



The Uprising in Algeria – Origins, Current Situation and Future – Hamza Hamouchene

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The Nokoko journal is committed to a world where people are free from all forms of oppression and exploitation, where respect for individuals' varied differences is maintained, and where everyone can realise their full potentials. NokokoPod is a companion to the journal, covering current African issues. It aims to bring forth new perspectives that broaden, trouble, complicate and enrich current discourses. Edited and annotated versions of the conversations will be made available on the journal website.

This issue of NokokoPod is all about the uprising in Algeria. The podcast for this discussion is available on the Nokoko journal website. This conversation took place on September 20th, with Logan Cochrane in Ottawa, Canada, and Hamza Hamouchene in London, UK. This version of the PDF has been reviewed by Logan Cochrane and Hamza Hamouchene. In addition to the conversation, a set of annotations have been added as footnotes so as to strengthen the value of these publications and enable them to act as a resource for listeners and readers who want to have additional context and/or find additional resources on the topics discussed.

Logan: Welcome to NokokoPod, podcast #11 of 2019. Today, we are joined by Hamza Hamouchene.¹ He is a co-founder of the Algeria Solidarity Campaign, a writer, activist and frequent commentator on a broad array of issues in Algeria and across North Africa. In this episode, we will be speaking about the uprising in Algeria, which has been occurring over the last year. We are speaking on September 20th, the 31st Friday of the protest. Hamza, could you start by giving us a synopsis of where we started up until where we are now?

Hamza: First of all, thanks for having me. I am glad to be here and talking about Algeria and the current revolutionary events that are taking place in the country. Today marks the 31st Friday of marches that have started since the 22nd of February.² It has been more than seven months of weekly protests, by millions of people all over the country — not just in the capital, from the east, the west, the north and the south. It is a mass-scale movement, nationally spread, which involves all sections of society with significant participation by young people and women.³ It is truly a historic moment in Algeria's history. According to many observers, we have not seen such moments of creative energy, of effervescence, of dynamism, of the occupation of public spaces since 1962, when Algeria got its independence.⁴ There have been seven months of weekly protests, not

1 On Twitter @BenToumert His works are available on OpenDemocracy, Middle East Eye and the Guardian, amongst many other places.

2 See an article by Hamza for additional background: <http://www.cadtm.org/Welcome-to-the-new-Algerian-revolution-an-interview-with-Hamza-Hamouchene>

3 See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-47927296>

4 For the history of Algeria, see:

Benboune, M. (1988). *The Making of Contemporary Algeria, 1830-1987: Colonial upheavals and post-independence development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ruedy, J. D. (1992). *Modern Algeria: the origins and development of a nation* (p. 344). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

McDougall, J. (2005). Savage wars? Codes of violence in Algeria, 1830s–1990s. *Third World Quarterly*, 26(1), 117-131.

just on Friday but also on Tuesdays by the students movement, which kept the momentum going. There were also other sections of society that were involved, mainly the trade unions and workers who organized some actions of their own — these included some strikes to force the regime to yield. Just after six weeks of protests, and more precisely in early April, the protests forced Bouteflika, the former president, to abdicate.⁵

To say a little bit about the origins of the uprisings, meaning the thing that pushed people to go to the streets, that was the announcement of the candidacy of the ailing President Bouteflika to run for a fifth term, which would have meant reaching a quarter of a century in power.⁶ Bouteflika, as you might know, has been ill for the last few years, has not been seen in public nor addressed the people for more than seven years. He was in a wheelchair and unable to speak. The regime wanted to impose his fifth term on the people and the people could not take it. They were so angry, and they went into the streets. The protests were small and localized at first. With time, they became massive and spread all over the country. As I said, millions and millions of people on the streets.⁷ The regime and the ruling elites expected that the movement would die out with time. They thought that it would lose steam, especially during the

McDougall, J. (2006). *History and the Culture of Nationalism in Algeria*. Cambridge University Press.

McDougall, J. (2017). *A history of Algeria*. Cambridge University Press.

Stora, B. (2001). *Algeria, 1830-2000: A short history*. Cornell University Press.

5 Abdelaziz Bouteflika (1937-) was President of Algeria from 1999 to 2019.

6 See: <https://www.cnn.com/2019/03/11/africa/abdelaziz-bouteflika-algeria-fifth-term-intl/index.html>

7 Specific figures are not common, but reporting of events lists millions of participants, for example: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190330-algeria-millions-protest-for-the-sixth-week-against-bouteflika/>

summer and during the fasting month of Ramadan,⁸ which was in May-June. But that did not happen. Actually, the movement continued — even if the numbers dwindled because of the scorching heat and the tiredness of fasting — people still went into the streets in hundreds of thousands, if not millions. By the end of the summer, especially with the coming of September, the numbers came back to their previous pre-summer levels. Today, I watched some videos and truly what is happening there is momentous and is historic.⁹

Logan: With these large, diverse movements where you have participation from different segments of society occurring on a regular, weekly basis and, as you mentioned, a specific original cause expanding to much broader calls for transformation — there is a complex story. Most of what we see in the in the English-speaking media has focused on the political roots of the uprising and the political implications. Could you start by speaking to the political context?

Hamza: Any uprising or any revolution does not happen in a vacuum. It happens in a political, social and economic context. The combination of several factors led to this explosion. Let me talk a little bit about the political context. Algeria has been experiencing a political crisis for decades. Actually, that crisis can be directly traced back to the 90s, especially after the military coup that happened in 1992 when the regime canceled democratic elections that were deemed to go and be won by the Islamists.¹⁰ That military coup led

8 Ramadan is a month in the Islamic calendar wherein Muslims fast from dawn to dusk.

9 For reporting on the September 20th protest, see

<https://www.france24.com/en/20190920-algeria-algiers-protest-army-gaid-salah>

10 See: Mortimer, R. (1996). Islamists, soldiers, and democrats: the second Algerian war. *The Middle East Journal*, 18-39.

Roberts, H. (2003). *The Battlefield Algeria, 1988-2002: Studies in a Broken Polity* (2003). Verso Books.

to an atrocious war against civilians. I do not like the term 'civil war', I prefer the term 'war against civilians' because that is what it was.¹¹ It was the military and the Islamists killing civilians, which led to 200,000 deaths and tens of thousands of disappeared.¹² That collective memory and that collective trauma is one of the causes that did not lead the Algerian people to revolt in 2011 at the time of the Arab and African uprisings, such as those in Tunisia, in Egypt, in Syria and Libya. We could say that this was because that trauma blocked the people from going into the streets and revolting in the same fashion. That history played an important role, especially with the imperialist intervention in Libya that exacerbated that sense of fear of violence, fear of blood and fear of chaos. That is one point.

The second point is the infighting within the Algerian regime. The regime is not a homogeneous entity. It is not just one faction ruling homogeneously without contradictions or without any power struggles. On the contrary, it is different factions, fighting to grab the reigns. Those factions are competing for the control of the oil and gas rent and they have different interests. That infighting actually exacerbated after Bouteflika, the deposed president, came into power in 1999. The military brought him to put in place a civilian, so-called democratic, government, a facade for the world. This was especially done for the West, in order to regain a kind of legitimacy in the international scene after a decade of an atrocious war against civilians. During that decade, the military lost legitimacy at the international level as all observers were looking at Algeria and what was

Takeyh, R. (2003). Islamism in Algeria: A struggle between hope and agony. *Middle East Policy*, 10(2), 62-75.

Willis, M. (1999). *The Islamist Challenge in Algeria: a political history*. NYU Press.

11 See: <https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/72/>

12 The data on fatalities is not strong nor the figure agreed upon. Bouteflika mentioned a figure of 100,000 as well as 150,000, some human rights organizations list a figure greater than 200,000. The Algerian Movement of Free Officers reported 173,000 (<https://sites.tufts.edu/atrocityendings/2015/08/07/72/>).

happening there. This was the reason that Bouteflika was brought in: to recover legitimacy in the international scene as well as give a civilian facade to the military dictatorship. However, Bouteflika did not want to be, as he said, 'three quarters of a president.' As a result, he created his own faction in alliance with some generals and oligarchs in order to weaken the military security services who were the most powerful group, strengthened by the bloody war of the 90s. Actually, the head of that military security services was General Toufik, who is dubbed and described by Algerians as 'the god of Algeria.'¹³ He was a long-time kingmaker. Everything passed through him. He was the most powerful man in the country. Bouteflika set to weaken that faction by intensifying the power struggle.

The expression of this can be seen in different forms, such as scandals related to corruption in the oil and gas industry. We saw that around 2010-2011 with 'Sonatrach 1' and 'Sonatrach 2' — Sonatrach is the national oil company and these refer to corruption scandals.¹⁴ One of the multinationals that was involved was Eni, an Italian company.¹⁵ The Italian courts were talking about 800 million euros of bribes.¹⁶ This is just the tip of the iceberg and just what we know about them. However, that power struggle intensified in other ways, such as with attempts to push for privatization of the oil and gas industry. We saw it also in scandals around narcotrafficking in 2018, when around 600 kilos of cocaine were seized in the port of

13 General Mohamed Mediene (1939-) is known as General Toufik. He was the head of the Intelligence and Security Department, or Algerian Secret Services, from 1990 to 2015.

14 See: https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region/2013/02/130221_algeria_corruption
And also: <https://www.meed.com/scandal-envelops-sonatrach-2/>

15 Eni is an oil and gas company, of which the Italian government is a key stakeholder.

16 Eni was acquitted of the bribery case, while its subsidiary was fined and a former boss jailed. See: <https://www.france24.com/en/20180919-italy-court-acquits-eni-fines-subsiary-algeria-corruption-case-0>

Oran in western Algeria.¹⁷ That is how the struggles inside the regime express themselves in Algeria. As a result, you have that deep political crisis inside the regime with a political faction, wanting to maintain the upper hand by attempting to extend Bouteflika's through the imposition of a fifth term — not just on other factions of the regime but also on the people.

We could say that for the uprising to explode in the manner that it did, there was a convergence of different factors: a) the political factors: there was that political crisis inside the regime and the attempt to impose a fifth term, b) the economic crisis, which we may talk about later on, with the austerity measures that affected a huge section of society, especially workers and the popular masses. The converging of these factors created that kind of explosion, at that particular time. Actually, we predicted in a 2016 paper, which was written with another Algerian researcher, that when austerity measures were starting to bite following the plummeting of oil prices that an explosion is looming in the horizon.¹⁸

Logan: Before we move to the economic sphere, in response to the political problems at the root of the uprising the initial demand of the people was for a change of government. The call was for Bouteflika to be removed from government and that he should not be able to hold a fifth term. However, since that initial demand things have expanded, and the demands have changed. Could you speak to the response on the streets — what are the political demands from the people?

17 The rise of Algeria as a trafficking route appears to have begun in 2012, see:

http://www.emcdda.europa.eu/cocaine-trafficking-europe_en Also see:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-44305875>

18 Hamouchene, H., & Rouabah, B. (2016). The political economy of regime survival: Algeria in the context of the African and Arab uprisings. *Review of African Political Economy*, 43(150), 668-680.

Hamza: That is a very good question. I always like to emphasize the radical evolution of slogans and demands of the people. As you said, it started with the rejection of Bouteflika's fifth term. Then, when Bouteflika reacted to the masses of millions of people in the street saying 'Ok. I am not running for a fifth term, but I am going to extend my fourth term for one or two years to prepare for my successor,' the people rejected this too. The people saw that as another way of extending his term in power. The people continued to push forward. In a way, the people forced the military high command to drop Bouteflika because they were supporting him from the start. General Gaid Salah¹⁹ was a close ally of Bouteflika. Actually, he was appointed by him as the chief of the military high command. General Gaid was loyal to Bouteflika but when he saw the huge numbers in the streets, a reconfiguration of forces within the regime has become a necessity for the whole regime's own survival.

Gaid Salah and the military high command forced Bouteflika out and claimed that they will be following the constitution (Article 102) in order to replace the ill president.²⁰ However, the people said that they did not just want a replacement of Bouteflika while maintaining the same institutions in place. The people understood that they needed to radically change the whole system and that is what they are calling for now. They want a radical overhaul of the current system-regime. With the on-going ploys and deceitful plans of the military high command in the person of General Gaid Salah, the

19 Ahmed Gaid Salah (1940-) was appointed by Bouteflika to Chief of Staff of the Algerian People's National Army. In 2013 he became the Deputy Minister of Defense. General Gaid Salah pushed Bouteflika out of power – Bouteflika has also stated that he would resign before the end of his term. See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/02/world/africa/Abdelaziz-Bouteflika-resigns.html>

20 See: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/algeria-using-article-102-remove-bouteflika-would-be-unconstitutional>

people were always reacting in the streets to his regular speeches. Gaid Salah is running the show. He speaks almost every week, from various military barracks giving orders and threatening people opposing him. This made the involvement of the military in politics very clear, which is completely unconstitutional. From a military dictatorship with a civilian façade, we have now a military dictatorship *tout court*. Popular slogans evolved accordingly: from a democratic transition to radical change and the overthrow of the system. Slogans also shifted to 'we want a civilian state not military rule.' The people were chanting 'Algeria is a Republic, not a military barrack'. The slogans shifted radically, becoming very hostile to the 'General Dictator', which is what I call him. People are also calling him a traitor because he was trying to manipulate the situation. How? He initiated an anti-corruption campaign. As we call it in French "*C'est de la poudre aux yeux*" (it's smoke and mirrors), meaning a distraction from the real issues. The campaign was to show that the military was somehow accompanying of the movement and with its demands. However, let us not underestimate that campaign because it jailed a lot of corrupt billionaires, oligarchs who benefited under Bouteflika's rule, with the benediction of the military of course.²¹ Today they are in prison, including high profile ministers and previous former prime ministers. For us, this a kind of a show because the judicial system is not independent yet. The judicial system is not autonomous. These things are not transparent. It seems that judges are getting their orders from the military.

Gaid Salah thought that by conducting this campaign, he would divide the movement — and he was betting on time, and on the summer's scorching heat, to exhaust the movement. He tried

²¹ See, for example: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/04/algeria-5-billionaires-arrested-part-anti-corruption-drive-190422111903777.html> After this interview took place, Bouteflika's brother Said was given a 15 year jail term: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-49823275>

many ploys. This included even trying to divide people via the identity and ethnic line. He tried to divide people between Arabs and Amazigh.²² In the marches — not just in the capital but all over the country — several flags have been raised, not just the Algerian flag. For example, there was the Amazigh flag, which is a cultural flag, that is shared with other countries in the region (Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Niger, Mali, Mauritania). There was also the Palestinian flag, a flag raised in solidarity with Palestine. Gaid Salah gave orders that if anybody raises a different flag, other than the Algerian one, that they were to be jailed.²³ People challenged that dictate and raised the Berber flag. We now have more than 100 people in jail because of this.²⁴ That is the paradox: you have an uprising for democratic change, calling for a radical transformation of the system, and at the same time there is an intensification of repression and suppression of individual and collective freedoms. There are even serious restrictions on the media.

The situation, to be honest, on that front is not going well. There is currently a campaign calling for the liberation of political detainees. People are fighting for their individual and collective

22 See:

- Crawford, D., & Hoffman, K. E. (2000). Essentially Amazigh: urban Berbers and the global village. *The Arab-African and Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies*, 119.
- Maddy-Weitzman, B. (2012). Arabization and its discontents: the rise of the Amazigh movement in North Africa. *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 3(2), 109-135.
- Silverstein, P., & Crawford, D. (2004). Amazigh activism and the Moroccan state. *Middle East Report*, (233).
- Silverstein, P. A. (2013). The pitfalls of transnational consciousness: Amazigh activism as a scalar dilemma. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 18(5), 768-778.

23 See: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2019/07/algeria-41-arrested-for-carrying-the-amazigh-flag-as-authorities-crack-down-on-freedom-of-expression/>

24 See: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/09/algeria-tightening-screws-protests>

freedoms. They are calling for a civilian state. They are calling for a true democratic transition that is not controlled by the military. The latest slogans, from the last few weeks, emanate from the frustrations of the people in front of the stubbornness and the insistence of the military to hold the presidential elections as soon as possible. The military high command tried to organize these elections on the 4th of July but that did not happen²⁵ as people defeated these attempts. Now Gaid Salah is doing everything to impose them on the 12th of December.²⁶ I am sure the people will defeat these attempts as well, because the climate is not adequate. Repression is ongoing and in face of such a transition that would be controlled by the military, protestors have started calling for civil disobedience. The slogans are saying 'civil disobedience is coming.' They are saying 'whatever happens, we are going to continue to resist; whatever means you are going to use against us, even your tanks, we are going to continue resisting.' From the videos that I have seen today, huge numbers of people are in the streets responding to the threats of Gaid Salah. They are reacting to his attempts to curtail the movement. They are reacting to his plans to silence people. This is a historic moment. Three or four decades of suppressing freedoms and of repression, I do not think that people are going to give up easily. People are tired, especially the young people who do not find opportunities or see a future in their own country — a country very rich in natural resources and a country that has a huge potential to become a leader in the global South.

Logan: In the discussions about this uprising, such as via the international media, I would say that several of these points have been well-covered, such as the political context and political history.

25 See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-algeria-protests/algerian-council-scraped-july-4-presidential-election-idUSKCN1T30D8>

26 See: <https://www.france24.com/en/20190915-algeria-presidential-election-fixed-december-12-says-bensalah-bouteflika>

However, an underlying factor, which you mentioned earlier, is an economic one. In earlier podcasts in this series we covered the uprisings and protests in Sudan,²⁷ where the economic factor also came up. Specifically, it was mentioned that there are other, as you said, converging factors that made this the moment. Could you speak a little bit to the economic roots or factors that contributed to this moment.

Hamza: I agree with you — we tend to underestimate or ignore or neglect the economic question. Actually, if you go to the mainstream coverage and analysis of the Arab and African uprisings in 2011 you see the same thing. There is a focus on those goals for democracy, freedom and human rights; that people are rising up against authoritarianism and against corruption. However, nothing is said about the economic conditions that led to those uprisings in the first place. The same thing is happening in Algeria. Algeria is going through an economic crisis and that crisis lies at the heart — in my opinion — of the current revolt. We had three decades of neoliberal restructuring, which started from mid- and late-80s. To give a little bit of historical perspective, Algeria got its independence from French colonial rule in 1962. Due to its war of independence, in the 50s, there was a kind of a rupture with the French colonialist system and an attempt to delink from the imperialist, capitalist system. We have seen that in the huge and ambitious industrialization projects and in the agrarian reform — with their own contradictions. However, the idea was to create an autonomous, industrial economic system that would better the livelihoods of the people. We have seen

27 See:

Cochrane, L., Ahmed, E. and Elkazin, T. 2019. Protests in Sudan - International Actors and the Future (Part 2): Elfadil Ahmed and Tag Elkhazin. *NokokoPod* 2019(6): 1-19.

Cochrane, L., Ahmed, E. and Elkazin, T. 2019. Protests in Sudan - History and Demands (Part 1): Elfadil Ahmed and Tag Elkhazin. *NokokoPod* 2019(5): 1-24.

tremendous and amazing results in education, in the health sector, in agriculture and in industry.²⁸

With the neoliberal counter-revolutionary wave in the 80s, and with the ascendancy of, you could say, comprador bourgeoisies, that project was abandoned and undermined. What followed was neoliberal restructuring. We have seen politics related to the deindustrialization of the economy, the dismantlement and privatization of public companies, deregulation, and other forms of restructuring. This led, in a way, to a military-private bourgeoisie nexus that took the lead in shaping Algeria's socio-economic agenda in line with the globally dominant neoliberal doctrine. In the 90s, for example, while the war against civilians was happening, there was a process of opening up the national economy to international capital, which resulted in the compradorization of the ruling elites whose interests have been subordinated to the interests of national and international capital. This process continued when Bouteflika came in 1999. I would describe the Bouteflika era as the most ultra-liberal era in Algeria's history. During this period there were huge privatizations, huge concessions were made to multinationals, and attempts made to privatize the oil and gas sector. All of this led to pauperization; to unemployment, to austerity, the plunder of resources, and even the development and explosion of corruption. During the 2000s and 2010s, there has been a huge explosion of corruption and we saw the rise of a new class, we call them the *nouveau riche*, the new rich people. In a way, this is a comprador bourgeoisie that benefits from the state and tries to align itself with the interests of international capital.

²⁸ See, for example, data from the World Bank on poverty reduction, economic growth, school enrollment, life expectancy and so forth:

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/algeria> This is also found in the United Nations Human Development Index and Indicators:

http://hdr.undp.org/sites/all/themes/hdr_theme/country-notes/DZA.pdf

To mention some basics about the Algerian economy: Algeria's economy is mainly based on the export of oil and gas.²⁹ You could say it is an extractivist economy. Because of the neoliberal policies, there has been a huge deindustrialization and a kind of a reprimarization of the economy, which was becoming more reliant on the export of oil and gas; 97% of Algeria's exports are oil and gas.³⁰ Two thirds of the GDP is related to the oil and gas sector. You can see the huge dependence of Algeria on the international market and the huge vulnerability of Algeria's economy to the cyclical shifts of oil prices. During Bouteflika's era, especially in the first decade, the oil prices were really high. That is partly why there was an explosion of corruption by a parasitic class of corrupt capitalists and entrepreneurs in order to siphon that rent. At the same time, there were huge projects of infrastructure that benefited the economy, that benefited some people (e.g. housing, roads). By 2016, the oil price went down dramatically. With prices decreasing in that way, Algeria found itself in deficit. The country had to use the reserves it had accumulated in the previous decade, reserves that were placed in US banks, instead of being invested into the economy.

Since 2016, the Algerian economy has been in deficit.³¹ The authorities decided to find a solution. What was the solution according to the dominant neoliberal framework? More austerity measures, which means more economic hardship, more pauperization, cutting of public services, cutting of public spending, and more unemployment. Most of the Algerian population is young; 65% of the population is under 35. A lot of these young people have university degrees, but when they come to the market, they do not find jobs. Moreover,

29 See: <http://atlas.cid.harvard.edu/countries/66/export-basket>

30 See: <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/dza/>

31 See: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/algeria/publication/economic-outlook-spring-2016>

some young people still (till today) risk their lives in the Mediterranean to reach 'the Fortress Europe,' running away from a very rich country like Algeria. All of this — combined with the political crisis — led to the explosion.

However, we must not forget that there has been an accumulation of struggles over the years, from the 80s. There was the Berber Spring.³² There was the intifada of the youth in 1988, which was related to the decrease of oil prices in 1986.³³ At that time, there was a huge socio-economic crisis concomitant with the political crisis that led to the intifada, an uprising in 1988. In response, the military shot hundreds of young people in the streets. That uprising led to a short-lived democratic transition, controlled by the regime. There were elections but the military refused to share power with the Islamists, which led to the coup. There have also been other protest movements in the last few years. In 2012, we had the unemployed youth movement at a national scale, but it was especially concentrated in the Sahara, the southern part of Algeria where most of the oil and gas resources lie. And then in 2015 there was the anti-shale gas protest movement, again in the Sahara. This second movement started when the people heard that the Algerian government wanted to deepen the extractivist development model and look for another resource rent in shale gas. They worried that such a development could lead to more pollution of water, more impoverishment, and

32 See:

Goodman, J. (2004). Reinterpreting the Berber Spring: From rite of reversal to site of convergence. *The Journal of North African Studies*, 9(3), 60-82.

McDougall, J. (2003). Myth and Counter-Myth: "The Berber" as National Signifier in Algerian Historiographies. *Radical History Review*, 86(1), 66-88.

Willis, M. J. (2015). Berbers in an Arab Spring: The politics of Amazigh identity and the North African uprisings. In *North African Politics* (pp. 95-112). Routledge.

33 Roberts, H., & Roberts, M. H. P. (2003). *The battlefield Algeria, 1988-2002: studies in a broken polity*. Verso.

the pillage of those resources. In response to that, people rose up for around five months. It was inspiring to see. There have been also other fights within the trade union movement, the teachers, the medics and others. I see the current uprising as a result of an accumulation of these struggles and the experiences built upon.

Logan: That probably rings true for a lot of the movements that we have seen across North Africa. It seems that many of those stories are not being told — the media might portray it as popping out of nowhere, or springing out of nowhere. But, as you say, there are deep roots to these struggles. Many of these movements were building over time, experimenting with different types of approaches where they might engage less than democratic governance systems. Looking across the region, both on the side of the government's response and also the people's response, what role does the context of the Arab Spring from its 2010-11 period to the more recent movements, for example in Sudan? How are these playing out in terms of justifications or warnings that 'you should not do this, we do not want a disaster' versus 'it is possible, we can do it'?

Hamza: In my analysis of the Algerian uprising, I see it within the second wave of the Arab uprisings. I share Gillbert Achcar's explanation³⁴ of what started in 2010-11 in Tunisia, and then spread into other countries in the region. It is a long-term, protracted revolutionary process with ups and downs, with victories and setbacks, which is doomed to continue in the region. What is happening today in Algeria and Sudan is in my opinion the second wave of that revolutionary process in the region. I hear some of my Algerian friends and comrades saying 'we are not Egypt,' 'we are not Syria,' 'we are not Tunisia,' and that 'this is not the Arab uprisings, this is

34 See: <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2015/12/achchar-arab-spring-tunisia-egypt-isis-islam-assad-syria-revolution/>

not the Arab Spring.' In reality, it is part of that. The Algerian regime played that card in 2011, saying that the Arab Spring is a conspiracy, that it is manipulated by the West to create destabilization, and they used the Libyan and Syrian cases with the imperialist interventions and the chaos created there to scare people away from revolting. They did not predict that eight years later Algerians would go to the streets — peacefully, so far — for seven months, in their millions, to ask for radical democratic change.

I feel, as an Algerian, that there is disconnect between the Algerian case and what is happening in the region. I feel that this is a weakness because we can learn so much from other experiences. If I compare between Egypt and Algeria, there are a lot of similarities between what the current dictator Sisi has been saying and has been doing and with what General Gaid Salah is doing now. It is as if they are taking the same leaves from the same book. They are using the same tactics and the same strategies. We can learn also from Tunisia: what they did with their democratic transition. Compared with other countries in the region, it has been relatively successful politically, but on the economic level nothing has changed in Tunisia. In fact, it has been the contrary. The same neoliberal recipe that led people to revolt in the first place are being applied on them with such violence. There is huge unemployment, huge corruption and underdevelopment, on-going looting and plunder of the resources while people are not benefiting from the wealth. One thing that we can learn from Tunisia is that you cannot disconnect political democracy from economic democracy. You cannot disconnect the question of democracy from social and economic justice. What we can learn from Egypt is to never trust a dictator, never trust the military. They might claim that they are accompanying the movement, that they are patriotic or nationalist, and they are aligned with the interests of the people. However, at the end of the day, it is about the balance of powers on the ground. If the people have that balance

in their favor, they can force things to change. If they get organized, they can impose their will. That is one of the similarities between all the uprisings and all the movements in the region: the loose, leaderless character. I have been really frustrated by this because I feel that we have not really learnt those lessons — that without being organized, without having a clear political and economic vision, without having a kind of a coherent strategy, you cannot defeat those much more entrenched and much more organized counterrevolutionary forces. You could have the numbers you want in the streets and we could call it a 'revolution' by movement — I have been in several marches myself and it is very powerful. You feel the power. You feel the energy. You feel that you really can change things. However, you need political organizations, revolutionary organizations, that can lead, that can strategize, that can escalate when there is repression, and that can propose solutions when there is deadlock.

We have a political deadlock right now in Algeria. On one hand, the military high command is insisting on holding elections as soon as possible, and they are trying to impose it on everyone else. On the other hand, you have the majority of people who are rejecting these elections and wanting a proper, meaningful democratic transition. There are many things that we need to learn from other struggles. It seems, from the Sudanese experience (of course it has its own contradictions and shortcomings), that they resolved one of the dilemmas of the Arab uprisings: the challenge of movements being spontaneous, loose, leaderless or hostile to any kind of representations. The Sudanese had an alliance of organizations, political parties, trade unions that gave a political expression to the protest movement in the streets in Sudan. They gave it a platform. They had a very progressive political vision, including feminist issues. That kind of leadership — some people call it reformist because they ended up agreeing to share power with the military — had a vision and pushed people to organize at the local level through

committees. I feel that is missing somehow in Algeria. But, it is not lost yet. It could spring up. People are feeling the urge to organize themselves right now and to escalate the resistance. The escalation needs to happen within a clear political framework and a clear strategy. Otherwise, it can be counterproductive.

Logan: That transitions to a bigger question around system change. Even some of the protest slogans have stated that the movement does not want to replace an individual, it seeks to replace the system. The movement wants to replace this whole enterprise. I think that challenges us to look at the legacies of power going back to colonialism, and seeing how the 'kingmaker' Toufik and General Gaid Salah are there — they do not exist only as individuals, there is a system of power. As you say, lessons from Egypt and maybe even lessons from Morocco, where you can see that these systems are quite difficult to transform, and to push for that radical change that people are calling for, because they are entrenched.

Hamza: I agree, it is not about individuals. Even when I talk about Gaid Salah in Algeria, he just represents the people around him, the current ruling classes, the people who are ruling the country right now. It is not just about him, even if individuals and leaders are sometimes important in movements and revolutions and counter revolutions, it always happens within structures and systems. If you want to change things, you need to change that system and that's what the history of revolutions tells us. Revolutions, as I understand them, are not short-term or brief revolutions. They do not occur in one or two years, they can be long-term revolutions, like the French Revolution. Sometimes, maybe most of the time, they get defeated and then other revolutions are needed to change the course of things. That is why I feel that you need that kind of revolutionary organization or revolutionary movement to learn about the history of

those revolutions and to learn from experiences of neighboring countries. If it does not work this time, it must work the next time.

Logan: Looking forward, as you mentioned, today is potentially a direction setting day. What are you watching for in particular around which side may engage in particular activities or there may be a break or a coalition of some form? What signposts or what indications are you watching for to see where this may head in the coming weeks and months?

Hamza: The current uprising released a lot of energy. I am not saying that initiatives are lacking. There have been a lot of initiatives; from political parties, from civil society organizations, from trade unions. These initiatives have been striving to propose a solution or to reach a consensus and a compromise together. However, I feel that most of these initiatives fall short of calling for a meaningful democratic transition. The initiative that I am very sympathetic with is the initiative of some lefty and secular political parties and some other organizations of the civil society that call themselves the Democratic Alternative. Basically, they are calling for a constituent process, a process that would lead to a constituent assembly, to changing the constitution first, and then going to elections. That would create, as they say, a new republic and that would renew the foundations of the state. It would push for the meaningful democratic change that the people want. I think that is the minimum needed. Other initiatives are scared of that kind of process because they think it may create instability and chaos and that it cannot be controlled. Instead, they are pushing for a short democratic transition, between six months and a year. I feel that is not enough. How can you change the structures and institutions of the state in six months or one year? How can you guarantee that elections would be free and democratic, after only six months?

Some political parties of the revolutionary left (unfortunately very small and do not have a lot of following) are calling for people to organize themselves at the local level, by making popular committees. They are calling for trade unions to be much more rebellious and much more involved in the process. To date, even if they (trade unions) have been involved in the popular uprisings and the popular movement, I do not feel that they have taken a revolutionary role as the trade unions did in Sudan. The trade unions in Sudan played a very crucial role with the general strike and shifting the balance of powers. That did not happen in Algeria. But, it might happen in September or October, especially with the obstinacy of the military high command in rejecting people's demands. If the trade unions enter the movement and call for a national general strike, that could shift the balance dramatically. That might make the military yield. The potential for escalation is there. There have been calls, all over the country, for civil disobedience. It is just that the popular movement needs the political elites, need those dissidents, those progressive figures and those lefty revolutionaries, to step up to their historic role of leading, strategizing and calling for escalation.

I do not know how that would happen, but I feel, from what I have seen today after the 31st week of protests, that the movement is not faltering and is going to continue until the end of the year, if not into 2020. At this point, however, it seems that the sheer numbers in the streets are not enough to shake the foundations of the counter-revolutionary forces or end the status quo. It seems that the status quo forces are adapting to those protests, which are not affecting economic production as they happen on Friday — which is the weekend in Algeria. So basically, they are not affecting economic production. Even if the student protests happen on Tuesday, the students do not constitute an economic force as such. Right now, I feel like other comrades in Algeria that escalation is needed. The regime is insisting. It is pushing its own agenda. It is taking its initiative. It

wants to hold its own elections. This must be stopped. A strategy and a plan of action needs to be prepared if the elections are happening on the 12th of December, we have time to stop them. By the use of general strikes and by other acts of civil disobedience. The Algerian revolution is peaceful, which makes it powerful. This is one of its strengths. The Algerian regime wants to push it towards violence, but it has not succeeded so far. However, revolution is sometimes about confrontation and it is the oppressor who shapes the nature of resistance. If the oppressor uses violence against you, you must resist. We have seen that in all other revolutions. I hope that will not happen. I hope that imperialist interventions do not happen but there is always a risk. Algeria is a very rich country, it has a lot of natural resources, it has a huge economic potential. If chaos and instability occur in Algeria, the responsibilities are definitely on the military high command and on the current ruling classes. However, I feel that there is a strong will to continue the resistance and, at least, to have the small political democratic opening that would allow for some freedoms to organize. This is a protracted process. Change will not just happen overnight. It will take time.

Logan: Do you see the provocation for the use of violence, or the response of violence by the state — initiating it or responding to it — as a signal for what to expect? Thus far, as you said, it has been a peaceful movement. If either side were to engage using violent means to disrupt the economy or to use a narrative around terrorism or state control and security instability to have a lock down — what implication would that have on either side, if we were to see that?

Hamza: To be clear, violence from the regime is taking place. They are not shooting people, but violence is taking place.³⁵ They are beating up protesters. They are taking people to jail. They are

35 See: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/algeria>

blocking access to the capital. For me, this is violence. They are already exercising violence at many levels. The threats coming from the military high command as well — three days ago, Gaid Salah said that all the people coming from outside Algiers to protest in the capital would be blocked and that their cars and their possessions would be taken away. This is violence and repression. They did not allow people to go to the capital today. However, people of the capital went in the hundreds of thousands to the streets. And acts of repression and provocation do not stop here. They jailed, or more accurately, they kidnapped three political figures of the movement. They are very well known and respected activists and intellectuals of the movement. The idea is to jail as many as you can, to scare people off, to silence the movement, to curtail it. That is why I say that in order to resolve that kind of contradiction, confrontation has to happen, and yes, it could be very violent. Confronting an obstinate military high command (known for its violence in the 90s) is likely to be violent unless a scission happens inside the military, unless a coup happens against Gaid Salah. But that is unlikely for now. At this current juncture, the Hirak (popular movement) is still chanting '*silmiyah, silmiyah*', which means 'peaceful, peaceful.' It is not responding to the attacks and provocations. The people really do not want a violent escalation. That is one of the lessons they learned from the Arab uprisings: Do not go violent. Try to make it peaceful. The regime also learned that; they did not use bullets and did not shoot people from the start. In other uprisings, hundreds of people had died in the first few weeks. In Algeria, there were some deaths, but they were not shot. There were two or three deaths caused by various factors including stampedes.

Logan: Maybe that contributes to — at least by the by the international media — an underreporting of what is happening. I am glad that we were able to speak today and bring some of this to light for those who are interested in learning more about these issues. I

would like to thank you for your time today and sharing your insight on everything we discussed — political, economic, historical. We will continue to follow the events. You are continuing to write and engage; listeners can find you and follow your works for more details as things change.

Hamza: Thank you for having me here. It was great speaking to you.