

Algeria's Second Revolution

By Marvine Howe

ALGERIANS WILL READILY TALK about November and their dreams of liberty, dignity and democracy...but they don't mean last November or next November. On their minds is November 1954, when a small group of Algerian nationalists launched their war for independence against the colonial might of France. The devastating Algerian war, which lasted eight years and cost 400,000 to 1.5 million Algerian lives and some 300,000 partisans of French Algeria, became a model for colonized peoples everywhere, but did not bring Algerians the sense of well-being and rule of law.

Today's descendants of those early revolutionaries are trying to achieve what their forebears failed to do—establish a democratic society with freedom, justice and opportunity for all. And they are determined to realize their goals peacefully.

In the introduction to a new collection of essays in French, entitled *To March!*, Algerian poet and former diplomat Amin Khan writes: "While the revolution of November succeeded in resuscitating a people from colonialist extermination, the February revolution should lift up the country to the highest level of freedom, that of a people governed by themselves and for themselves."

Every week since February, Algerians have turned out massively in street demonstrations around the country to demand change in the authoritarian, corrupt regime that has ruled since independence. Friday protests have been backed up by Tuesday marches of university students.

The popular movement, known in Arabic as *Hirak*, has already made important gains. By the sheer strength of numbers, the protesters forced the withdrawal of the ailing president, who was seeking a fifth term. They also pressured the authorities to cancel elections on the grounds they would be tainted by sympathizers of the former regime. And they imposed on the rulers the need for dialogue.

But there are two major obstacles to a solution to the Algerian crisis. On the one hand, *Hirak* has not been able so far to unite under the leadership necessary to take part in such a dialogue. Every time a possible leader emerges, he or she is shouted down in this aggressively individualistic society.

At the same time, the military command, which remains the *de facto* power, has not clarified its position regarding the revolution. Initially, the army chief General Ahmed Gaid Salah praised the "massive mobilization" and its "peaceful nature." He emphasized that the military had "no political ambitions and sought only to serve the country." But he has turned a deaf ear to the people's demands for a democratic transition and insisted on holding presidential elections as soon as possible.

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The Hirak popular protest movement in downtown Algiers. Protests ignited after the announcement that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who had a debilitating stroke six years ago, would run for a fifth term.

What happens in Algeria, the main Mediterranean gateway to Africa, does matter. Geographically the continent's largest country and with a population of 43 million, Algeria is rich in oil and natural gas reserves and untapped agricultural potential. A democratic revolution in Algeria could spur change throughout the region, and serve as a powerful impetus to revive the failed Arab Spring.

The mass uprising began as a spontaneous outburst last Feb. 22, in protest against the regime's plan to present Abdelaziz Bouteflika as its presidential candidate for a fifth term. Bouteflika, 82, has been paralyzed, unable to speak and wheelchair-bound since a debilitating stroke in 2013.

"Algeria was like a closed room with a gas leak that slowly builds up; then someone lights a match," Adlene Meddi, an independent Algerian journalist remarked the other day. He added that the spark was the demand for a fifth term and noted that the army chief was praising Bouteflika's record until a few days before the popular explosion.

In fact, no one could ignore the massive marches every Friday, the Muslim Sabbath, when two to three million Algerians took to the streets of the capital and millions more in other towns and cities. There was nothing menacing about these demonstrations. Rather it was like a joyous family festival, with men, women and children of all ages, associations and soccer fans, members of political parties, businesses, and artists of all kinds. Many demonstrators draped themselves in the national green and white ban-

ners and waved Algerian and Palestinian flags, as well as flags of the official Berber minority. Their chants and posters in French and Arabic were political, creative and good-humored.

“We refuse the 5th mandate—or an extension of the 4th”; “We reject the power and corruption of the Deep State”; “Algerians want to recover their dignity and freedom promised by the leaders of November 1954”; “Algeria is a Republic, not a military garrison”; “No foreign intervention; this is a family affair”; “Macron, stick to your Yellow Vests”; “Trump, we have no more oil for you—unless you want olive oil.” And over and over again, their favorite slogan: “*silmiya*”—peaceful!

Demonstrating a new civic spirit, commended even by the authorities, young volunteers cleaned the streets after every march, collecting all the discarded plastic water bottles and throwing them away in large trash bags brought for the occasion.

It was General Gaid Salah who delivered the *coup de grace* against Bouteflika on March 26. He invoked Article 102 of the Constitution, which states a president can be declared “unfit to exercise his functions because of a serious and protracted illness.” And the president resigned on April 2. Following constitutional procedure, the docile parliament accordingly named the President of the Senate Abdelkader Bensalah as interim head of state for 90 days and former Interior Minister Nouredine Bedoui as interim prime minister.

Apparently to mark their distance from the old regime, the army chief and the Interim Government have launched a far-reaching campaign against corruption. In the past few months, some 50 senior political and economic figures have been arrested on charges of large-scale corruption. The list includes two former prime ministers, other cabinet members and business oligarchs, the former head of the National Intelligence Service, as well as Bouteflika’s younger brother and close adviser, Said Bouteflika, considered the power behind the wheelchair.

The *Hirak* demonstrators generally approved of the arrests of Bouteflika’s cronies, but have denounced the detention of persons known as critics of Gaid Salah, among them former freedom fighter Lakhdar Boure-

gaa and the head of the opposition Labor Party, Louisa Hanoune.

The main mission of the Interim Government was to assure that national presidential elections would be held by July 4. But Algerian protesters saw these moves as a maneuver by the rulers to install a new Bouteflika regime without Bouteflika. Once again, the elections were widely rejected.

“Everyone wants to change the system,” commented a university graduate, who works as a hotel clerk. “We cannot understand why this rich country has such poor social services and so few job opportunities. Nothing works properly—hospitals, schools, social security. Our frustration built up slowly over the years until we exploded.”

As the protests maintained their momentum, the security forces resorted to increasingly repressive measures. On several occasions, they used water cannons against students. On Fridays, they closed the main highways leading into Algiers and cut off the central Post Office, a popular gathering place for protesters. Then in mid-June, police carried out a wave of arrests against demonstrators carrying Berber banners, also detaining street salesmen of Berber flags and pins. This arbitrary action spurred a spate of rumors. It was even suggested that the Gulf Arabs had demanded the removal of the Palestinian flags, seen as a sign of widespread Palestinian influence. Unwilling to act against the popular Palestinians, the Algerian military seized the Berber flags as “a threat to national unity.”

In a change of tactic, the Interim Government acknowledged “the need to restore the confidence of the citizens in their state and institutions.” While insisting that the principal mandate of the interim head of state was to quickly organize presidential elections, the authorities announced in July the creation of a national panel of “independent and honorable personalities” to engage in a dialogue with the public. It would be the panel’s task to “guarantee the transparency and regularity” of the electoral process. Despite conciliatory words, the powerless panel, headed by a former speaker of parliament, failed to win credibility with *Hirak*.

All through the Muslim month of fasting, the searing heatwaves and summer holidays, *Hirak* has kept up the fervor of its twice-weekly demonstrations. Although their



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Protesters carry the green and yellow Berber banner, later banned, next to the green and white Algerian flag.

numbers have decreased from hundreds of thousands to thousands, the demonstrators have shown unflinching determination in their demands for “a democratic transition.” And reinvigorated crowds were expected back in the fall.

Specifically, they want certain goodwill gestures like the release of all political prisoners starting with the 60-some Berber flag bearers, and an end to the police harassment and restrictions on basic freedoms. Their principal demand, however, is the replacement of “all the remnants” of the former regime by a new independent and trustworthy government that could begin to establish the conditions needed to draft a new constitution and hold presidential elections.

There is, however, a growing concern that as the conflict drags on one or both sides will lose their patience. Some radical voices in *Hirak* have called for general civil disobedience. For its part, the Interim Government has warned of threats of anarchy and foreign intervention should the crisis be prolonged. The military chief announced presidential elections should be held by the end of the year, but the people said no.

“The people know what they don’t want,” playwright-journalist Mustapha Benfodil told this correspondent over coffee. “What they want is more difficult to find: a strong symbol as president not involved in daily government, a mix of General [Charles] de Gaulle and Queen Elizabeth.” ■