

Algeria: Has the Hirak failed politically?

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Dr. Rachid Ouaisa is a professor at the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS) at the University of Marburg in Germany and, since 2020, director of the Merian Center for Advanced Studies for the Maghreb (MECAM) in Tunis. We spoke with him about the current political, economic, and social situation in Algeria, the state's failure to handle the Covid19 pandemic, the failures and potential of the Hirak (Arabic for "movement") protest movement, the role of Kabylia, and the increasing social and economic difficulties in the country that should be seen by the Hirak as an opportunity to reorganize itself and to create a more tangible vision for a more socially just Algeria. The interview was conducted by Sofian Philip Naceur in late August 2021.

Algeria's regime has increasingly pursued repressive tactics against the opposition since the Hirak protests had resumed in February 2021. The regime is trying to put an end to the protest movement once and for all. Currently, the country is also witnessing another coronavirus wave, by far the worst since the pandemic's onset. What options does the Hirak have to again exert pressure on the regime after the current Covid-19 wave?

Ouaisa: That is indeed unclear and also depends on what traces the corona crisis will leave behind. The current corona wave is the most severe the country has witnessed until today. The state's failure in handling the pandemic is evident. Hospitals are overloaded and there is a widespread shortage of oxygen. The traces of Bouteflika's system [Algeria's former President Abdelaziz Bouzeflika, in office between 1999 and 2019, ed.] are now even more noticeable. Therefore, it is indeed likely that the Hirak will react to the state's failure. Almost every family has seen relatives dying. This may contribute to an even larger potential for protest in the Algerian society. Hence, I expect the Hirak to focus more on economic and socioeconomic demands in the future. At the same time, the state's financial situation is likely to recover to at least some extent, as a medium term increase of oil prices is estimated to materialize. However, the state's reprisals may also lead to people being successfully intimidated. For this reasons as well, the Hirak will increasingly emerge regionally rather than nationally. The Kabylia region will certainly continue to revolt. Eventually, people will continue to take to the streets in major cities as well. But I do not believe that the Hirak will be able to successfully mobilize nationwide as it did in 2019, at least at the beginning of a new protest wave that is still to come.

Most recently, Kabylia was the Hirak's last bulwark. Protests there continued unabated until the beginning of the current coronavirus wave. However, we have also seen since 2019 that the regime is trying to divide the Hirak along ethnic affiliations and to play Arabs and Berbers off against each other. While the protests have been repressed almost nationwide by means of heavy repression, only people in Kabylia continue to demonstrate. People are continuously prosecuted for displaying the Berber flag. Is the regime trying to use sectarian means to divide the country and its society and to maintain its power by violently escalating the conflict in Kabylia?

Ouaisa: The regime resorts to the same means again and again and follows notorious patterns. It

attempts to divide by authoritarian means. Kabylia is framed as an exceptional case, while the Hirak relies on a kind of national consciousness – Algeria is seen as a whole – and tries to defend itself against this regional division. I don't think the Hirak and the Algerian people are falling for that. However, I consider the Hirak to be a political failure. Nevertheless, the movement has ensured that the people's self-confidence has grown. It is clear for everyone today that the regime is the problem, not Kabylia.

Why do you think the Hirak has failed?

Ouaisa: If a new wave of protests materializes after the current corona emergency, I hope that the movement has learned from its mistakes. The Hirak has failed because it unfortunately left aside all serious ideological-political issues. The main reason for its failure are the Islamists. The Rachad movement [an Islamist movement mostly active in European countries that has emerged from the ruins of the Islamic Salvation Front, ed.] destroyed the Hirak because, under its pressure, all important questions about the future of Algeria were left aside. The problem was always centered on the regime, but not on the system. The question of the system as such was never raised. The problem is not only the elite, it lies much deeper. Do we want an Algeria where we simply change the elites or do we want an Algeria where we also question and change the educational and economic system? The Islamists have never questioned the neoliberal structures of the Algerian economy. They have never questioned the crumbling educational system, which is considered to be highly influenced by religion. And they have insisted that any question that might divide the Hirak should not be asked at first. The same pattern has already been applied in Algeria during the war of independence between 1954 and 1962: our enemy is France and only after the victory against the colonial regime will we discuss in which direction the country should move to. This did not work out then and it does not work out now. We have to ask and discuss this key question now.

One central issue, however, was addressed quite consistently by the Hirak, namely the rule of the military or the military's political role. The demand for a civil state is even one of the movement's most important demands today.

Ouaisa: That is correct. This is a key question and it is considered a priority for the Hirak. But the secular leaders of the movement also say: the military and religion must not play any role within the state. However, while the question of the military has been prominently discussed, the role of religion in a new Algeria was not. But this does not work. Moreover, there can be no real revolution if economic actors are not convinced of it. The economic actors are afraid. They are afraid that after a real revolution there might be rules that are even worse than those rules imposed by the military. For economic actors, it is safer with the military in power as they already know the rules very well.

However, economic and social issues were also discussed by the Hirak. There have been repeated statements in which Hirak representatives outspokenly called for social justice – although there was usually no vision presented of how this could be achieved. The Hirak also regularly discussed the state's dependency on oil rents. The Hirak has thus certainly tried to emphasize socioeconomic and economic issues, and parts of the movement have repeatedly tried to stimulate corresponding debates. But so far these debates have only led into an impasse.

Ouaisa: Exactly. This discussion has been blocked again and again. I myself have experienced debates in which women's rights were demanded and then it was said that the women's rights issue was ideological in nature and that ideological debates had to be postponed for the time being. But such an approach does not convince people, the Hirak's vision was too vague. When you are on the path of a revolution, you already want to know where the country is heading. You need to present a more concrete vision of the future of Algeria, but the Hirak could not offer that.

Due to corona, social issues could be moved to the Hirak's center stage. But what does that mean in concrete terms? The socioeconomic situation is currently extremely tense, not only because of the run-down health care system. Socioeconomic protests have repeatedly occurred in Southern Algeria in recent times, e.g. in Ouargla. This could translate into new inflows of supporters for the Hirak. Could this also call into question the peacefulness of the movement since we are suddenly dealing with people in the streets who are simply hungry and not just joining a protest for political reasons?

Ouaisa: The risk is there. So far, however, the movement has failed primarily because it was an amalgamation of middle classes. These middle classes are both Islamist and secular. Their social visions differ, but in matters of economic policy they have similar ideas. The socioeconomically marginalized strata of society have received little attention. However, if these strata of society are to join the Hirak as new players, a pact must be made between them and the middle class. Economic issues and socioeconomic aspects must be upvalued and turn into key issues. It must no longer be just a question of regime change. Instead, a debate about a change of the system must be brought to the fore. Only cooperation between the ideologically divided middle class and low-income strata of society can turn the Hirak into a genuine revolution.

For more than a year, the Hirak has been primarily associated with NGOs, opposition parties, and public figures such as prominent lawyers and human rights activists, but not with trade unions. In 2019, independent trade unions still marched side by side with the partisan opposition. Today, they no longer play any role. Why is that?

Ouaisa: For a real revolution, we need to involve economic actors, whether those with money or those without money. Those with money must be reassured so they invest again. At the same time, those without means - the destitute - must be given hope that something will change for them later and that they will get something out of this uprising. These two actors - the employers and the employees, mostly represented by the unions - must be convinced and actively involved in the Hirak. If the state recovers financially in the medium term due to rising oil prices, employers and employees might calm down as well. If such a scenario occurs, the Hirak will have lost in any case.

Even if the state recovers in the medium term due to the rise of oil prices, the economic system will continue to be under enormous pressure. The decline in foreign reserves will continue regardless, and it is only a matter of time before the country is approaching bankruptcy. What would be an option for an economic and social policy intervention in the short term, and how could the state's dependency on the oil rent be countered in the long term?

Ouaisa: I believe Algeria cannot avoid negotiating with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The regime already did so in 1994, in the midst of the civil war. The domestic political situation at the time was a good distraction and cover for negotiating with the IMF from behind the scenes. Such a scenario is once again imminent. Under pressure from the corona pandemic and the economic crisis, there could be renewed negotiations with the IMF, resulting in a new liberalization programme. This, in turn, is likely to trigger new socioeconomically motivated protests. We must hope that this does not lead to a violent escalation.

But we also know that the IMF recipes are always the same. And they simply do not work. I do not claim that a heavily isolated economy like the Algerian one works - the Algerian model has clearly failed. But what alternative would there be to an isolated economic system in which the oil rent is monopolized by the elites and the IMF's deregulation strategy, which has failed again and again?

Ouaissa: Algeria is one of the very few countries in the world that could actually negotiate good terms with the IMF. Algeria is not a poor country. The IMF cannot impose its usual dictates here. In this respect, I can imagine that the welfare state can be reformed with so many oil rents and that the rent can be transferred and transformed into productive forms - given that the political will to do so is there. Rents are not per se an obstacle to development. Rents can also be transformed so that they are used as a boost for a productive economy. They could be used for consumption, so that Algerian entrepreneurs no longer have to rely on the generals to do business. If the rents were to be distributed as a means of consumption in society, e.g. in the form of salaries, certain products would no longer have to be imported, and with such a model it could finally be worthwhile for local entrepreneurs to produce in Algeria.

Unfortunately, it is almost impossible to use and redirect the oil rent like this. There are hardly any examples in the world where it has been possible to reform rent economies accordingly.

Ouaissa: The East Asian models are certainly examples of how states have succeeded in valorizing and utilizing labor in society to promote a rise of purchasing power. China is one example. Such a scenario is also possible in Algeria. Entrepreneurs must be convinced to invest and produce in the country and no longer import. For this, however, we need purchasing power in society. Rents could be used to generate this purchasing power. The question, however, is indeed how to implement such a policy in concrete terms.

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