

Introduction: Trade unions and the Algerian uprising

A Year in the Streets

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On 12 December 2019 a new president was declared elected in Algeria, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, despite the fact that millions of Algerians boycotted the election, which they saw as illegitimate. Since February 2019 millions have protested peacefully, every Tuesday and Friday, against a corrupt regime, and have been demanding system change.

The movement, or Hirak, forced president Abdelaziz Bouteflika to step down on 2 April after 20 years in power, after he proposed to stand for a 5th term. It then forced the postponement of two presidential elections, in April and July, because people refused simply a change of faces at the top in an unchanged system. Protesters want the removal of an entrenched political and military class that has held power in Algeria since independence from France in 1962. They demand a civilian, not a military state, based on the rule of law.

The protests are always peaceful, and full of satire, humour, chants and songs. There is extensive use of social media, especially Facebook. Some activists have been arrested merely because of their support for the Hirak on Facebook.

There have been many sectional strikes, for example education, health, public administration, lawyers, magistrates, port workers and the energy sector. Teachers have a long history of struggle, both on socio-economic issues and also in support of the popular movement.

Several general strikes took place between March and December. The first of these in March was instrumental in forcing Bouteflika to quit. A nationwide general strike was called for the four days prior to the December election. It was solid in Kabylia; in Bejaia there was a united call by numerous trade unions, political parties and other organisations. However, it was only partly successful in Algiers, and failed to be supported so well in other areas of the country.

The Algerian government is known as “Le Pouvoir” (The Power) or “the gang”, with power shared between the army, the National Liberation Front (FLN), businessmen and the intelligence services. The army has played the key role since independence, and also has a stake in major businesses.

During 2019 General Gaïd Salah was Algeria’s strongman and de facto ruler, until he died in December. He was succeeded by Saïd Chengriha, Acting Chief of Military Staff.

In June Gaïd Salah banned Amazigh (Berber) flags, and blocked access to Algiers for demonstrators. There has been an increase in repression since June 2019, with mass arrests and heavy policing. Hundreds have been kept in pre-trial detention, and prison sentences handed out – “justice by telephone” as the Algerians call it. The media is controlled by the government, journalists have been imprisoned and censorship has increased.

There has been an anti-corruption campaign, widely seen as a war between the ruling clans. There are also attempts to divide and rule, with accusations of “foreign interference”.

But significantly, the Hirak has united all the country for the first time in recent history in opposing the regime, and it has resisted the divide and rule tactics of repression.

Since Tebboune’s election, there has been talk of dialogue and negotiation, but repression and arbitrary arrests have continued. Human rights defenders, journalists, activists and politicians are still detained.

Hundreds remain in custody, some for “harming the integrity of the national territory,” which carries sentences of up to 10 years, others for “undermining the morale of the troops”, and “unarmed assembly”.

Others, like Samira Messouci, former elected representative for the RCD (Rally for Culture and Democracy), have served six months in prison merely for carrying the Berber flag.

The situation of prisoners and detainees is contradictory. By 6th February Tebboune had pardoned nearly 10,000 people sentenced to less than 18 months. But the CNLD (National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees) said the pardons excluded the 142 Hirak political prisoners who were still in preventive detention, while over a thousand are being prosecuted for participating in the movement. Some detainees have been acquitted, others released after serving their sentences or pending trial. Human rights activists denounce the current situation of many ex-Hirak detainees, whom public and private companies refuse to reinstate in their jobs.

In an attempt to end the Hirak, the new president Tebboune has been meeting with some politicians who are in favour of dialogue under the government’s terms, including the main Islamist party the MSP (Society for Peace Movement). The Hirak has rejected calls for dialogue with what they see as an illegitimate president, and refuse to be represented by political parties who claim to speak for them.

Tebboune has set up a ‘committee of experts’ to amend the constitution. Critics point out the tradition of previous constitutional amendments which have done nothing to alter the real exercise of power by the regime, and serve only to highlight the crisis in the system.

After Abdelmadjid Tebboune was declared president in December 2019, some expected that his talk of dialogue would lead to the freeing of political prisoners and a reduction in repression. The opposite has been the case.

Many Hirak activists have been arrested and imprisoned. Since the coronavirus pandemic started, the Hirak has ceased street demonstrations. However, the regime is using the crisis to continue its repression of the movement, and clamp down on activists, opposition politicians and journalists.

The PAD (Forces of the Pact for the Democratic Alternative) is a movement formed during the Hirak, and involves opposition political parties, associations, members of civil society, women, young people, human rights organisations and autonomous trade unions.

It calls for a transitional period for the establishment of the rule of law, a sovereign constituent process, the independence of the judiciary, free expression and the release of Hirak prisoners of conscience.

The PAD rejects the masquerade of the last presidential election and the current political operation which, through “consultations” and “constitutional review”, aims to legitimise the same power in

place.

Algeria also faces economic problems and increased financial pressure caused by a fall in energy revenues and foreign exchange reserves. The regime decided in 2013 to exploit the reserves of shale gas in the Sahara, the third largest reserve in the world, a decision supported by the major oil companies.

Fracking will endanger the precious fresh water reserves under the Sahara which are shared by Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. In 2014 there was a huge uprising of tens of thousands of people against shale gas, resulting in a suspension of drilling in 2015. Now Tebboune has announced drilling for shale gas will resume, but in 2020 it's the millions in the Hirak who now say "No to shale gas".

After one year of demonstrations, strikes and boycotts, the stalemate may lead some to be tempted into compromise. Trying to regain legitimacy, the regime declared February 22 a national holiday for the "blessed Hirak", and is courting certain politicians to support its revision of the constitution, while continuing with harsh repression. It has no intention of giving up any of its power.

While the anniversary of the Hirak saw a rejuvenation of the movement. However, the coronavirus pandemic has now forced a change of tactic. For the first time since the start of the Hirak over a year ago, and by common agreement, all demonstrations were suspended on 17 March.

Karim Tabbou, leader of the UDS (Democratic and Social Union), urged using this period to prepare for future struggles and to preserve the achievements of the Hirak, as the regime will try to use the situation to snuff out the revolution.

The demands of the movement remain: "a civilian not a military state", "free the political prisoners", "an independent judiciary", "freedom of the press", "the people want the downfall of the regime." The Algerian people will find other ways to continue the struggle.

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Transnational Institute (TNI)

https://www.tni.org/files/publication-downloads/tradeunions_algerianuprising_0520_hires-1.pdf

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