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Anne Wolf

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COMMENTARY

The myth of stability in Algeria

Anne Wolf[a,b]

[a]Girton College, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK; [b]The Project on Middle East Democracy, Washington, DC, USA

Over recent years, Algerian officials have gone out of their way to suggest that there was something particularly stable and resilient about Algeria, which could serve as a model for other countries in the region. Algeria is, they asserted, an 'exporter of security and stability' and 'has been shielded from the [turbulence] caused by the Arab Spring'.[1] Such a narrative has even been adopted by some pundits of Algerian politics. Intellectual Kamel Daoud, for example, proclaimed in the New York Times that Algeria was an 'exception in the Arab world' as it 'does not change and keeps a low profile' – though he conceded that this state of affairs could not last forever (Daoud 2015). Geopolitical events have long seemed to corroborate this official narrative. Algeria was among the few Arab republics – which tend to be more susceptible to social unrest than the monarchies – to rapidly control its Arab Spring protest movement in 2011, through a range of concessions, including constitutional revisions and subsidies on basic consumer goods. At any rate, social mobilisation in Algeria during that year never reached the level of momentum seen in neighbouring Tunisia or Libya. And while, more recently, many Middle East and North African countries have been drawn into further social and political upheaval – through the eruption of civil wars, military coups, the rise of the Islamic State or social mobilisation – Algeria again proved largely resilient to that kind of instability – at least, so it seemed.

The image of Algeria as an island of stability in an otherwise turbulent region was shattered, once and for all, when mass protests erupted in mid-February this year, after President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced that he would run for a fifth presidential term, despite having been seriously disabled ever since he suffered a stroke in April 2013 and rarely appearing in public thereafter. Demonstrations against this decision quickly gained momentum, drawing in millions of people from all age groups, professions, social classes and regions. Even representatives of Algeria's powerful National Mujahideen Organization – the alleged veterans of the war of independence – and the regime's own political movement, the National Liberation Front, came to

CONTACT Anne Wolf wolf.annemargret@gmail.com

side with the protest movement, despite their longstanding support of the regime (Ghanem 2019). Many regime loyalists found it increasingly difficult to back a fifth term for the president, who had come to power in April 1999 but whose ailing health had made him increasingly vulnerable to manipulation by key economic, military and political elites. Indeed, the only reason why these central powerbrokers – who largely operate behind the scenes in Algeria and have thereby become known as '*le pouvoir*' – had kept Bouteflika in power for so long was because they could not agree on a suitable successor.

The protest movement, triggered by the prospect of a fifth term for the ailing president, soon came to focus on a set of wider grievances. These included rampant poverty and unemployment, especially of university graduates, alongside political exclusion and, last but not least, growing popular dislike for the *hogra*, the term Algerians use to describe the contempt they feel directed by the ruling class towards ordinary people. On 26 March 2019 Abdelaziz Bouteflika stepped down, an historical move which caught not only Algeria's central powerbrokers but also many analysts and scholars of the region off guard. To an extent, this development bore similarities to the Arab Spring over eight years ago, when the demands of protesters quickly broadened to include deeper social and political change, which then escalated, in some cases, into the toppling of autocrats who had been in power for decades – a fateful chain of events that, even then, had been anticipated neither by policymakers nor by scholars. This then raises two questions: Why did the Algerian protests erupt when they did? And could we have seen them coming?

The exceptionalism paradigm

Some valuable comparative insights into an explanation of these events can be drawn from Gregory Gause's 2011 article, *Why Middle East Studies Missed the Arab Spring*. Written in the immediate aftermath of the events of the Arab Spring itself, Gause argues that the 2010–2011 uprisings caught some scholars off-guard because, until then, they had 'focused on explaining what they saw as the most interesting and anomalous aspect of Arab politics', that is, the seeming stability of authoritarian regimes, which had defied the democratic waves seen in other parts of the world. Ever since the Arab Spring, an increasing number of scholars have investigated the dynamics of mass mobilisation, civil society activism and processes of political change. But Algeria had become for some the one 'Arab Spring exception' (Cheriet 2014; Mojon 2012); it became the new 'anomaly' as it weathered the Arab Spring protests, which, in Algeria, were much more limited and quickly contained when compared with Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Syria or Yemen.

Many academics have since tried to understand why Algeria had seemed to defy any pressure for democratic change, despite a mounting number of

challenges to the regime – most obviously the ailing state of its longtime president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. One of the main explanations proposed was the memory of Algeria's bloody civil war of the 1990s, which left as many as 200,000 people dead (Entelis 2011, 675; Joffé 2015, 9; Willis 2012, 337). The underlying argument was that many Algerians seemed to prefer authoritarian security and stability over unpredictable political change which, in the case in neighbouring Libya and in Syria, was fast giving rise to chaos and civil war. Another factor helping officials to weather the Arab Spring protests was that, alongside political reform, they were quick to offer important economic concessions, which were made possible by virtue of Algeria's large oil revenues. Amongst other perks, in May 2011 officials increased the salaries of civil servants by 34% and announced further subsidies on basic food products, including milk, sugar and flour (BBC 2011).

Yet while all of these factors certainly played an important role in initially stemming the Arab Spring momentum in Algeria, there had, for a long time, been signs of simmering political change, both within the regime and in society at large. Most obviously, Bouteflika's advanced age and disability meant that he would not be able to hold on to power for too long, though, after nearly 20 years in office, it had become increasingly difficult for many observers to fathom how a post-Bouteflika Algeria might appear. Recent years had also seen a new wave of internal struggles amongst Algeria's central powerbrokers, as palace officials sought to shield the ailing president from possible challengers, especially in the army. In 2016 the presidency managed to take control of the military intelligence's powerful Department of Intelligence and Security (DRS), which was replaced by a Directorate of Security Services, for the first time, ostensibly under presidential control. However, competition between the military and the palace persisted, reaching new heights last year. Amongst other incidents, in September and October 2018, a series of top military officials were arrested on accusations of corruption and abuse of power, in what many viewed as a power play by the presidential palace to pave the way for a fifth presidential term for Abdelaziz Bouteflika (The North Africa Post 2018).

Could the uprisings have been predicted?

Recent developments within civil society further added to the sense that the decay of the regime was accelerating.[2] Most importantly, over the past few years, Algeria has witnessed a mounting number of protests and instances of social unrest. While in 2009 the number of riots had totalled 9,000, the figure had increased to 10,910 in 2011 and to 14,000 in 2015 (Joffé 2019). Only last year, the police cracked down on thousands of protesting medical doctors and students, who were taking to the streets to demand better working conditions, especially when assigned to marginalised regions. The

growing number of protests came as Algeria's economy was stagnating. In particular, a decline in oil revenues forced officials to reduce public spending, especially on subsidies for basic goods. The extent of popular socioeconomic disenfranchisement had been captured by a 2014 survey in which 77% of Algerian respondents said that economic issues, including poverty, unemployment and inflation, were Algeria's biggest challenge.[3]

The heightened number of protests also reflected the fading memory of the civil war, at least amongst Algeria's large youthful population, who increasingly have no recollection of the violence of the 1990s (Joffé 2015). Those who are now in their twenties and who make up the bulk of the protesters grew up after the civil war. As a result, they are less afraid to demand radical change in the face of economic and political crisis. Alongside the scope of people's socioeconomic disenfranchisement, the 2014 survey had also revealed that 'only a minority of citizens have positive evaluations of the government or the state of democracy in the country'.[4] Their political disillusionment had become publicly apparent during the 2017 legislative elections, when voter turnout was as low as 37%. Importantly, this was not because of a lack of desire *per se* for political participation. In fact, a 2018 poll evaluating people's commitment to democracy found that only 42% of Algerian respondents affirmed that their country was not ready for democracy; in other words, the majority believed it was. By comparison, respondents from Tunisia, the Arab Spring's only lasting democracy, evinced a much more pessimistic view: an overwhelming majority of 72% of those questioned affirmed that Tunisians were not ready for democracy.[5]

So, does this mean that we could and should have anticipated the Algerian uprisings this year? The answer to this question is both yes and no. Yes, in the sense that drastic political change had become increasingly likely, given the extent of the regime's decay, the socioeconomic crisis that it faced, and the fading memory of the civil war; something which some scholars had suggested (e.g. Joffé 2015; Volpi 2013). It is also important to recall that, far from being an 'exception' in terms of authoritarian stability, Algeria had already seen a political opening in the late 1980s, twenty years before the Arab Spring – even if this experiment was quickly ended by the military and eventually resulted in civil war. And, although it has been often overlooked, in 1980 Algeria witnessed a 'Berber Spring', when a series of protests, particularly in Kabylia, resulted in demands for greater rights for Algeria's Amazigh citizens (McDougall 2017; Willis 2012). Historically, then, large-scale social and political unrest has been far from an anomaly. And, in recent years, Algerians themselves have increasingly demanded political change, and their voices should have received far greater attention.

However, though political change had become more likely, this, of course, never meant that the precise events of the 2019 Algerian uprisings could have been predicted. While regime decay is a long-term trend, revolutionary

moments and dynamics of regime breakdown are highly contingent processes, in which 'beliefs cause events and events change beliefs' (Kalyvas 1999). This means that their timing and trajectory are prone to catch people off-guard, even if the very fact of their occurrence should not do so. And, indeed, not only were Algerian powerbrokers and international observers surprised by the momentum the demonstrations acquired and the speed by which change was achieved; so were many Algerian protesters themselves. While their goal was initially only to prevent Abdelaziz Bouteflika from running for a fifth presidential term – and even this outcome seemed highly unlikely at first – protesters have since demanded a complete overhaul of the political system to install a liberal democracy. As one young demonstrator summed up their struggle: 'The system is corrupt, fully corrupt. So we demand the removal of all those who were with Bouteflika's system'.[6] Algeria's political future remains highly uncertain, as many figures of the *pouvoir* are still in place and resist any fundamental change that would challenge their dominance. But, if the Arab Spring is any indication, the Algerian people have a long and challenging path ahead.

Notes

1. Statements of Algerian officials, quoted in: Métaoui (2018).
2. For a discussion of the difference between regime decay and breakdown, see Kalyvas (1999).
3. Robbins (2014).
4. Ibid.
5. Rahman (2018).
6. "Algerian Protesters Keep up Pressure on Country's Rulers." *Reuters*. July 5, 2019. Accessed July 12, 2019. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-protests/algerian-protesters-keep-up-pressure-on-countrys-rulers-idUSKCN1U0215.

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