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THE CONSEQUENCES OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

ON THE STABILITY OF THE ALGERIAN REGIME

عواقب جائحة كوفيد-19

على استقرار النظام الجزائري

LES CONSÉQUENCES DE LA PANDÉMIE COVID-19

SUR LA STABILITÉ DU RÉGIME ALGÉRIEN

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Abstract :

The following article will analyze the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic on Algeria by illustrating the growing complexity and the interplay between the Algerian regime and the Hirak mass protest movement. It will demonstrate the political impact of COVID-19 on the political transition; then it will proceed with an exploration of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the socio-economic situation in Algeria. To achieve the article's objective micro-level & multi-variables analysis were adopted to look at all aspects of the subject. In conclusion, we propose that the Algerian regime can semi-return power to Hirak and allow the old political groups that had been blocked to come to power under new conditions (political and economic reconciliation.)

Keywords: Algeria, Regime Stability; the Hirak mass protest movement; COVID-19.

الملخص:

تهدف هذه الورقة إلى دراسة مدى تأثير جائحة كوفيد-19 على استقرار النظام الجزائري، وذلك من خلال إيجاد إطاراً يُعتدُّ به لفهم التعقيدات المتزايدة والتفاعل بين النظام الجزائري والحراك الشعبي، يعالج هذا المقال مدى تأثير جائحة كوفيد-19 على الانتقال السياسي ومن ثم على الوضع الاقتصادي والاجتماعي الجزائري. وفي سبيل تحقيق هدف الدراسة وللوقوف على جوانب الموضوع كافة تم الاعتماد على التحليل الجزئي والتحليل متعدد المتغيرات. في الختام نقترح أن يقدم النظام الجزائري تنازلات من خلال إعادة السلطة بطريقة جزئية إلى الحراك والسماح للجماعات السياسية التي تم حظرها للوصول إلى السلطة في ظل عقد اجتماعي جديد (مصالحة سياسية واقتصادية).

الكلمات المفتاحية: الجزائر، استقرار النظام؛ الحراك؛ كوفيد-19.

Résumé:

Cet article discute les conséquences de la pandémie du COVID-19 sur l'Algérie en illustrant la complexité croissante et l'interaction entre le régime algérien et le Hirak (mouvement de protestation populaire). Il s'intéresse aussi à l'impact politique de la pandémie sur la transition politique; puis il procédera à une exploration de la façon dont le COVID-19 a affecté la situation socio-économique en Algérie. pour examiner tous les aspects du sujet, une analyse micro et multi-variables a été adoptée. En conclusion, nous proposons que le régime Algérien peut semi-rendre le pouvoir au Hirak et permettre aux anciens groupes politiques qui avaient été bloqués d'arriver au pouvoir dans de nouvelles conditions (une réconciliation politique et économique.)

Mots-clés : Algérie, stabilité du régime; Hirak; Covid-19.

1. INTRODUCTION

Algeria confirmed the first case of COVID-19 virus within its borders in the late of February the officials declared that the virus was imported by an Italian citizen who arrived in the country on February 17 and has been placed in isolation. On the 17-22 of March 2020 officials decreed to suspended non-cargo domestic and international air and maritime travel, and closed all universities, schools, kindergartens, and mosques to prevent the catastrophe, executives ordered to stop the demonstration which held each Friday since 22th of February 2019 these decisions came as preventive measures to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thenceforth, the Algerian government has followed the recommendations of World Health Organization (WHO) strictly to reduce the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Algeria was one of the leading countries starting to close borders, implement partial lockdowns and curfews measures in critical areas such as Algiers, Blida, Batna, Oran, TiziOuzou, Setif and many other cities which has the highest number of COVID-19 cases in Algeria and used mass media to spread awareness.

At the current stage of the pandemic at the time of writing, Algeria is ranked eighth in the MENA region, with 0.15 % of the population affected thanks to decisive measures that have limited contagion thus so far. Many observers associate this low rate with Algeria's young population (70% are under 30 years old), given that youth tend to face lower risks in terms of the health impact of the Covid-19. However, despite

the fact that hospital capacity is increasing and there is a 68.1% recovery rate, Algeria has ranked second after Egypt in the MENA region for Covid-19 deaths, with a 3.9% mortality rate.

The following article will analyze the outcomes of the COVID-19 pandemic on Algeria by illustrating the growing complexity and the interplay between the Algerian regime and the *Hirak* mass protest movement which we believe it's the only real opposition*. Further, the following paper will demonstrate the political impact of COVID-19 on the political transition; then it will proceed with an exploration of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the socio-economic situation in Algeria which we believe deserves to be observed. To achieve the article's objective micro-level & multi-variables analysis were adopted to look at all aspects of the subject.

The political impact of COVID-19 on Algeria:

Since it's started, the pandemic has paved the road to increase the Algerian regime's chances to control the *Hirak*. After the government's decree prohibiting the *Hirak* movement to prevent the spread of the pandemic, some protestation figures saw that as a new move from the government to restrict the demonstration. So the *Hirak* has decided to mobilize virtually, especially on Facebook, where in many pages and groups are created, as well as YouTube videos and people have started going live or using memes to denounce the government's lack of efficiency, to which the regime responded by using local oppression, i.e., arresting

activists through enforcing the law especially Art 144 Bis from the Algerian penal code:

The Law shall punish by imprisonment from two months to two years and be fined for 1,000 DZD to 500,000 DZD, or one of these two penalties only, whoever insults a judge, employee, public officer, commander, or one of the public power men by saying, indicating, threatening, sending or delivering anything to them, or by writing or drawing non-publicly while performing their duties or on the occasion of performing them, with the intention of prejudice With their honor, consideration, or due respect for their authority.

Whoever offends the President of the Republic in terms that include insulting, or defamation, whether by writing, drawing, permission, or any mechanism for broadcasting sound or pictures, or by any electronic means or other informational.¹

It seems like the regime has already controlled this arena, too, by putting in jail the demonstrators and journalists who spoke against the regime and its figures such as the president. We need to notice that 10.000 prisoners have been released by the actual president, 75 of whom were prisoners of conscience, but many of the protest movements have been arrested and put in jail during the COVID-19 pandemic, and some personalities of the *Hirak* see that as a new move from the government to contain the virtual demonstration and put the *Hirak* in check.

We noticed is that the COVID-19 impact on the Algerian political scene as manifested in the difficulty to return to the physical demonstrations makes the authority more able to catch its breath.

However, it looks that the actual president has the goodwill to implement all the political demands of the *Hirak*, but the pandemic has slowed down all the political reforms, especially those related to changing the constitution and the political-economical elites. To reach a consensual constitution, the executives shared the constitutional draft with all the actors (political parties, civil society, some political figures, and the public opinion). A debate has opened during the lockdown. Many declared that this draft does not reflect the new Algerian ambitions and intentions, describing it as a "continuation of the current constitution" drafted by former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

More than 2500 remarks and recommendations have been addressed to the Constitutional Committee that prepared the new draft constitution. On January 8th, and less than two weeks after he took power, the Algerian President had appointed a constitutional committee team of 17 experts in constitutional law, headed by former UN expert Ahmed Araba, to conduct a comprehensive review of the new constitution and reformulate it to build what He calls it "the new Algeria."

Democracy is a balance of power between the state and the people. Algeria is not an exception to that, and recently the struggle became within the regime and the *Hirak*. An unbalanced situation since the *Hirak* is not an institution, so the fight is out of category as the regime owns all the institutions. That is why the *Hirak* will not win any other rights unless it became an institution.

Historically, all Algerian movements, namely October 1988, April 2001, and the Arab spring 2011 had a central leadership, a

structure and a political project; all of them got absorbed by the regime, so in the public conscience, the idea that if they put a central leadership to the *Hirak* movement, they will get absorbed too comes to mind.

This is a double-edged sword, the absence of a central leadership or a pivotal force, which determines the *Hirak's* reaction toward the regime's policies internally and externally *ipso facto* is the reason for the movement's failure to gain more rights. These weaknesses in the *Hirak* (a movement without a leader, without structure and political project) has helped the regime to reach cohesion in the face of demands.

The popular movement's fate is governed by several variables that determine the future of the *Hirak*. These variables are²:

1. The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic led to stopping gatherings and demonstrations, at the request of the regime, a year after the mass rallies have started (Feb 2019– Feb 2020). With the increasing severity of casualties, the popular movement's conviction grew that preventing gatherings is not a political "move" to control the movement but rather an objective fact.

Accordingly, the regime's success in confronting the pandemic might enhance its balance and limit the *Hirak* movement. However, its failure might add a new congestion to the political and socio-economic ones, which open the way for the *Hirak* movement to return, but less regularly, although there might be a fracture within the movement between those who may "risk" organizing protests, and those whose concerns regarding the pandemic prevent them from participating.

2. The confrontations between the regime

and the *Hirak* movement in 2019 were generally peaceful. The compliance of the regime with several demands, such as the exclusion of Bouteflika and the imprisonment of some symbols of corruption (despite the arrest of some activists of the movement and some leaders for different periods), has enabled the authority to strengthen political stability, which it ultimately failed to achieve during the Black Decade.

3. There are weaknesses in the *Hirak* movement, which help the regime to hold together facing the demands:

a. The absence of a central leadership or a pivotal force, which determines the movement's reaction toward the regime's policies internally and externally.

b. The consensus of visions within the regime: When there was a conflict of wings within the Algerian system, the *Hirak* movement was able to achieve many of the demands.

c. The escalation of regional concerns (especially the Libyan crisis) might push the *Hirak* to wait for the outcome of the Libyan developments. This trend might expand if the outbreak of international wars in Libya, or the escalation of proxy wars.

d. Some fractures in the *Hirak* movement have been noticed during the demonstration; it manifested through subcultures dilemma: the continuous debate about the *Amazigh* identity with a significant variation in estimating their population and the limits for expressing cultural identity and the debate about raising *Amazigh* flags and the arrest of some who raised these flags. Besides, their presence in public institutions, where reports indicate their high percentage

in the technocratic sectors and a lesser influence in the military and security institutions, especially after the change in military intelligence. The acceptance of the *Amazigh* language varies, where it is constitutionally accepted, while socially, it is less accepted. Identifying it as a national language or an official language is also debated.

Now we are in the middle of a crossroad. The government has either to take the risk to empower the *Hirak* and include it into politics or keep it politically weak. In her article *Limiting Change Through Change: The Key to the Algerian Regime's Longevity*, Dalia Ghanem declares that the Algerian regime has shown a significant degree of resilience and adaptability during the upheavals³.

Despite the mass protest movement and the last presidential election, the People's National Army still dominates the country; they are the swordwielders. This order will likely continue for the foreseeable future. In his article *Strategic Situation Assessment: The Prospects of Algerian Policy Between Change and Adaptation*, Prof. Walid Abd al-Hay assumed that between 1962 and 2020 the military presidency has comprised 58.3% civilians got 41.7% of the same period, what we should notice is that most of the civilian periods are transitional periods, which have not been able to establish stable bases of civilian rule, thus allowing the military bases to be more sustainable⁴.

However, the international competition, turmoil in Libya, and the persistence of tension in the south of Algeria, especially in Mali and Niger, might force the Algerian regime to pursue the choice of army interference abroad.

Moreover, the persistence of tension in their neighborhood, even without Algerian intervention, keeps Algerian decisions in the hand of the military and other security forces and justifies military spending⁵.

Algeria ranks third globally in terms of the ratio of military spending to the GDP, reaching 5.3%. The military spending represents 13.8% of the Algerian government's expenditures. Between 2010 and 2020, the average annual military spending rate is about \$9.6 billion. With expenditure vacillating with fluctuating oil and gas prices, the current government decided to reduce its spending by 9%.⁶

The impact of COVID-19 on the Algerian socio-economic situation:

If the economy is the primary driver of events and facts at all times and places, then the economic impact of COVID-19 on Algeria is relevant to explain the interplay between the Algerian regime and the *Hirak* mass protest movement.

A famous Algerian says aptly what sums up the economic impact of the COVID-19 on the *Hirak* mass protest movement: "Starve the dog and it'll follow you." During the pandemic, many Algerian people, especially those working in the black market, which represents around 25% of the Algerian economy, lost their jobs, and the actual regime capitalizes on that by giving them financial aid. The regime continues this policy with some industries and small businesses, and 2795 artists benefit from this aid. The government sent many solidarity convoys to carry food supplies destined for needy families living in remote areas and *Bedouin* (nomadic areas)

and people with special needs. These measures will enable the actual regime to strengthen the political stability in the short term.

Oil & Gaz are the backbones of the Algerian economy; many global economic institutions foresee stormy days ahead of the Algerian economy due to the sharp and continuous decline in the prices of Oil. World Bank's last report on the Algerian economic situation declared that the COVID-19 outbreak would slow down consumption and investment while falling oil prices will cut into fiscal and export revenues. The new government has a difficult task maintaining macroeconomic stability, responding to the public health crisis, and pursuing structural reforms⁷.

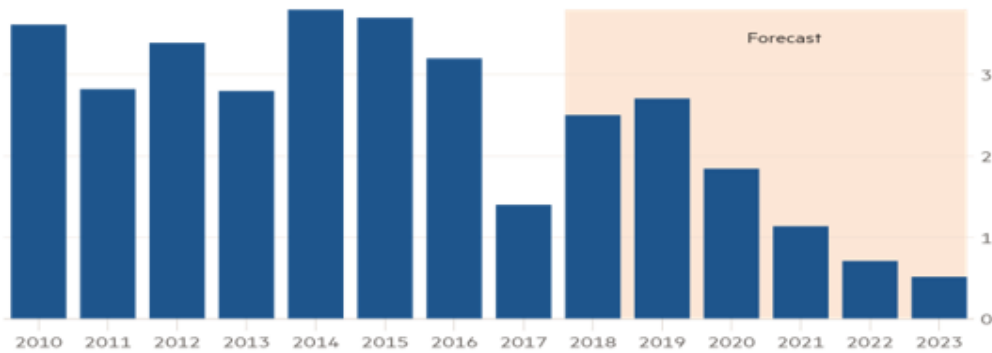
The present government has the will to liberate the Algerian economy from the control of the energy sector. Nevertheless, Algeria shows a total dependency on this sector; 95% of its revenues depend on its exports of black gold. Algeria's foreign exchange reserves have measured at 53.6 USD bn in June 2020, compared to 55.2 USD bn in the previous month⁸.

The national Industrial Production Index shows the deterioration of the vital Algerian economic sectors has been amplifying since the outbreak of the COVID-19, Hydrocarbons recorded a drop of 3.3%. The Mines and Quarries show a

decrease of 4.8%. Metal, mechanical and electrical industries have known a decrease of 38.2%. Agro-Food Industries registered an increase of 5.9% in the first quarter of 2020, a positive rate, but a more inferior extent than observed in the previous quarter (+11.3%). Building Materials continued their downward trend and showed a negative variation of -11.5%. Chemical industries observe a drop of 11.5%. Textile industries record a negative variation of -14.6%. The Wood and Paper industries observe a drop of 23.3% in the first quarter of 2020.⁹

Then, things became worse in the second quarter of 2020, according to the National Statistics Office (NSO) Algeria continued its downward trend and recorded a negative in industrial production of the national public sector. The Energy sector sees a decrease of 6.8% in the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same period of the previous year. Hydrocarbons recorded a drop of 8.5%. The Mines and Quarries show a decrease of -3,6%, however, of lesser magnitude than that observed in the previous quarter (-6.7%). Algeria knows significant reductions characterize the rest of the activities.¹⁰

The scene becomes further complicated if we add the decline of the economic growth rate, which has already started in 2015 (the rate was about 3.5%), and in 2023, it is expected to reach 0.5%, as shown in the following graph:



Source: Walid Abd al-Hay, Strategic Situation Assessment: The Prospects of Algerian Policy Between Change and Adaptation, July 2020, <http://eng.alzaytouna.net/2020/07/28/strategic-situation-assessment-the-prospects-of-algerian-policy-between-change-and-adap/#.Xyg4m4gzbiU> p 11.

Besides, the World Bank report announces that Algeria is facing a combined shock from halving oil prices, a public health crisis, and global economic disruptions following the COVID-19 outbreak. An oil price at US\$ 30/barrel in 2020 would decrease Algeria's total fiscal revenues by 21.2%. Despite cuts to public investment (-9.7%) and public consumption (-1.6%) envisaged by the 2020 Finance Law, the fiscal deficit would increase to 16.3% of GDP. Meanwhile, the sharp decline in export revenues (-51%) will lead the trade deficit to expand to 18.2% of GDP and the current account deficit to peak at 18.8% of GDP in 2020, despite efforts of the regime to contain imports and weak domestic demand.¹¹

The post-pandemic's economic consequences on the Algerian regime stability and resilience represent an opportunity for the *Hirak* movement to regain the street. Also the openness of the regime to create new political, economic and

social elite could take the *Hirak* into the official institutions.

While acknowledging the importance of the economic impact of COVID-19 on Algeria, the social impact also has an essential role in defining the interplay between the Algerian regime and the *Hirak* mass protest movement.

The increase of violence due to the economic situation revealed the extent of the danger threatening the Algerian society. Official statistics indicate an increase in Algeria's crime rate during the first half of the year 2020, the statistics recorded a quarter of a million crimes, with an average of 693 accidents per day, in which more than 220,000 people were involved. The statistics consider 70 thousand cases of violent crimes against women. The statistics mention that unemployed people are at the forefront of those implicated in the crimes. At the same time, the different age groups involved by 3.8% are those under the age of 18, and 57.3% between 18 and 30 years old, and 25.63% between 30 and 40 years old, the percentage of those over the age of 40 exceeded 13%, and the percentage of male gender was estimated at 97.8 %, and 2.20 % of females.¹²

Moreover, during the COVID-19

pandemic, we noticed an increase in domestic violence led to an extension in divorce rates in Algerian society. Official statistics show that 20% of marriages end in divorce and that divorce to marriage rate has increased dramatically since 2014, reaching more than 68 thousand divorce cases annually at a rate of one case every 8 minutes, children are usually the first victims, with an average of 100,000 per year. This could be caused by the economic and political pressure, and the accelerating spread of social media networks with which the Algerian society have failed to cope, thus leading to social unrest with divorce as its most prominent manifestation.¹³

Eventually, this creates social turmoil, which indirectly nourishes the political turmoil. Furthermore, the *Hirak* movement can challenge the regime by increasing its demands and put him in check since the economic crisis is at the door.

3. CONCLUSION

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to thinking in two prospects: short term and long term.

In the short run, the regime has to choose among four courses of action, whether it retains power or returns it to the *Hirak* movement and whether it acquiesces in or resists the expansion of political participation. Each option, however, imposes costs on the military and the political system.

1- Progressive-return and Restrict: The regime can progressively return power to the *Hirak* movement through purging the governmental officials and restricting new groups to political power by nomination into office or elections.

2- Semi-return and Expand: The regime can semi-return power to the *Hirak* movement and permit the previous political groups which were blocked to come to power under new conditions (a political & economical reconciliation).

3- Retain and Restrict: The regime can retain power and continue to resist the *Hirak* movement's expansion through political participation. In this case, despite whatever intentions the regime may have, they are inevitably driven to more repressive measures.

4- Retain and Expand: the regime can retain power and permit or, indeed, capitalize upon the expansion of political participation to the *Hirak* movement.

In the long run, options three and four will reinforce the fears of the regime's longevity *ad vitam aeternam*. Based on the previous factors, option one will create the trend to "relative" stability in Algeria would be the right thing to happen, and a new generation of political and economic forces

will take shape within the next 3–5 years to be more responsive to the local, regional and international challenges. Option two will create real stability through a new political, economic, and social pact within old regime figures and the new one based on new values and conditions. This path will take Algeria to a long stability and create a real cohesion among all the parts of the regime and society. In this situation, Algeria can be a regional player out of exporting its stability toward the Sahel region and Libya.

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* During the last twenty years of former President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's reign, the "opposition" parties largely embraced the regime for survival. With no real opposition, Bouteflika followed what could be called a "corruption democratization policy" with the complicity of some foreign countries. To minimize the influence of his political opposition, Bouteflika created more than 67 new parties, supporting them financially

while exploiting their internal problems and undemocratic structures to ensure their

loyalties. This was not a true democracy, by any standards.