



Algeria is undergoing a transformation that might lead either to a true political transition or simply to a change of regime. Since the departure of Bouteflika, the regime's margin to manoeuvre has increased a bit, but the people seem to believe that the president's resignation was a way for his clan to gain time to install a successor close to it. The ruling powers are still in control and they do not want to hand over the power to the new Algerian generation until they will be satisfied with a compromise candidate. In the background the Algerian Army is protecting its unrelenting political dominance, says Mariano Garcia Munoz.

THE STARTING POINT.-

The beginning of such transformation was the 11th February when President Bouteflika announced that he will seek a re-election the 18th of April, date fixed for the polls. On February 28th demonstrations started all over the country, and new movement was created: Al Mouvatana (Citizen's democracy). The demonstrations and the civic forces compelled the ailing President not to seek another fifth term, avoiding at the same time that he did not extend the fourth thus managing the pseudo-transition that he referred to in a letter. His resignation as President was half a victory for Algerians.

Nevertheless, the protests have been going on every Friday in a peaceful way since the participants believe that his clan and the groups supporting him after his first term in 1999 are manipulating the transition. The move by the Bouteflika's clan shows that the different cliques that surrounded him are fighting for their survival through the search of a candidate of consensus, meaning that the system could remain in place.

The Algerian citizens consider that this situation is an insult to their dignity and an affront to the political feelings of the people who would like to see the end of corruption and graft when they are suffering from a string of economic measures that have lowered their standard of living. To appease the protesters the constitution has been invoked and the Chairman of the Higher House has been appointed acting President with the task of defining and setting the future of the country.

This new approach has received a wave of bigger and more numerous protests based on the wish of the people for real changes in the political and economic landscape of Algeria that has not evolved since the end of the war of independence but it could also lead to a very uncertain future.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF THE ALGERIAN REGIME.-

The Algerian system is a by-product of the anti-colonialist war, since the main group that took part against the colonialist rule, the Front National de Liberation (FNL) later on became the core of the Armée National de Liberation (ANL) and transformed itself into the Armée National Populaire (ANP) once the independence from France was achieved. Therefore, the existent Algerian regime was founded on the victorious anti-colonial struggle of the 60 led by the Army that granted itself the right to oversee the economic and political life of the country. In addition, the FLN has been the source of politicians who have been at the government's helm. They were inspired by the Arab socialism rooted in the nasserism of those years. Bouteflika was the last remnant of the fighting elite. Other supporters of the government have been the big business, in the frame of the Forum des Chefs d'Entrepise (FCE) – the Algerian business organization- that have improved their position after the arrival of Bouteflika in 1999. The political parties like the FLN and the Rassemblement National Democratique (RND) have also been the pillars of the political life in the last 20 years, since the opposition groups in the Parliament have been tolerated to give an idea of democracy like the Justice and Development Front and the Social Movement for Peace, both Islamists, which have survived after the civil war from 1992 to 1999. The convergence of the military with the political elite and the economic sector has given way to what the Algerians call "le pouvoir".

This connection led to what this Observatory wrote on the report of November 2018:

"The continuity of the isolation and the strong presence of the state in all sectors of the economy can be explained by: (1) intra-elite struggles and violent conflicts between state elites and armed groups over the distribution of rents, rendering decision making and coherent reform strategies impossible; (2) military and bureaucratic clans profit from import monopoly and oligopoly rents and display little interest in increased domestic production; (3) the role of industrial enterprises that create their own social networks; (4) the strong remnants of a nationalist, state oriented, socialist and collectivist ideology."

In the present-day political situation, the stakeholders to watch during the debate on a post Bouteflika Algeria, include the military elite, led by Gen. Ahmed Gaid Salah; the business elite, including trade unions and business conglomerate bosses within the FCE; and the two parties in the government's ruling coalition, the National Liberation Front and the Democratic National Rally.

The issue now is that if the persistent civil unrest can also foster an environment in which these power holders, who are fearful of losing control of the simmering Algerian street, should make space at the table for opposition parties and civil society groups that are often kept out of the political process.

The transitional democratic moment that Algeria is going through and will be living in the coming months is a decisive move that can show how much power the Army is ready to give out to the people or if it will start a process to reaffirm its leadership likewise it has happened in Egypt. The arrest of prominent business men, in late April by the Army and the detention of the once all powerful brother of Bouteflika, Saidi, perhaps is showing the way to autocracy. In any case, the ongoing Algeria's political transition will also produce ripples in the regional dynamics.

Tunisia and Morocco are watching with special interest developments in Algeria, because they worry that if the country enters in a period of chaos and insecurity the waves could also reach them. The success of the peaceful Algerian demonstrators might inspire activists in the region with the idea that the people are not powerless to confront autocracies.

CLOSING REMARKS.-

The EU should analyse closely the political and economic transformation of Algeria given the consequences that might arise from it. It could also contribute to its political transformation by:

- * Helping to renew the social contract
- * Supporting economic change from isolationism to open cooperation, and
- * Helping to establish better standards of living for all its citizens.

We have to bear in mind if the future presidential elections set for next July, are a first step towards democracy that will produce a different outcome than what the country has experienced for the past 25 years.

In the emerging new Algeria it seems that its citizens have found out that in order to achieve democracy, they must first refuse to engage in unfair democratic elections.

This paper was presented by retired Spanish Ambassador Mariano Garcia Munoz to a meeting of Eurodefence Presidents in Madrid in May 2019. REduced by his kind permission