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Protesters in Algeria use nonviolence to seek real political change

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The Algerian population has taken to the streets in a peaceful and nonviolent manner to protest against President Bouteflika's running for a fifth term of office. Ryad Kramdi/AFP

Until Monday, March 11, it was the people of Algeria against the country's 82-year-old president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika. He has been in power since 1999, and the state news agency announced in February that he would run for an unprecedented fifth term, and this despite his poor health and the country's deep economic crisis.

Previously there had been little public opposition to the seemingly endless reign of the country's "phantom president", but this time protests erupted and grew. Despite efforts to intimidate protestors with dark threats of a "Syrian scenario" – civil war – in the end, the government blinked: On March 11 Bouteflika announced he would no longer seek a fifth term, adding somewhat enigmatically, "for me there has never been any question of it".

Taking to the streets

After the announcement, the streets in Algiers and other cities filled with joyful protesters. From the

Author



Ghaliya Djelloul

Sociologue, chercheuse au Centre interdisciplinaire d'études de l'islam dans le monde contemporain (IACCHOS/UCL), Université catholique de Louvain

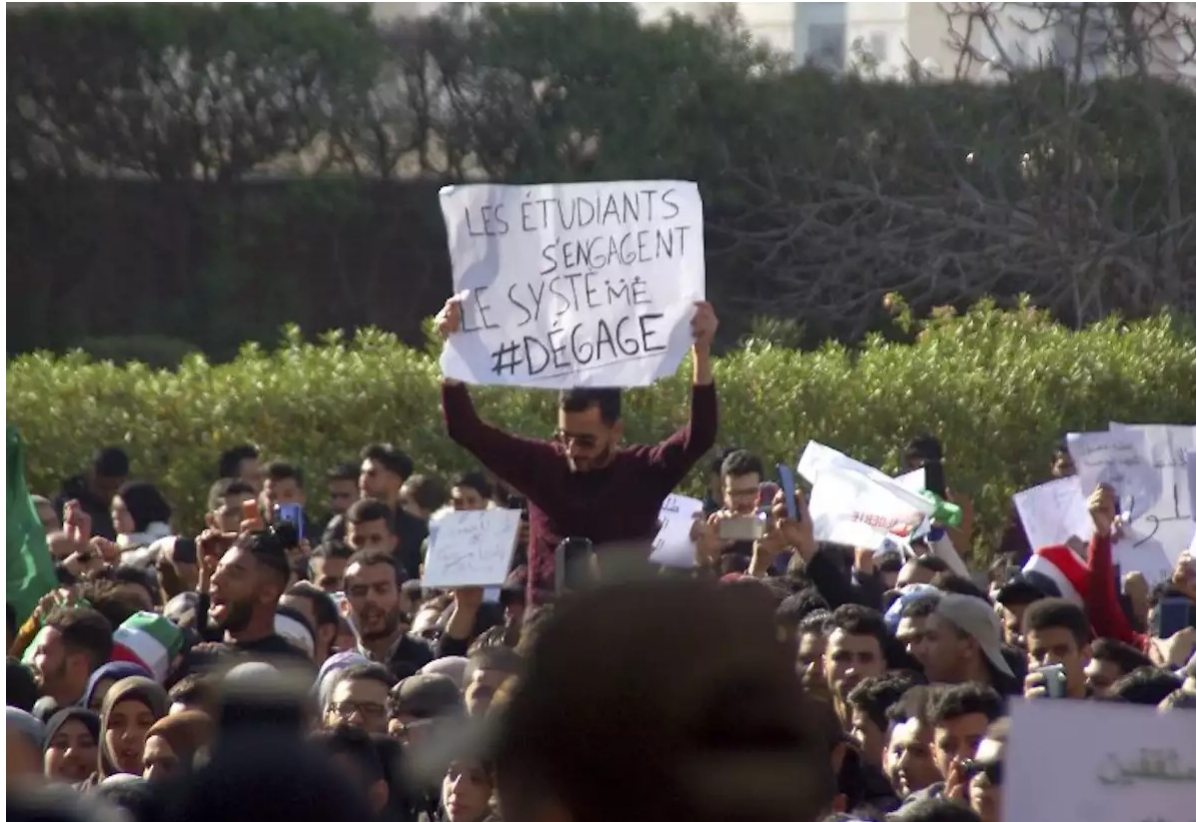


Languages

- English
- Français

beginning, people of all ages, from Algiers to Oran, were part of the peaceful protests against the continuing grip of Bouteflika and his inner circle. Algeria's economy has been plunged into crisis as oil prices fell and revenues with them. The unemployment rate is near 12%, with the youth rate at 29%. Even with the departure of Bouteflika, the government is facing a structural and social crisis of unprecedented proportions.

Several candidates had registered to run against Bouteflika, but with him out of the running and the April 18 elections put off, it's unclear what happens next.



Students joined the mobilisations against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika on February 26, in Oran, Algeria. AFP

Large-scale public protests are unusual in Algeria, where the National Liberation Front – a political regime in power since independence from France in 1962 – regime has violently crushed all signs of dissent. In 1988, more than 500 were killed during Algeria's "black October" demonstrations, which were followed by a military coup in 1992 and subsequent civil war.

Security forces also met 2001 protests by Algeria's Kabyle people with violence; 160 were reportedly killed. Other opposition movements, such as protests in 2011 and an anti-shale gas movement in 2015, flared but weakened quickly.

Algeria largely stood out the Arab Spring – a series of protests in 2010 and 2011 that brought down authoritarian governments in Egypt, Libya and elsewhere – in part because of memories of the country's brutal civil war of the 1990s.

The protesters who stopped Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term are of all ages and walks of life – students, working men and women, and journalists resisting state censorship. All are calling for a return to the rule of law and demanding an end to the rule of Bouteflika and his clan. This includes the president's brother Saïd and other family members who have a controlling hand in state affairs and the economy.

The atmosphere of Algeria's protests is generally festive. As they march down city streets, protesters often sing popular football anthems with a political twist to express their demands. Songs ring out from Algeria's 1962 independence movement and the social movements of the 1980s. From balconies overhead, women sing out their support.

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Pro-democracy protesters sing Algerian football songs, adjusting their lyrics to reflect the current situation in Algeria. For more information, see the documentary *Babor Casanova*, by Karim Sayad (2015).“

The street as public forum

The moving crowds, rallies and meetings have turned Algeria's streets into something of a public forum. In a country where the government does not allow a real political dialogue, this is how the Algerian people practice their politics.

The Algerian resistance has also taken to social media to share messages of hope, filling the web with broad smiles and forceful slogans about political change in their country. Twitter posts show that citizens are remaining positive about their chances of democracy.



[See Heyitsrano's other Tweets](#)

Unlike in the past, protests this time have received domestic media coverage – particularly after journalists protested Bouteflika's rule – both in mainstream papers as well as private broadcasts. Ongoing coverage shows streets and squares occupied by protestors, with police officers surrounded by demonstrators.

Algerian protesters also gained an international audience, with support from the Algerian diaspora in Paris, Montreal, Geneva and other cities.

Is the regime losing its grip?

Across the nation, the feeling that the 57-year-old regime's grip on power may finally be slipping.

So far, the protesters' strategy has been resolutely nonviolent. They have even made peaceful gestures toward the police and expressed their civic responsibility in unexpected ways, including cleaning the streets after demonstrations.

By resisting political pressure and fatalism through nonviolence, everyday citizens are seeking to change how power may be exercised in Algeria, peacefully yet insistently calling on the government to allow dissent and listen to what its people have to say. Real dialogue, they say, is the only way to restore the legitimacy of Algeria's government in the eyes of its people.

Will peaceful protest be enough to shift the balance of power in Algeria? The future of the movement

is uncertain, but the possibility of a fifth term for Bouteflika already belongs to the past.

Translated from the original French by Clea Chakraverty and Leighton Kille.

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