

Imagining a new political space: the power of youth and peaceful protest in Algeria

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Picture by Carole Hénaff

On 16 February 2019 in Kherata, in the east of Algeria, protest marches were organised following the unconstitutional decision by Abdelaziz Bouteflika to stand once again for a fifth presidential mandate. As momentum built, on Friday 22 February hundreds of thousands descended on the streets. Algerians marched in all cities, including the capital Algiers, where protests had been banned since 2001. At the symbolic central post office in Algiers, and in public squares across the country, young people, women, children and men gathered peacefully, simultaneously reclaiming these spaces and breaking the wall of fear in a phenomenal display of civic engagement [1].

As well as a deeper understanding of the intricacies of the Algerian Constitution, after years of exclusion from political life, prior to and during the demonstrations, young Algerians in particular swiftly developed high levels of political awareness. From political songs in football stadiums to significant numbers of strike actions across multiple sectors, to grassroots engagement in the social sector, political consciousness and engagement rose exponentially.

The resulting civil movement throughout 2019 and 2020 became known as the Hirak. Its root causes are deep. Algerians no longer accept unaccountable elites; they refuse to be humiliated by the lack of respect of their rulers for ordinary citizens, known as *hogra*, the

corruption and mismanagement of the country's resources.

The Hirak movement focused on democracy, the rule of law and social justice. These were arguably also the longstanding aims of European Union policy statements, since the Barcelona Process in 1995. The Barcelona Process had aimed to encourage support for democratic institutions and for strengthening the rule of law and civil society around the Mediterranean. In practice, the implementation of such goals was limited. This was particularly the case in Algeria, where there were deep suspicions of the EU's underlying interests, its preference for trade liberalisation, its obsession with security and immigration controls, as well as its asymmetric power relations and its tendency to try to dominate [2].

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Largely oblivious to what they considered disingenuous international actors, the message throughout the Hirak was consistently one of unity, peace and solidarity. Protesters chanted that the army and the people were brothers, *jeich chaab khawa khawa*, and shouted out the principle of peaceful protest, *silmiya*—effectively deflecting violent state responses. Throughout weekly marches, protesters used slogans, humour, creativity and artwork to challenge corruption, authoritarianism, imperialism, neo-colonial interference and capitalist models of exploitation. Recent corruption cases linked to high-ranking politicians had antagonized the population. Whilst elite politicians and business leaders siphoned off wealth, ordinary Algerians continued to suffer the austerity measures linked to the falling oil prices on which the Algerian economy was dependent. The Hirak actively challenged these local to global injustices.

To understand these transformative protests in the Mediterranean context, it is essential to first explore the key political developments and demands of the Hirak after February 2019. Secondly, contentious politics and the repertoires of action that emerged in Algeria are equally important to re-assess. What inspired these actions; how similar are they to other movements in the region; and how have they inspired beyond their borders? Thirdly, how internationalist is the Hirak movement and what role have international actors played? Lastly, what lessons are there for the EU and all Mediterranean states and societies in respect to the policies that frame the region? How can the mobilisations of 2019 contribute to the striving for a common political space in the Mediterranean, based on respect, exchange and solidarity, rather than death and distrust?

Political developments and demands

The Algerian Hirak began marching in February 2019 when President Bouteflika

announced his decision to stand in a contested and, from that moment, anti-constitutional election. The president's decision to stand for a fifth mandate effectively violated the Algerian Constitution on a number of points. First, the Constitution clearly limits mandates to two, as confirmed in a constitutional revision in 2016. Second, article 102 requires the president to hand over power to the head of senate in the case of incapacity. Bouteflika had not spoken in public since suffering a stroke in 2013. He no longer took political decisions —they were assumed to be taken by the army chief of staff and the President's brother. Yet the political demands were far deeper than simply Bouteflika standing down, which he did, on 2 April 2019. Respect for the constitution went hand in hand with the wider political objectives of justice, rule of law, freedom of speech and the ending of austerity. As Bouteflika no longer held the reins of power, what mattered now was to challenge the deeper structures of power. This included the institutional inertia that stifled the social, political, cultural and economic development of the country.

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Increasingly active online media and the radical discourses of bloggers such as Emir DZ called out the corruption of Algerian politicians and the hypocrisy of extravagant elites. Images of corruption, linked to politicians and business leaders, including a cargo of 700 kilos of cocaine found at the port of Oran [3], angered ordinary Algerians, particularly young people, who struggled with unemployment. Integrity and equality remain central to the Algerian political consciousness, born out of the struggle for democracy of the liberation movement. In the face of such excesses and crimes, the liberation movement itself was seen as betrayed by politicians, many of whom had effectively been in place since Independence in 1962. The presence of Independence struggle heroes during the marches, such as Djamil Bouhired, reinforced the legitimacy of the Hirak as a continuation of the struggle for justice and decolonisation.

Lack of transparent governance, absence of an independent judiciary and rule of law, and increasing corruption were at the heart of the claims against the wider Bouteflika clan, renamed by the Hirak as the *Isssaba* —the bandits. Public policies were actively challenged, during the Hirak, but also during the multiple strikes in the preceding year by doctors, teachers, industry workers, the unemployed and many more. Better education and healthcare were key demands. Bouteflika's decision to seek his own medical care in Switzerland underlined the failures of the Algerian health system and the hypocrisy of its rulers.

Grievances were collectively framed against a regime that was out of touch with the people. Austerity had been imposed on the population by the government after years of massive investment programmes that produced minimal local job creation. These programmes

ranged from roadbuilding to infrastructure, largely implemented by Chinese companies, to the extent that the Chinese government publicly funded the new Algiers Opera House to thank Algeria for the huge number of public works contracts it had secured. Challenging this, protesters also demanded an end to exploitation and capitalist extractivism by Western countries. Europeans had a major stake in the hydrocarbon industries in particular, with the majority of Algerian resources leaving the country. Local and national protesters had long challenged the decision to impose the controversial extractive industry of fracking on the south of Algeria, highlighting the risks to the fragile water table, local environments and populations.

Across Algeria, youth played a predominant role in this mobilization and in the social solidarity that simultaneously emerged. Three quarters of Algerians are under 30. The aims and ambitions of young people, at the core of the movement, include the desire for meaningful employment and the right to participate in the political, social and economic life of the country. Caring for sick or injured protesters, providing meals and cleaning up after the marches, young people demonstrated their readiness to actively shape the nature of the marches as profoundly peaceful, inclusive and a positive celebration of Algerian culture and hospitality.

In 2020, the global pandemic ended the physical marches of the Hirak. However, the solidarity and social engagement that emerged as one of its most powerful tools persists. Young people have been disinfecting cities and providing food for vulnerable or isolating families affected by the coronavirus. The Hirak movement has demonstrated an impressive longevity, with over fifty-four weeks of marches. The president stood down, and politicians and business leaders were arrested. Its resilience indicates a potential for lasting impact on Algerian society. The uniting of men, women, generations and ethnicities in the struggle for democracy, overcoming attempts to divide, will be its lasting legacy and its political demands remain clear.

Repertoires of protest

Deep structural inequalities and social injustice were at the heart of the Hirak messages. Banners, slogans and songs all portrayed the sources of discontent: poor governance of Algeria's natural resources; the role of the US and former colonial powers and the absence of meaningful democracy. The arrest of political protesters, often on spurious grounds such as for carrying the Amazigh flag, was seen as a deep injustice, provocation and an attempt to divide Algerians —though this approach largely backfired against the regime, as Algerians came out in traditional regional dress, celebrating the diversity and cultural richness of their heritages. This pride in the national cultures too became an important part of their repertoires of action in the protests.

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Steady progress in civil society at grassroots level also facilitated the organisation and peaceful mobilisation of protesters. This provided them with the spaces and networks for constructive reflection about political life, as well as the experience of civic engagement. Algerian associations had been organising since the 1990 Law on Associations opened up the associative field. Despite the violent conflict of the 1990s, associational activism had been increasing. Social, human rights, environmental, heritage and cultural associations, if not overtly political, had created spaces in which Algerians could organise collectively, contribute to social capital and reflect on the future [4]. Combined with the youth mobilisation in public spaces, stadiums and other sports arenas [5], this everyday activism has contributed to what Asef Bayat describes as 'nonmovements.' These are 'a form of the non-deliberate and dispersed but contentious practices of individuals and families to enhance their life chances' [6]. Many Algerians were already mobilised at the grassroots levels and were ready to take back political and public space in an ordered and peaceful way.

The use of slogans such as *silmiya* for peaceful protest, enabled diverse groups to unite politically. Participation in political debate included public forums on the steps of the national theatre, collective Ramadan ftour evening meals on the streets of Algiers, and actively engaged students in and outside universities, reclaiming the public space that had long been stifled.

Internationalism

What role then have international actors played in these developments and how internationalist is the Hirak in its outlook? International players have historically held a contested place in Algeria. The principles of national sovereignty and non-interference are fundamental to Algerian political culture. The tendency of European diplomacy to take an ahistorical approach clashes with Algerian demands for truth and justice, including truth about European crimes committed in the War of Independence. Democracy promotion goals fell by the wayside as Europeans failed to understand, let alone support Algeria in the Black Decade of the 1990s [7]. More recently, Darbouche writes that the EU has managed to install a form of Euro-Arab dialogue based on 'European fears rather the region's socio-economic preoccupations' [8]. This has underpinned its failure to support the real democratic reform that citizens have demanded over a long period and its relative absence both in diplomacy and commentary around the Hirak.

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EU positions and policy statements have attempted to frame the southern Mediterranean region in terms of a dangerous and divided space, compared to the united and peaceful

northern shore, further entrenching negative trends and unequal power relations [9]. The lack of meaningful dialogue on democracy in EU-Algeria interaction stems from 'highly Eurocentric, interest-driven, top-down' and 'depoliticizing, technocratic and highly securitized' approaches [10]. Negative tropes of division and disunity in Algeria abound in the media, in international and national discourses and in academia [11]. Beyond its immediate achievements, one of the key developments of the Hirak is the challenging of such negative tropes about Algeria and the southern Mediterranean region more widely.

In taking back the public sphere, in a united, peaceful manner, the Hirak connected to wider expressions of global discontent and internationalism. This included those in Sudan, Iraq and Lebanon, where protesters in 2019 were also demanding justice and representation, faced with corrupt and divisive elites. These movements undoubtedly inspired and took inspiration from the Algerian Hirak.

Throughout the Hirak, Algerians challenged international actors with humour and creativity on their banners and slogans that called out French interference or US hegemony, for example over the hydrocarbon sector. Such challenges to the neoliberal order and capitalist structures, seen to profit from Algerian resources, struck a chord with other international movements drawing even wider support.

Equally important, was the role of the Algerian diaspora. On 8 March, International Women's Day, thousands marched in Paris. Large movements formed and met in spaces of symbolic importance in the UK, Germany, US, and Canada, reconnecting all Algerians in an international network of support.

Transnational identities and cultures, and solidarity with the Palestinian cause in particular, unite Algerians and Southern Mediterranean populations in a political identity that transcends borders. They share the historical injustices and grievances, untruths, and lack of justice for crimes committed by European powers. The Hirak offers an opportunity to revisit history, political roles, and spaces. It allows a new form of dialogue to emerge with an empowered youth who could re-engage with Mediterranean history.

Lessons for a new political space

The Caribbean writer Edouard Glissant spoke in 1998 of the difficulties Europe had in opening up and understanding its neighbours, long considered as the 'other', suggesting 'it is difficult to lose one's habits, particularly when one has conquered, lead, dominated the world' [12]. He argued that it would take a change of consciousness and imagination in Europeans to enable meaningful inclusion and the opening up of Europe. Similarly, in the *Poetics of Relation*, he argued for the 'right to opacity' of the oppressed 'other,' and the right to not be understood, but to simply exist differently [13]. The Western tradition of measuring and passing judgment, creating hierarchies, as was done by colonial regimes, prevented the acceptance of difference and underpinned the structures of oppression.

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At a global turning point with the corona pandemic, Europe needs now to reflect on its history. Europeans can learn from the impressive social mobilization during 56 weeks of protest in Algeria, and similar movements in Iraq, Lebanon and Sudan, to rebuild their own broken communities and to rethink the exploitative structures of their economies.

The worldwide pandemic has highlighted the limitations of the Western capitalist model. The basic social structures on which we depend are often underfunded or privatized, communities fragmented and social solidarity eroded. Euro-centricity fails both sides of the Mediterranean. The myth of the southern Mediterranean as a dangerous space and the north as a peaceful one falls apart when we compare the types of protest in France and in Algeria over the last year. The unity on the streets of Algiers during the peaceful Hirak movement first needs recognition, rather than deconstruction in academic analysis designed to disprove the democratic credentials or potential of Algerian society for reform.

Algerian protesters have shone a light on problems of global significance: unaccountability, corruption and the breakdown of the capitalist model, the rise in authoritarianism and the failure to protect our environment. They have done so not only in protesting, but also in offering an alternative model and values. In promoting social solidarity, cultural diversity, environmental activism and a wider, engaged political debate, Algerians are reclaiming their environment, their cultural and political spaces in an urgent move to reform society for a fairer, more sustainable future.

Documenting these developments, commentators such as Yahia Zoubir, have recognised the Hirak for its inherent value, as the 'stunning development' of a 'powerful civil society, with incredible organizational, nonviolent skills' [14]. This uniting of Algerian society, challenging the stereotypes of apathy, division and violence, has brought with it a sense of collective belonging. It has created a new political space in which reflection and debate could happen, one which could transcend the borders of the Mediterranean if there is sufficient recognition, imagination and political will.

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