Algeria in the Face of the Arab Spring: Diffuse Pressure and Sustained Resilience

Louisa Dris-Aït Hamadouche
Lecturer,
Faculty of Political Science and Information,
University of Algiers

A quick survey of North Africa would allow the countries to be placed into two categories. The first would be the countries where the Arab Spring sounded the death knell for regimes deemed immovable (Tunisia, Libya and Egypt). In the second category we could place the leaders who promulgated limited reforms of the strictly controlled, top-down type (Morocco and Algeria).

The Algerian regime is not only subject to new regional pressure, but has been experiencing for years the demands of a population that, over the course of twenty years, has tasted the freedom arising from the political opening up of 1989, suffered the tragedies of terrorism and counter-terrorism of the 1990s and accumulated political-economic frustrations that the return to peace has paradoxically exacerbated. Why has this pressure, indeed, quite real, not yet shaken the foundations of the system? What are the resources behind the resilience of the Algerian regime?

Algeria under Pressure

Algeria is under both internal and external pressure. Let us consider the former before going on to discuss the impact of the Arab revolts on the increased pressure on Algeria.

Social Ferment

Breaking out at the point when the revolts in Tunisia had reached their height, the January 2011 riots attracted the attention of the national and above all international media, which saw them as the beginning of the Arab Spring in Algeria. Nothing came of them and the social movement stopped just as quickly as it had begun. Why? The first reason is undoubtedly related to the nature of these social movements in Algeria.[1] Those who believed in a snowball effect failed to note the redundant and ultimately trivial nature of the riots, to the point where they were compared, not without irony, to a national sport: there was rioting in 30 wilayas in 2002, and in all 48 in 2011. In 2010, the police identified 10,000 social movements throughout the country. The figures in 2012 will certainly be even more impressive. These riots are spectacular prima facie, yet short-lived, of low intensity and geographically limited. They can arise on the least pretext, as a football match, the distribution of housing, a power outage or even a revoked driving licence.

To better understand this reiterated recourse to the riot, one must appreciate the true intensity of the strong sense of injustice imbuing a population perfectly informed of the fact that Algeria is a rich country (182 billion dollars in reserve funds in February 2012), whereas the repercussions on the quality of life are not sufficiently felt. True, the State is investing in huge projects to improve the infrastructure necessary for economic recovery, but the additional costs accumulated, primarily due to corruption, fuel anger. Moreover, the results in terms of unemployment, training and improvement of health, schooling and

[1] Louisa Dris-Aït Hamadouche, "L'abstention en Algérie : un autre mode de contestation politique," *Année du Maghreb*, 2009, pp. 263-274.

higher education remain below the promises made. By way of example, the government committed to creating 250,000 jobs from 2007 to 2012, but only half of them have come into being. Overall unemployment is not dramatically high (less than 10% according to official statistics), but among graduates it has risen to nearly 18%. Even worse, precariousness is clearly on the rise, insofar as indefinite contracts have fallen from 65% to 49%, while fixed-term contracts have gone from 35% to 50% and the informal sector has literally doubled. Youth who cannot find work, in particular graduates, are citizens who will lose their sense of values, fail to integrate into society, lose confidence in the future and look for an escape route. Violence, delinquency, extremism or *harga* (illegal emigration) are some.

One must appreciate the strong sense of injustice imbuing a population perfectly informed of the fact that Algeria is a rich country, whereas the repercussions on the quality of life are not sufficiently felt

Despite the strong police control of cities (one police officer per 180 inhabitants), the authorities tend to handle situations of tension by imposing a certain degree of restraint on riot police. A restraint that is, after all, quite comprehensible given that the number and frequency of riots renders the option of repression too risky. The other factor for avoiding confrontation is the absence of political continuity. As indicated by the sociologists Amel Boubekeur and Abdel Nasser Djabi, both strikes and riots are driven by pragmatic, socio-economic demands without a trace of political or ideological connotations. What's worse, parties' attempts to appropriate themselves of these movements fail miserably, as if protesters were wary of the impact that political parties could have. Have Algerians adopted a culture of apolitical protest?

Political Stagnation

In contrast to socio-economic life, political life seems frozen, suspended in time and space for ten years now. The cause? A great number of factors, among which we shall cite the monopoly exercised by the Presidential Alliance. Comprised of the National Liberation Front (FLN, formerly the sole party), the National Rally for Democracy (RND, founded in 1997 to fill the political void) and the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP, ex-Hamas), the Alliance has de facto effectively ended the game, both on the arithmetical and the ideological levels. Indeed, these being the three most important parties with seats in parliament, nothing can be done without them or against them. Moreover, they represent "nationalist" and Islamist movements, which are the most mobilising ideological trends. This political immobility is certainly not unfamiliar with either the latent or overt tensions that have accompanied an alliance often considered unnatural. First of all, the inevitable rivalries between the FLN and the RND have endured, the two parties investing in and supported by the same constituency. The control of the symbolic posts, in particular the presidency, has also fuelled tension, since neither RND nor MSP put candidates into the running: the RND by its own choice, while the MSP was prevented in 1999, thereafter supporting the successive re-elections of the incumbent president. In addition, there were internal party crises due to rivalries in leadership, political choices or obtaining a position on the electoral lists. The Presidential Speech of April 2011, the announced reforms and the perspectives of change at the head of the State fuelled political rivalries and eventually sounded the death knell for the Alliance. Political immobility is also the responsibility of the political parties, which are nearly invisible beyond elections. They are characterised by unsophisticated programmes, discourse limited to criticism without offering alternatives, ostentatious clientelism, all-round cooptation and absence of change-over within parties claiming to be democratic. Only the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) created a buzz of interest when it announced, at its national convention, that Said Saadi was leaving the presidency of the party he had founded. This is worth mentioning because the RCD is the first party of democratic persuasion to exercise change-over within its ranks.

Incidences in which the political and autocratic system has been called into question are so rare that they are worth mentioning. At the State summit level, there were the declarations made by Minister of the Interior Dahou Ould Kablia acknowledging that Abban Ramdan, an emblematic figure of the War of Independence, had been assassinated by his com-

panions, that those who had negotiated, directed and concluded the Evian Accords had been wrongly prevented from governing and finally, that Algeria had lost 40 years of development and democratisation due to the conflict between "those who were nourished by the teats of socialism and those who sought pragmatic, liberal and rational governance."[2]

Political immobility is also the responsibility of the political parties, which are nearly invisible beyond elections. They are characterised by unsophisticated programmes, discourse limited to criticism without offering alternatives, ostentatious clientelism and all-round cooptation

This is an unprecedented criticism of the system established at independence and a desecration of the War of Independence. Is regional pressure there for a reason?

Regional Pressure

Once the surprise effect had passed, the major powers readjusted their position and took up a line of support for the changes in Egypt, Libya and Syria while welcoming reforms initiated in Morocco and the resignation of Yemen's Head of State. In this extremely unstable context, Algeria maintains a single discourse, transmitting a single message: non-interference in the domestic affairs of countries experiencing strong internal instability, respect for their sovereignty and preservation of their territorial integrity. In the face of successive crises, Algeria advocates the same solution: inclusive political dialogue and managing the crisis in a regional context (the Arab League or the African Union). These positions have brought Algeria the worst criticism. Accused of supporting dictatorships, lending a hand to dictators and ignoring peoples' legitimate demands, it is the object of hostile campaigns, to which it responds, relegated to a defensive, reactive position. When the war in Libya was at its height, Algeria found itself nearly cornered, holding a determined opposition to any foreign intervention, arguing that such escalation would considerably aggravate the tribal hostilities and historic regional divisions, fuelled by Muammar Gaddafi over the course of 40 years. Moreover, the configuration of the land and the geopolitical environment are conducive to the exportation of the conflict, since it is a region impossible to control that has long been susceptible to the influence of the man who had wished to become king of Africa and who did not hesitate to blow up civil airplanes without fear of retaliation.

Although shared by the African Union, Brazil and India, to cite but States directly involved in the Libyan conflict, Algeria's position is censured based on the premise that it reflects the fears of an authoritarian regime and not reasons of State. But are these two motives as contradictory as one is led to believe? When the Libyan revolution reached its first anniversary, Cyrenaica unilaterally declared the autonomy of that richest of Libyan regions. At the same time, the first regional initiatives aiming to minimise the heightened risks of destabilisation included Algeria. Also, what seems like *a posteriori* acknowledgement of the arguments it put forth from the start of the revolts tends to confirm the hypothesis that it is not so much the content of Algeria's position that should have been questioned, but rather its form. Hence the centralisation of decision-making, the gaps in terms of communication and the illegible, reactive and defensive nature of Algerian policy are clearly problematic. It is thus legitimate to assume that if Algeria had completed its democratic transition, its positions on the Libyan (and Syrian) situation would have been discussed and judged according to developments and the risks to its national security instead of simply being rejected as alibis of a regime on the defensive. Can the reforms passed change that fact?

Algeria's Resilience

Through ten years of high-intensity terrorism, ten years of stabilisation and political immobility, then

[2] *TSA* (*Tout Sur l'Algérie, le quotidien électronique*), 18 March 2012.

one year of the Arab Spring, Algeria has maintained the political status quo. How and why?

Diversion through Legislative Adjustments

No doubt realising that political stagnation on the one hand and social ferment on the other was too fragile a balance to maintain, the policymakers decided to make a gesture. A set of laws were passed promoting political and collective freedoms. In the sphere of political freedoms, the parliament adopted a new law on parties and a new electoral code, as well as a quota system aiming to foster the role of women in elected offices.
This legislation was given a very lukewarm reception. Indeed, in the law on parties, Article 4 stands out for its ambiguity insofar as it prohibits anyone responsible for exploiting religion having led to the national tragedy from founding a party, taking part in its founding or forming part of its governing bodies, whereas individuals having participated in terrorist actions and having acknowledged their responsibility are free to do so. Can a political position, radical though it may be, be more deplorable than the use of violence? Knowing that neither the law nor morals nor ethics can condone such treatment of the issue, the government was quick to clarify that the situation of the reformed terrorists would be studied on a case by case basis. Insofar as the electoral law, to general public satisfaction, it has replaced agents of the Administration with election judges, but has kept "floor-crossing" and the possibility of individuals in office standing as candidates in elections. The President's draft laws prescribed that ministers who were candidates step down from office three months before elections and that an elected officer could not switch political parties during his or her term in office, to which FLN and RND were opposed, standing to lose the most from these prescriptions. With regard to the anxiously awaited law on information, it is no less ambiguous. Among its positive aspects are the elimination of the prison penalty, the raising of the minimum wage for journalists and the opening of the audio-visual market to private industry. On the other hand, the members of the Regulatory Authority, the questioning of source protection and the identification of no less than 13 conditions hampering journalists' freedom of expression have aroused criticism and concern about the government's wish to encourage self-censorship among journalists. The law on associations continues in the line of ambivalence. Though it simplifies the administrative procedures necessary to establish a non-governmental organisation, it tightens government control over NGO relations with foreign partners, prohibits any relations with political parties and stipulates suspension of an NGO's activities or its dissolution in case of interference in the country's internal affairs or undermining of national sovereignty.

The government grasped the potentially dangerous nature of the situation and took quick countermeasures. Economic measures came first, with the multiplication and increase in subsidies for staples

These legislative adjustments have not only disappointed supporters of progressive, controlled change within the regime itself, but have also raised questions on the nature of relations within the government, since the proposals put forth by the President were emptied of meaning by the parties constituting the Presidential Alliance. Was this why, two months before the legislative elections, the Head of State prohibited the FLN ministers and local party leaders from standing for parliamentary election? In any case, the aim of passing these laws and of their timing seems to be to occupy public opinion and reduce the risks of change to simple legislative adjustments.

The Depoliticisation Effect of Income Distribution

The government grasped the potentially dangerous nature of the situation and took quick countermeasures. Economic measures came first, with the multi-

[3] Centre national de l'informatique et des statistiques (CNIS), Direction Génerale des Douanes, *Liberté*, 15 February 2012. The figures for the first semester are available at the CNIS website at www.douane.gov.dz/pdf/r_periodique/1er%20SEMESTRE%202011.pdf

plication and increase in subsidies for staples. Importation of food products also rose considerably, reaching 10 billion dollars in 2011, that is, an increase of 60% over 2010.[3] Then, throughout 2011, the Administration began to increase social transfers, to the point where the 2012 complementary budget law provides an additional 317 billion dinars (4.22 billion dollars), allocated to supporting the wage increases agreed in 2011.

The psychological impact of the quantitative increase in Islamist actors is heightened by the spectacular victories of Islamists in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, and the trend will most likely repeat itself in Libya as well

In addition to raising wages in a great many sectors and raising the minimum wage and pensions, the government cleared certain companies of debt and increased credits to young entrepreneurs.[4] In total, the social transfers will amount to nearly 1,500 billion dinars (approximately €1.5 billion), that is, 10% of the national budget. The direct impact was immediate, since the per capita GDP went from $1,801 in 2000 to $4,798 in 2011. It will reach $4,987 by 2012, $5,179 by 2013 and $5,388 by 2014.[5] In any case, economists contest this policy to buy social peace and consider it a waste of State resources and an encouragement of inflation to the detriment of productive investments. Employers are rebelling against the obligation to raise their pay scale to the level of that of civil servants, whereas policymakers advocate government support to the most disadvantaged.[6]

The Dissuasive Effect of Fear

On the basis of a historical determinism, conscious for some and unconscious for others, the Arab revolts have revived the worse fears in Algeria regarding the risk of sliding back into high-intensity violence. The scars of the terrorism of the 1990s having had neither the time nor the opportunity to heal, the revolts have a tendency to cause, in public opinion, including among youth, the perpetuation of the status quo. The authorities do not hesitate to exploit this trauma, at the least opportunity recalling that uncontrolled change would be equivalent to playing with fire. Two arguments have allowed the calculated, interested official discourse to reach its target. The first is the absence, in contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, of intermediary civil structures capable of organising social protest, of optimising it, turning it into a source of proposals and preventing any violent tendencies. The persistence of the "microrevolts" is a consequence of this absence. The authorities know this well, for it is they who have issued the licences to the over 80,000 civil society organisations. On the other hand, no-one knows the real potential of the Islamists. The head of the FLN, Abdelaziz Belkhadem, a conservative who is considered to have Islamist sympathies, foresees an Islamist victory of 35 to 40%. In the face of a "democratic" trend, always so divided, three Islamist parties have decided to run in the elections with joint lists in order to optimise their results. There are also the Islamist parties recently fostered within the framework of reforms.[7] The psychological impact of the quantitative increase in Islamist actors is heightened by the spectacular victories of Islamists in Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt, and the trend will most likely repeat itself in Libya as well. All of these factors are used in official discourse to stoke fears of a dramatic regression. However, the real situation is more complex. Algeria's "green" or Islamist coalition consists of three parties, the MSP, Ennahda and El

[4] Annually, 20% of the State's expenditure goes to support for housing, families, pensions, health, war veterans and the destitute and other disadvantaged groups. Support for families alone represents over a quarter of the social transfers for 2011, with DA 302.2 billion, of which DA 93 billion went to supporting the price of milk and wheat and DA 78 billion to access to water and electricity. Transfers allocated to the housing sector, amounting to DA 282.7 billion, accounted for 23.5% of overall transfers, whereas over 18% of transfers went to support for health, with DA 220.6 billion, the majority of which (DA 218.5 billion) went to public health establishments. United Nations Commission for Social Development, Press Release of the UN Information Center in Algiers, 14 February 2011: www.dz.undp.org/omd/dossiers_presse/Revue_presse140211.pdf

[5] Omar, KHIDR, "Banque mondiale/Algérie : Des prévisions en hausse sauf pour les investissements étrangers," *Algérie1.com*, 15 February 2011: www.algerie-plus.com/affaires/banque-mondialealgerie-des-previsions-en-hausse-sauf-pour-les-investissements-etrangers/

[6] Ali Boukrami, Secretary of State for Statistics.

[7] These are Abdallah Djaballah's Front for Justice and Development (FJD), Abdelmajid Menasra's Front for National Change (FCN), Mohamed Said's Party for Freedom and Justice (PLJ) and Djamel Benabdeslam's New Algeria Front (FAN).

Islah, involved in the political arena since their creation. The MSP is the most deeply involved, since it has been a stakeholder in the executive branch since it first supported Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1999 and some of its ministers have been involved in scandals. Not all Islamists, however, are in favour of participating, as the leaders of the dissolved Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) have refused to see their followers join their rivals and have called a boycott.

The second major argument used in official discourse to stoke fear is supplied by the situations of civil war in Libya and potentially in Syria – the thousands of civilian victims, the shift towards militarisation of protest and the risk of foreign intervention.

The Algerian system's capacity for resilience has various sources: financial, security and historical. But like oil, these are non-renewable resources and will eventually run out

There is also the case of Bahrain and Yemen, where the International Community has more or less opted for the preservation of the status quo. The famous speech of "double standards" and "Western hypocrisy" was merrily pronounced, much to the chagrin of those who expected a relaunch of democratic transition in Algeria thanks to the regional context.

Conclusion

The Algerian system's capacity for resilience has various sources: financial, security and historical. But like oil, these are non-renewable resources and will eventually run out. The double legitimacy – revolutionary and antiterrorist – will eventually be eroded, by time in the case of the former, and by the controversial effects of national reconciliation in the case of the latter. With regard to the financial resources upon which the influence of the neo-patrimonial system partially depends, they are as volatile as the financial markets. What's worse, they put Algeria in a situation of temporary affluence and chronic vulnerability. Since independence, the Algerian system has been based on power relations and balances of power between domestic and foreign, civilian and military, East and West, secular and religious, liberalism and state control. However, abuse of power and regional changes have been rendering these balances increasingly fragile and their sharp break would be highly dangerous, for both those wishing to perpetuate the status quo and those wishing to replace it with real democratic change. For all of these reasons, the question is to ascertain, not whether there will be change, but how it will come about and to the benefit of whom.

Bibliography

Addi, Lahouari. *L'Algérie et la démocratie. Pouvoir et crise du politique dans l'Algérie contemporaine*, Paris, La Découverte, 1994

Cavatorta, F. "Geopolitical Challenges to the Success of Democracy in North Africa: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco," *Democratization*, Volume 8, Issue 4, December 2010, pp 175-194

Chibani, Ali. "L'Algérie marchera-t-elle pour la démocratie?", *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 17 February 2011, www.monde-diplomatique.fr/carnet/2011-02-17-Algerie

Dris-Aït-Hamadouche, Louisa. "L'abstention en Algérie : un autre mode de contestation politique," *Année du Maghreb*, 2009, pp 263-274.

Sanbakken, Camilla. "The Limits to Democracy Posed by Oil Rentier States: The Cases of Algeria, Nigeria and Libya," *Democratization*, Volume 13, Issue 1, 2006 pp 135-152.