

Bouteflika May Run for a Fifth Term

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On 23 October 2016 Amara Benyounès of the Mouvement Populaire d'Algérie (MPA) publicised his support for President Bouteflika, should he run for a fifth term in 2019 (Semmar 2016). This is problematic, as Bouteflika is seriously unwell. Since officially, Algeria functions as a democratic republic, succession should be up to popular vote and under these circumstances, should Bouteflika remain President, his capacity for governance is in doubt. This begs the question: who is truly governing Algeria?

Abdelaziz Bouteflika has been President of Algeria since April 2004, when he was elected with 83.5% of the vote (Migdalovitz 2011). All rival candidates withdrew from the race, citing electoral fraud. Nevertheless, under his leadership, Bouteflika ended the war and has remained in power for 12 years. In 2008, Bouteflika announced constitutional reform revoking the two-term limit on the Presidency, meaning that Bouteflika was likely to be president for life (BBC 2013).

The President himself has not spoken in public since 2012 (Spencer 2015) and many speculate that he can barely speak since he was hospitalised with a mini-stroke on 28 April 2013. Moreover, leaked US diplomatic correspondences have alluded to Mr Bouteflika suffering from stomach cancer, while official reports maintain that he merely suffers from a stomach ulcer (BBC 2013). Nevertheless, speculation of the 77-year-old President's capability to govern has been prominent in the private Algerian press, as well as in academic circles. Some say that he is being presented as the figurehead for the country while the real behind-the-scenes governance is being undertaken by ambitious circles within government and the military. This is not too difficult to imagine, considering his seeming frailty on the rare instances he has emerged in public.

The governance crisis is nothing new (Daraghi 2015). The government seems to have been ruled by Said Bouteflika and members of the President's clan since his stroke in 2013, with Abdelaziz's role reduced to a figurehead – though he seldom speaks when he does make it into the public eye. The government has long been nicknamed 'Les Decideurs' as a result of this, implying that Algerians know that there is a cloud of ambiguity as to who the real decision makers are. The insecurity has further increased since 2013, but some believe that the introduction of a new president will bring an era of reform (Stefanini 2016).

The official name of the country is the Peoples' Democratic Republic of Algeria and since 1999, the country has staged elections every five years. However, all of these elections have all been marred by allegations of electoral fraud (Migdalovitz 2011). The military and secret service (DRS) had always been an integral part of Algerian politics by way of controlling the Front de Liberation National (FLN), the ruling party since the country's independence from France in 1962 until 1992. This all changed in 2016, when the DRS was disbanded, showing that Bouteflika's allies have more control than ever. Should 'Les Decideurs' attempt to arrange a successor, they will certainly be going against the official nature of the state.

Despite the collective memory of 'the black decade', it is not uncommon for people to descend to the streets in protest. These demonstrations may regard Algeria's stagnant socio-economic issues (as Algerians are citizens of a rentier state, who do not benefit from

Algeria's wealth in natural gas and hydrocarbons) and 'el-Hogra' (the term which encompasses the concept of corruption, but is also used to describe the attitudes of governmental figures who are committing such crimes) (Bouandel 2015, 455-456). It is precisely this behaviour which could explain the inner governmental circles' disregard of the need to stage free and fair elections.

Nevertheless, the reluctance to stage genuinely democratic elections in Algeria could stem from the long period of instability and political violence which followed the country's previous attempt at democracy. That resulted in the elections being cancelled by the FLN, as the Front Islamique de Salut (FIS) were set to win by a large majority on the mandate of creating an Islamic State in Algeria.

The importance of a stable Algeria which is willing to participate in international politics cannot be underestimated; the country is a stalwart against Islamic terrorism in North Africa and a possible source of gas for the EU. This would serve the EU by allowing them to move away from Russian energy and stabilise North Africa (Stefanini 2016). Algeria would benefit from the possible deal by allowing European investment to boost their economy since the plummeting oil prices have greatly affected the population.

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