



## Corona's Storm in Algeria: Only the Beginning

**Zine Labidine Ghebouli**

On 22 February, 2019, millions of Algerians flooded the streets to demand radical political change. This unprecedented political movement managed to topple the long ruling president Abdelaziz Bouteflika on April 2<sup>nd</sup>. However, Algerians' struggle for freedom continued even as the country witnessed presidential elections on 12 December, 2019 which brought former Prime Minister, Abdelmadjid Tebboune to power. After more than a year since its inception, the Algerian protest movement is determined to reclaim popular sovereignty over political decisions.

Amidst this political upheaval, Algeria faced an unprecedented and unpleasant new crisis, the corona pandemic. On March 12<sup>th</sup>, 2020, Algerian health ministry announced first death from the novel coronavirus. Essentially, this meant that Algeria was about to face not only a public health crisis, but also a difficult political and socioeconomic challenge given the country's vulnerable conditions.

This public health crisis has prompted the protest movement to halt its demonstrations to safeguard people's lives. On the other hand, Algerian authorities exploited this "break" to tighten restrictions on basic freedoms including freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Since Algerian president, Tebboune, announced a lockdown, security forces have arrested, interrogated and imprisoned several activists. Many were arrested for social media posts and were charged with "threatening the integrity of national territory". Among these activists, Walid Kechida, a young 25 years old Algerian, was put in pretrial detention for creating a group on Facebook for satirical political caricatures.

Moreover, the Algerian government, following instructions from President Tebboune, has approved several amendments to the Penal Code. The Algerian parliament passed these amendments that aim, officially, to address the issues of "fake news" and "hate speech" and strengthen "national unity". Nevertheless, human rights activists denounced these new laws; protesters see these new regulations as another "legal excuse" for authorities to crackdown on basic freedoms. According to the new penal code, activists could spend 3 years in jail for "propagating false information"; they could also be punished for "receiving foreign funding".

These repressive measures have also touched the media sector. Algerian prominent journalist, Khaled Drareni, who serves as TV5Monde correspondent in Algeria and who covered the protest movement for over a year, was put in provisional detention for "incitement to unarmed gathering". Additionally, three independent media online outlets, RadioM, Maghreb Emergent and Interlignes, were censored and are no longer accessible in Algeria. The communication minister and government's spokesperson, Ammar



Belhimer, said these outlets receive “foreign funding”. Interlignes’ Publications Director, Bouzid Ichalalene, stated this is an attempt to deprive Algerians from “serious and professional media”.

As the government is accelerating and intensifying its repression against the protest movement, the country is on its way to face the worst socioeconomic crisis in decades. Due to the corona crisis, oil prices have fell to a historic record; Algerian Saharan Blend is well below 20 dollars per barrel. Since the country’s rentier economic model is essentially based on the oil and gas industry, Algeria will face a significant economic challenge especially as it is still attempting to overcome the post-corona social repercussions. According to the International Monetary Fund, the Algerian government needs a reference price of 157 dollars per barrel to balance its budget.

Even if the corona crisis has exacerbated the economic challenges in Algeria, the crisis has been looming for a while. Foreign exchange reserves have sharply decreased from over 150 billion dollars in 2014 to an estimation of 50 billion dollars by the end of 2020. Evidently, the current political turmoil has worsened the socioeconomic grievances; however, this looming financial collapse was expected. The corona crisis will also have its impact on the Algerian economy as the IATA expects this North African country to lose about 3.1 billion dollars because of the lockdown.

To face this difficult crisis, the Algerian government has announced a series of measures to address the socioeconomic repercussions of the pandemic. Authorities decided to decrease Sonatrach’s, Algerian state-owned oil and gas company, budget by 50 percent. The government also announced it received 100 million dollars from the IMF and 75 million euros from the European Union to overcome financial challenges. However, authorities have not yet disclosed the president’s full plan to reform the economy and assist small and medium businesses.

The current situation in Algeria is far from being resolved. Despite the government’s promises, the country’s ability to protect its already vulnerable stability remains questionable. As the lockdown could be lifted within a few weeks, Algeria will be facing two challenges that could prove detrimental. First, the country will most likely witness the return of the protest movement that will probably take a more radical stand considering the ongoing repression. Second, Algeria will also have to manage the financial repercussions of this public health crisis that could destabilize its weak economy.

The outbreak may have delayed the social explosion in Algeria as the protest movement halted its activities, temporarily. Nevertheless, the reasons that drove Algerians to the streets on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019 are still present. Authorities’ crackdown campaign is unlikely to put an end to the movement, it will rather strengthen it given the deteriorating socioeconomic conditions and the growing feeling of injustice. If president Tebboune had a chance of negotiations with protesters and appeasing the streets a few months ago, this chance is quickly disappearing making the new president the most likely target of popular discontent.

Furthermore, Algeria has been able to maintain its stability since 2011 using social welfare policies. The rapid drop in oil prices restricts the government's choices to buy social peace. Since the Algerian economy needs urgent structural reforms, it is unforeseeable that the political establishment would be able to stabilize the economy without opting for harsh austerity measures. These needed reforms will be unpopular and will result in social tensions and civil unrest.

The path towards stability in Algeria will be complicated in the upcoming months. Unless a sustainable and democratic solution to the country's complex layers of issues is found, Algerians could face an unprecedented state of chaos that does not only threaten Algeria but the entire region. The post-corona era will determine whether the protest movement will succeed in achieving a radical change and if Algeria will be able to avoid the worst of scenarios.