.

Activists say that as the regime expects to have to face more public discontent, it wants to silence critics who were vocal during the past year of dissent.

“I think they will continue settling political accounts [with opponents], said Mr Benchemsi. “The coronavirus is for now sucking up all the media oxygen, they believe whatever they do will be under the radar.”

P.S.

Source: Financial Times