

# Arab Spring à l'algérienne

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## ■ Executive summary

Even though many of the socioeconomic conditions that have driven the popular Arab Spring uprisings and toppled several regimes across the Middle East have been present in Algeria as well, the Algerian regime has thus far been able to weather the winds of change. This policy brief takes a closer look at the “Algerian exception” by examining the protest movement in Algeria and why it has been more limited than elsewhere, as well as recent political “reforms” adopted in response to the protests. It argues that in addition to the experiences of the bloody decade of the 1990s, a number of factors account for the more limited protest movement in Algeria, such as the regime’s larger spending power and its experience in dealing with large-scale protests. While the Algerian regime has introduced reforms over the last two years, these have been mainly cosmetic, largely consolidating the political status quo. The policy brief also briefly discusses the threat of Islamist terrorism in the Sahel region, with particular reference to the recent In Amenas hostage crisis in Algeria. As for Algeria’s future evolution and prospects for political reform, fundamental change seems unlikely, at least in the short to medium term.

## Introduction

Algeria is often seen as a – if not *the* – major exception to the profound transformations that have swept across the Arab world since late 2010. While in countries such as Tunisia, Egypt or Yemen popular protest movements have toppled long-standing autocrats and the rule of other Arab leaders has seemed increasingly shaky in the face of growing domestic turmoil, the Algerian regime has thus far been able to weather the winds of change. This has been despite the fact that many of the socioeconomic conditions that have fuelled the anti-regime movements elsewhere, such as high levels of unemployment, rising living costs, and widespread cronyism and corruption, have been present in Algeria as well. This policy brief takes a closer look at the “Algerian exception” and the differences to experiences in countries such as Tunisia and Egypt. More specifically, it examines the protest movement in Algeria and why it has been more limited than elsewhere, the government’s response, and recent “reforms”, as well as the likely evolution of the current situation in the short to medium term.

## The protest movement in Algeria: why has it been limited?

Despite the common perception of relative calm in Algeria, the country has in fact experienced a considerable degree of internal unrest in recent years. In 2010 alone security forces were called out to deal with more than 10,000 sit-ins, riots and similar protest incidents. Popular discontent has been expressed across a broad spectrum of Algerian society, including by school teachers, medical personnel, communal workers, the unemployed and pensioners, who have demonstrated against their working conditions, rising living costs and injustice generally. The widespread sense of desperation has also been manifest in the exodus of tens of thousands of young Algerians attempting to cross the Mediterranean to Europe each year – many of whom never reach their destination – and the growing number of self-immolations, which have occurred practically on a daily basis.

The protest movement reached a turning point on January 3rd 2011, when overnight the government decided to raise

the price of staples such as sugar and oil, and to ban street vendors. In response, protests mostly of young and marginalised youths increased rapidly, also reaching previously calm areas, such as the deep south. In mid-February 2011 a heteroclit grouping composed of opposition parties, human rights organisations, student and women's associations, and representatives from unofficial trade unions launched the so-called National Co-ordination for Change and Democracy, which called for political reforms and regime change. The group was spearheaded by the Rally for Culture and Democracy, a political party that has its main power base in the Berber-speaking areas of Algeria, although it claims to represent all Algerians.

However, the protest movement in Algeria, although it did not die down entirely, never reached the same momentum as in Tunisia and Egypt, so what explains the difference? One important factor is certainly the still-vivid memories of the "civil war" (the expression itself is contested) of the 1990s that gripped Algeria after the aborted 1991 elections in which Islamists won the first round. Unlike their neighbours, Algerians still carry the psychological and political scars of the "red decade", during which state security forces, Islamist rebels and state-sponsored militias engaged in acts of extreme violence, leaving more than 150,000 people dead, many of them innocent civilians, while at least 7,000 disappeared. Many Algerians now fear that the Arab Spring could bring the country into a renewed state of violence and chaos, as has happened in both Libya and Syria.

Another weakness of the Algerian protest movement is that many of its proponents belong to the political establishment and thus do not have enough credibility to inspire a widespread popular uprising. It can be argued that the "organic intellectual", to use Antonio Gramsci's term, who would be able to credibly articulate popular grievances and a call for regime change has been missing in Algeria. It was precisely the presence of leaders who were able to make this link between "social justice" and "regime change" that made the revolutionary movement of 1954 possible, despite the fact that the historic context was more difficult than today. Compared to this earlier revolutionary movement, the problem with Algeria's current elite is that it is too fragmented, and is implicated in the system of corruption and mismanagement. As a result, its capacity to organise and lead a broad popular movement is also very limited. The so-called *pouvoir* (the power to be) has been able to manipulate and corrupt large segments of Algeria's political class, be they nationalist, secularist or Islamist.

Finally, compared to the leaders of Tunisia and Egypt, the Algerian regime has responded more effectively to the protest movement. To begin with, Algerian security forces are well trained and equipped to deal with large-scale

demonstrations without using excessive force, while both the Tunisian and Egyptian police were quick to open fire on protesters, killing hundreds. The Algerian leadership also reversed its decision practically overnight to increase the prices of food, and disbursed some \$35 billion in micro-credits for projects that had been "dormant" in the drawers of bureaucrats for years. In addition, a range of public sector workers received significant wage increases. Compared to the Tunisian and Egyptian leadership, the Algerian regime has a much larger distributive capacity, thanks to its hydrocarbon revenues and massive foreign exchange reserves (over \$180 billion in 2012), which has allowed it to contain the unrest without having to concede any significant political reforms.

### Political "reforms" and the parliamentary elections of May 2012

In addition to this reactivation of the welfare state, the government initiated a "political reform" process in response to the popular protests. Its main elements have included the passing of several new bills on information, associations, political parties, elections and constitutional reform. However, human rights organisations, both inside and outside the country, have pointed out that rather than amounting to genuine reforms, these measures represent additional tools for the regime to control Algerian society.<sup>1</sup> Thus, while the Algerian leadership has presented these reforms as an attempt to enhance individual freedoms and the country's democracy, the various bills in fact strengthen the power of the executive, e.g. in areas such as the registration of political parties and associations or in authorising imports of foreign newspapers.

On the eve of the May 2012 legislative elections 23 new parties were authorised, bringing the total to 47. This marked the first time since 1999 that any new political party had been legalised. The newly created parties, however, were hardly ready for the elections, with neither sufficient grassroots support nor a clear political agenda. Contrary to official declarations, the proliferation of "micro parties" has rather increased the electoral masquerade that characterises the Algerian political system. Indeed, many of the new political parties vanished immediately after the elections and most of them arguably did not even fulfil the strict criteria imposed by Algerian law on political parties.

Moreover, candidates are perceived by the wider public as being motivated primarily by financial interest. It is worth noting that the salaries of Algerian deputies have been raised several times in recent years and now amount to almost 30 times the minimum wage. Even by regional standards, this is high. In Tunisia, for example, the salaries of members of the National Constituent Assembly amount

1 See, for example, the joint report by the Algerian League for the Protection of Human Rights and the Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Network entitled *Réformes politiques ou verrouillage supplémentaire de la société et du champ politique en Algérie? Une analyse critique*, <[http://www.algeria-watch.org/pdf/pdf\\_fr/remdh\\_reformes\\_politiques\\_2012.pdf](http://www.algeria-watch.org/pdf/pdf_fr/remdh_reformes_politiques_2012.pdf)>.

to around ten times the minimum wage, even though they too have been increased significantly of late.

For the Algerian regime the key issue was to achieve a high voter turnout, and it made use of all available channels to convince people to participate in what it called an “historic” election. Even President Bouteflika himself, who due to ill health rarely addresses the population, became involved in the election campaign. However, Algerians showed little interest in the ballot, which they believe was rigged. Moreover, given that the most important decisions in the country continue to be made not by elected bodies, but behind the scenes, these “historic” elections were not seen as very relevant. Real authority in Algeria continues to rest with the military intelligence apparatus and its network of unofficial contacts that expand into the country’s rentier and bazaar economy.

Another important feature of the May 2012 elections, in contrast to earlier elections, was that the government welcomed some 500 international observers from the European Union (EU), the Arab League, and non-governmental organisations such as the Carter Centre and the National Democratic Institute. While the EU observer mission gave a qualified endorsement to the elections, it also noted some “weaknesses” and “shortcomings”, such as the absence of a consolidated voter register at the national level and the high number of blank ballots (see below).

Ultimately, 42.9% of the country’s 21 million eligible voters took part in the elections, a voter turnout that was seen as a great improvement over the 35% participation rate of the previous elections. However, of the 42.9%, around 18% cast blank ballots, which means that more than two-thirds of Algerians effectively did not take part in the vote. Despite the regime’s official campaign message that the elections would “save Algeria from civil war and foreign intervention”, Algerians thus showed little enthusiasm, in considerable contrast to the legislative elections in Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt, which achieved considerably higher voter turnouts.

Against all expectations, the Green Coalition of five Islamist parties performed poorly, not even coming close to winning a majority of seats in the new parliament. The Islamist bloc received only 50 of the total of 462 seats, while the FLN (National Liberation Front), which has ruled the country since independence, won 208 seats and the National Democratic Rally led by the former prime minister, Ahmad Ouyahia, won 68 seats. It is worth recalling here that, in contrast to neighbouring countries, Islamists have held ministerial portfolios and other important positions since 1997, and their behaviour in government has not been different from that of other decision-makers. As a result, Algerian Islamists do not enjoy the same public credibility as in Tunisia and Egypt. Given both the experiences with Islamist violence during the 1990s and the at least partial co-option of Islamists by the regime since then, they are

perceived as either terrorists or as part of the political establishment.

The elections clearly demonstrated the Algerian regime’s unwillingness or inability to implement “change from within”. The new cabinet that was unveiled some three months after the ballot does not differ significantly from the previous one, almost as if no elections had taken place. Even though a new prime minister, ‘Abd al-Malik Sellaal, a former diplomat and head of Bouteflika’s electoral campaign of 2009, has been appointed, key positions such as the heads of the Ministries of the Interior, Foreign Affairs and Energy all remain in the same hands. The municipal elections held in November 2012 also led to a further consolidation of the political status quo. Like the bill on the legislative elections, the new bill on municipal elections favours the “big parties”. Moreover, this new bill does not grant any significant powers to the elected mayor, but rather to the governor, who is appointed by the central government. Like the legislative elections, the municipal elections were won by the FLN by a large margin, although also with a rather feeble participation rate of around 44%.

### **Terrorism and the In Amenas hostage crisis**

Another key factor in Algeria’s political landscape, including its potential for transformation, remains the threat of Islamist terrorism. The Algerian regime brutally fought armed Islamist groups during the 1990s, hunting them down across the national territory. While the most high-profile terrorist organisation at the time, the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), is now widely considered to be defunct, splinter organisations such as the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC) remain active. In 2007 the GSPC reorganised itself under the name of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). AQIM fired its opening salvo against the Algeria state on April 11th 2007 with three simultaneous suicide bombings in Algiers targeting a government building, a police station and a gendarmerie post. There is also evidence of collaboration between AQIM and Boko Haram, a Nigeria-based radical Islamist organisation that has been responsible for a large number of violent acts, including the suicide attack on the United Nations headquarters in Abuja in August 2011.

These jihadist groups have not only carried out numerous violent attacks, but have also amassed vast sums of money as a result of kidnappings of foreign tourists and oil workers in the Sahara along Algeria’s southern borders. In addition, these groupings have become involved in various lucrative trafficking activities across the Sahara, such as the smuggling of drugs, cigarettes and weapons. Currently the Sahel region forms a vast sanctuary for these terrorist-criminal groups, which arguably pose the most serious threat to regional stability. Beyond that, given the growing importance of this area in supplying the energy needs of major powers such as the U.S., Europe and China, instability in the Sahel region also has global repercussions.

Al-Qaeda and its splinter groups in the Sahel are currently no longer under the command of a single charismatic leader, such as Osama bin Laden. Rather, there are numerous commanders, and the jihadist groups they lead are often highly volatile. The currently largest such grouping is Ansar ed-Din, which is based in Mali and headed by Iyad Agh Ghaly, who is commonly considered a cynical political opportunist. Ansar ed-Din has an estimated 1,500 fighters, most of them Tuareg tribesmen. When the anti-government rebellion broke out in northern Mali in early 2012, Ansar ed-Din practically “stole” the Tuareg uprising and succeeded in bringing large parts of the country’s north under its control, establishing an extremist, sharia-based, but unpopular regime.

Another high-profile terrorist leader in the region has been Mukhtar Balmukhtar. The one-eyed Balmukhtar has had a long career as a jihadist fighter: in the early 1990s he fought in Afghanistan against the communist government and subsequently returned to Algeria, joining the GIA and then becoming one of the leaders of the GSPC. Currently Balmukhtar runs his own jihadist group, the so-called Masked Brigade.

It was Balmukhtar and his new grouping who, together with other jihadist fighters, carried out the spectacular attack on the Tigantourine gas facility in January 2013. The plant, which is operated by the Algerian state oil company, Sonatrach, jointly with BP and the Norwegian Statoil, is located some 40 km south-west of In Amenas, close to the border with Libya. This important site supplies more than 10% of Algeria’s natural gas production. The terrorists first attacked two buses transporting workers from the airport to the gas plant, killing several of them, and subsequently took control of the facility itself, taking some 800 hostages. Apart from Algerians, these included nationals from the U.S, Britain, France, Norway, Romania, Malaysia and Japan.

Algerian special forces rapidly attacked the facility, fearing that the gunmen would attempt to move the hostages out of the country and blow up the gas plant. The rescue mission lasted for four days and triggered a considerable diplomatic crisis, as several countries expressed concern about the safety of their citizens. When the crisis was over the Algerian prime minister announced that at least 38 hostages had been killed during the course of the four-day siege in addition to 29 terrorists, while ten people were missing. Algeria’s response to the crisis was typical of the country’s traditional approach to confronting terrorists, which favours military action over negotiation. Algeria’s counterterrorism units are not trained for rescue missions that require precision and restraint in order to minimise civilian casualties.

The attack on the In Amenas facility was unprecedented, because not even during the otherwise extremely violent 1990s were the country’s energy installations targeted by terrorist groups. The incident was also a clear reminder of

the region’s chronic problems linked to weak state structures and rampant banditry, which in recent years have been further exacerbated by the spread of jihadist ideology, as well as the presence of large quantities of easily available weapons as a result of the Libyan crisis. Finally, incidents such as the In Amenas hostage crisis are also likely to have a negative impact on Algeria’s future political evolution and its prospects for genuine reforms: the Algerian regime has long used the spectre of Islamist terrorism as the main justification for the security apparatus’s predominant position and restrictions on civil liberties.

### **Looking ahead: possible scenarios after Bouteflika**

Most observers of the Algerian political system agree that it is characterised by a greater degree of opacity than that of its neighbours, and predictions about its future evolution are thus more difficult to make. Nevertheless, one of the following three scenarios is likely to occur in the short to medium term.

In the first scenario the regime would ensure a “smooth” transfer of power to a new leader when President Bouteflika’s current mandate ends in April 2014 – assuming that he will not run for a fourth term. Prior to 2010 the most likely successor was the president’s younger brother, Saïd, but one effect of the Arab Spring is that such a family succession no longer seems to be on the cards. The balance of power within the Algerian regime has instead been tilted away from the Bouteflika clan to the military-business establishment, which will most likely choose a successor from within its inner circles (even though it is still too early to identify any particular individual).

In another scenario President Bouteflika would, due to health reasons, not finish his current term. His frequent absences from the country for medical treatment suggest that this is not unlikely. In this case the president of the Senate would take over power for 45 days. After that the military-business establishment would put forward a successor from within its ranks, while the fragmented opposition is unlikely to come up with a credible alternative. As in the first scenario, genuine democratic transition would not be on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

Finally, there is a third possible scenario, even if it is less likely than the others in the short to medium term. The possibility cannot be excluded that popular discontent will grow further, fuelled by rising unemployment, the housing crisis, corruption and other social problems. While high oil prices might allow the Algerian government to buy off dissent for the time being, oil revenues will not address the country’s underlying economic and social problems. The hydrocarbon sector’s contribution to employment creation is minimal (less than 5%) and the government has long preferred to save its oil revenues in an old-fashioned way rather than investing in job creation or housing. Moreover,

the mismanagement of public finances and corruption in the oil sector remain widespread: Transparency International recently gave Algeria one of the lowest rankings in the region on the former's corruption index, behind Tunisia, Morocco and Egypt.

Despite the previously mentioned obstacles to popular mobilisation in Algeria, if oil prices were to collapse, this

could lead to large-scale riots and a broad popular movement against the Algerian regime, as was the case in October 1988. Depending on the Algerian leadership's response to such a challenge, this could then either pave the way for real political reforms and democratisation, or open the Pandora's Box of chaos and war comparable to the 1990s. ■

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