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Why True Change in Algeria Will be Difficult

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Like many others around the world who have visited Algeria and follow its politics, I have been watching intently the development of the post-Bouteflika era. Longtime president of Algeria, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, resigned on April 2, after weeks of peaceful protests.

But while regime change seems unlikely for one of the Arab world's most populous and oil-rich countries, so does political stasis. Algeria's young, engaged population is already altering their leaders' decision-making and rejecting the narrative that their only choice is between the authoritarian status quo and chaos. And, at least for now, Algeria's leaders appear willing to make some concessions to avoid more serious unrest. Yet the jubilant and energetic demonstrators, who for weeks have been inspiring citizens in both Algeria and in cities across the world, including in Paris, are transforming the country's image in U.S. media, which has

traditionally not covered Algeria, despite the security and economic ties between the U.S. and Algeria.

What Will Not Change?

There is much in the short term that will not change in Algeria. Abdelaziz Bouteflika may have resigned on April 2, but he has not been running Algeria for some time. Those who have are still in power. Following the constitutional rules, the president's allies put in place a caretaker president, Abdelkader Bensalah, who will take part in a transition process that will include a presidential election within 90 days, currently scheduled for July 4, the eve of the country's Independence Day celebration on July 5. Bensalah has been the head of the Council of the Nation since 2002. The Council of the Nation is the upper house of parliament created in 1997 to ensure political stability as the country resumed parliamentary elections during the decade-long civil war. Two-thirds of the Council of the Nation's members are indirectly elected by regional and local councils, and one-third are appointed by the President of the Republic (that is, by Bouteflika until his recent resignation). As the Council must approve any legislation emanating from the lower house by 3/4 vote, the Council provides an important safety valve function against legislation that has not been approved by the executive from passing into law.

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Thus, with the Council of the Nation's longtime president now in the role of caretaker president, the Algerian regime has largely ensured continuity. As president of the Council of the Nation, Bensalah was already hand-picked by Bouteflika and his allies, whose interests he shares.

Bensalah's appointment also points to the importance of the bonds of political and military clans and regional origin. Like Bouteflika, Bensalah is from western Algeria. Bensalah grew up in Morocco during Algeria's war of independence from France (1954-1962), and took part in the country's independence struggle against its colonial occupier. Bensalah has represented Bouteflika at official events. Whatever Bensalah's personal views and leadership qualities may be, Algeria's elites remain very much in control of the country's transition process.

Why Some Change Might Come to Algeria

Yet elites also face constraints and are debating on how to proceed in the face of unrelenting protests. Protesters rejected Nouredine Bedoui when his name was floated to be interim president because, as Interior Minister, he presided over flawed elections. Even still, Bedoui was named Prime Minister however on March 11, 2019.

Yet protesters will not be satisfied until there is some change to the system and a greater say in who will be president. This reality is deeply unsettling not only to entrenched political and economic elites in Algeria, but also to regional powers with an interest in stability.

There have been other shakeups as well. Athmane Tartag, head of the Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité (the army's internal intelligence agency) and veteran of the

civil war between the state and armed Islamist groups in the 1990s, was removed within days of Bouteflika's resignation.

Yet unless changes in Algeria include reforms for truly fair presidential elections that allow the people—not elites—to choose the next president and a new constitution that provides for the possibility of checks and balances, addressing serious problems such as systematic corruption and weaknesses in the health and education sectors will be difficult, if not impossible. Such constitutional changes might include direct election to the upper house of parliament and requiring governors (walis) to be elected, not appointed as they are now. These structural changes will not come easily.

Between Continuity and Change

To be sure, radical change is likely not coming to Algeria anytime soon. Elites still control the process and the military will continue to play a guiding role. For example, Lt. Gen. Ahmed Gaed Salah called on Bouteflika to resign, leaving Bouteflika and his supporters no choice but to end his mandate. The military will also provide a bulwark against violence and instability as elites negotiate what comes next.

Yet while complete regime change is unlikely, neither is complete stasis—not in the post-Arab spring era. The realm of what is possible in the minds of Algerian citizens has changed. And the Algerian people, through mobilization, are projecting a powerful image abroad as a peace, engaged force for change in their country. Hopefully, Algeria's rising new leadership will recognize the necessity of difficult economic and political reforms.

But while the military has long warned the people of the specter of civil war, the days of quelling demands for justice and dignity with token concessions may be coming to an end. Algerians will soon have a new president, but ending systemic practices of corruption, achieving rule of law and building an accountable political system will be much more difficult. By freely protesting, the Algerian people—and the Algerian military by showing restraint—are transforming the nation's image, particularly in the English-speaking world.

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