DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 11.06.2021 | Claus Leggewie & Rachid Ouaissa

Algeria's Gramscian situation

In Algeria, the protest against the political elite aren't going anywhere. And the upcoming elections likely won't change that

The old ruler had to go, but the democratic upswing failed to materialise. This is the situation in many countries where we have seen massive protests against the ruling elite in recent years. And Algeria is no exception. In 2019, hundreds of thousands of demonstrators prevented a fifth term in office for the aged President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Now, on 12 June, there will be early parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, the street protest, known as the Hirak, is already in its third year, with no political solution in sight.

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, who has been in office since 2019, wants to use the elections to establish legitimacy for the old regime. However, major political groups like the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) and the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), which represent the Kabylie and secular city dwellers, have called for a boycott. They are joined by some small social democratic and socialist parties.

The Islamists, who won a broad majority in the early 1990s and went underground after the Islamic Salvation Front was banned, also support a boycott. Those Islamists now belong to RACHAD, a conservative Islamic movement calling for regime change. The Algerian government designated RACHAD as a terrorist organisation in May 2021. Only a few small Islamist parties close to the regime have said they will participate.

Most Algerians, especially those under 30 who make up half the country's population, have little or no faith in the election.

Most Algerians, especially those under 30 who make up half the country's population, have little or no faith in the election. They prefer to continue with the Hirak protests, which in recent days have increasingly been blocked by security forces. There have been arrests and torture, and harsh prison sentences meted out to activists. The case of Ibrahim Daouadji, a 38-year-old blogger who was arrested and tortured

many times before fleeing to Spain by boat, shows that nothing much has changed about Algerian prisons.

Algeria's 'Gramscian' situation

Unfortunately, Hirak activists, including a remarkable number of women who for months have peacefully shown their discontent with the corrupt, military-backed FLN regime, don't have a political solution either. Hirak has resisted government and Islamist attempts to co-opt it, seriously debated constitutional issues, and displayed great political rationality and accountability. But no alternative political party has emerged to assume responsibility in Algeria.

The countrywide protest movement is explicitly leaderless and decentralised. In this 'Gramscian' situation, 'the old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born'. Everyone is hoping that no *new* 'time of monsters' will dawn. The October Riots of 1988 – now seen as the first 'Arab uprising' – had ushered in a 'black decade' of an incredibly brutal war between the army and jihadists.

Most foods and consumer goods have to be imported and a large share of Algerian families remain dependent on remittances from the umpteenth generation of 'guest workers'.

Back then, the foundations of the state apparatus, which was officially interpreted as Islamist-Socialist, had already collapsed. It was obvious that the old guard of the National Liberation Front (FLN) and National Liberation Army (ALN), which had won Algeria's independence from France in 1962, was bureaucratically decrepit and corroded by the nepotism of rival clans. They failed to create opportunities for Algerian youth, forcing many to emigrate. The rentier state, based on oil and natural gas exports, could no longer act.

Since then, prices have continued to fall, while the housing crisis has worsened and the pandemic has revealed glaring deficiencies in health care. Most foods and consumer goods have to be imported and a large share of Algerian families remain dependent on remittances from the umpteenth generation of 'guest workers'.

Hirak had raised hopes that Algeria could develop into a freer democracy on new foundations – to be laid with European help. But France, Germany and the European Union haven't been thinking about Algeria for decades. The country with the greatest amount of solar radiation per square metre has made virtually no effort to break out of the hydrocarbon

exports trap and develop alternative energies. Yet, that is what could advance a trans-Mediterranean energy partnership and change what is now mainly viewed as a source of terror and migrants.

Europe's hesitant plan to 'fight the causes of flight' must begin with such forward-looking solidarity and cooperation. During the Hirak protests, the number of boat refugees (*harragas*) noticeably dropped. But prolonged stagnation could again push young people to head north – with or without papers.



Claus Leggewie
Essen

Claus Leggewie is Ludwig Börne-Professor at the University of Gießen, Co-Director of the Centre for Global Cooperation Research in Duisburg and author of several books.



Rachid Ouaissa

Rachid Ouaissa is a professor at Philipps-University Marburg since 2009. He is the head of the department of Politics of the Near and Middle East at the Centre for Near and Middle Eastern Studies (CNMS).