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Algeria's deceptive quiet

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>> Parliamentary elections in Algeria are due for 10 May. While these are not nearly as important as presidential elections from the population's point of view, the question looms of whether they will open the way for political change. Doubts surround the ailing president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's ability to finish his mandate.

When the Arab spring arrived in early 2011, Algeria seemed ripe to follow Tunisia's path to transition. Despite the country's oil-derived wealth, corruption and abject income inequality had impoverished citizens living under this military-backed regime. Frustration reigned. A lack of hope was increasingly palpable among young Algerians. And yet Algeria has remained relatively calm. Popular demonstrations have not hit boiling point. The prospect of regime change has dissipated.

Algeria is a key piece in North Africa's geopolitical puzzle. Its shared border with Libya, major reserves of oil and gas, regional counter-terrorism strategy and steely refusal to fall in with the regional strategies of foreign powers all afford it a unique status. Understanding why the Arab spring has so far passed Algeria by is of considerable geostrategic import. There are several reasons for the apparent 'Algerian silence': historical antecedents that feed the opposition's current organisational muddle; the government's populism; and shortcomings in European strategies.

ALGERIA'S PARADOX

History looms large in Algeria's current soul-searching. The 132 year French occupation (1830 -1962) and the people's subsequent fight for

HIGHLIGHTS

- Understanding why the Arab spring has so far passed Algeria by is of considerable geostrategic import.
- The government's reform proposals have highlighted its limited room for manoeuvre.
- A possible change in leader, overtures to the West and a harnessing of economic potential are all good auguries for a better future.

»»»»» independence today evoke great national pride. Yet periods of calm have been the exception to the rule. Bad governance and inefficient distribution of oil-generated wealth became entrenched. Political life operated beneath the banner of the single-party rule of the National Liberation Front. With growing resentment towards the regime, violent riots broke out in October 1988. These marked a new chapter in Algerian politics. President Chadli Benjedid passed a new constitution based on a transition towards a multi-party system. But in 1991, following the country's first fair legislative elections, incipient reforms were reversed due to the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front. A decade of violence ensued. The Islamist threat permitted the resurgence of the military, supported by the West. While outbreaks of violence were commonplace through the 1990s, the army has reasserted its grip since.

The year 2011 could have brought substantial changes. One of the most significant events took place on 5 January. That day, riots took place in Oran and Algiers that were brutally quashed by security forces. Once again, the government played deaf to demands for better socio-economic conditions and an improvement in living standards. However in the wake of the Tunisian revolt, the Algerian state apparatus understood the perils of not reacting at all. A dose of pragmatism was vital to mitigate the winds of change that threatened to sweep away the region's authoritarian regimes. Hence the regime changed behaviour. An insider to president Bouteflika explains: the strategy was to present Algeria as an incrementally 'developing democracy'. On 15 April 2011, President Bouteflika gave a televised speech in which he announced that important political reforms would be introduced in the near future.

At the same time, a certain ambivalence coloured Algerian responses to the actions of citizens elsewhere in the region. Demonstrations in Algeria never reached the intensity of those in Tunisia, Egypt or Libya. Opposition leaders have failed to counteract the regime's containment tactics. The fundamental lack of political organisation in the Algerian population is the most pertinent factor. Asked why protests have failed, opposition figures in

Algiers all refer to the absence of organisational structures, especially among the youth. They also accuse national media and ostensibly opposition parties in parliament of helping the regime. As one journalist put it: the regime is 'playing on society's divisions to strengthen its position; it just distributes money to various socio-economic categories of the population in order to buy social peace.'

Indeed, the chaotic political organisation of Algerian society stands as an astonishing paradox. Algerians are well known for having a critical point of view on their institutions; this much is gleaned simply by being on the streets in Algiers. And trade unions have begun to press harder for social demands. Nevertheless, while there are 90,000 registered associations, only 1000 of these are really active. A serious disconnect has emerged between trade unions and the population. Algeria is a young country; half of its population is under the age of 25. But youth's limited presence in trade unions dominated by elder stalwarts that cling to archaic means of organisation will have long-term ramifications. Collective action does have a role, and Algerians' desire for radical change burns on. But fledgling coordination and regime divide-and-rule tactics too easily stifle its potential. This is all too easily compounded by apologists hiding behind the president's political weakness as justification for the stunted reform; a pretext strikingly present even among more reformist voices in the capital.

Amid weak opposition, the regime's ability to play on Algerian patriotism has gained it support. The scars of its painful experience with France are still on show – something that cements its postcolonial national identity. Contrary to its neighbouring countries, Algeria has developed a foreign policy that promotes non-alignment in nationalist as well as pan-Arabic decisions. In recent years, president Bou-

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teflika has routinely demanded that France apologise for its former conduct. Policies are dominated by the development of military understandings and alliances with non-American partners such as Russia and China; the regime's 'euro-scepticism'; its relations with the Polisario Front in Western Sahara; its denunciation of Israel's policies towards the Palestinians; and its push for pan-Arab unity and assertiveness. Despite the country's numerous problems, Algerians feel their honour has been recovered. This 'Algerian-centred' interpretation of trends must not be underestimated. NATO's role in ousting Libya's Moammar Qaddafi led to a backlash against foreign interference in Algeria. The government thus has decided to react to the Arab spring, but in its own way.

LIMITED REFORMS

Having announced reforms in mid-April 2011 the government clarified some months later. Its parliament in turn adopted reforms later in December 2011. Taken as a whole, Algeria's current reforms are notable but cover a limited number of areas.

The government currently focuses on three main decisions: a reform of the media sector that should put an end to the government's monopoly on broadcast media; a reform of civic associations to revive their activity; and a law on political parties that should prompt the emergence of new political movements. But critics state that this is far from sufficient. They insist that authority for the regulation of broadcast media should be totally independent, which is not contemplated by the regime. The government also plans submitting religious associations to a 'special regime'. And measures are afoot for forbidding any partnership between Algerian associations and foreign NGOs. These are clear signs of regression. Interestingly, secular opposition figures are reluctant to support the lifting of restrictions on Islamist organisations' political activity.

The regime's proposals are far from sufficient; and even the limited steps that are contemplated will face opposition in the parliament. The National

Liberation Front and the Democratic National Rally have insisted on amendments to protect their own positions.

The reforms to date are timid and inchoate. Algeria is wealthy but still needs to improve on a plethora of issues, such as fighting unemployment, encouraging foreign direct investment, promoting industrial policy, increasing revenues and combating corruption. The army's strident interference in civilian affairs is no secret but the government's reluctance to address this ignores a vital opportunity to inspire confidence in the people. The gap that opposes conservatives to reformists is also reflected within the state apparatus. Therefore, instead of profiting from regional instability to strengthen its position, the government's proposals for reforms have simply highlighted its limited room for manoeuvre.

Tellingly, few interlocutors in Algeria seriously expect that the regime's internal tensions and contradictions will bring top-down change. The army remains a strong actor that operates under civilian auspices. Bouteflika is still the army's preferred leader; it was the army that allowed him to benefit from a 2008 constitutional amendment to open the way for a third presidential term. His popularity may be declining, but a lot of Algerians see in him a 'saviour' who turned the violent page of the 1990s. Yet with discredited institutions and a lack of tangible social reform, few are optimistic about May's election.

A NEW OPENNESS TO THE WEST?

Curiously, despite the regime's nationalist tendencies, it has recently shown a more positive attitude to Western governments. People posted to Algiers date a relative improvement in EU-Algerian relations from the visit of the European Commissioner for Enlargement, Stefan Füle in May 2011. From the regime there have been demands for significant presence and action in the country, discrete but effective calls for greater foreign investment and the removal of red tape for business linkages.

»»»»» A significant development can be found in the nature of France's relations with Algeria. The visit to Algeria by Jean-Pierre Raffarin, France's special envoy for the promotion of economic cooperation, represented an important step forward. In February 2012, the launch of common Franco-Algerian projects in the pharmaceutical and petrochemical industries was announced. As Mohamed Benmeradi, the Algerian minister of Industry, put it, 'Algeria wants its commercial and economic relations with partners such as France to be based not solely on imports and exports anymore but also on productive investment on its soil'. Businessmen also say they are pushing the regime hard for similar cooperation with countries like Spain and Germany.

Algeria's search for more commercial partners is clear. The country was never entirely confined to autarchic self-sufficiency, but the government has now understood how important it is to promote commercial and industrial projects with a wide range of foreign partners to preserve its international position. Algeria's economic development remains far from reaching its real potential. Corruption and the army's monopoly of the main economic sectors feeds social unrest. The state apparatus still has to understand how important it is to satisfy the population's socioeconomic needs if it wishes to avoid the plight of neighbouring regimes. Algeria will not open to foreign partners unconditionally, but there increasingly exists opportunity for foreign actors to lead the government toward more openness.

Frank and direct demands for more reforms and respect for human rights could be counter-productive, however. The ruling class remains conservative and nationalistic. Even 'friendly advice' on these matters would be suspected as direct interference. That said, there is enough room to allow Algeria's main economic partners to express their interest in deeper political reforms. Europeans could make the difference, if this moment is grasped when long-stagnant relations between the EU and Algeria might be unblocked. The EU is still Algeria's main economic partner; about 50 per cent of the country's trade depends on the Union.

The EU-Algerian association agreement came into force in 2005, but is yet to realise its potential. This prompted Algeria's minister of foreign affairs Murad Medelci to express his concerns on the matter in June 2010. The imbalance between the two actors, combined with EU's focus on hydrocarbon and anti-terrorism issues, led Medelci to express Algeria's desire to amend some of the association agreement's terms. Relations seem to have improved now. In December 2011, following his meeting in Brussels with Algeria's deputy foreign minister Abdelkader Messahel, Stefan Füle announced that Algeria was finally ready to start exploratory negotiations for a European Neighbourhood Action Plan. This does not mean that EU-Algerian relations will enjoy an instant boost - Algerians will take their time to negotiate. But a flexible approach to Algeria's demands and needs could at this stage lead to better cooperation, and stronger prospects for European influence on political events in Algeria.

CONCLUSION

The 'Algerian silence' only exists in name. Having seen its democratic process derailed in the violent interlude of 1990s, Algeria finds itself at an era-defining juncture. Weak civic organisations and anti-Western reservations have reduced the prospects for democratisation. Pandering to international (NATO intervention), regional (Libya, Israel-Palestine) and national issues (Islam, terrorism) to quell dissent helps preserve the status quo. However there is now some space to see Algeria evolve and open at its own pace. May's elections will not bring a sea change in perspectives - the scepticism of the population is deep. Nevertheless, a possible change in leader, overtures to the West and a harnessing of economic potential are all good auguries for a better future. The EU should be cautious but not waste this opportunity.

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