



# The Return of the Hirak Movement and the June Legislative Elections: What Path for Algeria?

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## Introduction

On 22 February 2021, the pro-democracy Hirak movement returned to the Algerian streets after a one-year hiatus linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. The date was symbolic as the second anniversary of the protest movement, which because of its all-embracing and leaderless character became known simply as the *Hirak* (“movement”) in Arabic. It had mobilized millions of Algerians in opposition to a fifth presidential term for Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013. The crowds led to his removal in April 2019 after 20 years in power. Although the main demands of the protesters resembled those voiced last time – radical change to the system, a civil state to replace the current regime and liberation for prisoners of conscience – the scene had shifted slightly.<sup>1</sup> The unemployment rate was now 14.5% (it was 14.2% in 2020 and 11.4% in 2019), repression was intensifying, and a social dimension had been added to the political movement.<sup>2</sup>

In March 2021, President Abdelmajid Tebboune called early legislative elections for 12 June in order to appease the protesters. The elections were widely rejected by the electorate and boycotted by

the Hirak, leading to a historically low turnout of 23% (compared to 35.7% in 2017).<sup>3</sup> Prior to the elections, the weekly demonstrations by the Hirak drew thousands of people. These coincided with protests demanding jobs and housing in the impoverished parts of southern Algeria, strikes in the industrial zones of the northern parts of the country and a surge in labour disputes in the public sector. According to the sociologist, Nacer Djabi, there is a “junction between the political movement and socio-economic demands, as is the case in Tunisia and Lebanon”.<sup>4</sup> To shed light on the deepening state-society divide, this brief explores the history of the Hirak, the backdrop to the Algerian economic crisis, and the June legislative elections and their consequences.

The Hirak is not just a response to the stagnated system of governance known as *le pouvoir* (the power), in which the military represents the spine, with the branches made up of patronage networks of politicians, bureaucrats, economic elites and the main state party, the National Liberation Front (*Front de Libération Nationale*, FLN).<sup>5</sup> It is also an expression of the grievances felt by many ordinary Algerians across society. The Covid-19 crisis has so far triggered the loss of at least 500,000 jobs, leading to a 4% fall in

<sup>1</sup> Le Monde. Nouvelle journée de manifestations contre le pouvoir en Algérie. *Le Monde*. 2021-04-24. [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr) (retrieved 2021-05-05).

<sup>2</sup> International Monetary Fund. Unemployment Rate: Percent. 2021. [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org) (retrieved 2021-05-21).

<sup>3</sup> France 24. Algérie: le FLN remporte les législatives, sans majorité, devant les indépendants. *France 24*. 2021-06-15. [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com) (retrieved 2021-06-16). See also France 24. Turnout at lowest in 20 years in

divisive Algerian parliamentary elections. *France 24*. 2021-06-13. [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com) (retrieved 2021-06-14).

<sup>4</sup>Safia Ayache. Covid-19: en Algérie, la colère sociale monte face aux restrictions sanitaires. *Le Monde*. 2021-02-05. [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr) (retrieved 2021-05-05).

<sup>5</sup>Lahouari Addi. Algeria. In *The Middle East*, Ellen Lust (ed.), 403-423. Thousand Oaks: CQ Press, 2017. 14<sup>th</sup> Edition.



employment opportunities.<sup>6</sup> The economic crisis has been further fuelled by the global drop in oil prices, which hits Algeria particularly hard as the hydrocarbon sector makes up around one-third of Algeria's gross domestic product (GDP) and nearly 95% of its export income.<sup>7</sup> Inflation rose to 3.9% in January 2021 (from 1.4% in December 2020), leading to water rationing and soaring food prices.<sup>8</sup>

Social tensions increased at the same time as arrests of protesters rapidly multiplied in the run-up to the June elections.<sup>9</sup> In May, the regime decided that the Hirak demonstrations required prior authorization, and subsequent protests in the capital were prevented by an enormous police presence. At the same time, the director of a media channel close to the Hirak was sentenced to a judicial review.<sup>10</sup> Algeria is no stranger to political instability. The country was shaken by nationwide riots in "Black October" in

1988.<sup>11</sup> A military coup following the victory of Islamists in the 1991 parliamentary elections then paved the way for the "Black Decade", a bloody civil war in which approximately 200 000 civilians were killed. There have also been mass upheavals and nationwide riots are not uncommon.<sup>12</sup>

What is different this time is the magnitude of the Hirak movement, which represents all social strata, as well as the perseverance of the protesters. In 2013, John Entelis argued that "the gap between state and society in Algeria has never been wider than it is today".<sup>13</sup> This is even more the case in 2021, as the regime increasingly struggles to co-opt the public, which in turn has developed highly divergent political visions of the future. The widespread boycott of the June elections is a distinct example of this disparity, as is President Tebboune's remark on the turnout: "To me, the turnout does not matter. What matters to me is that those for

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<sup>6</sup> Amal Belalloufi & Philippe Agret. En Algérie, la grogne sociale aggrave la crise politique. *Le Soleil*. 2021-04-24. [www.lesoleil.com](http://www.lesoleil.com) (retrieved 2021-05-05). See also The World Bank. Labor force, total – Algeria. *World Bank*. 2021. <https://data.worldbank.org> (retrieved 2021-06-07).

<sup>7</sup> Cecilia Camporeale, Roberto Del Ciello and Mario Jorizzo. Beyond the Hydrocarbon Economy: The Case of Algeria. In *Sustainable Energy Investment – Technical, Market and Policy Innovations to Address Risk*, Joseph Nyangon & John Byrne (ed.), IntechOpen.

<sup>8</sup> Trading Economics. Inflation Rate in Algeria increased to 3.86 percent from 1.4% in December 2020. *Trading Economics*. 2021. [www.tradingeconomics.com](http://www.tradingeconomics.com) See also Safia Ayache. En Algérie, le ramadan de tous les défis. *Le Monde*. 2021-04-12. [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr) (retrieved 2021-05-05).

<sup>9</sup> VOA. Des milliers de manifestants dans les rues d'Alger. *VOA*. 2021-04-23. [www.voaafrique.com](http://www.voaafrique.com) (retrieved 2021-05-04).

<sup>10</sup> Judicial review is a procedure that prevents a person suspected of a crime from being released. A criminal law judge decides that a suspect cannot remain free during an investigation or when awaiting trial or lays out the obligations that the person must respect. See France 24. Algérie: les manifestations du Hirak de nouveau réprimées à Alger et dans plusieurs villes. *France 24*. 2021-05-21. [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com) (retrieved 2021-05-25). See also Le Monde. En Algérie, le directeur de médias proche du Hirak placé sous contrôle judiciaire. *Le Monde*. 2021-05-19. [www.lemonde.fr](http://www.lemonde.fr) (retrieved 2021-05-25).

<sup>11</sup> Addi. Algeria. In *The Middle East*. 403-423.

<sup>12</sup> Andrea Liverani. *Civil Society in a Weak State: The Political Functionings of Associational Life in Algeria, 1987-2005*. PhD Diss., London School of Economics and Political Science, University of London, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> John Entelis. Algeria, revolutionary in name only. *Foreign Policy*. 2011-09-07. [www.foreignpolicy.com](http://www.foreignpolicy.com) (retrieved 2021-05-25).



whom the people vote have sufficient legitimacy”.<sup>14</sup> The idea that the legitimacy that arises from elections is closely connected to voter participation is conveniently forgotten.

## The Hirak Movement

Frustration over the deteriorating socioeconomic situation, widespread corruption and an out-of-touch political elite has been triggering discontent and anti-government attitudes in Algeria since the late 2000s. Inspired by their neighbours, Algerians took to the streets during the “Arab Spring” of 2011, but never in numbers large enough to cause an upheaval. The population had been scarred by the trauma of the civil war in the 1990s and feared that a popular revolt would either face a violent crackdown by the security forces or mobilize radical Islamist elements in or around the country’s borders.<sup>15</sup> By 2019, however, the landscape had shifted. The size of the protests, which had evolved into the largest Algerian social movement since the 1992 coup, and its largely peaceful character made it difficult for the regime to respond with its usual repressive and redistributive measures.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> France 24. Algérie: le FLN remporte les législatives, sans majorité, devant les indépendants. [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com)

<sup>15</sup> Mikael Eriksson. *Popular Uprisings that Never Came: Algeria and Morocco in the Light of the Arab Revolts*. Stockholm: FOI, 2014. [www.academia.edu](http://www.academia.edu) (retrieved 2021-05-10).

<sup>16</sup> Frédéric Volpi. Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy. *Journal of Democracy*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2020: 152-165.

<sup>17</sup> Andrew G. Farrand. Two years on, Algeria’s Hirak is poised for a rebirth. *Atlantic Council*.

Students started demonstrating every Tuesday and the broader population expressed their discontent every Friday.<sup>17</sup> From the outset of the movement, a social media campaign, “Peaceful-Silmia”, was organized to demand peaceful protest and condemn all sorts of violence or behaviour that could provoke the police. In order to avoid another violent landmark in its national history, and another failed revolution in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, protests were only planned for daytime. The traumatic memory of the civil war lingers on in society, as noted in slogans such as “Algeria is not Syria”, “Policemen and people are brothers” and “The black decade has ended; we build a white decade”.<sup>18</sup>

Protesters decided that no opposition party had the right to adopt the movement, and no religious slogans or practices were allowed. There was still deep mistrust of the opposition – especially the Islamists – following the Black Decade. There was also fear that the movement would be hijacked by self-appointed representatives who would either be co-opted by the authorities or direct the Hirak on a course of conflict.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, the Hirak represents a clear rupture with the mobilization of the Arab Spring, as activists with secular and Islamist leanings joined the same protests. The broad

2021. [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org) (retrieved 2021-05-10).

<sup>18</sup> Faouzia Zeraoulia. The Memory of the Civil War in Algeria: Lessons from the Past with Reference to the Algerian Hirak. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, vol. 7, no.1, 2020: 42-43.

<sup>19</sup> Faouzia Zeraoulia. The Memory of the Civil War in Algeria: Lessons from the Past with Reference to the Algerian Hirak. *Contemporary Review of the Middle East*, vol. 7, no.1, 2020: 32-33.



coalition was a key factor in the movement's success and can be explained by the strong presence of the youth, who had not experienced the violence of the civil war.<sup>20</sup> Another determining factor was the scope of the Hirak's objectives at the time. The rejection of Algeria's formal power, embodied by the president and the government, was within the framework of what the military, representing the country's real power, found acceptable.

The departure of Bouteflika in April 2019 was not enough to stamp out the uprising. Protesters called for the replacement of the real power structure, demanding an entirely different system and uniting under slogans such as "A civilian state, not a military one" and "Get them all out".<sup>21</sup> The Hirak can be conceptualized as a counter narrative of Algerian history, as the official narrative used to build on the idea that Bouteflika was the only guarantor of national peace. By contrast, protesters maintain that the national reconciliation process following the civil war mainly served the interests of the warring factions and the political oligarchy.<sup>22</sup>

## Same System, New Facade

Following Bouteflika's resignation, the Algerian military responded to the Hirak

using both co-optation and intimidation strategies to muffle the movement. After the cancelled June 2019 elections, an unparalleled anti-corruption campaign was launched against Bouteflika's former allies as a concession to the protesters. This resulted in the jailing of the former president's influential brother, Saïd Bouteflika, two former prime ministers, two former intelligence chiefs, several former ministers and regional governors, and high-profile businessmen. Led by the powerful army chief-of-staff, Ahmed Gaid Salah, the campaign enabled the military to remove its key rivals within the regime.<sup>23</sup> Protesters carrying Berber flags were also jailed around the same time, in an attempt to divide the Hirak.<sup>24</sup>

The Hirak's Achilles heel – its lack of leadership – became clear after the cancellation of the elections. While the "big tent" nature of the Hirak had made it strong and enduring, this became a stumbling block in the movement's external communications, strategic decision making, and ability to negotiate with the regime. As a consequence, the Hirak failed to gather behind a common leadership, formulate a distinct programme for political change and benefit from the window of opportunity that emerged when the regime was riven by internal division.<sup>25</sup> Lack of leadership is indeed a distinctive feature of social

<sup>20</sup> Volpi. Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy. 152-165. See also Louisa Dris-Aït Hamadouche. Algérie 2019: Hirak algérien. Des ruptures confirmées et des réconciliations inattendues. *L'Année du Maghreb*, vol. 23, 2020: 189-202.

<sup>21</sup> Farrand. Two years on, Algeria's Hirak is poised for a rebirth. [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org).

<sup>22</sup> Zeraoulia. The Memory of the Civil War in Algeria: Lessons from the Past with Reference to the Algerian Hirak. 25-53.

<sup>23</sup> Volpi. Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy. 152-165.

<sup>24</sup> Farrand. Two years on, Algeria's Hirak is poised for a rebirth. [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org).

<sup>25</sup> Volpi. Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy. 152-165.



movements in the MENA region. It was highly visible in the Iranian demonstrations in 2009 as well as in the horizontal and mostly non-ideological protests in the early phases of the Arab Spring in 2011. Like the Hirak, the initial uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen were marked by a rejection of formal organization, mobilization via social media and a narrow focus on a rejection of status quo and incumbent regimes.<sup>26</sup>

After two delays, following demands by the Hirak, the presidential election took place in December 2019 against a backdrop of mass protests. Since many popular personalities were either in prison or deemed ineligible to run, Algerians were given the choice of five regime insiders. The election, which was marked by a low turnout of just under 40%, resulted in the victory of former housing minister Tebboune – the army’s preferred choice. For the regime, it was critical to organize the election for two reasons. First, legitimacy through elections is one of the instruments of “electoral authoritarianism”, which has become increasingly important since the coup in 1992. Since then, the state has gradually developed from a military regime into a “pseudo-democratic” system led by civilians, predominantly from the FLN, with the support of the military.<sup>27</sup> Second, to maintain a durable division of power in order to prevent the eruption of violence amid a leadership vacuum.<sup>28</sup> The population had no

prospect of affecting the outcome of the election, however, so the protests continued.

Just two weeks into Tebboune’s presidency, his key backer, General Gaid Salah, died. His position was filled by the commander of the country’s ground forces, General Saïd Chengriha. President Tebboune had to re-establish his legitimacy among both the Hirak and the new leading figures in le pouvoir, amid accelerating rivalry between politico-military factions.<sup>29</sup> Internal conflicts have multiplied since the death of General Salah, which has pushed the regime to exclude unwanted individuals in order to establish stability. Tebboune’s lack of public legitimacy and his acceptance of the role of the military mean that the relationship between the presidency and the military has shifted to the advantage of the latter.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the intensified clampdown on the Hirak is probably an outcome of the regime’s focus on internal stability.

In seeking to bring the preceding year’s turmoil to an end, the President has introduced a new constitution. The document ignores the protesters’ demands, such as a transfer of presidential power, an assurance of judicial independence and a reinforcement of the protections of freedom of expression and press freedom. The protesters called for a boycott of the 1 November 2020 referendum on adopting the new constitution, and the turnout was a

<sup>26</sup> Vincent Durac. Social movements, protest movements, and cross-ideological coalitions – the Arab uprisings re-appraised. *Democratization*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2015: 239-258.

<sup>27</sup> Volpi. Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy. 152-165.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. See also Milan W. Svobik. *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Dalia Ghanem. 2: Above the State: The General’s Republic in Algeria. *Texas National Security Review*. 2021. [www.tnsr.org](http://www.tnsr.org) (retrieved 2021-06-01).



meagre 23%. Although the constitution passed by a two-thirds majority of the votes cast,<sup>31</sup> the record low turnout was an embarrassment for the government.

## **French-Algerian Hirak: At the Crossroads of Diasporas and Bilateral Relations**

There is also a transnational aspect to the Hirak movement. At every Friday demonstration in Algiers since the beginning of the second wave of protests in February 2021, signs are waved denouncing France and President Emmanuel Macron, along with calls for boycotts of French products.<sup>32</sup> The protesters see Macron as supportive of Tebboune, with the aim of cementing French influence in Algeria. France has been a stage for the movement from the very start, as the diaspora mobilize every Sunday at Place de la République or in front of the Algerian Consulate in Paris, as well as in other cities nationwide. Algerian political life relates strongly with the past, and the collective memory of colonialism is omnipresent in these protests. Signs display the names of forgotten personalities from the Algerian liberation movement as a way of delegitimizing those in power and demanding “real” independence, since the one obtained in 1962 is seen as usurped.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Farrand. Two years on, Algeria’s Hirak is poised for a rebirth. [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org)

<sup>32</sup> Alexandre de Saint Aignan. Pourquoi la tension monte entre l’Algérie et la France? *RTL*. 2021-04-12. [www.rtl.fr](http://www.rtl.fr) (retrieved 2021-05-06).

<sup>33</sup> Didier Le Saout. Les Relations France-Algérie et le Soulèvement du Hirak. *Pouvoirs*. Vol. 1, no. 176, 2021: 105–118.

French-Algerian relations have been strained and complex ever since the colonial period and the war of independence. The French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jean-Yves Le Drian, has repeatedly expressed support for the Hirak and the need for a democratic transition, while also emphasizing Algerian sovereignty. Despite having placed the popular uprising high on his agenda, however, his three visits to Algiers in 2020 were mainly focused on the crises in Libya and Mali. For Paris, reinforcing relations with Algeria and finding common positions on the conflicts in Libya and the Sahel are essential to preserve French influence in the region.<sup>34</sup> These objectives make it unlikely that the Algerian regime’s repression of protesters will be penalized by France. Although French interference in the neighbourhood is treated with scepticism in Algiers,<sup>35</sup> its engagement means that the regime can depend on France as a vital support network amid an increasing legitimacy deficit at home.

## **The Covid Détente and a Deteriorating Economic Crisis in a Rentier State**

The Hirak largely approved of the government’s containment measures in the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic and

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. See also Thomas Hamamdjian. La Libye et le Mali au centre de la visite de Jean-Yves le Drian à Alger. *Jeune Afrique*. 2020-10-15. [www.jeuneafrique.com](http://www.jeuneafrique.com) (retrieved 2021-05-07)

<sup>35</sup> Alexandra Hallqvist and Bitte Hammargren. *Navigating in a complex neighbourhood: Algeria’s responses to security challenges in Libya and the Sahel*. Stockholm: FOI, 2020. [www.foi.se](http://www.foi.se) (retrieved 2021-05-06).



paused its protests in March 2020.<sup>36</sup> Like many other authoritarian regimes, the government exploited the crisis to jail journalists and activists, and blocked access to independent media websites.<sup>37</sup> Despite the reduced pressure from the streets, another danger arose following the collapse of oil prices in mid-March 2020 – the stability of the regime, which relies to a great extent on hydrocarbon rents to buy social peace and control the opposition.<sup>38</sup> The fall in oil prices wiped out government revenues, forcing the regime to slash the state budget by around 50%.<sup>39</sup> The economy has suffered a great deal (see Table 1), not least the value of the Algerian dinar which has fallen as low as 135 to the US dollar.<sup>40</sup> If reforms are not implemented, the country is likely to face a currency crisis in 2022–2023.

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<sup>36</sup> International Crisis Group. *Algeria: Easing the Lockdown for the Hirak?* Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2020. [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) (retrieved 2021-05-09).

<sup>37</sup> Farrand. Two years on, Algeria's Hirak is poised for a rebirth. [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org)

<sup>38</sup> Francesco Cavatorta and Belgacem Tahchi. *Politique économique et résilience autoritaire en Algérie: Les difficultés de la diversification*

économique. *Études Internationales*. vol. 50, no. 1, 2019: 7–38.

<sup>39</sup> Stellah Kwasi and Jakkie Cilliers. *Stagnation or growth? Algeria's development pathway to 2040*. Pretoria: Institute for Security Studies, 2020. [www.issafrica.com](http://www.issafrica.com) (retrieved 2021-05-26).

<sup>40</sup> Investing. USD/DSD – US Dollar Algerian Dinar. *Investing*. 2021. [www.investing.com](http://www.investing.com) (retrieved 2021-06-01).



Table 1: Socioeconomic Data for Algeria

	2019	2020
<b>Variation in GDP (percentage)<sup>41</sup></b>	+0.8	-6
<b>Budget deficit (as percentage of GDP)<sup>42</sup></b>	-9.6	-16.4
<b>Current account deficit of GDP in the balance of payments (as percentage of GDP)<sup>43</sup></b>	-10	-14,4*
<b>Foreign exchange reserves in US dollars (billions)<sup>44</sup></b>	61.8	46.7
<b>Public debt (% of GDP)<sup>45</sup></b>	30.2	50.4
<b>External debt (% of GDP)<sup>46</sup></b>	2.5	2.3
<b>Inflation<sup>47</sup></b>	2	2.4
<b>Average exchange rate of the Algerian dinar against the US dollar<sup>48</sup></b>	119.1	126.8
<b>Unemployment rate (% of total labour force)<sup>49</sup></b>	11.4	14.2
<b>Youth unemployment rate (% of total labour force aged 15–24)<sup>50</sup></b>	29.5	29.7

Source Table 1: Data from macroeconomist Abdelrahmi Bessaha, the World Bank, Investing, the IMF and Statista.

\*= Estimates

<sup>41</sup> Data from Bessaha. L'économie algérienne est en récession: Le report des réformes n'est pas une option. [www.elwatan.com](http://www.elwatan.com) and the World Bank. GDP growth (annual %) – Algeria. *The World Bank*. 2021. [www.data.worldbank.org](http://www.data.worldbank.org) (retrieved 2021-06-01).

<sup>42</sup> Data from the World Bank. *Algeria*. Washington DC: World Bank, 2021. [www.thedocs.worldbank.org](http://www.thedocs.worldbank.org) (retrieved 2021-06-01).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Data from Bessaha. L'économie algérienne est en récession: Le report des réformes n'est pas une option. [www.elwatan.com](http://www.elwatan.com)

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Data from the International Monetary Fund. Algeria: Country Data. *The International Monetary Fund*. 2021. [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org) (retrieved 2021-06-08).

<sup>48</sup> Data from Investing. USD/DSD – US Dollar Algerian Dinar. [www.investing.com](http://www.investing.com)

<sup>49</sup> Data from the International Monetary Fund. Unemployment Rate: Percent. *The International Monetary Fund*. 2021. [www.imf.org](http://www.imf.org) (retrieved 2021-05-21).

<sup>50</sup> Data from Statista. Algeria: Youth Unemployment Rate from 1999 to 2020. *Statista*. 2021. [www.statista.com](http://www.statista.com) (retrieved 2021-05-21).



The roots of the current crisis can be found in the period following 2014. At that time, the price of Brent crude fell while public spending gradually increased relative to state income.<sup>51</sup> This ratio has become more unbalanced amid the persistent fall in the volume of hydrocarbon production (see Figure 1) and therefore exports.<sup>52</sup> The crisis rapidly worsened following the dramatic plunge in the prices of Brent and Sahara Blend (the two types of Algerian oil export) in 2020, which plummeted to their lowest levels in 40 years (in US dollars adjusted for inflation).<sup>53</sup>

To balance the budget, Algeria needs a minimum price per barrel that is one of the highest in the MENA region: over \$150.<sup>54</sup> As a consequence, budgetary and trade deficits

will continue to swell, adding to economic troubles such as overregulation, cronyism, corruption and a lack of innovation. It seems likely that the price per barrel of Brent and Sahara Blend will remain relatively low and unstable. As the Hirak has recently shown, a low oil price will not only deal a major blow to foreign exchange reserves; it will also intensify public pressure for democracy. When public spending decreases, demands for accountability and influence over political decision-making tend to increase.<sup>55</sup> The regime's response has so far been in line with the logics of a rentier state – increased repression in order to stay in power.

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<sup>51</sup> See Abderrahmane Mebtoul, "Les six impacts de la baisse du cours des hydrocarbures sur l'économie algérienne. *La Nouvelle République*. 2020-05-03. [www.lnr-dz.com](http://www.lnr-dz.com) (retrieved 2021-05-21).

<sup>52</sup> See International Crisis Group. *Breaking Algeria's Economic Paralysis*. Brussels: International Crisis Group, 2018. [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org) (retrieved 2021-04-23). See also El Watan. En dépit du renouvellement de ses contrats: les exportations gazières de

l'Algérie en baisse. *El Watan*. 2019-11-26. [www.elwatan.com](http://www.elwatan.com) (retrieved 2021-05-21).

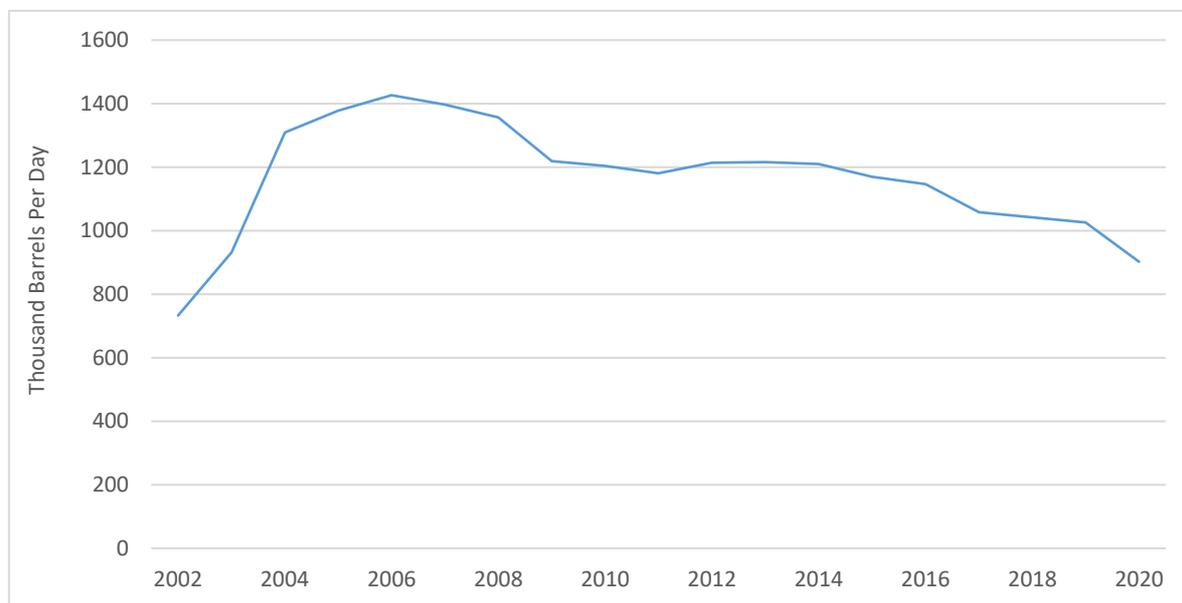
<sup>53</sup> International Crisis Group. *Algeria: Easing the Lockdown for the Hirak?* [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org)

<sup>54</sup> The International Monetary Fund. Table 6. Breakeven Oil Prices. *The International Monetary Fund*. 2019. [www.data.imf.org](http://www.data.imf.org) (retrieved 2021-05-21).

<sup>55</sup> See Cavatorta and al. Politique économique et résilience autoritaire en Algérie: Les difficultés de la diversification économique. 7–38.



Figure 1. Algerian Production of Crude Oil



Source Figure 1: Data from Knoema.

There is a risk that Algeria could shortly be under pressure to allow its currency to depreciate and have recourse to external debt, which will probably further exacerbate social tensions. Although President Tebboune has frequently refused to take this route, emphasizing national sovereignty – a crucial part of Algerian foreign policy in the light of its colonial past – the country might be compelled to request assistance from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank to replenish its foreign exchange reserves.<sup>56</sup> It is possible that these reserves

will be empty by 2023, meaning that essential food and social security would no longer be guaranteed.

Food prices in Algeria are already rising significantly faster than wages. In the spring of 2021, the price of certain types of potatoes spiked from 55 DZD (\$0.41) to 75 DZD (\$0.56) while a kilo of tomatoes more than doubled from 60 DZD (\$0.45) to over 120 DZD (\$0.90), and vegetables such as peppers and zucchini were sold for 150 to 170 DZD (\$1.12 to 1.26), compared to 120 DZD (\$0.90).<sup>57</sup> These price

<sup>56</sup> Middle East Monitor. Algeria refuses to borrow from the IMF. *Middle East Monitor*. 2021-05-20. [www.middleeastmonitor.com](http://www.middleeastmonitor.com) (retrieved 2021-05-21). See also Jean-François Daguzan. La politique étrangère de l'Algérie: le temps de l'aventure? *Politique étrangère*. vol. 3, 2015: 31-42.

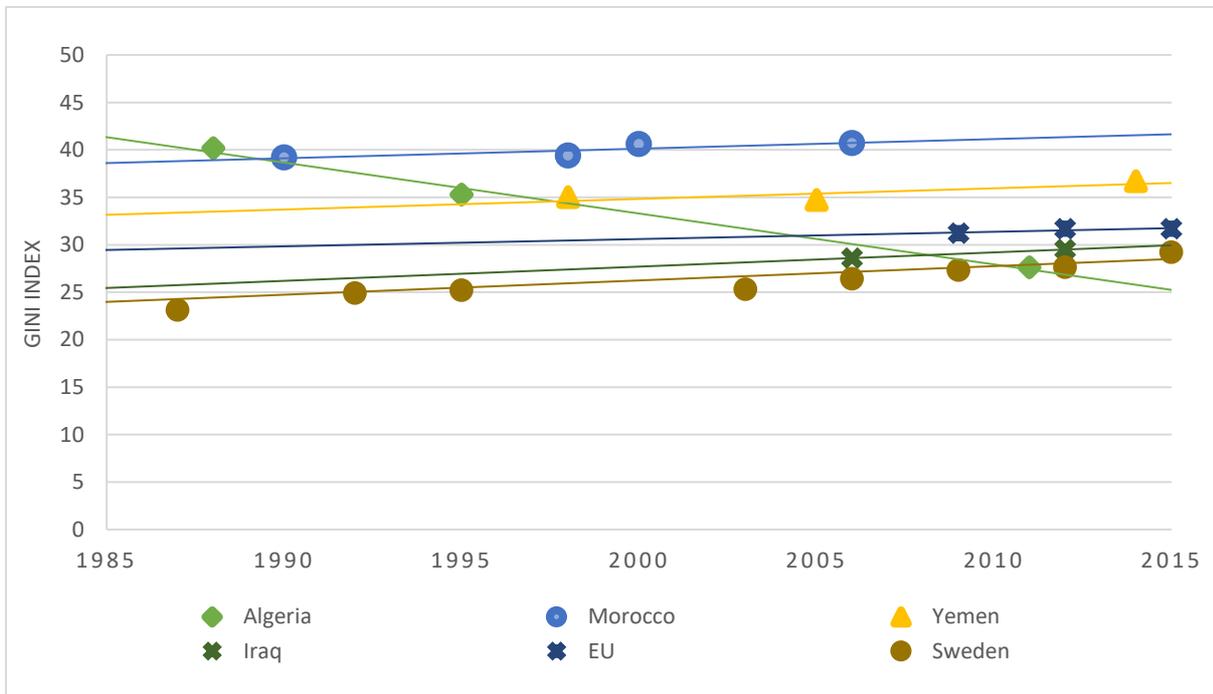
<sup>57</sup> Kenza Adil. Hausse des prix: le 1er jour de Ramadan aux marchés d'Alger. *TSA*. 2021-04-13. [www.tsa-algerie.com](http://www.tsa-algerie.com) (retrieved 2021-06-10). See also A Nora. Flambée de prix des produits alimentaires quelques semaines avant le Ramadan. *Maghreb Emergent*. 2021-03-02. [www.maghrebemergent.com](http://www.maghrebemergent.com) (retrieved 2021-06-10).



hikes do not just affect the poorest segments of society, they also have an impact on the broader middle class. The state wants to avoid a food crisis but the memory of its last agreement with the IMF is still fresh. In 1994,

it accepted a sweeping package of profound neoliberal reforms, which contributed to a halving of Algeria's manufacturing output between 1989 and 2015.<sup>58</sup>

Figure 2. Social Equality: Algeria Compared to Arab States, the EU and Sweden



Source: Data from the World Bank.

Note: The Gini Index measures the extent to which the distribution of income among individuals or households within a country diverges from a perfectly equal distribution. A Gini index of 0 signifies perfect equality, whereas an index of 100 represents perfect inequality. The data presented for the EU and Sweden only shows every third year of the time period 1985–2015. The trend lines are used to clarify historical development but given the lack of data, may be misleading.

<sup>58</sup> Gianni Del Panta. The Workers and the Left Are Not One Hand: Insights from Algeria. In *Routledge Handbook on Political Parties in the*

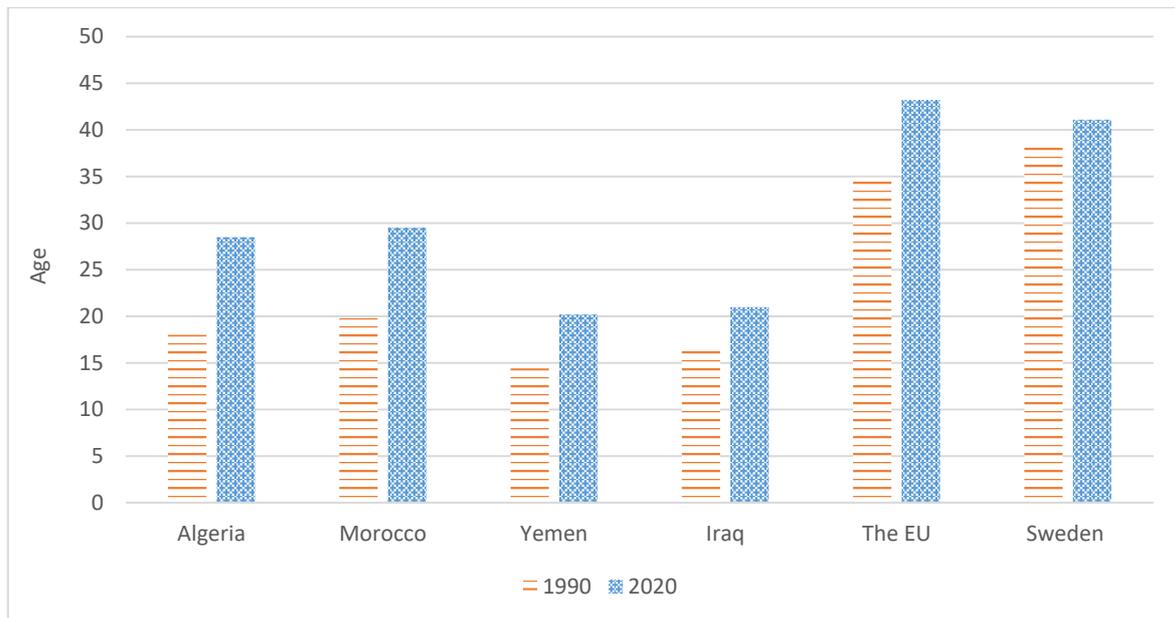
*Middle East and North Africa*. Francesco Cavatorta, Lise Storm, Valeria Resta (ed.), 295-306. London: Routledge, 2020.



Figure 2 shows that social equality in Algeria generally increased in the period 1988–2011, and that it was more equal than other medium-sized Arab states and the EU in the period for which the most recent statistics are available. While the Gini index would probably have been higher had it been collated after the financial crisis of 2014, the data suggests that social inequality in Algeria is no greater than in the rest of the Euro-Mediterranean region. Nonetheless, with a median age of 28.5 (see Figure 3), youth

unemployment at 29.7% is clearly a significant negative factor for the population and has an important impact on the prospects for social cohesion and political stability. There has been a modest increase in average salaries in Algeria (see Figure 4) but the population is still generally getting poorer, as demonstrated by the World Bank’s decision to downgrade the country from an “upper middle income” economy to a “lower middle income” economy in July 2020.

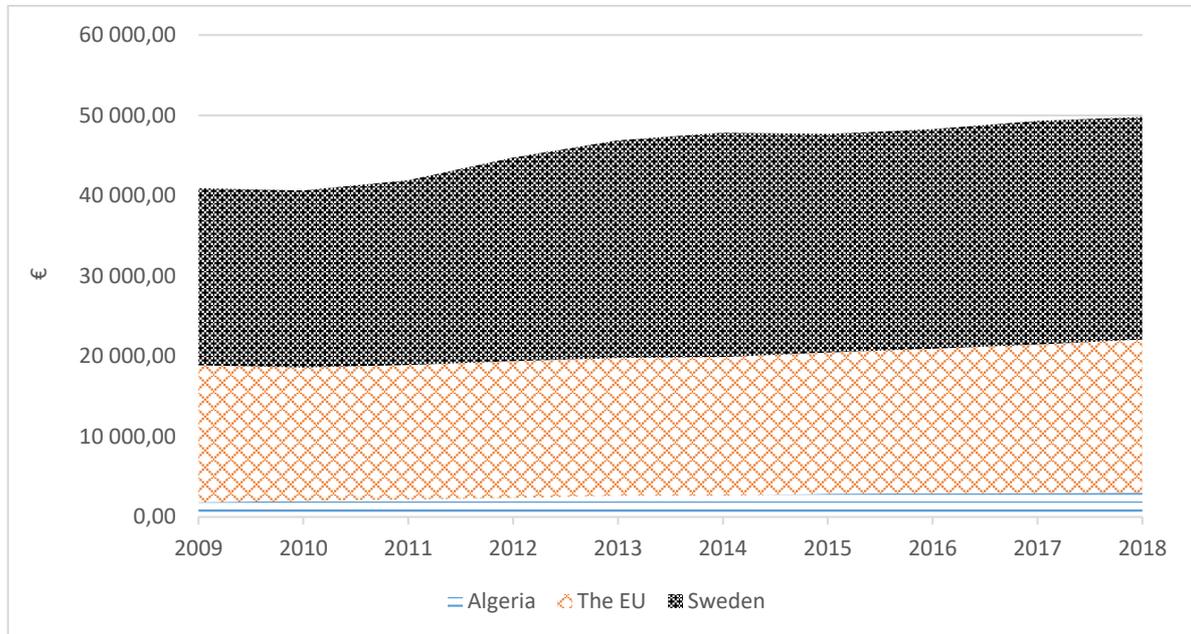
Figure 3. Median Age of the Algerian Population in Comparison with Arab States, the EU and Sweden



Source: Data from the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. Data for 2020 is based on estimates.



Figure 4. Average Annual Salaries in Algeria, the EU and Sweden (Net)



Source: Calculated data on Algeria from CEIC Data (converted from DZD to EUR). The data on the EU and Sweden is from Eurostat.

As they do after every national political crisis, the authorities have suggested that they will diversify the economy and expand the non-energy sector to reduce dependency on oil and gas, which represents 60% of the state budget.<sup>59</sup> There is, however, a threefold problem with this strategy. First, a decrease in rent dependency could have negative consequences for the clientelistic networks that draw advantages from the regime, potentially triggering the collapse of the political system. Second, economic diversification is time-consuming before it

becomes efficient, and the elites do not have enough time to convince citizens of the appeal of this strategy, especially if they do not introduce genuine political liberalization, which they are unlikely to do. Third, major European economies, such as Italy, France, Germany, Spain and the UK, rely heavily on Algerian hydrocarbons and generally disapprove of economic diversification, since they wish to preserve their opportunities for exploitation (See Figure 5 & 6).<sup>60</sup>

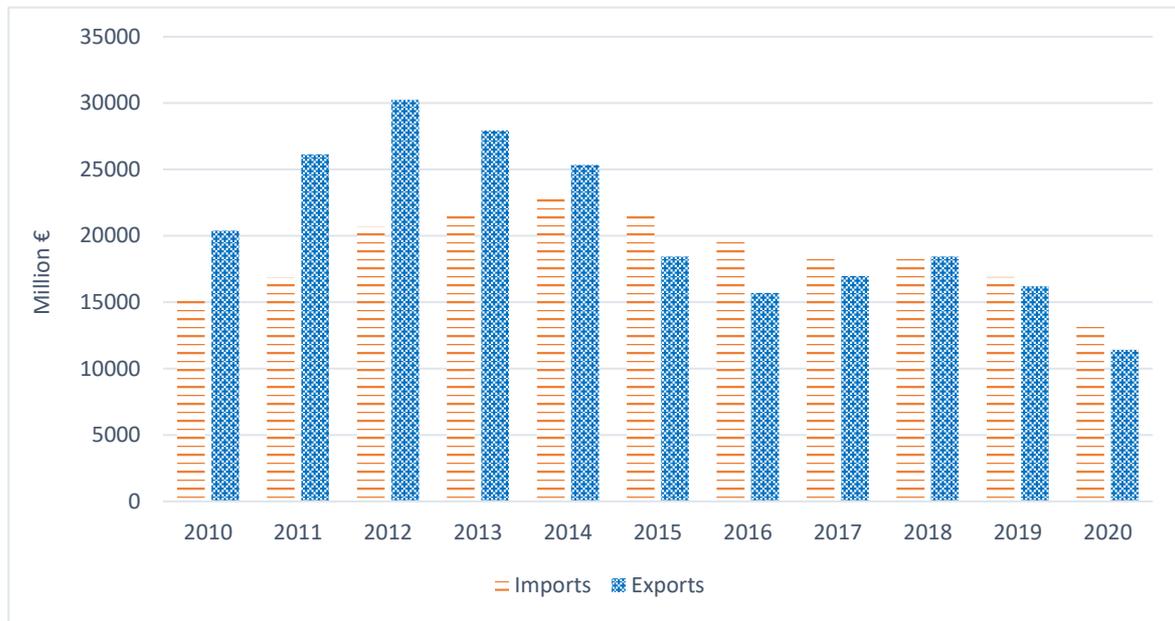
<sup>59</sup> Reuters. Algeria appoints new heads at state banks. *Reuters*. 2021-04-29. [www.reuters.com](http://www.reuters.com) (retrieved 2021-05-21). See also Cavatorta et al. *Politique économique et résilience autoritaire en*

*Algérie: Les difficultés de la diversification économique*. 7–38.

<sup>60</sup> Cavatorta and al. *Politique économique et résilience autoritaire en Algérie: Les difficultés de la diversification économique*. 7–38.

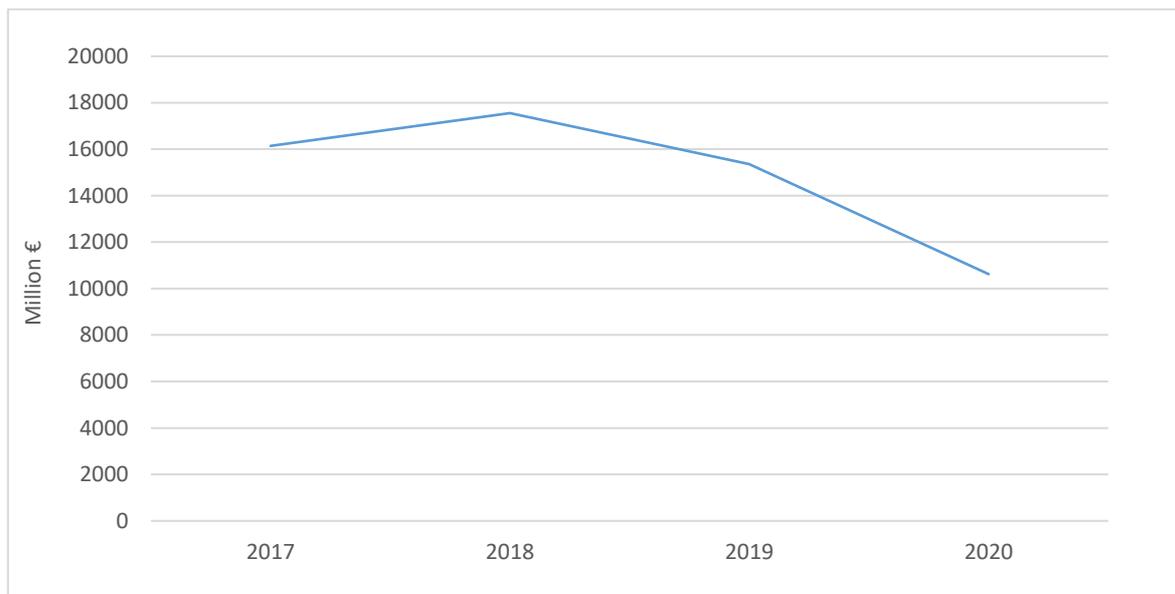


Figure 5. Algeria: Trade with the EU



Source Figure 5: Eurostat.

Figure 6. Algeria: Exports of Oil and Gas to the EU



Source Figure 6: Eurostat.



The perpetual predicament is that the needs of citizens who find themselves at subsistence level must be addressed, which occasionally requires a redistribution of rent in order that the regime can retain power. Hence, Algeria finds itself in a vicious circle of rent dependency, inability to reform the economy, governmental opacity, political uncertainty and resilient authoritarianism – a volatile system that is increasingly contested by its citizens. Since the military and political elite has proved unable to transform itself,<sup>61</sup> it is unlikely that an economic diversification bearing heavy political fruit could be initiated in the short term. Continuing political lethargy will hit Algeria hard; its average GDP growth between 2020 and 2040 is currently expected to be 1.8%.<sup>62</sup> Given the country's closed and state-led economic system, the plunge in oil prices and high unemployment levels, this growth rate is inadequate to properly enhance the livelihoods of the Algerian population.

## June 2021: New Pseudo-democratic Elections

President Tebboune dissolved the lower house of parliament in February 2021 and took up the toolbox of electoral

authoritarianism – calling early legislative elections for June 2021, which were originally scheduled for 2022, in a strategy to conciliate increasingly frustrated protesters and release internal pressure. Like elsewhere in the MENA region, however, Algeria's weak political parties are a key feature of the authoritarian regime.<sup>63</sup> Legislative elections therefore generally have little impact on the country's hyper-presidentialist system. Despite the establishment of a multiparty system in 1989, the FLN has continued to dominate the political scene, often together with its traditional coalition partner *Rassemblement National Démocratique* (Democratic National Rally, RND).<sup>64</sup> The formation of new political parties was allowed in the wake of the Arab Spring – in an important step in the creation of Algerian pseudo-democracy – but these were largely co-opted by the regime. The parties were added to its patronage network, further fuelling public mistrust of politicians.<sup>65</sup>

According to the official results, the FLN topped the poll, winning 98 of the 407 seats,<sup>66</sup> but lost over 60 seats. This reflected the party's gradual decline following its concluding settlement with Bouteflika, the corruption trials of 2019 and the rejection of the candidacy of the leader of the FLN by the Algerian election authority. Second place was

<sup>61</sup> Bustos Rafel and Aurelia Mane. Algeria: post-colonial power structure and reproduction of elites without renewal. In *Political Regimes in the Arab World*. Ferran Izquierdo Brichs (ed.), 38-64. London: Routledge, 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Kwasi et al. *Stagnation or growth? Algeria's development pathway to 2040*. [www.issafrika.com](http://www.issafrika.com).

<sup>63</sup> See Francesco Cavatorta and Lise Storm. *Political Parties in the Arab World: Continuity and Change*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Jan Claudius Völkel. Pawns in the Army's Hands: Political parties in military-dominated regimes. In *Routledge Handbook on Political Parties in the Middle East and North Africa*. Francesco Cavatorta, Lise Storm, Valeria Resta (ed.), 125-136. London: Routledge, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Volpi. Algeria Versus the Arab Spring. 104–115.

<sup>66</sup> France 24. Algérie : le FLN proclamé vainqueur des élections législatives. *France 24*. 2021-06-24. [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com) (retrieved 2021-07-01).



taken by so-called independent candidates, who secured 84 seats.<sup>67</sup> They outnumbered the candidates on party-affiliated lists for the first time, in a bid by the regime to restore its legitimacy by establishing a new facade. Many of them have ties with the FLN and the RND, and some with Islamist parties.<sup>68</sup> The main Islamist party, *Mouvement de la société pour la paix* (Movement of Society for Peace, MSP) is a Muslim Brotherhood-style party that is considered by some to be the third party of the regime;<sup>69</sup> it won 65 seats. The RND came fourth with 58 seats, losing over 40 seats. The removal of a quota system set up in 2012 meant that the number of women parliamentarians fell dramatically, from 146 in 2017 to 35.<sup>70</sup>

The election, which only served the interests of the “old guard”, was the first voting of its kind since the rise of the Hirak in 2019. It took place in a context of accelerating repression and a widening breach between state and society. The three-week campaign was marked by apathy, and a relative scarcity of rallies, posters or other usual signs of pre-election activity. Even on 12 June, it was barely noticeable in many corners of Algiers that election day had arrived. Along with the Hirak boycott, this made the historically low turnout of 23% no surprise. Although calm prevailed in most parts of the country, tensions were palpable in the opposition

stronghold of the largely Berber-speaking region of Kabylie. There, ballot boxes were looted, most polling stations stayed closed and scuffles occurred, leading to 12 arrests.<sup>71</sup> Less than 1% of registered voters in the region cast a vote,<sup>72</sup> clearly demonstrating their rejection of the election.

Just as in Turkey, secular and leftist opposition parties aligned themselves with the protest movement’s boycott. These included the oldest opposition party the Socialist Forces Front (*Front des Forces Socialistes*, FFS) and Rally for Culture and Democracy (*Rassemblement pour la Culture et la Démocratie*, RCD), both of which have a strong presence in the Kabylie region. Parties such the Workers Party (*Parti des Travailleurs*, PT), the Socialist Workers Party (*Parti Socialiste des Travailleurs*, PST) and the Union for Change and Progress (*Union Pour Le Changement et le Progrès*, UPC) also boycotted the vote.<sup>73</sup> The strength and endurance of this mobilization highlights the difficulties for regimes that depend on electoral authoritarianism: the longer they stay in power, the less effective pseudo-democratic tools, such as elections, become at responding to legitimacy deficiencies,

<sup>67</sup> France 24. Algérie : le FLN proclamé vainqueur des élections législatives. *France 24*. 2021-06-24. [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com) (retrieved 2021-07-01).

<sup>68</sup> Andrew G. Farrand. Parliamentary elections won’t rescue Algeria from its legitimacy problem. *Atlantic Council*. 2021. [www.atlanticcouncil.org](http://www.atlanticcouncil.org) (retrieved 2021-06-11).

<sup>69</sup> Lahouari Addi. Les partis politiques en Algérie. In *Les partis politiques dans les pays arabes*. Myriam Catusse (ed.), 139-162. Saint-Rémy-de-Provence: Edisud, 2006. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition.

<sup>70</sup> France 24. Algérie : le FLN proclamé vainqueur des élections législatives. [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com)

<sup>71</sup> France 24. Turnout at lowest in 20 years in divisive Algerian parliamentary elections. [www.france24.com](http://www.france24.com)

<sup>72</sup> Arab News. Algeria awaits results after voters snub elections. *Arab News*. 2021-06-14. [www.arabnews.com](http://www.arabnews.com) (retrieved 2021-06-15).

<sup>73</sup> Arab News. Algeria awaits results after voters snub elections. *Arab News*. 2021-06-14. [www.arabnews.com](http://www.arabnews.com) (retrieved 2021-06-15).



since the public views them as meaningless.<sup>74</sup> While authoritarian regimes can partly push aside this problem through so-called reforms and occasional internal “purges” – such as the anti-corruption campaign of 2019 – this is rarely enough to convince an increasingly politicized public that change is under way.

## The Path Ahead on Uncertain Ground

In line with the uprisings of the Arab Spring, the political drama that has unfolded in Algeria over the past two years demonstrates how extremely complicated it is for popular movements to remove regimes driven by ingrained military interests. However, one of the main pillars of the regime – the revolutionary legitimacy of the war of liberation – is declining in importance. Through numerous references to colonialism, the civil war and the national reconciliation process, the Hirak has demonstrated that many Algerians have an understanding of the past that diverges greatly from the official narrative. Nonetheless, there is an absence of a clear political agenda for the future, or a mechanism to allow the movement to efficiently negotiate a halt to the protests in return for genuine political change.

The Hirak is also battling internal division on multiple levels. On the one hand, differences in regard to Berber identity and religious conservatism frequently arise within the movement, but these tend to quickly

disappear. On the other hand, there is a constant confrontation between two groups gathered around small opposition parties and activist associations. *Pôle démocratique* (Democratic Pole) promotes negotiations with the authorities and a quest for consensus. In contrast, *Forces du pacte de l’alternative démocratique* (Forces of the Democratic Alternative Pact) rejects any talks with state representatives and is calling for a complete overhaul of the “system” and a subsequent democratic transition, including the election of a constituent assembly.<sup>75</sup> The resulting vacuum leaves the Hirak vulnerable to regime manoeuvring as well as infighting, while minority groups in the movement could be radicalized.

Not all Algerians back the Hirak, and the government can still rely on that segment of the population. While some long for stability following the pandemic and a tumultuous political period, others consider Algeria’s finest democratic accomplishment to be popular sovereignty. They are wary of foreign influence over the uprising, worrying that external actors will incite a transition that advances regional, tribal or corporatist interests at the expense of the national interest.<sup>76</sup> Such a transition would push the country into unknown territory at a time when Algeria needs a robust state in the midst of an unstable region that has been badly shaken by crises in Libya, Mali and Niger.

Amid increased repression, internal division and a lack of leadership, there is a possibility that the Hirak will wear itself out. After all,

<sup>74</sup> See Volpi. Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy. 152-165.

<sup>75</sup> International Crisis Group. *Algeria: Easing the Lockdown for the Hirak?* [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org)

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.



the state has had almost 60 years of experience of smothering dissent, and as long as popular mobilization does not reach the same massive scale as in early 2019, the cost of repression for the government is quite low. Recent protests have been limited in size, and they have mainly occurred in the larger cities and some opposition strongholds, such as Kabylie. When seeking to overcome a crisis, the regime has historically relied on three tools: the security apparatus, used to stifle dissent; patronage rooted in oil and gas revenues, used to secure the primacy of the state within Algeria's economic sector and to redistribute rent amid opposition from smaller parts of society; and limited political reform, implemented to co-opt the opposition and reduce the cost of repression.<sup>77</sup> Given the regime's experience and its array of tools, it is likely to continue to quell the Hirak.

Nonetheless, the Covid-19 crisis along with reduced revenues from hydrocarbon production and exports – another important pillar of legitimacy – will make it increasingly difficult for the regime to fund the security apparatus and use patronage. Pseudo-democratic reforms will do little to appease the protesters, who have been heavily affected by the economic crisis and clearly continue to view both President Tebboune and the wider regime as illegitimate. The extremely low turnout for the June elections reflects the accelerating crisis of confidence that characterizes current state-society relations.

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<sup>77</sup> See Volpi. *Algeria: When Elections Hurt Democracy*. 152-165. See also Eva Bellin. *The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle*

The elections further deepened the Algerian political deadlock. The political make-up of the new parliament will mirror the previous one, with a probable alliance between the traditional parties, the FLN and the RND, the independents and moderate Islamists. Rather than buying peace, this will only strengthen the general perception of a fractured social contract and add more fuel to the fire of public discontent. The military's tightened grip on the country is likely to persist, whereas the government and the Hirak will probably pursue their quests for power, at the risk of hardening attitudes on both sides. Algeria is likely to remain torn between the same conflicts of identities – Arabness, Berberness, Islam and French colonial heritage – that have characterized state-building since independence. Hence, the country will continue to constitute a bastion of instability for the foreseeable future, just 150 kilometres from the EU's external border.

## Recommendations

External actors should:

1. **Prepare for a change in civilian leadership.** Although such an outcome is relatively unlikely in the short term, the Arab Spring along with the Hirak's early successes have shown that mass mobilizations can lead to a change in leadership in the MENA region. If the Hirak manages to achieve momentum by mobilizing

East: *Exceptionalism in Comparative. Comparative Politics*. vol. 36, no. 2, 2004: 139-157.



a significant proportion of the population in the aftermath of the June elections, Algeria's partners will need to be ready for changes to the formal power structure. Ties with diverse political actors and civil society need to be reinforced in order to ensure relations and preserve points of contact in case of rapid change.

2. **Contribute to an opening, diversification and digitalization of the economy.** If Algeria is to emerge from its deepening economic crisis, it is vital to reduce investment barriers, encourage merit and efficiency, and create an opportunity-based economy. External actors should promote greater economic freedom, inclusivity and competition to boost

entrepreneurship and enlarge the private sector, while also fostering economic diversification and a favourable investment climate. They should make use of Algeria's technological potential to advance the digital economy.

3. **Promote food security.** Algeria is highly dependent on food imports, making it extremely vulnerable to risks linked to variations in international commodity prices and disruptions to supply chains, as well as to social unrest in the wake of price rises. External actors should promote practices that increase the efficiency and productivity of Algeria's agricultural sector.



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