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► **To cite this version:**

Luis Martinez, Rasmus Alenius Boserup. Introduction - The Disappearing of Algeria's Hirak. Luis Martinez & Rasmus Alenius Boserup (eds). The Disappearing of Algeria's Hirak, Centre de recherches internationales (CERI), pp.8-19, 2024, Les Dossiers du CERI. hal-04536566

HAL Id: hal-04536566

<https://sciencespo.hal.science/hal-04536566>

Submitted on 8 Apr 2024

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The Disappearing of Algeria's Hirak

Luis Martinez & Rasmus Alenius Boserup

Ten years after the “Arab Uprisings”, a peaceful mass protest movement abruptly emerged in Algeria.¹ In an astonishing show of force, the so-called *Hirak* exponentially grew from a few thousand protesters in the capital in early February 2019 to hundreds of thousands of protesters in all major Algerian cities. Inspired by the peaceful regime changes in Tunisia in 2011² and in Sudan after the dismissal of Omar el-Bashir in 2019, the protestors called for a regime change and for an establishment of a democratic system based on the rule of law.

The emergence of the *Hirak* movement is well-known today: The mobilisation was initially triggered by the announcement on 10 February 2019, that Algeria's incumbent president Abdelaziz Bouteflika would run for a fifth term in office.³ Since the end of the “civil war” in the late 1990s, Bouteflika, who was elected for the first time in 1999, had used the revenue generated from exporting natural gas to buy social peace and to co-opt state actors, civil society organisations, as well as popular movements. In parallel, Bouteflika had relied on the military,

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² Masri, Safwan, *Tunisia. An Arab Anomaly*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2017.

³ Mellah, Salima (ed.), *Hirak en Algérie. L'invention d'un soulèvement*, Paris, ed. La fabrique, 2020; Filiu, Jean-Pierre, *Algérie, la nouvelle indépendance*, Paris, Seuil, 2019; Mebtoul, Mohammed, *Libertés, dignités, algérianité avant et pendant le hirak*, Paris, Karthala, 2019; Boumedine, Rachid Sidi, *Aux Sources du hirak*, Alger, Chihab éditions, 2019; Grim, Nordine, *L'An I du Hirak : Autopsie d'une révolution inédite*, Algiers, Casbah Editions, 2020; Revue Mouvements, *Hirak, Algérie en mouvements*, Paris, La Découverte, 2020; Mesloub, Khider, *Secouée par le hirak : l'Algérie à la croisée des chemins*, Paris, l'Harmattan, 2020.

whose combat and intelligence units had accumulated power and experience during the civil war, to coerce or repress political and social challengers. Bouteflika had met little resistance to his rule from the political elite, which had been deeply internally divided since the outbreak of the civil war in the early 1990s. While popular unrest increased during Bouteflika's presidency, calls for fundamental political change had rarely been heard—except for the voices that since the 1980s had called for greater autonomy for the Kabyle region. During his first term in office, Bouteflika had mobilised considerable popular support, but his decision to run in the presidential elections of 2014 had elicited a wave of criticism mainly focusing on his challenged physical state after a stroke had left him severely weakened the year before. Confined to a wheelchair, incapable of speaking, and rarely appearing in public, Bouteflika defied the criticism and won a presidential election that critics considered fraudulent. When the president's office in early 2019 announced that the ageing president would run for a fifth term in office, the public response was far harder than five years earlier. Social media brimmed with Algerians expressing feelings of humiliation, shame, and anger against a system that seemed incapable of providing acceptable outcomes for large segments of the population. It was this context that the *Hirak* movement mobilised hundreds of thousands of Algerians from all social, economic, and cultural backgrounds to unite in rejecting Bouteflika's candidacy. Where the mobilisation in 2014 had failed, the *Hirak* of 2019 seemed successful: Within days, several of the president's most ardent supporters withdrew or put distance to Bouteflika. A few weeks later, the Bouteflika himself announced that he would not run for a fifth term. The story did not end there, however. Over the following months, ongoing street protests triggered purges of previously untouchable political, financial, and military personalities. In the summer 2019, the power of the *Hirak* movement seemed almost unlimited. Five years after its emergence, the *Hirak* movement has all but disappeared. Many of its protagonists are in prison or have fled into exile. And its core political aspirations have been blocked or rolled back. A new president, Abdelmajid

Tebboune, largely considered an establishment-loyalist has been elected against the explicit wish of the *Hirak*. In short, the seasoned authoritarian regime seems for now to have endured.

How did this happen? In contrast to the broad documentation and analysis of the emergence and early successes of the *Hirak* movement, scholars and experts have tended to ignore its later disappearance and political failure. This collection aims to remedy this situation by providing a series of analyses and documentations of how and why the Algerian *Hirak* movement disappeared. Through six essays based on recent fieldwork and fresh desk studies, the publication gives a first take on how a multitude of authoritarian institution and actors—including the media, the judiciary, the political parties, the financial institutions, and above all the army orchestrated the disappearance of *Hirak* and the survival and consolidation of the authoritarian regime.

In her opening article, Giulia Fabbiano demonstrates how supporters of the *Hirak* quickly moved from their initial call for Bouteflika to step back, to an increasingly revolutionary call for a total systemic overhaul. Drawing actively on collective memory and symbols, the *Hirak* movement represented a synthesis of the narratives of previous protest movements—from the ‘Berber Spring’ of the 1980s, to the Islamist movement of the 1990s. Like these previous movements, the *Hirak* established, however, a revolutionary agenda that clashes with the army’s interests and political agenda. These stood in such sharp contrast with the *Hirak*’s revolutionary orientation that the army high command and Algeria’s political elites were the target of much criticism throughout 2019. The *Hirak* movement seemed unstoppable, categorically rejecting initiatives for public dialogue, which it regarded as attempts to appease it by sacrificing individual political dignitaries. The Algerian government, on its side, would adroitly use the fight against Covid-19, to project itself as a guardian of the nation and its citizens. Henceforth, the police and the gendarmerie no longer presented themselves as law enforcement officers policing *Hirak* demonstrations. Instead, they framed their presence during the *Hirak* protests as attempts to safeguard public health by enforcing

compliance with the partial lockdown rules and curfew requirements. In parallel with this change in the role of law enforcement officers, the military highlighted how successfully it had imported the necessary equipment for healthcare workers via a widely publicised air bridge between Algeria and China. Such events were broadcast on national television and plastered in regime-loyal media.

As Rasmus Alenius Boserup demonstrates in his article, the Algerian authorities would also take advantage of the pause in *Hirak* protests during the lockdowns to further intensify the crackdown on new online media, which, since the mid-2000s, had partially escaped state control. The intensified crackdown on media freedoms was, however, only part of a broader suppression of freedoms under the new constitution, as Mouloud Boumghrar demonstrates in his article.

As time passed and the pandemic put an end to *Hirak's* mass mobilisation, the movement itself seems to have come to the bitter realisation that Algeria's military regime is, indeed, nothing like Ben Ali's police state. Algeria is compères better with the Maduro regime in Venezuela across the Atlantic, than it does with its Tunisian neighbour.⁴ Underpinned by the military, financed through revenue from oil exports, the Maduro regime has successfully fended off demands for democracy, human rights, and freedoms raised in his country's protest movement. Such trajectories have, however, also been seen in several other authoritarian regimes in Algeria's broader regional neighbourhood—including in countries like Egypt⁵ and Syria.

The recent failed attempts at triggering democratisation through domestic uprisings coincide with a series of failures of international democratisation efforts—notably in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Mali. Niger Together they have considerably diminished the international political will to impose democracy by force. Consequently, bolstering democracy and human rights depends increasingly on the national movements' ability to transform themselves into a

⁴ Lezama, Paula Vasquez, *Venezuela : Pays hors service. De l'utopie au chaos*, Paris, Buchet Chastel, 2019.

⁵ Long, Baudouin, *L'Égypte de Moubarak à Sissi*, Karthala, Cedej, 2018.

reformist political actor, and strike deals to reform the systems together with their key stakeholders.

In Algeria, a crucial factor in such a negotiated reform process would be the military. As Abdennour Benantar demonstrates in his chapter of the present volume, the army high command considers itself as the backbone of the Algerian state, and is committed to ensuring the country's security and to protecting its republican form of government.⁶ Despite its many internal factions, the military establishment has historically been able to overcome its internal differences and stand united when confronting political crises that have marked the history of Algeria since independence. The role of the military in the country's political life may be defined as that of a central regulator determining the place and function of all political parties, and movements on the political scene.⁷ The Algerian people's attitude toward the military is inherently ambivalent, regarding it both with pride and frustration.

When protests broke out in 2019, the military high command cleverly used the demands expressed by the *Hirak* movement like 'Remove them all' or 'They are all thieves', to dismantle the political, administrative, financial and security networks associated with President Bouteflika. The military high command did so primarily because they considered that these circles of power were both incapable of solving the crisis at hand, and because they believed that these actors had gained too much autonomy from the military. The purges led by the military affected ministers, business leaders, and high-ranking security officers, most of whom were handed jail terms on charged of corruption or high treason. Initially, this attack on close associates of the former president satisfied many Algerians as it was presented as a response to the *Hirak* movement's calls for the removal of corrupt state elites. Initial support gradually gave way, however, to a general sense of concern about the military's motives and plans. This would

⁶ Cook, Steven A, *Ruling But Not Governing: The Military and Political Development in Egypt, Algeria, and Turkey*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins University Press, 2007.

⁷ Nemar, Radidja, "Au-delà des casernes. Le rôle de l'armée en Algérie", *Les Cahiers de l'Orient*, n° 100, pp. 19-32, 2010, available at <https://doi.org/10.3917/lcdlo.100.0019>

increase when, early in the transition, the military announced that contrary to the *Hirak* movement's demands presidential elections would be organised quickly and within the deadline prescribed by the constitution. Despite their historically low voter turnout and despite taking place in the midst of an accelerating economic crisis—as Luis Martinez's chapter in this book shows—the election of Abdelmadjid Tebboune as president on 19 December 2019, was a success for the military, and it was a clear indication of the pivotal role the military continued to play in regulating Algeria's political life.

It was also the military establishment that in 1999 organised the election of Abdelaziz Bouteflika to the presidency. Widely criticised for its mass human rights violations during the civil war (1991-1999), the military was aware that for the Algerian government to regain international recognition, the military would have to withdraw from its visible role in running the country. Accordingly, the top brass picked Abdelaziz Bouteflika as a civilian candidate to become the country's new head of state as the military gradually consolidated its victory over the Islamist militias. In 1999, rigged elections were held to formally instate Bouteflika as president, and a referendum for amnestying all parties in the civil war was organised to help build a presidential image based on national reconciliation.

The military and intelligence services were delighted with Bouteflika's achievements during his first decade in power: his first (1999-2004) and second (2004-2009) terms saw Algeria move on from the civil war and start afresh. Public spending increased, and to some extent the country's improved situation opened new prospects for the Algerian population. From 2003 to 2014, due to rising oil prices, the regime was able to buy social and political peace. Though the military withdrew from politics, the annual defence budget increased fivefold to around 11 billion USD. The military set out to modernise its equipment, professionalise the armed forces, and develop an embryonic military industry. The challenges posed by the 2011 Arab uprisings, the Libyan war, and emerging security threats in the Sahel threw the army's defensive and static military doctrine into disarray, resulting in the decision to redefine the country's territorial defence strategy. In

terms of political developments, the military establishment and the presidency sought to curtail the power of the security services, and hence to marginalise the head of the Department of Intelligence and Security (Département du Renseignement et de la Sécurité - DRS), General Tawfiq, then considered to be the most powerful man in Algeria. Together, Abdelaziz Bouteflika and the Chief of Army Staff, General Gaïd Salah, ultimately removed Tawfiq from office on 13 September 2015. The army chief's attempt to banish the influence of the intelligence service for good was consolidated when on 4 May 2019 Tawfiq was arrested and sentenced to 15 years in prison by a military court.

Despite its political victory over the *Hirak* movement, the military high command continues to this day to view its anti-military slogans like “A civilian state—not a military state” with concern and suspicion. There is little indication that the military will anytime soon push for a genuine transformation of the political system. On the contrary, the military today seems bent on improving the government's efficiency and ability to meet the socio-economic demands that the *Hirak* protestors put forward.

The military's perception of the *Hirak* movement as a threat to its vital interests were further reinforced by the fact that the movement was built in opposition to existing political parties and unions, as Sihem Baddoubia demonstrates in her article of the present collection. In contrast to *Hirak's* revolutionary stance, the military wish to see country's the political parties and the state unions return centre stage and start rebuilding alliances and manage the political institutions. The animosity that the military high command and key stat actors hold against the *Hirak* movement is rooted in its deeper history with managing popular protest and. Algeria's military establishment, it seems, was quick to conclude that *Hirak* was nothing but a new manifestation of the revolutionary protest movements it the military had crushed several times since taking power in 1965. The first of these protest movement had emerged shortly after Algeria has won its independence from France in 1962. The protest movement had been led by

one of the founding figures of Algeria's anti-colonial movement, Hocine Ait Ahmed, who had founded the Socialist Forces Front party (FFS - Front des Forces Socialistes) in 1963. From its creation the FFS criticised the new regime and called for a socialist and popular restoration of the Algerian "revolution" with the aim to guarantee social justice and freedom. FFS also pushed forward the message that the victory of the Algerian war against colonial France from 1954 to 1962, had been stolen by "putschists" from the paramilitary group ALN (*Armée de Libération Nationale*), which at independence in 1962 had changed name to ANP (*Armée Nationale Populaire*) and become the official military institution of the new Algerian state. The military government of Houari Boumediene who took power after ousting Algeria's elected president, Ahmed Ben Bella, in a coup in 1965, quickly and violently turned against the FFS: In the months following the coup, 3.000 FFS cadres were arrested. Some were tortured and released. Others were killed.⁸ Over the following fifteen years until his sudden death in 1979, President Boumediene headed an authoritarian regime that demanded undivided loyalty to the ruling party and left no room for pluralist or democratic aspirations. The second revolutionary movement to be crushed by the military had emerged under president Boumediene's successor, Chadli Bendjedid. Having seized power in 1979 and almost immediately repressed a short-lived Kabyle protest movement known as the "Berber spring" in 1980,⁹ president Chadli faced a growing wave of anti-regime protests throughout the 1980s. The protests were spearheaded by Algeria's Islamists and further fuelled by the social and economic crisis that materialised in the wake of the collapse of the oil prices in 1986. Following a heavy-handed regime suppression of urban protesters in October 1988, president Chadli initiated an institutional reform process. This put an end to single-party rule that had been in place since independence and established a

⁸ Monbeig, Pierre, "Une opposition politique dans l'impasse. Le FFS de Hocine Ait-Ahmed", *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 1992, pp. 125-140.

⁹ In April 1980, the authorities refused to let the writer Mouloud Mammeri give a lecture on ancient Berber poetry at the University of Tizi Ouzou. In support of the Tamazirt cause, demonstrations erupt in Algiers and Kabylia. A violent repression came over the region, resulting in an estimated 32 dead and hundreds of arrests.

multiparty political system. Chadli had betted that a multi-party election would ensure a victory of the former single party and historical heir to the anti-colonial revolutionary movement, the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*), by splitting the still nascent opposition between socialists, Islamist and Berber currents. When municipal elections were held in 1989, however, a newly formed political coalition party known as the FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*), which encompassed representatives from most of Algeria's Islamist tendencies, won massively. FIS' proclaimed aim was to put "Islam" at the heart of the State and to change what its leaders saw as "deviations" from the principles behind the anti-colonial revolution that was started in 1954. In this spirit, FIS leaders denounced what they saw as decadence among the members of the state elite—especially secular, French-speaking communists who had gained influence after independence to the detriment of Arabic-speaking figures from the Islamist circles. The FIS party thus aspired to revitalise Algerian society and to restore confidence in the state through a revival of Islam. When FIS in December 1990 won another electoral victory in the first of two rounds of parliamentary elections, the military pulled the brake on Chadli's project. Worried by the revolutionary orientation of the FIS, the Algerian army stopped the electoral process, dissolved the FIS, and arrested and deported thousands of the party's members to harsh internment camps in the Sahara Desert.¹⁰ The military intervention kickstarted the seven years long armed conflict between state agents and Islamist militias that is commonly known as the "Algerian civil war". By the end of the 1990s, the army finally declared that it has succeeded with what it referred to as an "eradication" of the protagonists and supporters of an Islamist takeover of the state. The process was marked by the election of Algeria's first non-military president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika in 1999. The cost of this victory, however, was mass human rights violations, tens of thousands of killed, a fractioned and paralysed political class, and a halt of the institutional democratisation process that had begun in 1989.

¹⁰ Arezki, Saphia, "Les camps d'internement du sud en Algérie (1991-1995)", *Année du Maghreb*, 2019, pp. 225-239. Available at <https://doi.org/10.4000/anneemaghreb.4825>

As this collection of articles demonstrates, there is no doubt that state-orchestrated repression as well as bureaucratic and administrative manipulation have been major factors in the making the Algerian *Hirak* disappear. The arrests and harassments of protestors, the judicial intimidations of protestors and journalists, the legal bans on protests, and the accusations of treason brought against activists and public intellectuals have all contributed to weakening the movement and stalling the political reform it sought to foster.

Yet, the articles also show that state orchestrated repression and smart regime manoeuvres alone cannot fully explain the failure of a powerful and ambitious popular movement like the *Hirak*. Indeed, two other key factors—one external to Algeria and one internal to *Hirak* itself—seem also to have played important roles in the movement’s political failure and eventual disappearance.

Externally, the Covid-19 pandemic played a key role in halting the mobilisation of the *Hirak* and in providing renewed legitimacy for the state institutions. In early March 2020, amid fears of the spread of Covid-19 across Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, *Hirak* protestors initially refused to suspend the Friday demonstrations. Hence, on 13 March 2020, protesters took to the streets for the fifty-sixth consecutive Friday, chanting, ‘Neither Covid nor arrests will stop us’. But just a week later, on 20 March 2020, the streets of the capital and other major cities were empty. The *Hirak* had decided to temporarily halt demonstrations and encouraged protestors to fight the pandemic by cleaning and sanitising the streets. The Algerian authorities were quick to take advantage of the break in street protests to intensify its repression of the *Hirak* movement. In parallel, the Algerian army drew intensely on its ties with China to import the supplies needed by the health sector to combat the pandemic establishing a heavily mediatised “air bridge” between Algeria and China. In April 2020, for example, *El Djeich*, a military journal, wrote that ‘the Algerian state’s determination has averted a genuine catastrophe in the country’.¹¹ The same attitude was found in high-quality mainstream media like *El Watan*, which

¹¹ *El Djeich*, April, n° 681, 2020.

published an editorial on 15 April 2020 entitled: 'The state has risen to the challenge'.¹²

Internally, the activists' continued insistence on a revolutionary political agenda prevented *Hirak* from transforming itself into a pragmatic political actor capable of making deals with key stakeholders in the regime that could have ensured its long-term political success. This desire for wholesale regime change rather than a reform from within would eventually turn against the *Hirak* movement. Confident in its own legitimacy and convinced of its own strength, the movement had little trust in Algeria's established political parties. While it is correct that the political class in Algeria performed disappointingly both before, during, and after the emergence of *Hirak*, the movement's own mistake was to put opposition parties and regime protagonists in the same basket. Instead of building structural links to allies in the opposition that could have helped the movement to prevail, *Hirak* denounced all parties and public figures regardless of where they stood, simply on the ground that they had participated in elections under Bouteflika's presidency. Rejecting these actors meant that *Hirak* failed to capitalise on their intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the regime, of the army, and of its clientelist networks—knowledge that could otherwise have helped the *Hirak* to formulate a long-term strategy for challenging the regime's roadmap for rebuilding itself through presidential elections, a referendum, legislative elections, and local elections.

Hirak's choice to remain a force emerging uniquely from civil society and professing an authentic call for purity and revolution, would also indirectly contribute to weaken the established opposition forces in the country. Hence, in 2022, the State Council suspended the Socialist Workers' Party and threatened to close the Union for Change and Advancement. In parallel, the Interior Ministry ran a process harassing both the leaders of the Democratic and Social Movement and the leaders of the Rally for Culture and Democracy. Opposition parties that had called for a boycott of the elections and been rejected by

¹² Bahmane, Ali, "Ce qui nous attend demain!", *El Watan*, 15 April 2020.

protagonists from the *Hirak* thus became easy targets for regime intimidation and repression. Additionally, *Hirak's* refusal to participate in formal politics denied it representation within the political institutions that reemerged under and after the Covid-19 pandemic. Much like its socialist, Amazigh, and Islamist predecessors, the *Hirak* movement thus adopted a horizontal internal hierarchy structure that prevented its leaders from effectively representing it in formal politics.

This systematic refusal by the *Hirak* to invest in formal politics and in political institution-building further facilitated the regime's crackdown. By rejecting the election of president Abdelmadjid Tebboune and maintaining that all political institutions were illegitimate, an actor like the Forces of the Democratic Alternative (FDA)—a structure consisting of civil society organisations, opposition parties, trade unionists, intellectuals, and lawyers—contributed to tipping the political balance of power further to its own disadvantage. Instead of challenging the regime politically, building a platform, staking candidates, and presenting a political alternative in the elections, the FDA spearheaded a rejected elections in boycott campaign that would eventually contribute to undermine the movement itself. In 2019, the authorities arrested members of the FDA and some of the affiliated key civil society organisation like RAJ (*Rassemblement Action Jeunesse*) were dissolved on 13 October 2021.

With the *Hirak*, Algeria's civil society demonstrated remarkable energy and creativity, both online and in the streets. Actors from civil society including judges, feminists, artists, journalists, independent trade unionists, and academics worked together to create a powerful political dynamic. This dynamic was not matched by capable politicians, however. And as the movement failed to transform itself into a formal political actor, the existing state elites—and in particular the military establishment—came to dominate the political scene.