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Report

The purge of powerful Algerian generals: Civil-military reform or presidential power grab?

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Algerian military [Reuters]

Abstract

The balance of power between the military and the presidency has been central to Algerian politics since independence. At the outset of his fourth term in 2014, Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika charted a course to consolidate state power in the office of the presidency and pave the way to install his eventual successor. With questions surrounding Bouteflika's ability to seek a fifth term—he has not spoken in public for three years following a debilitating stroke—these political reforms have accelerated over the last year.(1)

As part of this maneuvering, Bouteflika has altered the constitution and instated new media restrictions, but his key move has been to dissolve the powerful security apparatus, the DRS (*Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité*), and sideline the coterie of its longtime director General Mohamed Mediène, popularly known as Toufik. On the surface, it may appear that the balance of power has shifted from the military to the political class. In reality, Algeria under Bouteflika is still a police state, and the moves simply represent the victory of one clique over another.

Algeria is at a crossroads. It badly needs profound reform of its security sector and more transparent civil-military relations. However, the measures taken over the past years do not fundamentally alter the method of governance, as the aim is to strengthen the position of Bouteflika and his inner circle.

Security state vs nation state

As a result of Algeria's violent history, the military has played a dominant role in national politics. As the historian Mohammed Harbi said, the state does not control the military, the military controls the state.

Post-colonial state building in Algeria tended to strengthen the security and military apparatus at the expense of an autonomous civil society. This process led to the prominence of a strong security state at the expense of a weak nation-state. (2) These processes were reinforced by the government's retreat from electoral politics in the 1990s and the subsequent violent anti-Islamist campaigns. The entrenchment of the security state was further legitimized by the US-led global war on terror from 2001 onward.

The DRS state

For decades, the nerve center of the security apparatus was the leadership of the DRS, which often intervened in political decision-making. An opaque group of senior military leaders has always sought to exert influence on the heads of state, from Ahmed Ben Bella (1962-65) to Chadli Bendjedid (1979-92) to Bouteflika (1999 to present).

Despite regular elections involving presidential and parliamentary turnovers, the Algerian state remained steadfastly under the control of a military unwilling to cede power to civil society and the rule of law. During this period, a prerequisite for high positions in government, diplomacy, public corporations, elective assemblies, and universities was always an allegiance to the DRS. Without this commitment, individuals would not have been otherwise appointed.

Bouteflika's struggle against military control

A few months after he took power in 1999, President Bouteflika addressed the nation, calling on Algerians to help him curtail the influence of "the fifteen"—fifteen army generals who at the time held power over foreign trade and the local economy. (3) Even though the election was engineered by the military, Bouteflika proclaimed that he would not be a "quarter of a president," stating that he must obtain full power for the country to emerge from its crisis of legitimacy.

On the eve of the April 2014 vote, conflict again erupted between the president's office and the DRS. For the sake of regional stability, a deal was ultimately struck to re-enlist Bouteflika for a fourth term. Political and institutional stability was viewed as crucial for protecting national security, especially amid volatile Tunisian and Libyan borders. President Bouteflika easily secured a fourth term despite being virtually unable to move or speak during the presidential campaign. He used this new position to purge his opponents.

A few months after securing his fourth term, Bouteflika issued a series of decrees removing several civilian associates and senior military officers from government and military positions. These included the president's defense adviser, General Mohammed Touati, who was seen as a Trojan horse for the military establishment in the government, and his removal was a sign that president Bouteflika was pushing back against the influence of the military elite. Bouteflika especially targeted a radical group within the military known as the "eradicators" (as opposed to the "reconcilers" in the fight against armed Islamists) that had risen to prominence in the 2000s.

In July 2015, the heads of three groups responsible for providing personal security for Bouteflika were dismissed after an alleged lapse in security at the presidential residence at Zeralda. Fearing a "medical putsch" similar to the coup that drove Tunisian President Habib Bourguiba from power in 1987, Bouteflika removed the officials in charge of his bodyguards. The heads of internal security, presidential security, and the Republican Guard were all removed to ensure the loyalty of those close to Bouteflika.

Several other intelligence officials were also removed from office in the security shake up. The chief of staff of the army, Mohamed Lamari, who supported Bouteflika's opponent in the election, was the first military general to be removed from office. Lamari's ouster was followed by the former intelligence chief, Abdelkader Ait-Ouarabi, who was arrested and jailed in 2015. It was then very clear that the days were numbered for General Mediène, head of the mighty security apparatus, who had amassed immense power through decades of underhanded dealing. (4) Mediène was swiftly removed from office in September 2015. Without a public fuss, he was dismissed, as the others, after quarter of century in office. The myth of an invincible DRS was shattered once and for all when the long-ailing head of state dismissed the feared chief who never appears in public. (5)

A few weeks later, the retired General Hocine Benhadib was arrested and jailed for eight months for denouncing army chief of staff Gaid Salah and referring to the president's brother, Said Bouteflika, as "the big boss." It was a radical departure in Algerian politics that a retired military general—a decorated war veteran, no less—would be jailed for denouncing nepotism in politics. As a final measure, the Bouteflika administration passed legislation forbidding to retired security officials to speak out on politics.

Despite this radical re-ordering of personalities, it would be a mistake to conclude that the security state is being diminished. In fact, military and security expenses have risen since Bouteflika assumed power. Even the drastic decrease in oil revenues has not affected defense expenditures, which continue apace as if Algeria is on a war footing.

Out with the DRS, in with the DSS

In January 2016, President Bouteflika finally succeeded in his long fight to dissolve the country's powerful security service, the DRS. A new agency, the Security Services Department (DSS), was formed through secret decree. The goal of the new agency is to manage and harmonize all security matters—police, military, and intelligence. To run the DSS, Bouteflika appointed a former close associate of Mediène, General Bachir Tartag, who was promoted to the rank of minister. Unlike the DRS, the DSS will not fall under the authority of the Minister of Defense, but will answer to the head of state, as will the entire security and intelligence apparatus. With this move, Bouteflika has consolidated considerable power, both constitutional and informal, thus strengthening his hand to select his successor.

The 2016 constitution and procedural amendments

While the political-military purge was underway, President Bouteflika engineered a new constitutional text. Like all Algerian heads of state since independence, Bouteflika wishes to place his stamp on the country's constitution. Since he rose to prominence, Bouteflika has expressed discontent with the constitution he inherited from his predecessors. (6) He has long claimed that the constitution does not reflect the spirit of the time. According to Bouteflika, the constitution establishes neither a clear parliamentary system, nor a pure presidential one.

After five years of discussions behind closed doors, the amended constitution arrived like a letter in the mail in February 2016. The new text passed parliament with overwhelming support.

The new constitutional text adds numerous amendments. Several articles reaffirmed individual and collective freedoms. An independent electoral commission—long a demand of the political opposition—was established. And Amazight was adopted as a national and official language, along with the creation of an Algerian Academy of Berber language.

The most crucial amendment term-limits the presidency to two terms of five years each. Under this amendment, President Bouteflika would not be able to run for a fifth term. If it would be the case, his successor will most likely come from his inner circle.

At the same time, Bouteflika ushered in sweeping media reforms. Much like his security reforms, the new media regulations served to tighten his grip on power. Under these new rules, media outlets can be shuttered and journalists censored for violating any of 12 catch-all rules, including disrespecting the state or its symbols.

The road ahead

Since he rose to prominence, Bouteflika has both relied on the influence of the DRS and sought to remove them from the decision-making process. His ultimate aim was not to enlarge political participation to all actors of civil society in order to embolden Algeria's deliberative democracy. On the contrary, president Bouteflika made every effort to gain full power to the detriment of the rule of law and economic liberalism. The period of high oil revenues allowed Bouteflika to renew patrimonialist politics, which came to define his rule. By the end of the fourth term, president Bouteflika has become the "big chief," even more important than Toufik at his zenith. He is now in a position to bequeath to his heirs a powerful, centralized political machine. As an immediate result, the political opposition will be most likely be under-represented in the parliament in the upcoming April 2017 elections.

Algeria is at a crossroads. It badly needs a profound reform of its security sector and more transparent civil-military relations. The measures taken over the past years do not fundamentally alter the method of governance since the aim is strengthening Bouteflika's position.

The "civilian state" that Bouteflika strives to build remains essentially a security state. The political police are still active. Military expenditure continues to rise. The military and security budget accounted for 32% of the national budget in 2016 despite the sharp drop in oil revenues. (7) At the same time, other ministries, including Culture, Communications, and Health, have been cut over the past two years. The fiscal pressure will be more burdensome in the 2017 budget.

As with other Arab states, Algeria needs a new concept of security to face its current challenges, domestic and regional. The fetishism of security should not prevail in the civil-military reform. A profound and radical security reform is needed more than the removal of a few generals or the purchase of sophisticated military technology. Unfortunately, the

current political trajectory under Bouteflika makes these crucial reforms unlikely in the near and mid-term.

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References

- 1) On Bouteflika's medical condition and speculation surrounding his capacity, see Carlotta Gall, "Who Runs Algeria? Many Doubt It's Ailing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika," *New York Times*, 23 December 2015, <https://nyti.ms/2joPrHE>
- 2) Rachid Tlemçani, *State and Revolution in Algeria*, Westview Press, 1986
- 3) Rachid Tlemçani, *Etat, bazar. L'aventure de l'infatigable en Algérie*, Hikma, 1999
- 4) A close ally of Bouteflika, the FLN's general secretary, Amar Saïdani, publicly denounced this situation. According to him, the DRS head is responsible for the security crisis that has deteriorated the political and economic environment. He concluded, "Toufik should have resigned, he failed in his job."
- 5) Little is known about Mediène. Nobody knows his birthdate or birthplace. His photograph was published for the first time in a local newspaper only after his removal. Toufik amassed immense power through collecting information and blackmailing politicians, diplomats, other public servants and entrepreneurs. More critical to his ouster, however, was Toufik's exposure of corruption involving the ministry of energy and the ministry of public works—close associates of Bouteflika. The former partnership between General Mohamed Médiène and president Bouteflika seems to be broken forever.
- 6) Nacer Djabi, "The Algerian constitution: Lip-service to safeguards," Arab Reform Initiative, 20 September 2016, www.arab-reform.net/en/node/981
- 7) Rachid Tlemçani, "Le complexe militaro industriel: Armée, Bouteflika croissance, économique," *El Watan*, 19 November 2014.