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# Algeria's Hirak protest movement is back

Tens of thousands take to the streets in Algeria to protest corruption and despotism. That's a warning signal for the region – and for Europe

While the tenth anniversary of the Arab Spring has just passed in Egypt, another North African country is in the midst of its own 'spring awakening': Algeria. On the second anniversary of the country's peaceful protests, tens of thousands of people took to the streets at the end of February to voice their demands for an end to corruption and despotism, and for democratic reforms and genuine political change.

In 2019, the people managed to prevent the aged President Abdelaziz Bouteflika from having a fifth term in office. Each week they had demonstrated by the hundreds of thousands: peacefully, with creative slogans and 'cleaning crews', who cleared away rubbish after the demonstrations. But the new government is de facto made up of the old guard, and so the Algerians continued to demonstrate in the *Hirak* protest movement until the coronavirus pandemic brought this to an abrupt end in March 2020.

Now they are back – with banners demanding 'A civilian state, not a military state', 'Freedom of the press and freedom of expression!', and 'An independent judiciary'. In the capital, Algiers, people are openly flouting the official ban against demonstrations. They're also ignoring the roadblocks the government has set up to prevent revolutionaries from other parts of the country from joining the protests in Algiers. Even the pandemic couldn't stop them: the anger and dissatisfaction are too great.

## The dark period of the Algerian civil war

Experts expect the demonstrations to gain new momentum in the coming weeks. Rachid Ouaissa, professor at the Philipps University of Marburg and head of the Center for Near and Middle Eastern Studies there, is convinced that the movement will undergo a 'sociological change'. So far, the *Hirak* movement has mainly been supported by a

politicised middle class making political demands. Because of the twin crisis in the country – economic and health-related –, people from other social strata will now also demonstrate for their material needs.

In the past few months the price of food in Algeria has tripled and the country is also suffering from the currently low oil and gas prices. Unemployment is high and even well educated young people cannot find jobs. Frustration is growing and the regime is panicking. Former Defence Minister Khaled Nezzar, known for his iron-fisted crackdown on opposition groups, is back. Nezzar is considered the 'father' of the 1992 coup that resulted in a bloody civil war.

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The horrors of that dark decade are still very much present in Algeria. Those young people who are playing a significant role in today's *Hirak* protest movement were childhood witnesses of fathers being arrested, uncles disappearing without a trace, brothers returning broken from prisons. Almost every family had members who were killed or missing. There remained a deep-seated fear, which is why the Arab Spring initially passed Algeria by.

## European hypocrisy

The new awakening of civil society, the overcoming of fear, the experience that peaceful protests are possible, all amount to a miracle for many Algerians. The euphoria of the beginning is long gone, but the number of protesters is again increasing from week to week. Their anger is directed primarily at the military, which is pulling the strings behind the scenes and which enjoys tremendous power thanks to the new constitution that came into force a few weeks ago.

Every Tuesday and Friday, female students now demonstrate side by side with the elderly, lawyers next to the unemployed, doctors with sanitation workers. The Algerian government is getting nervous: in a kind of carrot-and-stick strategy, it has released a number of prominent political prisoners, including the journalist Khaled Drareni. In addition, the president has dissolved parliament and announced new elections.

However, contrary to what it seems, these are not necessarily positive steps. 'Measures like these primarily serve to provide a sham legitimation

vis-à-vis the outside world,' explains political scientist Ouaissa. He sharply criticises French President Macron. When Macron congratulated his Algerian counterpart Tebboune on the two-year anniversary of the revolution, while at the same time Tebboune's followers are imprisoning and abusing activists, then this is 'a prime example of European hypocrisy'.

## German arms exports to Algeria

The developments of the past weeks have proven him right: the Algerian government does not seem interested in any serious change. Activists who were initially released were arrested again. In an hour-long speech President Tebboune made no mention of the protests and did not even begin to respond to the protesters' demands. The people have seen this as a provocation.

The cases of Sami Dernouni and Walid Nekkiche are particularly shocking. Dernouni, one of the demonstrators, is said to have been tortured with a taser while in prison, while the 25-year-old student Nekkiche was sexually and physically assaulted. On 5 March, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Algerian authorities to immediately end violence against peaceful demonstrators and to stop arbitrary detentions. But the regime is likely to shrug off such statements.

Europe – and Germany in particular – has so far remained silent about the ongoing human rights violations, the intimidation of journalists and lawyers, the arbitrary arrests, and the torture. The example of Algeria makes clear the double standard of German foreign policy: sanctions are being imposed on the Russian regime, the media reports extensively on the protests in Myanmar, but the Algerian activists are overlooked.

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The German federal government continues to supply weapons to the authoritarian Algerian regime, from maritime equipment to tanks and border protection material. The main thrust of its strategy is clear: to ward off potential refugees. For some years now, the number of Algerians irregularly arriving in Europe has been increasing. If the protests gather momentum, the regime cracks down even harder, and Algeria is rocked by unrest and massive fighting between the military and the population, they will also use German arms to silence the peaceful demonstrators.

## The protest movement's challenges

Algerians in North Africa and in the diaspora vacillate between optimism and resignation. Many however doubt that any real change will come to Algiers soon. 'For the movement to succeed, it needs a leader at the top,' believes the Algerian human rights activist Rabah Arkam, who lives in the US. He has a point. The *Hirak* movement has deliberately refrained from putting people into leadership positions, because the experience of the 1990s has taught Algerians that when there are prominent opposition members, they are immediately arrested by the government.

Therefore, this time they have build a broad, democratic grassroots movement. But that also presents a problem, because without charismatic men and women at the top, the question of what happens after the protests remains unanswered. So far, the *Hirak* has not been able to resolve this dilemma.

'We are lacking a real political programme,' says Samy, a student from Algiers who gives only his first name. He was once an active member of the *Hirak* and started a protest group at his university. He has since become disillusioned. 'Many of my people just think about protesting and forget to think about strategies for how to move forward,' he says. Some feminists have also turned away in disappointment, dissatisfied with the fact that questions about the status of women within the *Hirak* are considered secondary.

Protesters and political analysts across all camps agree on one thing: the protests will remain peaceful. That, they believe, is the *Hirak*'s most powerful weapon. Professor Ouaissa even suspects that the Algerian protests will have repercussions for the entire region: 'If the flame of change burns successfully in Algeria, it can be expected that the peoples of the neighbouring countries will also embark on such a path again.'

Whether it will come to that is uncertain. Ten years ago, European politicians were surprised when the Arab Spring ran its course. At least that is not expected to happen again. It is time for Europe to take notice of what is happening on the other side of the Mediterranean.



**Elisa Rheinheimer-Chabbi**

Elisa Rheinheimer-Chabbi is a journalist. She writes for the magazines *Publik-Forum* and *Welt-Sichten*, among others. Her main topics are Europe, flight and migration, living together in a multicultural society, global justice.