

Geographical Overview | **MPCs. Maghreb**

Algeria: Hiding Continuity and Immobilism behind the Mask of the “New Algeria”

Laurence Thieux

Professor, Department of International Relations and Global History
Complutense University of Madrid
Researcher, Research Group on Arab and Muslim Societies (GRESAM) and Complutense Research Group on the Maghreb and the Middle East (GICMOM)

Since the December 2019 election of President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, references to the slogan “new Algeria” have been pervasive in official speeches. Yet this narrative barely conceals the challenges the country faces to renew its political, economic and even diplomatic plans. As Youcef Aouchiche, leader of the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), quipped, the new Algeria seems a lot more like the old one,¹ an observation confirmed by the country's political, economic, social and diplomatic performance.

The Army: A Ubiquitous Presence on the Political Scene

Although ostensibly withdrawn, the army remains in control. Major decisions are taken by the High Council of Security, chaired by President Tebboune, but whose members include the military chief of staff and the senior intelligence officials (Ourabah and Khariief, 2023). Although weakened by decades of power struggles during Bouteflika's terms in office and the Hirak protests, this triumvirate, based on complex balances of power, remains. For President Tebboune, the army's preferred candidate elected with record

levels of abstention in December 2019 (only 39.93% of Algerians went to the polls), on the eve of the next presidential election in 2024, the time of reckoning grows near. In these turbulent times, hidden, latent and internal crises are causing shifts in the delicate balances of power. Political parties, marginalized and discredited, continue to play a minor role in the farce. Given this election horizon, some political parties have launched new initiatives, such as the national one launched by Abdelkader Bengrina of the Islamist El-Binaa party or that of the FFS seeking to remobilize the opposition parties around a common agenda. However, these dynamics remain quite disconnected from the political aspirations and economic and social demands of the people.

Closure of the Political Space and Repression of Opposition Voices

To neutralize the opposition and keep Algerian civil society at bay, “le pouvoir” continues to resort to tried and true strategies, such as using the spectres of Islamism and terrorism to justify its repressive policies. The official narrative accuses the opposition of being manipulated by a foreign plot to destroy the Algerian nation: an old ploy that feeds on nationalist rhetoric to neutralize the country's internal enemies.² In 2022 and early 2023, selective and arbitrary arrests of those voices that break with the official discourse of the “new Algeria” have proliferated, such as that of journalist Ihsane el Kadi and the dissolution of his independent media group Interface (Radio M and Maghreb Emergent) or that of the editor-in-chief

¹ www.tsa-algerie.com/le-ffs-lance-une-nouvelle-initiative-politique-pour-premunir-lalgerie/.

² In 2021, the High Council of Security classified the RACHAD organization (bringing together former members of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) abroad) and the Movement for the Self-Determination of Kabylia (MAK) as terrorist organizations.

of the eastern regional daily *Le Provincial* on 8 February 2023 in Annaba. Arbitrary detentions have also affected the scientific community, with the arrest, in February 2023, of the Canadian-Algerian researcher Raouf Farrah during a visit to Annaba and its unfortunate overlap with the episode involving the opposition activist Amira Bouraoui's flight from the country³ and exfiltration from Tunisia by France.

Following the dissolution of the Youth Action Rally (RAJ), which played a prominent role in the Hirak mobilizations in November 2022, in January 2023, the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) was officially dissolved for failing to comply with the provisions of the 2012 law regulating associations.

New legislative measures have also been taken to curb civil society. In March 2023, two bills were passed aimed at restricting trade union freedoms and limiting the right to strike (Boukhlef, 2023).

The intensification of repressive mechanisms and proliferation of violations of individual and collective rights and freedoms of association, expression and protest lay bare the continuity of the Algerian political system and even its backsliding in matters of human rights. Algeria slipped two places in the World Press Freedom Index (RSF) in 2023 compared to the previous year.

The Continuity of the Logic of a Rentier Economy

With oil prices continuing to rise (registering an average of \$98.22 per barrel in 2022), profits from oil and gas exports have allowed the government to use energy revenues to compensate for the inertia of the economy and the accompanying endemic ills, such as inflation or the exclusion of much of the workforce from its production system (Alilat, 2023).

The macroeconomic indicators are positive: foreign exchange reserves top 64 billion dollars in 2023.⁴

According to World Bank estimates,⁵ GDP growth stood at 3.2% in 2022, although it is expected to slow, situating GDP at 1.7% in 2023.

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A coveted energy supply partner, Algeria has undertaken to meet the European Union's energy needs. In 2022, it produced 102 billion m³ of gas, half of which went to the local market.⁶

The state-owned company Sonatrach has forged partnerships with other large international groups, such as Italy's ENI, the US company Occidental, France's TotalEnergies or China's Sinopec.⁶ Additionally, the Sonatrach group has announced new oil and gas discoveries made in the first quarter of 2023 (Hajbi, 2023): 17,773 barrels of oil equivalent per day and 1.4 billion m³ of gas per day.⁷

The good economic performance is linked to external factors and depends on global energy market trends. It hides the Algerian economy's structural weaknesses or vulnerabilities: the diversification of its productive sector remains unresolved and structural reforms are long in coming. Inflation has reached high levels (9.7% on the eve of Ramadan 2023) and unemployment remains endemic, especially among young people (12.7% of the total workforce in 2021 and 31.9% of young people between the ages of 15 and 24).⁸ Energy rents, however, have allowed the Algerian government to continue with compensatory social policies: wage increases, revaluation of pensions, the creation of a benefit for unemployed youths. The January

³ The activist Amira Bouraoui, leader of the Barakat movement against Bouteflika's fourth term in 2014, was exfiltrated from Tunisia, which she had entered illegally, with the consular intervention of France, prompting Algeria to “withdraw” its ambassador to France, Said Moussi.

⁴ <https://observalgerie.com/2023/03/15/economie/algerie-reserves-de-change-2023/>.

⁵ WORLD BANK, *Global Economic Prospects 2023*. www.worldbank.org/en/publication/global-economic-prospects?intcid=ecr_hp_header_M_en_ext.

⁶ www.jeuneafrique.com/1434821/economie/sonatrach-apres-la-decouverte-de-six-nouveaux-gisements-lalgerie-se-reve-en-partenaire-energetique-cle-pour-leurope/#:~:text=Si%20l%27Algerie%20a%20il,avec%20la%20Russie%20depuis%20l%27.

⁷ www.aps.dz/economie/154206-hydrocarbures-sonatrach-annonce-la-realisation-de-six-decouvertes-au-1er-trimestre-2023.

⁸ www.banquemondiale.org/fr/country/algeria/overview.

2023 Finance Act and planned budget distribution for the fiscal year underscore this continuity of practices and immobilism of economic policies: a large share of the tax receipts will be swallowed up by the costly system of price subsidies for basic goods and wage increases. The other large budget item is the ever-increasing defence budget, which stood at 22 billion euros in 2023.⁹

Algeria on the Regional and International Stage: The Great Comeback?

In an international context marked by the consequences of the war in Ukraine and the instability of its regional setting, Algeria has sought to play up its diplomatic role, presenting itself as a “mediator” country and exporter of peace and security.

The dynamics of the reshuffling of the international and regional landscapes have provided Algeria with opportunities to diversify its relations and play the multi- or poly-alignment card. Courted by Europe as an alternative supplier to Russian gas and also asked to play a more active role in regional security following France’s withdrawal from Mali, Algeria has new windows of opportunity to take on a more prominent role. In Europe, it has strengthened its relations in the field of energy with some EU Member States, such as Italy. The January 2023 visit of the Algerian chief of staff¹⁰ also highlights the importance of Algerian cooperation in the Sahel for France. However, relations remain rocky, and the visit of the Algerian head of state planned for the first quarter of 2023 has been postponed several times.¹¹ Tensions in relations with Spain have likewise persisted, leading to economic consequences for Spanish businesses, with estimated losses of 630 million euros between June and October 2022.¹² Algeria has also maintained fluid relations with the United States in the area of counterterrorism.¹³

Although Algeria has kept the doors open to energy and security cooperation with Western countries, it has also sought closer ties with other powers, for example, by applying to join the BRICS group of the leading emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). Its economic relations with China are strong: the two countries signed a strategic cooperation plan in November 2022.¹⁴

Russia remains a fundamental pillar of Algeria’s defence,¹⁵ although it has also sought to maintain certain limits in its cooperation relations, for example, refusing to allow the establishment of Russian naval bases or cancelling the joint military exercises planned for November 2022 (Alilat, 2023).

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The reaffirmation of Algeria’s international role was on display in its hosting of the 31st Arab League Summit on 1 November 2022 or important sporting events, such as the Mediterranean Games in Oran from 25 June to 6 July 2022 or the African Nations Championship (CHAN) in February 2023. Algeria used these events to cast itself as a champion of “just causes” and leader of the resistance to the process of normalization of relations between the Arab states and Israel in the framework of the Abraham Accords (Abed, 2022). Algeria’s diplomatic action concerning the Palestinian issue resulted in the signing of the Algiers declaration, a reconcilia-

⁹ www.courrierinternational.com/article/armes-les-grandes-puissances-louchent-sur-le-budget-militaire-de-l-algerie.

¹⁰ www.arabnews.fr/node/339421/france.

¹¹ The visit was postponed due to the protests in France against the planned pension reforms, but also to head off demonstrations against the President. Sensitive dates, such as 3 May, World Press Freedom Day, were avoided.

¹² According to ICEX data, 129,475 Spanish companies suspended their trade relations with Algeria.

¹³ www.menadefense.net/algerie/algerie-usa-renforcement-de-la-cooperation-militaire-et-securitaire/.

¹⁴ <https://www.aa.com.tr/fr/afrique/lalg%C3%A9rie-et-la-chine-signent-un-plan-de-coop%C3%A9ration-strat%C3%A9gique-qui-s%C3%A9tend-jusqu'en-2026/2732546>.

¹⁵ Between 2017 and 2021, more than 80% of Algeria’s arms imports came from Russia.

tion agreement between the Palestinian factions, in October 2022.¹⁶

This “just causes” diplomacy is well received by Algerian public opinion. However, it clashes with other actions, such as the repression of identity-based protests in the country’s own territory or the fate of the sub-Saharan migrants expelled into the desert.¹⁷ The ongoing rivalry with Morocco also detracts from its position as an efficient conflict mediator. Since the severing of diplomatic relations with Morocco in the summer of 2021, the thorny dynamic with Morocco has only festered and grown more acute in relation to the issue of Western Sahara, leading both countries to flex their military might on either side of the border (Hernando de Larramendi and Thieux, 2023).

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Conclusion

The upward trend in oil and gas prices has once again entrenched the rentier nature of the Algerian economy, making it less urgent for the country to adopt far-reaching structural reforms to diversify its economy and face the challenges that lie ahead for it in the medium term: climate change, marginalization and exclusion of young people, deficient public services and regional instability.

Old power habits die hard in the “new Algeria.” The plans to erect a giant statue of Emir Abdelkader in Oran, to be even taller than the Christ the Redeemer statue in Brazil, is yet another example of the extravagance and disconnect of those in power with the aspirations and demands of the people. The project has

come under fire on social media, where it is viewed as a colossal boondoggle, given the significant deficits that continue to plague more essential sectors for the population’s well-being, such as healthcare, education and other infrastructure.

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¹⁶ www.arabnews.fr/node/300946/monde-arabe.

¹⁷ Some 20,000 people were deported from Algeria and abandoned in the Nigerien desert in 2022, and 15,000 more in the first four months of 2023. www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2023/05/10/niger-azizou-chehou-l-homme-qui-sauve-des-vies-au-sahara_6172825_3212.html.