



(AP/Fateh Guidoum, 2019)

Algerian Elections: Protests, Bouteflika, and the Absence of Alternatives

Popular protests in Algeria against the proposed re-election of ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika have gripped the world's attention. In an apparent breakthrough, Bouteflika announced that he was to withdraw from the election process altogether, but with this the entire election process was postponed indefinitely. This article examines this, and focuses on the power vacuum in Algeria's opposition, suggesting that the continued absence of any credible challenger to Bouteflika has been central to this political drama.

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The first draft of the article below was originally composed on 22 February 2019. In the short time between then and 11 March 2019, the situation in Algeria changed significantly. The popular protests against Bouteflika's 5th term, grew into a national movement so large, that it captured the attention of the world's international media¹. These protests accommodated Algeria's vast student bodies and have manifested in industrial actions across the country². For his part, Bouteflika's office released a statement³, indicating his intention to stand down before the end of his term if he should be re-elected. He himself, only returned to Algeria on 10 March 2019, following an extended stay in Geneva, Switzerland to undergo medical treatment for his ongoing health issues, as discussed below. Up until 11 March 2019, despite this vast public anger, this was it: no opposition figure for the protestors to rally behind, rather a sense of anger and frustration was the idea of Bouteflika's re-election for a 5th term.

That was up until around about 18:30 on 11 March 2019. An announcement⁴ was made to the world that Bouteflika was now not going to run for re-election for a 5th Presidential term, and that the elections scheduled for April had officially been postponed. This news was coupled with another announcement indicating the resignation of Algerian Prime Minister Ouyahia from government⁵. Within minutes, there was a flurry of articles published by French media, such as *Le Point*⁶, indicating that this news was something, at the least, highly expected by some members of the international community.

At first glance, this maybe nothing more than a ploy for Bouteflika and his confidants to remain in power for a longer period, as he is still President for the interim, and there has been no mention of any new schedule for elections. But, maybe this is instead a way for Algeria to contain the consequences of the public protests and stall for time. Regardless, this political episode has exposed the dearth in the alternative candidates to Bouteflika, for they have postponed the entire elections

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/algeria-unprecedented-growing-protests-10-photos-190310133609464.html>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/10/algerians-begin-general-strike-against-abdelaziz-bouteflika-presidency>;

³ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47516159>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47531917>

⁵ Note: The comment on Ouyahia's lack of political support in the main text body seems to be validated by this.

⁶ The upload timestamp says 18:37 on 11 March 2019: https://www.lepoint.fr/monde/algerie-abdelaziz-bouteflika-renonce-a-briguer-un-cinquieme-mandat-11-03-2019-2299928_24.php

rather than merely pulling Bouteflika from the scheduled race. For now, whilst the administration scrambles to find a credible replacement for Bouteflika, the divided opposition in Algeria has an opportunity to strengthen their own profile and suitability of candidates.

The original text of this article was written just as the protests were beginning to be reported on social media. In it, the suggestion was made repeatedly that there was a lack of credible alternatives to Bouteflika, and that time was running out for Algeria's political parties to find one. Now that Bouteflika has officially withdrawn from the Presidential race, and elections have been postponed, this genie is out of the bottle. The time that this shocking announcement has brought the administration is critical and must be used wisely.

2019 is a year of political significance in Algeria with the round of Presidential elections scheduled for 18 April 2019. On Sunday 10 February, reports emerged⁷ that current President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was to be seeking a 5th term as President, having initially secured the Presidency in 1999. Bouteflika at 81 years old, has rarely been seen in public since 2013 when a stroke confined him to a wheelchair, and ever since there have been intermittent reports of his health deteriorating ever since. Coupled with this question mark over his physical fitness for office, reports across social media suggested that the announcement of his candidacy was met with some protests across many Algerian cities. So why, despite these concerns, was Bouteflika the only viable Presidential candidate in Algeria for an April election?

Lack of Alternatives

The principal reason is that there is no alternative candidate to Bouteflika that could gain enough support to function. The ruling party in Algeria, the National Liberation Front, directly nominated Bouteflika as their choice⁸, which was almost immediately reinforced by other key establishment figures. For instance, current Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia, himself involved heavily in Algerian politics since the 1990s, was discussed as a possible candidate, but he himself publicly announced⁹ his support for Bouteflika for a 5th term. In the case of Ouyahia, some commentators¹⁰ have speculated that if Ouyahia had run for President and had won, there could have been a military coup due to a lack of backing from the senior commanders of the Algerian military. In effect,

⁷ <https://af.reuters.com/article/algeriaNews/idAFL5N2050DW>

⁸ <https://www.france24.com/en/20190211-algeria-ailing-president-bouteflika-confirms-run-5th-term>

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190218-algeria-activists-call-for-protests-against-bouteflika-5th-term/>

Ouyahia, though a key establishment figure himself, does not yet command the respect that Bouteflika does¹¹.

Interestingly, the claim that the military is not neutral with respect to the Algerian elections was fiercely contested¹² by Mouad Bouchareb, Chairman of the National People's Assembly. Such statements arose in response to Louisa Hanoune, leader of one of the many opposition parties, the Worker's Party, who had accused¹³ the military of being biased regarding the upcoming elections. But for their part, the opposition in Algeria has done little to present alternative candidates. An opposition boycott¹⁴ of the election process was called by the Rally for Culture and Democracy party and National Rally for Democracy party, and for most of the other opposition parties they have failed to reach a consensus¹⁵ on who to field as their sole representative to stand against Bouteflika. A failure to reach a consensus is typical due to such varying opposition groups, including nationalists and Islamists of differing ideological extremes. Unfortunately, should they wish to field an opposition candidate they need to agree and submit the application by 3 March, and even then, there would barely be over a month of time left to campaign and raise the profile of any contender to Bouteflika.

Protests and Repression

Perhaps surprisingly, despite these conditions there have been some, albeit marginal, opposition figures who have arisen as potential contenders. For example, retired general Ali Ghediri, was the first individual to announce candidacy for the election¹⁶, though he is widely considered to not have enough support for a successful campaign¹⁷. Perhaps a more direct challenger is Rachid Nekkaz, leader of the opposition party Algerian Party for Democracy and Socialism. Nekkaz is a former Presidential candidate from 2014 who became famous for publicly committing to pay fines of Denmark's niqab ban in 2018. For this election of 2019, Nekkaz has begun a campaign to become a Presidential candidate. Even then, he has faced new impediments. While trying to organize a rally

¹¹ And it is thus unsurprising that he resigned on the evening of 11 March 2019, as discussed in the introductory amendment.

¹² <https://www.echoroukonline.com/parties-try-to-distort-the-armed-forces-constitutional-role/>

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1573156/algeria-opposition-party-boycott-presidential-elections>

¹⁵ <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2019/2/20/algeria-opposition-groups-seeking-joint-candidate-against-president-bouteflika>; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/02/algeria-opposition-fails-agree-joint-candidate-190221075834983.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.france24.com/en/20190211-algeria-ailing-president-bouteflika-confirms-run-5th-term>

¹⁷ <https://theArabweekly.com/retired-algerian-general-faces-tough-road-election-trail/>;

<https://theArabdailynews.com/2019/02/15/why-general-ali-ghediris-candidacy-is-way-too-early/>

with supporters in the city of Khenchela on 20 February, the local municipality intervened to block the meeting from happening. The municipal chief was quoted¹⁸ as saying:

“I will not allow any candidate to enter my town. I will not allow anyone to oppose the president”.

In response to this, supporters of Nekkaz formed a protest which eventually reached the municipality office, whereby protesters tore down posters of Bouteflika¹⁹. This incident of protest was by no-means isolated. On 16 February, protestors held a demonstration in Kherrata against Bouteflika’s re-election campaign²⁰. On 18 February, protests were reported²¹ in several cities including Algiers, Oran, Annaba and Bataa, likewise on 21 February in Tichy²². However, these protests were not reported in many of Algeria’s leading media outlets, who have instead focused on commissioning editorial pieces²³ coming out in support of Bouteflika, indicative of the state-run nature of much of Algerian media. Instead, news of protests has reached the world via social media on platforms such as Twitter. On these networks, campaigns against Bouteflika’s re-election began to materialize, with one such campaign “Let Him Rest”²⁴ focusing on the health issues of the President and his fitness to govern.

Even Without Elections, Is a President-For-Life Still Possible?

Outside of Algeria, in France there were also protests by the Algerian population in France against Bouteflika’s election, especially in Paris²⁵. The reality is that for the domestic population, and the international community at large, there may be unease at the prospect of a President-For-Life but in the absence of any credible opposition, Bouteflika, despite his physical ailments, was the only viable actor sufficiently respected enough to hold Algeria politically together.

At first glance, his withdrawal from the Presidential race, and postponement of the election process shook this notion of inevitability up. But consider instead, there is now no new elections, and Bouteflika will remain as President while his 4th Presidential term mandate will continue until new elections are organized. When this will be is pure speculation at this point, leading to a new fear of a

¹⁸ <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1599691/protests-algeria-after-opposition-candidate-barred-holding-rally>

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ <https://www.albawaba.com/loop/algerians-nationwide-protest-5th-term-long-ruling-bouteflika-1253956>

²² <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/algerians-protest-bouteflika-s-5th-bid-for-presidency/1399225>

²³ For example: <http://www.elmoudjahid.com/en/editorial/196>

²⁴ <https://www.albawaba.com/loop/algerians-nationwide-protest-5th-term-long-ruling-bouteflika-1253956>

²⁵ Ibid; Since 22 February 2019, protests in France have continued and have grown in terms of public attention, see: <https://www.thelocal.fr/20190310/thousands-join-algeria-protests-in-france>

President-For-Life due to a failure to create new elections. But time for this is running out, both to abate the anger of protestors and due to the realities of life. Clearly, Bouteflika's health is fragile, and yet clearly there are no alternative candidates who are ready to naturally succeed him.

Additionally, even if alternatives are found, this case shows the necessity of reform in the Algerian political system. For a while, there were suggestions²⁶ that the creation of a Vice-President role, responsible for much of the current responsibilities of the President, could be a way to create experience and exposure of potential candidates for the future. Unfortunately, there is insufficient time for this for now, but this could potentially be a method for the future to ensure that this situation, of Presidential elections without credible candidates, does not happen again. If this is the case, then the true test for Algerian politics may in fact be the Presidential elections to come in future years.

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