



BEYOND THE STREETS, TOWARDS NEW INITIATIVES: THE RECENT EVOLUTION OF THE ALGERIAN HIRAK

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The Algerian protest movement known as *Hirak* emerged on February 22, 2019, to oppose the candidacy of Bouteflika - who had been the Algerian president for two decades - to the upcoming presidential election. From that day on, the protesters marched twice a week in Algerian streets asking for a profound political change. The resignation of Bouteflika did not stop the movement, as the "hirakists" did not believe that this step was sufficient to carry out a democratization of the country. However, after 56 weeks, the movement has had to cease its marches due to the spread of the Coronavirus pandemic.

This Insight aims at analysing the recent evolutions of the *Hirak*, which tried to develop new methods of contestation and to go beyond the weekly marches in Algerian streets in order to avoid its disappearance and to overcome the restrictions. Notably, after a



first phase of *Hirak* «behind closed doors»¹, some activists played an active role in the opposition to the recent referendum for constitutional reform. At the same time, some “hirakists” developed new initiatives to reinforce the movement, among which this text will discuss *Nida-22* and *Al-Massar al-Jadid*. Furthermore, the Algerian regime is living uncertain times due to the bad health conditions of president Tebboune, affected by COVID-19 and hospitalised in Germany. Consequently, the current situation raises a question: will the effects of the extremely low turnout of the referendum and the emergence of these initiatives mark a future revival of the movement?

THE MOVEMENT BEFORE THE PANDEMIC

The *Hirak* (“movement” in Arabic) emerged in February 2019 as a reaction to the announcement of the candidacy of the ruling president Bouteflika to the following presidential election. Bouteflika had led the country for two decades and had suffered bad health conditions since 2013. To express their opposition to another mandate, some Algerians started protesting in the city of Kherrata on 16th February 2019. In the following week, on 22nd February, the official date marking the emergence of the movement, the protests spread in different parts of the country asking for a profound political change. While marching in the streets, the citizens shouted «there won’t be a fifth mandate, Bouteflika»², asking the end of a presidency which seemed to be lasting forever after a series of constitutional reforms that had allowed Bouteflika and his clan to rule for more mandates than it was previously expected. Since February 22, many Algerians have joined the *Hirak*, marching twice a week, on Tuesday and Friday.

¹ Zanotta, Sara. 2020. “La trasformazione del movimento di protesta algerino di fronte al Covid-19. Dalle manifestazioni per le strade all’Hirak “a porte chiuse”.” *Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie: Diritto, Istituzioni, Società* 2, no. 1: p. 296. <https://doi.org/10.13130/2612-6672/13435>.

² Zamirli, Zohra Aziadé. 2019. “Quelle place pour le pluralism religieux dans le mouvement de protestation algérien de 2019?” *L’Année du Maghreb*, no.21: pp. 91-104, <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.5231>.



Despite the lack of a leadership, the movement managed to obtain a relevant concession with the decision of Bouteflika to resign on April 2, 2019. The resignation was an important step, yet not a victory: the *Hirak* continued marching as the objective was not a partial change but a true democratization of the country which had not taken place as Bouteflika was only an atom of a molecule, the ruling *élite*, which was still in power.

In particular, this became clear in the presidential election when all the candidates were expression of the establishment and the winner, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, had already hold relevant offices under the same Bouteflika, including the one of prime minister. On that occasion, considering the different candidates, the “hirakists” had asked the population to abstain from voting and, in fact, the election was marked by an extremely low turnout, as about 60% of the population did not vote. The result showed that the newly elected president, Tebboune, was lacking legitimacy and needed to search for it³. According to Tebboune, one of the possible solutions was a constitutional reform that responded to the demands of the *Hirak*. However, the movement did not accept this limited change and continued organising peaceful protests every week.

The “hirakists” marched for 56 weeks from February 2019 to March 2020. As the Algerian youth was at the core of the movement, the marches were not the exclusive method of contestation. In fact, the use of the social media to criticise the regime or to let people know more about the objectives of the protests was widespread, but it was supplementary to the marches in the streets. Finally, the outbreak of the pandemic and the restrictions that the government had to adopt in order to safeguard the population marked a turning point in the history of the *Hirak*.

³ Ghanem, Dalia, Benaïdji, Ryad. 2020. “In Search of Legitimacy.” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 22, 2020. <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/80848>.



THE OUTBREAK OF THE PANDEMIC AND THE END OF THE PROTESTS

Since the 20th of March 2020, the *Hirak* has changed. The movement had to renounce to the marches, and the method which had previously been simply supplementary – the social media – became the only available one to continue the protests and avoid losing a role in the Algerian opposition. The activists also tried to take advantage of the situation and to spread a positive image of the movement, stressing their role as good and patriotic citizens who asked to respect the necessary measures to limit the diffusion of the pandemic⁴. Therefore, the *Hirak* underwent an evolution of its strategies, which were no longer based on the occupation of the public spaces, but on the use of private spaces⁵, sharing messages and selfies behind closed doors. They also tried to continue the weekly protests with radio emissions, as it was the case of *Radio Corona Internationale*⁶. However, it should be acknowledged that this evolution risked endangering the effectiveness of the movement, especially considering that it does not have a single leader.

In addition, the regime tried to take an advantage to further weaken the movement. In fact, since the beginning of the pandemic, the state leadership increased the number of arrests of activists and journalists linked to the *Hirak*. Probably, the most famous case is the one of the journalist Khaled Drareni who was condemned last September to two years in prison for having

⁴ Zanotta, Sara. 2020. "L'Hirak "a porte chiuse". L'evoluzione del movimento di protesta algerino di fronte al Coronavirus." *Osservatorio su Nuovi Autoritarismi e Democrazie*, April 24, 2020. <http://nad.unimi.it/lhirak-a-porte-chiuse-levoluzione-del-movimento-di-protesta-algerino-difronte-al-coronavirus/>.

⁵ Zanotta. "La trasformazione del movimento di protesta algerino di fronte al Covid-19. Dalle manifestazioni per le strade all'Hirak "a porte chiuse"." p. 296.

⁶ The link to Radio Corona Internationale: <https://soundcloud.com/radio-corona-internationale>.



reported the manifestations on 7 March 2020⁷. Despite the growing number of arrests, the activists endured in the opposition to the leadership, as it was especially clear in occasion of the constitutional referendum.

THE OPPOSITION TO THE CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM

On November 1, 2020, Algerians casted their vote in the constitutional referendum proposed by Tebboune which should have been the «main priority of his presidential mandate»⁸. Due to the scarce legitimacy which had characterised Tebboune's election in December 2019, the president proposed the reform to respond to the demands of institutional and political change the Algerians had expressed through the *Hirak* protests⁹, including wider freedom of assembly and freedom of the press. However, the movement strongly expressed its opposition to the referendum, stressing the fact that this reform project would have not led to a profound democratisation of the country. In fact, several propositions of the activists had been ignored, including the creation of a transitional government, the dissolution of the parliament, a constitutional assembly and an independent electoral commission¹⁰.

In addition, the project had been considered as a product of the ruling élite which did not mirror the everyday reality of the country characterised by frequent arrests. In fact, according to the National Committee for the Liberation of the Detainees, 90 people are

⁷ Amnesty International, 2020. "Libérez Khaled Drareni." <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/get-involved/take-action/w4r-2020-algeria-khaled-drareni/>.

⁸ People's Democratic Republic of Algeria, 2020. "Fondement et objectifs de cette révision", *Constitution 2020*, <https://www.constitution2020.dz/fr/goals/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Bajec, Alessandra, "Algeria's Hirak protest movement is gearing up for a comeback." *The New Arab*, September 17, 2020 <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/9/17/the-return-of-algerias-hirak-protest-movement>.



currently in jail due to charges related to the protests of the *Hirak*¹¹. These factors led the “hirakists” to oppose to the referendum asking their supporters to abstain from voting. This decision was coherent with the stance adopted in the 2019 Presidential election as they believed that Tebboune and the other candidates represented the establishment, marking no change with the Bouteflika era. Consequently, the refusal to cast their vote once again was a way to stress their belief that no real change had happened and the incumbent president and his reform project were illegitimate.

Despite the impossibility to adopt the same strategies – the protests in the streets – that had worked in occasion of the resignation of Bouteflika and the election of Tebboune, the results of the referendum still mirrored a widespread abstention. On the one hand, it is necessary to acknowledge that the low turnout of the referendum (23,70% of the Algerians) does not completely reflect those who support the *Hirak*, as we might expect it to include also a percentage of people who preferred not to vote due to the fear of COVID-19 and those who never vote, as abstentionism is a relevant characteristic in Algerian elections¹². On the other hand, the low turnout has been a record in Algerian elections and reflected the position of the movement furthering reducing Tebboune’s legitimacy.

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW INITIATIVES

However, in the last months the movement has not only adopted a destructive stance based on a critique of lack of democratic credentials of the ruling regime but has also adopted a constructive stance trying to develop new initiatives to revive the

¹¹ Glez, Damien, “Algérie: le procès de Karim Tabbou peut-il relancer le Hirak?” *Jeune Afrique*, December 1, 2020.

<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1084257/societe/chronique-algerie-le-proces-de-karim-tabbou-peut-il-relancer-le-hirak/>.

¹² Dris-Aït Hamadouche, Louisa, 2009. “L’abstention en Algérie: un autre mode de contestation politique.” *L’Année du Maghreb*, no V, pp. 263-273.



movement. In fact, the new *Hirak* “behind closed doors” would have risked becoming less effective if limited exclusively to online activities. The new initiatives try to establish an alternative to the marches by developing some forms of coordination and dialogue among the members of the movement. Among them, *Nida-22* and *Al-Massar al-Jadid* are quite relevant.

Nida-22 was launched at the end of October to create «an independent initiative for a national autonomous cooperation within the *Hirak*»¹³. This project has gathered relevant activists both in Algeria and in the diaspora to establish a dialogue that aims at creating some forms of organisation, coordination and development of a network¹⁴, an aspect which has always been considered one of the major weaknesses of the movement.

On the other hand, *Al-Massar al-Jadid* is not limited exclusively to the supporters of the *Hirak*. While it has been presented by its promoters as a product of the movement and, as in the case of the *Hirak*, the youth is at the very centre of the process, its scope is wider, and it tries to develop some forms of discussions between different actors, including some representatives of the *élite*. The aim of this initiative is to gather different components of the society to make them take part actively in the «building of a new Algeria and to give the necessary contribution to make the country exit the political crisis»¹⁵.

¹³ Aichun, Abdelghani. 2020. “‘Nida-22’, une initiative pour une concertation autonome intra-hirak.” *El Watan*, October 22, 2020. <https://www.elwatan.com/edition/actualite/nida-22-une-initiative-pour-une-concertation-autonome-intra-hirak-22-10-2020>.

¹⁴ Mehenni, Makhlof. 2020. “Louisa Aït Hamadouche : « L’initiative Nida-22 transcende la feuille de route du pouvoir ».” *TSA Algérie*, October 26, 2020. <https://www.tsa-algerie.com/louisa-ait-hamadouchelinitiative-nida-22-transcende-la-feuille-de-route-du-pouvoir/>.

¹⁵ Neffah, Hocine. 2020. “Un acteur pour le renouveau.” *L’Expression*, September, 20, 2020. <https://www.lexpressiondz.com/nationale/un-acteur-pour-le-renouveau-335305>.



However, despite the development of these new projects, the main method to express the (op)position of the *Hirak* is still the use of social media.

Notwithstanding the growing restrictions, like the amendment to the Penal Code to fight against the diffusion of fake news and disinformation¹⁶, the *Hirak* "behind closed doors"¹⁷ still takes place mainly online and has adopted new strategies to circumvent the control of the government. For example, Karim Tabbou, representative of the opposition party Democratic and Social Union and one of the most relevant members of the *Hirak*, has explained that Algerians have become very creative in criticising the regime¹⁸. Notably, they apparently criticise Trump but, according to Tabbou, by reading those messages it is possible to understand that they are making reference to the Algerian president¹⁹.

The critiques to the president have increased especially in the days following the referendum. Not only the record low turnout proved a widespread disenchantment, but the referendum also took place while Tebboune was hospitalised in Germany. For some days, no news of the health conditions of the president was officially spread. The fact that he was affected by COVID-19 was announced only after the referendum. In Algeria, this situation seemed to revive the experiences lived under Bouteflika, and led someone to talk about

¹⁶ "Nouvelles dispositions pénales pour responsabiliser les auteurs de fake news et combler le vide juridique." *Algérie Presse Service*, April 22, 2020.

<http://www.aps.dz/algerie/104289-nouvellesdispositions-penales-pour-responsabiliser-les-auteurs-des-fakes-news-et-combler-un-videjuridique>.

¹⁷ Zanotta, "La trasformazione del movimento di protesta algerino di fronte al Covid-19. Dalle manifestazioni per le strade all'Hirak "a porte chiuse"." p. 296.

¹⁸ Okello, Christina. 2020. "Algérie: malgré le Covid-19, le mouvement de contestation Hirak résiste." *RFI*, December 21, 2020.

<https://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20201221-alg%C3%A9rie-malgr%C3%A9-le-covid-19-le-mouvement-de-contestation-hirak-r%C3%A9siste>.

¹⁹ Okello. "Algérie: malgré le Covid-19, le mouvement de contestation Hirak résiste."



of «political death of the president»²⁰. Despite the diffusion of a short video on 13th December, where Tebboune tried to reassure the population, the image of the convalescing president did not erase the doubts about his legitimacy and ability to rule the country.

In a similar unstable situation, the opposition, including the *Hirak*, might take an advantage. The “hirakists” might try to exploit this unstable situation to avoid their disappearance and obtain more room in Algerian politics through the development and strengthening of new initiatives of dialogue and coordination. One important occasion will be the legislative election which is going to take place in 2021. In the meantime, the strength of the *Hirak* will also largely depend on the weaknesses of the regime.

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²⁰ Beau, Nicolas. 2020. “L’après Tebboune aurait débuté en Algérie.” *Mondafrique*, September 1, 2020. <https://mondafrique.com/lapres-tebboune-aurait-debute-en-algerie/>.



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