Algeria at a Crossroads in its Political Development

Despite efforts by Algeria’s ruling elite to keep the country afloat amid environment in which the president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, is old and seriously ill and the senior figures in the administration, parliament, the armed forces and the security services have surpassed the age of 70, Algeria continues to inch toward a severe political crisis. For now, the April presidential election, which the ailing Bouteflika won with 81.5% of the vote, thereby earning his fourth mandate to govern the country, shows that the authorities can still manipulate the political process. But it is becoming ever more difficult for them to impose their agenda on society, and popular support for the regime continues to erode. Bouts of interclan warfare at the top are on the rise. The opposition is gradually coalescing and could at some point steal the initiative. Islamists retain their firm standing in Algerian society.

Factors that work in the regime's favor include a favorable financial and economic situation, growth of currency reserves thanks to oil and gas revenues, and an influx of foreign investment. In addition, Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia is supervising a revision of the constitution. The constitutional reform envisions a clearer separation of powers, an enhanced role for the legislature, codification of the rights of the opposition, a guarantee of universal freedoms and provisions for strengthening the independence of the judiciary, and so forth. The opposition has distanced itself from this endeavor, seeing it as a ploy by the authorities to avoid the radical overhaul of the political system that the country has long needed.

Clan infighting in the parties loyal to the government is hampering the regime. Abdulaziz Belkhadem, a longtime leader of the ruling National Liberation Front party, lost his job as its secretary-general, then was expelled from the party, and finally, in September he lost the honorary position of minister of state. His replacement, Amar Saadani, is striving to come across as a pragmatic reformer willing to engage in dialogue with the opposition. He is pushing ideas for modernizing the country, floated the idea of giving equal status to the Arab and Berber languages, called for the winner of party elections to be designated prime minister, backs tougher anti-corruption legislation and came out in favor of "distancing" from the politics of the army and intelligence services, and advocates the expansion of the legislature's powers over the executive branch. However, it is now evident that constitutional amendments will be screened to avert destabilization of the country, which includes the preservation of significant restrictions on the activities of the opposition. Even so, the new Constitution must demonstrate that Algeria is moving toward democratic change.

One area of particular concern for the authorities is the Berber question. The Berbers (Kabyles, Chaouis, Mozabites, Tuaregs, etc.) make up about 20% of the population of Algeria. This summer, there were serious clashes between the Mozabites and Ibadites and the numerically superior Arab-Malikites in the Ghardaia area, in Algeria's southeast. Authorities struggled to calm the situation but eventually succeeded and managed to keep it from escalating. There was upheaval in Kabylia as well, in the immediate vicinity of the capital, where the people are demanding autonomy, and radicals are clamoring for independence from Algeria. In the far south of the country, the Tuareg tribes assisted the terrorist bands of AQIM (Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb).

However, the primary conflict rests within the ruling elite. Any big-name politician who wants to move up the ladder is compelled to seek support from the military. And the army has its own vision of the situation. The intrigue lies in
the fact that no one can predict who will support the leadership of the armed forces if Bouteflika departs. The current Prime Minister, Abdelmalek Sellal, is a protege of the president and a very strong figure, and he cannot establish trust with the military command. Saadani is closer to the military but lacks the political heft of Sellal. In addition, the military has internal differences of its own. The “old guard,” headed by Chief of Staff Salah Gaydom, sees its priority as the preservation of stability, given the existing circumstances and the uncertainty about who would become head of state if Bouteflika leaves office. Hence the unwillingness to pursue any serious reforms that could rock the boat. By virtue of their outlook and their age, they are conservatives, so they inhibit any procedures that might prepare the country for a soft and planned transfer of power into the hands of the younger generation. And that will inevitably happen, given the fact that more than 50% of Algeria's population is under 30 years old. This explains the apathy of the younger generation, the desire to go abroad and make something of themselves there, an unwillingness to stay home and work, and an attraction to drugs and criminality. In fact, a sort of “lost generation” has formed, which is highly susceptible to the ideological influence of Islamic radicals, extremists and even terrorists. Many young Algerians simply go to hot spots in the Arab world, becoming militants in terrorist organizations in Iraq and Syria: ISIS, Dzhabgat en-Nusra, etc.

On the other hand, the changes are demanded by technocrats with a Western mindset who advocate radical modernization of the country and democratization along European lines. Their positions are very strong in the economic sphere, especially in the oil and gas sector and the financial fields.

As it stands currently, there are a few force fields that could spark conflict after Bouteflika leaves. Furthermore, the conflict could develop into acute civil strife involving the army and other security agencies. Indeed, even among the junior and mid-level officers, there are many people who are either sympathetic to the Islamists or in favor of Westernization of the country or committed to the Arab nationalist course. So in the event of a major internal conflict, the armed forces and law enforcement agencies could embark on a course that would inevitably lead to any number of military scenarios -- from a coup to a protracted civil war. That is especially true because Algeria was left as the only Arab country with a republican system that was spared from the wave of "color revolutions" from 2011 to 2013.

Therefore, we can safely say that today, Algeria is on the verge of inevitable change, and the lack of serious efforts to prepare for them only aggravates the situation. The experiences of neighboring Tunisia and Libya show how it all can end. Algeria, of course, is a slightly different case, given the particular role of the army in the country's political life and the experience of the armed suppression of terrorism in the 1990s. But if we take into account Algeria's geopolitical importance and its huge oil and gas resources, internal conflict would inevitably bring outsider intervention, especially by the United States, France and Qatar. Getting a hold of Algeria doesn't just mean acquiring direct access to its energy resources. It also means the ability to use Algeria to counter Russia as a major player in the European gas market. These conditions make it incumbent on Moscow to support the current Algerian government and friendly relations between Algeria and Russia.

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