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European Languages

زبانهای اروپایی

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30.04.2019

Welcome to the New Algerian Revolution: an Interview with Hamza Hamouchene

In 2011, a wave of revolutionary struggle swept the Middle East and North Africa, often bringing down dictatorships that had governed for decades. Millions protested on the streets, occupied public spaces and demanded “bread, freedom and social justice”. Having broken through the fear produced by years of repression, the Arab Spring became an inspiration for activists across the world.

Predictably, the existing elites – the military, big business and the institutional Islamist groups – refused to accept the democratic aspirations of the people. Rather than subject their states to democratic reform, they used all their tricks, including cooptation and brutal repression, to defeat the revolutionary movements.

Yet the conditions that sparked the Arab Spring, notably the combination of extreme economy inequality and political authoritarianism, remained unchanged. While the first wave of the revolutions ended in defeat, it was sure to be back. In Sudan and now Algeria, enormous and persistent protest movements re-emerged late last year with all the same courage and dynamism. They have toppled their own military dictatorships, although in both cases the military remains in power despite the removal of the hated figurehead.

Omar Hassan speaks to Algerian scholar and activist Hamza Hamouchene, coordinator of Environmental Justice North Africa and co-founder of the Algeria Solidarity Campaign, about the mass movement sweeping the country.

What have the protests in Algeria been about?

The mass protest movement started just a few days after Abdelaziz Bouteflika's announcement of his intention to run for a fifth term as president. At first, the mobilisations were small and localised, but they became massive. Every Friday from 22 February, millions of Algerians (some estimates are as high as 17 and 22 million in a country of 42 millions) – young and old, men and women from different social classes – have taken to the streets in a momentous uprising, re-appropriating long confiscated public spaces. These historic Friday marches have been followed by protests by workers in education, health, the justice system, the petrochemical industry, and student and trade union mobilisations, making the contestation a daily matter.

What started as a rejection of the candidacy of a physically unfit octogenarian president has transformed in face of the obstinacy and deceptive ploys of the ruling elites into a united rejection of the ruling system, with demands for radical democratic change, freedom and justice. This revolt is an expression of the convergence of popular discontent from below with a deep internal crisis within the ruling classes. Basically, those from above can no longer rule in the old ways and those from below can no longer take it.

It is also the expression of decades of profound pain and anger and a rejection of the repressive authoritarianism, suppression of freedoms, economic and social exclusion, endemic corruption and nepotism, parasitic accumulation and impoverishment, growing social inequalities and uneven economic development in the country. There is a lack of horizons, especially for the unemployed youth risking their lives to reach the northern shores of the Mediterranean to escape the despair and the humiliation of being marginalised and relegated to being Hittiste – the unemployed who ceased to be stakeholders in post-colonial Algeria. And all of this taking place in a rich country like ours!

The Algerian uprising is a revolt against dispossession and plunder. The Algerian slogan, “The people want them all to go!” (or, more accurately, “The people want them to be all extirpated!”) is another version of “The people want to overthrow the system!” – the slogan of the Arab uprisings in 2010-11. In this respect, what is happening in Sudan and Algeria is the continuation of a revolutionary process in North Africa and West Asia, a process with ups and downs, gains and setbacks, which materialised in a neoliberal democratic transition in Tunisia and bloody counter-revolutions and imperialist interventions in the remaining countries.

The hope is that people in Algeria and Sudan will learn from the experiences of their brothers and sisters in other countries and push their revolutions even further to achieve their

fundamental demands of dignity, justice, popular sovereignty and freedom, and end decades of political and economic oppression.

There have been several videos released online that demonstrate the creativity and solidarity of the revolutionary movement in Algeria and elsewhere. Are there any stories that have highlighted this for you?

The revolutionary movement in Algeria released the boundless creativity of the “popular genius”. When chanting, “We woke up and you will pay!”, the people are expressing their newly-discovered political will. The liberatory process is at the same time a transformative one. We can witness this in the euphoria, energy, confidence, wit, humour and joy this movement has inspired after decades of social and political suppression. Humour and satire can be very subversive. Algerians demonstrate this in their slogans, chants and placards reviving and emphasising popular culture. I have seen and heard so many online and in the streets in several towns in Algeria. Here are a few I captured with my phone camera:

“Algeria, country of heroes that is ruled by zeros”

“System change ... 99 percent loading”

“We need Detol to kill 99.99 percent of the gang” [referring to members of the regime]

And this one from a medical student: “We are vaccinated and we have developed anti-system IgGs (antibodies) ... and we keep getting boosters every Friday”

“The problem is the persistence of idolatry and not the replacement of the idol”

Some slogans were directly targeting French complicity and interferences:

“France is scared that if Algeria takes its independence it would ask for compensation for the metal it used to build the Eiffel tower”

“Allo Allo Macron, the grandchildren of November ’54 are back”

And in reaction to calls by the chief commander of armed forces, Gaid Salah, to apply article 102 of the constitution, which would allow the leader of the upper house to take over and to organise elections 90 days after the presidency is declared vacant by the constitutional council, people replied:

“We want the application of article 2019 ... You are all going”

“We asked for the departure of all the gang, not the promotion of some of its members”

“Batteries are dead so no need to squeeze them”

“Dear system, you are a piece of shit and I can prove it mathematically”

“Here Algeria: the voice of the people. The number 102 is no longer in service. Please call people’s service at 07” (in reference to article 07 stipulating that the people are the source of all sovereignty)

When it comes to international solidarity, the downtrodden and oppressed people in the region and beyond are in a dialogue. The Sudanese and Algerians are following each others' struggle and get more inspired and more determined to follow with their own revolution and topple the systems that crushed them for decades. There is a funny cartoon by Algerian journalist Ali Dilem showing Sudanese so far winning 2-1 against Algerians because they toppled two heads of state compared to only one in Algeria. The Moroccans are also inspired by what is happening.

While the events of 2011 swept much of the region, important local differences shaped the divergent outcomes. For instance, in Egypt it was youth-led and relatively loose, which meant it lacked institutional and social weight at crucial times. In Tunisia, the national trade union centre – especially its lower ranks – was very important. What kind of social forces have been leading the movement in Algeria? Are there organisations or ideas of particular prominence?

The Algerian uprising has its own specificities, strengths and weaknesses.

First, what makes this movement unique is its scale, peaceful character and national spread, including in the marginalised south. The movement is also characterised by significant participation of women and especially young people, who are the majority of the population. Algeria has not witnessed such a broad, diverse and widespread movement since 1962, when Algerians celebrated their hard won independence from French colonial rule.

Second, one can see this uprising as a continuation of the anti-colonial struggle of the 1950s and 1960s to regain popular and economic sovereignty. Many references have been made in the protests and marches to the anti-colonial revolution and to its glorious martyrs who sacrificed their lives for Algeria's independence, reaffirming that formal independence has no meaning without popular and national sovereignty – the ruling elites have been selling off the country and its resources for more than 30 years. These anti-colonial sentiments are reinforced by a staunch hostility to foreign interference and imperialist intervention.

Third is the unshakeable and eternal solidarity with Palestinians: Algerians understand that their liberation won't be complete without the liberation of Palestine. This is unique in the Arab world: alongside Algerian flags, you always see the Palestinian flag. And people commemorate Algerian and Palestinian martyrs without distinguishing between them. This can be explained by Algeria and Palestine being the only countries in the region that experienced racist, genocidal settler-colonialism.

Fourth, the arid political landscape that resulted from the decimation of a genuine political opposition – the bankruptcy of party politics within the country – coupled with the repression

and co-option of trade unions led people to organise differently. In the last few years, growing dissent and discontent have increasingly been expressed through sectional protests or the emergence of horizontal social movements, especially in the gas and oil-rich Sahara.

There is an entrenched hostility toward political parties. Similar to Egypt, the movement is youth-led and relatively loose. There are no clearly identifiable leaders or organised structures that are propelling it. It is a popular uprising mobilising mass forces from the middle classes and from the marginalised classes in urban and rural areas affected by decades-long neoliberal policies and a corrupt rentier economy within the framework of a predatory globalisation that facilitates the pillage of the country's resources, financial and natural. Students, workers (especially those in the oil and gas sector), autonomous trade unions, judges and lawyers are playing a very important role in these mobilisations as they participate and organise their own protests, call for strikes and keep the momentum going. Unlike Sudan, where the Sudanese Professional Association is playing a leading and organising role, in Algeria it looks like things get organised mainly through social media.

Finally, I am not one of those who, if they don't like the outcome of a revolution – or its forces, demands and strategies – rush to downplay or deny its revolutionary character. However, we need to be critical, intellectually honest and learn from the mistakes of previous revolutions. The valorisation of spontaneity and “leaderless” movements, and the hostility to any form of structuring, is not unique to the Algerian case but has been seen in other revolutions in places such as Egypt and Tunisia.

Spontaneity and leaderless movements will generate large inter-class mobilisations that give the impression of unity despite class, gender and ideological differences. However, this can become dangerous when the question of the socio-economic rights of the marginalised are expelled from any debate. In such scenarios, legitimate questions of popular sovereignty and social justice will give way to vague liberal notions of democracy, freedom and equality at the expense of the fundamental demands of the wretched of the earth.

This situation has been dubbed the “revolution without revolutionaries” or “revolution without organising”. These amorphous, non-structured and leaderless dynamics and movements are extremely vulnerable. These characteristics can be fatal weaknesses, especially when repression starts.

This is the reality on the ground. But it is amazing and inspiring to see people regaining their confidence and starting to trust a collective “we”. I have seen how they have not been fooled by the various ploys advanced by the different factions of the system. The movement is growing stronger and its demands are getting more radical by the day. What unites them is

that all the symbols of the old system must go and must be made accountable for all the pain and depredation they caused.

The leading role of women in the protest movement in Sudan has increasingly come to the fore, most dramatically in the person of Alaa'a Saleh. This is not a surprise for those who have studied history; revolutions have often been described as festivals of the oppressed. Can you talk about the situation in Algeria in relation to women, the Berber minority and other oppressed groups? What are their grievances and what has their involvement been in the protests so far?

Revolutions cannot happen without women and without their active participation. The Algerian revolution is no different. From the start of this popular dynamic, women have played an important role linking their demands against the patriarchy with the democratic demands of the whole movement. I've seen how women's involvement has grown week after week. Their numbers were significant in the protests I've seen in Algiers, Bejaia and Skikda. They are also very much involved in the student and trade union movements.

However, much of Algerian society is still conservative and macho. One episode helps illustrate this: feminists were harassed and attacked on one march in Algiers and have been exhorted (by men) not to make feminist demands – because they allegedly divide the movement. There was also a video circulating, in which men threatened to use acid against women who dare to advance such claims. This might be an isolated and extreme incident, but it shows the entrenched sexism and opposition to women's rights that are present in our society. A few days ago, the police arrested four female activists and humiliated them by forcing them to strip themselves of all their clothes!

Despite all the achievements that women have made in the last few decades in education, employment and involvement in political life, their struggle for equality with men and against patriarchal oppression and violence is still far from over (as in all parts of the world). They are still resisting a reactionary vision of their role in society.

As for the Berber minority, I want to make a correction: it is not a minority. The majority of Algerians are ethnically Berbers (Amazighs). We are Arabo-Berbers; Arabic is also an important part of who we are as a cultural and political community. These identity issues have created a lot of tensions in the last few decades because our cultural diversity was ignored for a narrower conception of our identity. The Berber dimension of the Algerian cultural heritage was marginalised and reduced to folklore.

However, the struggle to recognise Tamazight language as an equal element to Arabic and Islam in our cultural identity has achieved much since the Berber Spring of 1980, when the

Cultural Berber Movement rose in the Kabylie region in the north of the country. The Berber Spring was the first large scale political challenge to the regime since the early 1960s, when the Kabyles articulated their grievances against regime authoritarianism, its disdain for rich Berber linguistic and cultural identity and its neglect of the region's economy. This true democratic mass movement inspired a decade of continuing struggle and revolts.

In April 2001, an insurrection started in Kabylie and in 18 months, a strong popular movement called La'rouche occupied the front of the political scene and put the question of democracy back on the agenda. This movement organised a very impressive march on Algiers and inspired many citizens in other regions to revolt against Hogra (humiliation and social injustice). However, that movement was co-opted, infiltrated and crushed.

When people in the West talk about the Berber minority, they mainly mean the Kabyle population. For reasons that go back to colonial times, this region has been at the frontlines of struggle against oppression and authoritarianism. In the current events, this is no different. The same goes for other Amazigh groups such as the Chaouis, Mouzabit and Touaregs. All are involved as Algerian citizens confronting the "divide and rule" tactics of the ruling elites. Slogans were clear in the marches: "We don't want division, we are all Algerians", emphasising their popular unity.

What are the main strands of leftist thought in Algeria and to what extent does the organised left play a role in this movement?

The left should be the force that can bring freedom and equality together. Not only political equality, but socio-economic equality that eliminates class disparities in society. Democracy cannot be complete under the framework of the domination of capital and the dictatorship of the markets. That's why we need social and economic democracy too. What would a young Algerian do with freedom if they don't have a job or decent housing?

Unfortunately, for various reasons, including global ones, the organised left in Algeria is fragmented, atomised and weak. However, in revolutionary moments it can revive itself and grow if it wants to play its historic role as a tool for the masses to express and achieve their fundamental demands of freedom, dignity and justice. To do so, it needs to have a clear vision of that desired future, it needs to be autonomous intellectually and organisationally and must rid itself of paternalism and become mass organisations in the service of the masses.

The biggest lefty party in Algeria is the Workers' Party of Louisa Hanoune, which is Trotskyist. Unfortunately, for reasons beyond comprehension, Hanoune supported Bouteflika for a long time because she considered him a bulwark against imperialism. This misguided "anti-imperialist" stance that ends up justifying authoritarianism has been seen before,

especially in the case of Syria with Bashar al-Assad. It is ironic when the Bouteflika era is the most ultra-liberal era in the history of independent Algeria, with many concessions made to multinationals and Western capitals. It is the era of the compradorisation of the ruling elites by aligning their interests and subordinating national ones to those of international capital. Simply put, Bouteflika's system dispensed with popular legitimacy to benefit domestic and international capital.

There are other smaller organisations and political parties, such the Socialist Workers Party and the Democratic and Social Movement, trying to multiply initiatives such as calls for the self-organisation of workers, students and popular masses. This initiative should be encouraged and strengthened. We are already seeing this within the student movement and in attempts by some rank and file trade unionists to re-appropriate the country's largest union, the General Union of Algerian Workers, and to oust its corrupt, pro-business and pro-regime leaders.

In places such as Egypt there is a strong political tradition defending the military based on its supposed "Arab Nationalist" past. Are there similar illusions in Algeria regarding the government's roots in the National Liberation Front (FLN)? And how much have people absorbed the lessons of the military's reactionary role in the Egyptian revolution?

The National Popular Army in Algeria has a unique history as it originated from the anti-colonial struggle against the French and has played a predominant role in the political sphere ever since. So it still has some revolutionary legitimacy despite all its excesses since independence in 1962 – including the killing of hundreds of youths in the 1988 Intifada, the military coup of 1992 and its implication in massacres and in the war against civilians in the black decade of civil war that followed.

Because of the deep militarisation of society, there is justified fear of the army and what it can do. The military high command and the generals have participated in parasitic accumulation and entrenched corruption within a military-oligarchic nexus that denies the Algerian people their right to self-determination.

The FLN has been completely discredited as the civilian façade of an authoritarian corrupt military rule. The decisive entrance of the people onto the political stage forced the military high command to distance itself from the presidency. The military intervened to put an end to Bouteflika's reign to safeguard the regime. Bouteflika's abdication is a significant moment in the popular dynamic as this is only one victory in the long struggle for radical change that must include the overthrow of all the symbols of the system, including major general Gaid

Salah, a key loyal figure in Bouteflika's regime and a supporter of his fifth term before backtracking under the pressure of the growing popular movement.

The army leadership is not to be trusted. This was made clear by Salah's initial threats against the movement before he adopted a more conciliatory tone. In a 10 April declaration from Oran, a port city in the north-west, the general said there is no other solution to the crisis except through a constitution designed in the first place to safeguard the ruling elites and their interests. Basically, he is giving his support and weight to a transition controlled from above – to a coup against the popular uprising. Salah and the military high command are the spearhead of the counter-revolution that has shown itself openly, including in the violent repression of peaceful protesters. Those with illusions in him – and in his announcements that he is on the side of the people and their aspirations – have become much more cautious.

Slogans such as “The army and the people are brothers” cannot be applied to the corrupt generals that benefited from and upheld Bouteflika's rule. The Algerian people – especially the popular masses – need to be wary of the interventionism of such actors to avoid a scenario à la general Sisi in Egypt. There too, Sisi claimed that he intervened on behalf of the people when he executed a coup against Morsi. We all know what has happened since. It could be tactical to profit from the ongoing internal power struggle among the ruling elites. But it would be a fatal mistake to believe that the leadership of the army would be on the side of the people or their revolution. The Algerian people need to be more vigilant and determined than ever to stop the counter-revolutionary forces from hijacking this historic uprising.

What are the immediate tasks and challenges facing the movement?

In this, the 9th week, despite all attempts to manipulate through propaganda – to divide, to instil fear – the movement is not faltering. It is growing and spreading. No one expected that judges would come out and support the popular movement and even refuse to oversee the next presidential elections scheduled for 4 July. Students are still organising huge protests and marches all over the country to support Al Hirak Acha'bi (the popular movement) and have called for a national strike. Some autonomous trade unions are maintaining their calls for strikes to support the ongoing dynamic. This week, around 40 mayors declared their refusal to organise elections in their localities. Some organisations of civil society are determined to re-appropriate public spaces by organising public debates and activities, which are not allowed in the capital Algiers and which end in repression and arrests.

We've also seen how various ministerial visits were disrupted or cancelled as people chased several ministers from Tebessa, Bechar, Tissemsilt and Tipaza. It is becoming clear that

people are rejecting the regime's transitional plan and we are living in a revolutionary situation that could escalate and radicalise, depending on the reaction of the ruling classes and the level of political consciousness and organising in the movement. What the protesters are calling "members of the gang" have huge vested interests in maintaining the status quo. They will do whatever it takes to preserve these, including sacrificing scapegoats to gain time and save the system.

We cannot be naïve; revolutions come at a cost and repression will be in the mix. The peaceful or violent character of a revolution is always determined by the oppressor and its methods. The balance of forces must be shifted significantly toward the masses by maintaining the resistance (marches, protests, occupations of public spaces, general strikes, etc.) to force the army command to yield to people's demands for system change and the removal of the entire old political guard.

Some of the challenges facing the movement can be summarised:

It must structure itself by encouraging local self-organisation through neighbourhood committees, student collectives, independent local representations and the opening up of spaces for discussion, debate and reflection to have a solid platform or a coherent program.

It must be endowed with popular and democratic structures and mechanisms that allow us to strategise: how to formulate clear demands, what kind of tactics to adopt and when to escalate resistance or negotiate. We cannot rush into elections as it will be always the structured forces (including the ancient regime) that will take over.

At this crucial juncture, it is very important to insist on individual and collective freedoms of expression and organising all the time, not just every Friday.

We must categorically oppose any transition managed by the comprador oligarchies and the military and call for a sovereign and popular constituent assembly to come up with a popular and democratic constitution that will consecrate social justice and popular sovereignty over natural resources. The democratic transition must be in the hands of the people, managed by its forces and for the people.

We must continue to reject any foreign intervention in the ongoing events.

Finally, we must wed social justice and socio-economic rights to democracy because this revolution expresses a general will of the downtrodden to defend their common interests.

Radical change is not a programmed push-button operation; it is a protracted political process, requiring confrontation and sacrifices that, at certain times, lead to a path prepared by long struggles and accumulated experiences. To paraphrase a saying familiar to Muslims:

“Let’s work for radical change as if it would take an eternity to realise, and let’s prepare the ground for it as if it’s going to happen tomorrow”.

APRIL 29, 2019

This article was originally published by [Redflag](#) on April 17, 2019.