Algeria on the Verge of Change

Recent news in the Western and, primarily, the French media about the health of Algeria’s president are being used by the many enemies of that state’s independent politics to spread speculation and make predictions about the future of that excellent freedom loving country.

On April 27, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika was treated for cerebrovascular disease in the French military hospital of Val-de-Grâce in Paris. He had been in the hospital many times previously, including in 2006, but then it was thought he might have a different disease — cancer. The Algerian leader has sometimes disappeared for weeks or even longer, and each absence has given rise to rumors about his imminent demise. But he returned home each time and “took up the reins again.”

If the French media are to be believed, the situation this time is serious. It has even been reported that Bouteflika is actually in a coma and is unlikely to come out of it. If true, he will be the last of the elderly leaders from the age of “Arabic socialism” swept away by the Arab Spring over the past two years — or to be more precise, leaders that were toppled by Islamist uprisings prompted and financed by the Wahhabi regimes of the Persian Gulf.

These events bypassed Algeria, which had been immersed throughout the 1990s in a war for survival that amounted to an armed insurrection by Islamist extremists from the Armed Islamic Group of Algeria (GIA) and the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), which were ultimately defeated by the Algerian Army after hundreds of thousands of civilians died in the war on terror. However, Islamism still exists in Algeria. It has adopted more moderate features, and in places it has continued in the form of underground rebel groups subsequently joined by Al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb, which regularly carries out armed attacks against the army, the police, civilians and foreign experts. Russians have fallen victim to them more than once (the last time in January 2007, when Islamists killed a Stroytransgaz employee at a remote facility 150 kilometers from the capital).

Therefore, Bouteflika’s departure will mean more than just the end of a 50-year era of Algerian independence during which it was ruled entirely by a generation of leaders from the liberation movement that fought French colonialism. Algerian leaders from Ben Bella to Bouteflika that came out of the war of liberation called themselves the “old guerrillas, and they were buttressed by the Algerian Army’s leaders, who also fought in the war, one and all.

Experts both in the Western countries and in northern Africa believe Algeria may again be on the brink of a split if the Islamists lift up their heads and are supported by Qatar and Saudi Arabia (as happened in Egypt, Libya, Tunisia and Syria). Especially since several thousand militants are hiding and biding their time in the mountains, the forests and the Sahara Desert. Algeria’s sociopolitical environment is very favorable to them: Unemployment is extremely high (especially among young people, who almost without exception are striving to leave the country to seek work and a better life in France); corruption permeates the power structure; the bureaucracy, private business and political parties have been discredited; parliament is powerless; and the justice system is nonfunctioning. And although Algeria has almost $200 billion in gold reserves from gas and oil exports that have enabled the current regime to last without significant change for many years, many people believe reform is overdue. Against that backdrop, there is significant potential for a revolutionary upheaval that various Islamists would be sure to try and take advantage of. Algeria’s nationalist society, which is grounded in the armed forces (military leaders actually
control everything — from the state-owned Sonatrach company, which is responsible for the oil and gas sector, to the banks and the financial system), has outlived its usefulness, although it has so far allowed the country to avoid the fate of its North African Arab neighbors — Libya, Tunisia and Egypt. In addition, it is possible that Qatar and Saudi Arabia simply were not up to taking on Algeria while the Arab revolutions were getting underway, and now they are too involved in Syria’s civil war.

All they need to do, however, is send Wahhabi money to support the Islamists in Algeria as its regime totters. Like Syria, however, the Algerian military, which has managed over the past five years to fully reequip the army and has received sophisticated weapons from Russia, is fully capable of suppressing any rebellion by Islamic radicals. That it would plunge the country again into civil war and return things to the way they were in the 1990s is a different matter altogether.

However, it does not appear that Chief of Staff Gayed Saleh and intelligence chief Mohamed Meziane are willing to implement reforms or make peace with the Islamists. And Bouteflika and his supporters have only one powerful security agency as a counterbalance to the army — the Interior Ministry and police. But it was severely weakened after the 2010 assassination of Ali Tounsi, who was also an “old guerrilla.”

In any event, Algeria has been unable to avoid a period of political transformation, a process that began 20 years ago after the Islamists won parliamentary elections. However, the military intervened then to save Algeria from Islamization. Now, if the president resigns or is unable to continue performing his duties, early elections will have to be held. And on Algeria’s political horizon there are no strong candidates, much less charismatic leaders.

There is the current prime minister, Abdel Malek Sellal, of course. He is an experienced diplomat (ambassador to Hungary). He also served in the Ministry of the Interior (as its general secretary), as governor (wāli) of a province and as Minister of Public Works. But he is an excellent technocrat rather than a politician. He does have the support of the army and the security service, however.

There is another candidate — Abdelaziz Belkhadem, a former prime minister and leader of the ruling FLN party. However, he is a moderate Islamist and unlikely to receive the army’s support.

It is possible that the army will again seize direct control during the post-Bouteflika transition period, although the likelihood of that happening is low. The generals are too old — they are “old guerrillas.” Still, any new leader of Algeria will have to solve the problems of relations with the Islamists and radical reformation of the society and the economy. Unless that is done, the country will be doomed to instability that will grow into an acute crisis. The transition can succeed unless Qatar and Saudi Arabia intervene in Algeria’s internal affairs.

Especially since Europe — and particularly France, for which Algeria is its “southern underbelly” — have an interest in that: Islamists in distant Egypt are one thing. Islamists right next door are something else altogether — especially since the Algerian community in France numbers more than 3.5 million, many of whom openly sympathize with the Islamists, including the radicals.

Given the long-standing partnership Russia have enjoyed with that country for the more than 50 years it has been independent, we would also benefit from having a stable regime in Algeria with a secular government. We can only wait and see what path Algeria will take in its completely new stage of historical development. And Russia — the North African country’s old and true ally — is always willing to assist Algeria, as it demonstrated when this freedom loving country was building its new post-revolutionary society and strengthening its economic, political and military independence.

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