

ALGERIA'S "HIRAK" MOVEMENT (2019): ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES

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The article has been delivered on 25.10.2022, reviewed on 25.01.2023, accepted for publication on 07.08.2023
DOI: 10.53548/0320-8117-2023.2-76

Introduction

Algerian President Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika's¹ 20-year tenure who was elected in 1999 was marked by a number of social and economic changes. One of the key policies implemented by Bouteflika was to reduce Algeria's dependence on oil and gas exports. The government invested heavily in diversifying the economy, particularly in the non-hydrocarbon sector. Despite these efforts, the Algerian economy remained heavily reliant on oil and gas exports throughout Bouteflika's time in office. This dependence made the economy vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. Additionally, corruption and inefficiencies in the government bureaucracy hindered the effectiveness of economic policies and slowed progress. In the later years of Bouteflika's presidency, the economy began to stagnate, with high unemployment rates, inflation, and a widening trade deficit. This was compounded by a decline in global oil prices, which led to a decrease in government revenues and an increase in public debt.

Two events happened in the early 2000s had a direct impact on the formation of modern history of Algeria. In 2003 a severe stroke made Bouteflika physically incapacitated², he was rarely seen in public which immediately affected his reputation. The sharp fall in global oil prices in 2014 had much more negative consequences. This was a tremendous blow not only to Algerian government revenues, but also to social and political stability, as the revenues from the sale of oil and gas enabled the implementation of state-imposed social reforms. The fact that an unstable financial environment and arising economic problems could fuel radical Islamism and spread a new wave of violence across the country was also troubling.

¹ Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika was elected president of Algeria in 1999: Mundy 2015, 24.

² Rachid Tlemçani 2020, 72.

"Hirak" protest movement

The social and political upheaval erupted in Algeria in 2019, but it took a form and a character that few expected. Unlike the protests of previous decades, the mass protests that began in 2019 did not form on an established and entrenched ideological base, nor around linguistic, cultural or religious unity. What is interesting is that Islamists, Berbers, and representatives of other political forces participated in the protests together.

All of them were united by the demand of Bouteflika to leave the post of president and form a new government. Even more significant was the lack of any kind of violence during the demonstrations, despite sheer size and apparent diversity, the protesters apparently refraining from any actions that could cause damage to buildings³. This circumstance was really new for Algeria, because the mass protests that took place throughout a new and contemporary history were almost always accompanied by violence and bloodshed, which could be repeated in 2019. However, this time the Algerians showed a determination to avoid violence at any cost.

On February 22, 2019, an unprecedented popular movement began in Algeria, which became known as "Hirak" (adjective from the Arabic harka, standard Arabic haraka حركة "war party" or "movement"). It was the country's most significant political event since independence in 1962. Millions of Algerians⁴ took to the streets to protest against Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term in the presidential elections despite widespread reports of his poor health and limited mobility. The announcement was met with general anger and disappointment, as many Algerians believed the country needed significant reform and that Bouteflika could no longer lead.

"Hirak" movement was not only directed against Bouteflika's decision to participate in the presidential elections, but also had deeper requirements. The movement was driven by a number of factors, including widespread corruption in the country, economic instability, an established system and an unchanging political regime. Many Algerians felt that the country's political and economic systems were not working in their favor and that the ruling elite was out of touch with the needs and desires of the population. There was also growing frustration with the lack of transparency and accountability in political processes, as well as a desire for greater freedom of speech and assembly. The demonstrators demanded the-

³ Zine Labidine Ghebouli, Algeria's opposition after the Hirak: Limitations and divisions, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/algerias-opposition-after-hirak-limitations-and-divisions>

⁴ Women and young people, who made up about 60% of Algeria's population, took an active part in the protests: Linda El-Naggar, Algeria's Hirak Movement: A Second National Liberation? Published by the Swedish Institute of International Affairs 2022, 15.

creation of a civil and democratic state based on social justice, the release of political prisoners⁵, they also raised various deep internal political issues.

On March 11, almost a month after the beginning of the popular movement, Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika withdrew his candidacy from the presidential elections, and already on April 2, he resigns from the post of Algerian president⁶. Under the circumstances of this development it is interesting to note the position of the army, which always held the real power of the country in its hands. It is worth mentioning at this period of the time Bouteflika's resignation which was one of the main demands of the movement did not contradict the point of view of high-ranking officers. This is evidenced by the words of Ahmed Gaid Salakh, the Chief of general Staff of the Algerian army, that "the army shares the same values as the people"⁷. The lack of active intervention of the army can also be explained by the fact that the latter also realized that the years of Bouteflika's rule were coming to an end and that the current regime could not control the protest movement in the country. In addition, it should not be ignored that the military took into account the mistakes made in the past⁸. However, the "pro-people" position of the army did not last long.

Contrary to the expectations of the Algerian political elite and the army, Bouteflika's resignation did not resolve the situation. The protest movement did not fade or even weaken, but continued with the same momentum, because the resignation of the president, in fact, did not lead to any significant changes. The country's ruling elite, which many Algerians associated with Bouteflika, retained their positions and power. New mass protests began in the capital of Algeria, the participants of the demonstrations demanded immediate resignation of interim president Abd al-Kader Bensalah⁹, prime minister Nouredine Bedoui, chairman of the

⁵ Northey and Guemar 2020, 16.

⁶ Algérie: le hirak, deux ans déjà, Le Point Afrique, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/algerie-le-hirak-deux-ans-deja-22-02-2021-2414967_3826.php#xtmc=hirak&xtnp=1&xtr=1. Nadjji Safir, Algeria in the 2000s A Rentier System in Crisis. The Politics of Algeria Domestic Issues and International Relations 2020, 9.

⁷ Algérie: le hirak, deux ans déjà, Le Point Afrique, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/algerie-le-hirak-deux-ans-deja-22-02-2021-2414967_3826.php#xtmc=hirak&xtnp=1&xtr=1

⁸ In 1992 the military, troubled by the victory of Islamic forces in the parliamentary elections, openly intervened in Algeria's internal politics, dissolving the National Assembly and deposing the country's president, Shadli Benjadid. The army's actions were one of the reasons that started the Algerian civil war. Jacob Mundy, Imaginative Geographies of Algerian Violence, Conflict Science, Conflict Management, Antipolitics, Stanford University Press 2015, 53. Frédéric Volpi 2003, 55-56.

⁹ Abd al-Kader Bensalah, president of the Senate, was appointed interim president of Algeria on April 9, to lead the country until new presidential elections scheduled on July 4. Hocine Dziri, La couverture très orientée du hirak par les médias algériens / Hirak en Algérie: l'invention d'un soulèvement, sous la direction de Omar Benderra, François Gèze, Rafik Lebjaoui, La Fabrique éditions, Paris 2020, 148.

constitutional council Tayeb Belais, leaders of the ruling party and all prominent representatives of the current political system¹⁰.

In addition, the protesters were strongly against the presidential elections set for July 4, 2019, demanding to implement real democratic reforms in the country and ensure fair presidential elections. Under the slogans "Down the government", "People want freedom and independence", "We do not want gang's participation in the presidential elections"¹¹, tens of thousands of people continuously took to the streets of different cities of Algeria. The participants of "Hirak" movement were well aware that the representatives of the former regime continue to maintain their power and influence not only on the political but also on the electoral processes. That was one of the reasons why the opposition was categorically against the holding of presidential elections, being concerned about the possibility of reproduction of the authorities, the elections scheduled for July 4 were postponed until December 12, 2019 as a result of the pressures and the boycott of the presidential candidates¹².

It must be noted that in the conditions of ongoing protests, the army in the person of General Gaid Salah, in whose hands the real power of Algeria was, opposed the demands "Haraqa"¹³. The authorities changed their tactics to paralyze the protest movement. Activists and journalists were regularly arrested on charges of terrorism. The government also introduced new rules that ostensibly related to hate speech but in practice limited free speech. At the same time, an attempt was made to weaken the activities of both traditional and new political parties that joined the movement and disperse some public organizations through various pressures¹⁴.

However, the repressions applied by the authorities had almost no effect on the course of the popular movement, nor on the declared goals of the movement. Realizing the futility of pressure and persecution, the authorities once again changed their method. Trying to regain the trust of the society and temporarily

¹⁰ В столице Алжира проходят новые акции протеста с требованием отставки президента Бенсалаха. <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/6323106>

¹¹ В Алжире оппозиция отвергла проведение выборов президента с участием представителей режима, <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/6749946>. Alger, les manifestants fustigent le «panel de médiation» désigné par le pouvoir, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/07/26/a-alger-les-manifestants-fustigent-le-panel-de-mediation-designe-par-le-pouvoir_5493944_3212.html

¹² Hocine Dziri, La couverture très orientée du hirak par les médias algériens / Hirak en Algérie: l'invention d'un soulèvement, sous la direction de Omar Benderra, François Gêze, Rafik Lebджаoui, La Fabrique éditions, Paris 2020, 151.

¹³ Algérie: le hirak, deux ans déjà, Le Point Afrique, https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/algerie-le-hirak-deux-ans-deja-22-02-2021-2414967_3826.php#xtmc=hirak&xtnp=1&xtcr=1

¹⁴ Algeria's opposition after the Hirak: Limitations and divisions, Middle East Institute (mei.edu). <https://www.mei.edu/publications/algerias-opposition-after-hirak-limitations-and-divisions>

divert their attention, an anti-corruption operation¹⁵ was launched at the initiative of the army chief staff and under its supervision, the target of which was Bouteflika's inner circle.

Halim Feddal, Secretary General of the National Anti-Corruption Organization, in an interview with French media Point Afrique, condemned the actions of the army and said, "Attacks by the real government, that is, the General Staff of the army, on corrupt businessmen and politicians is a subversive policy aimed at diverting the popular movement. The General Staff does not have the right to use justice to solve political problems, the executive power does not have the right to interfere in the judicial process by giving instructions to judges in accordance with the principles of separation of powers and independence of the judiciary¹⁶.

A number of high-ranking officials, politicians and business representatives were arrested and convicted as a result of the judicial processes held within the framework of the anti-corruption operation. Among those convicted was Said Bouteflika (former president Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika's brother and adviser), as well as Labor Party leader Louisa Hanoun and two former heads of special services: Major General Atman Tartag, the former coordinator of Algeria's security services and retired Corps General Mohammed Medien¹⁷. At the same time, the authorities continued to apply pressure and various prohibitions against the movement. About 2,500 protesters were arrested or detained during 2019-2020¹⁸.

All the steps taken by the authorities were not only aimed at weakening and mitigating popular protest, but also at paving the way for the victory of their candidate in the presidential elections.

In the presidential elections that took place in 2019 on December 12, 74-year-old Abd al-Majid Teboun, former minister and head of Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika's government, won 58 percent of the vote¹⁹. Abd al-Majid Teboun was one of the five candidates (Abd al-Kader Bengrinda, Ali Benflis, Azedin Mihoubi and Abd al-Aziz Belaid) participating in the presidential elections. The latter were acceptable

¹⁵ Akram Belkaïd 2019, 208.

¹⁶ Les dessous de l'opération « mains propres » en Algérie. https://www.lepoint.fr/afrique/les-des-sous-de-l-operation-mains-propres-en-algerie-01-05-2019-2310290_3826.php

¹⁷ Для двух экс-премьеров Алжира потребовали по 20 лет тюрьмы за коррупцию. <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/7294567>

¹⁸ ООН призвала алжирские власти прекратить насилие против протестующих, <https://ria.ru/20210305/alzhir-1600150552.html>

According to Human Rights Watch, as of February 2020, at least 280 activists of the movement were in prison in Algeria: Algeria: 3 Years On, Repression on Protest Tightens, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/02/21/algeria-3-years-repression-protest-tightens>

¹⁹ Algeria election: Fresh protests as Tebboune replaces Bouteflika. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-50782676>

and "forced nominated" candidates by the army, persons whose political life and activities were somehow connected with the former administration and Bouteflika²⁰.

"Hirak" movement, which forced Bouteflika to resign, categorically rejected the holding of these elections, considering it as an attempt of reviving and reproducing the "system" that had been ruling the country for many years. That was the reason that in 2019 the presidential elections were marked by an unprecedentedly low voter turnout. According to Freedom House, it was about 40 percent²¹.

The holding of presidential elections, considered by the authorities and especially the army as a possible way out of the established political crisis in the country, did not live up to expectations. The presidential election, which was supposed to be the beginning of the creation of a new system, did not change anything in general. The ruling elite once again succeeded in implementing its plan and maintaining the existing system. With the election of Abd al-Majid Tebun, the Hirak movement did not stop, the demands and goals of the protesters remained the same, but the new government's *modus operandi* changed by intensifying the pressure and persecution of the movement's participants and activists.

Conclusion

"Hirak" movement was a significant challenge to the current political system in Algeria and had far-reaching consequences for the country's political landscape. It led to the formation of new political parties and alliances, as well as the election of a new president in December, 2019. The movement has been considered to be a turning point in Algerian history, reflecting a desire for greater transparency, accountability and responsibility and participation in political processes. So, what was "Hirak" movement, what was its nature and what was its aim? Below are some key points.

- Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term: The initial trigger for the protests was the announcement that Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had been in power since 1999 and was widely seen as corrupt and ineffective, would run for a fifth term as president. This announcement was seen as a symbol of the government's disregard for the popular will and a manifestation of the lack of political alternatives in the country. Economic grievances: The Algerian economy has struggled in recent years, with high unemployment rates, inflation, and a widening wealth gap. Corruption and lack of accountability: Corruption has been a persistent problem in Algeria, with the ruling elite accused of enriching themselves at the expense of the country's resources and public services. Additionally, the government was criti-

²⁰ Présidentielle en Algérie : qui sont les cinq candidats en lice? https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2019/12/11/presidentielle-en-algerie-qui-sont-les-cinq-candidats-en-lice_6022443_3212.html

²¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/algeria/freedom-world/2020>

cized for failing to address issues such as police brutality and human rights abuses.

- "Hirak" movement can be characterized as a mass, decentralized movement without any clear leadership and leader. It was not associated with any political party or ideology, which had its negative impact on the movement, but at the same time it was a new reality in Algerian political life.

- The authorities and especially the army, in whose hands the real power of the country was concentrated, showed unexpected restraint from the beginning of the movement, but when it became clear to them that "Hirak" could pose a threat to the existence of the government system, the army's position changed. The participants of the movement were subjected to various pressures and persecutions.

Today, Algeria's socio-political climate may be in a worse state than it was before the "Hirak" movement, but it also ushered in a number of important changes that cannot be underestimated. It is difficult to ignore the political role that the protest movement played as a symbol of democracy and liberalization. Different layers of society are now more actively involved in public affairs, despite the pressures from the authorities. Today's Algeria is no longer what it was under Bouteflika, but its new form still retains the contours of its past.

The lack of compromise solutions between the authorities and the opposition led the settlement process to a dead end. However, Algeria's entrenched governing system is likely to persist for the foreseeable future, which in turn will lead to continued political instability and public disillusionment. As a result, the gulf between the authorities and the Algerian population, particularly its young majority, will continue to deepen, intensifying the crisis of state-society relations.

Apparently, the authorities will take steps to suppress the protestant sentiments of Algerians. Considering that the new administration of the country does not differ much from the previous ones in its *modus operandi*, their preferred methods of solving the problems will be used to maintain the power. Thus, for example, pressures, persecutions will intensify, or, as is customary with authoritarian regimes, attempts will be made to divert the public's attention from internal political issues to security issues, such may be the tense relations between Algeria and Morocco.

However, "Hirak" movement continues to exist, the demands put forward by it remain relevant today and the Algerian society is ready to continue the struggle for the rights.

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Արամ Գասպարյան

Ամփոփում

Ալժիրի մի շարք քաղաքներում 2019 թ. փետրվարին սկսվեցին բողոքի զանգվածային ցույցեր, որոնց պատճառը երկրում տիրող քաղաքական-տնտեսական իրավիճակն էր: Բողոքի զանգվածային ակցիաները ստացան «Հիրաք» անվանումը: Ցույցերի դրդապատճառը գործող նախագահ Աբդ Ալ-Ազիզ Բուտեֆլիկայի՝ նախագահական գալիք ընտրություններում հինգերորդ անգամ առաջադրվելու մասին հայտարարությունն էր՝ չնայած նրա պատկառելի տարիքին և առողջական լուրջ խնդիրներին:

Ալժիրցիները տևական ժամանակ էր, ինչ դժգոհ էին իշխող վերնախավից, երկրում առկա կոռուպցիայից, քաղաքական ազատության բացակայությունից: «Հիրաք» շարժումն այս դժգոհությունների արտացոլանքն էր և համախմբեց տարբեր խավերի մարդկանց՝ ուսանողներից մինչև թոշակառուներ: Ցուցարարները հանդես էին գալիս Բուտեֆլիկայի ռեժիմը տապալելու, երկրի քաղաքական համակարգը վերանայելու, ինչպես նաև կոռումպացված պաշտոնյաներին հեռացնելու, ժողովրդավարական և հաշվետու կառավարություն ստեղծելու կոչերով: Շարժումը կրում էր խաղաղ բնույթ, հիմնականում ապակենտրոնացված էր, առանց առաջնորդների:

Այս շարժումն իրապես նոր երևույթ էր Ալժիրի նորագույն պատմության մեջ. այն առանձնանում էր իր էությամբ, ձևով և մեթոդներով: Ալժիրի տարբեր քաղաքներում տեղի ունեցած զանգվածային ցույցերին մասնակցում էին ոչ միայն տարբեր խավերի, մասնագիտությունների և տարիքի ալժիրցիներ, այլ նաև քաղաքական տարբեր ուղղությունների ներկայացուցիչներ:

Ընդդիմադիր շարժման զարգացմանը զուգահեռ՝ փոփոխության ենթարկվեց նաև իշխանությունների գործելաոճը: Ցանկանալով պահպանել իր դիրքն ու ազդեցությունը, միևնույն ժամանակ թույլ չտալ ստեղծված իրավիճակի սրում՝ Ալժիրի քաղաքական վերնախավը գործեց իրավիճակին համապատասխան:

Բանալի բառեր՝ Ալժիր, «Հիրաք», բողոքի շարժում, ժողովրդավարություն, բանակ, Աբդ ալ-Ազիզ Բուտեֆլիկա, Աբդ ալ-Մաջիդ Թեբրուն:

ДВИЖЕНИЕ «ХИРАК» В АЛЖИРЕ (2019): УСПЕХИ И НЕУДАЧИ

Арам Гаспарян

Резюме

Протестное движение «Хирак» началось в феврале 2019 года в Алжире. Оно было вызвано всеобщим гневом и разочарованием в связи с экономической и политической ситуацией в стране. Первоначально протесты были вызваны заявлением президента Абд аль-Азиза Бутефлики о баллотировании на пятый срок, несмотря на преклонный возраст и ухудшающееся здоровье.

Алжирский народ давно был недоволен правящей элитой, царившей в стране коррупцией и отсутствием политической свободы. Движение «Хирак» стало ответом на эти недовольства и быстро переросло в массовое протестное движение, объединившее людей из всех слоев общества.

Протестующие призвали положить конец режиму Бутефлики, требуя смены политической системы страны.

Движение «Хирак» стало новым явлением в новейшей алжирской истории. Одним из важных моментов исследования является позиция алжирских властей, в частности армии, структуры, обладающей реальной властью в стране. Вместе с прогрессом и развитием оппозиционного движения менялся и стиль работы властей. Желая сохранить свои позиции и влияние и в то же время не допустить обострения противоречий, алжирская политическая элита действовала соответственно сложившейся в стране ситуации.

Ключевые слова – Алжир, «Хирак», протестное движение, демократия, армия, Абд аль-Азиз Бутефлика, Абд аль-Маджид Тебун.

ALGERIA'S "HIRAK" MOVEMENT (2019): ACHIEVEMENTS AND FAILURES

Aram Gasparyan

Abstract

The Hirak protest movement in Algeria began in February 2019, sparked by widespread anger and frustration over the government's handling of the country's economic and political situation. The protests were initially triggered by President Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika's announcement that he would seek a fifth term in office despite his advanced age and declining health.

The Algerian people had long been dissatisfied with the ruling elite and the government's perceived corruption, economic mismanagement, and lack of political freedom. The Hirak movement was a response to these grievances, and it quickly grew into a massive protest movement that brought together people from all walks of life, including students, professionals, workers, and retirees.

The protesters called for an end to the Bouteflika regime and demanded an overhaul of the country's political system. The movement was peaceful and largely decentralized, with no clear leaders or formal organization.

One of the important points of the paper is the position of the Algerian authorities, particularly the army, the structure that has real power in the country. Along with the progress and development of the opposition movement, the tactics of the authorities changed too. The Algerian political elite chose a tactic appropriate to the moment to maintain their position, influence and wishing to prevent the situation from escalating at the same time.

Key words – Algeria, "Hirak", protest movement, democracy, army, Abd al-Aziz Bouteflika, Abd al-Majid Teboun.