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The Layers of History Beneath Algeria’s Protests

MURIAM HALEH DAVIS

Algerians have been protesting against their regime for months, maintaining a staggering revolutionary momentum. The demonstrations began on February 16, 2019, in response to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s attempt to run for a fifth term despite having been incapacitated for several years. They prompted Bouteflika’s resignation on April 2, but this has not satisfied the protesters, who are calling for genuine political change and the removal of the current ruling elite (known as the *isaba*, or gang). They have also rejected the elections currently scheduled for December 12.

Across the country, people now associate Fridays with the act of participating in a *vendredi*—a compound word that merges *vendredi* (Friday) and *dire* (to say). Fridays are not the only designated day of protest, though. On Tuesdays, students take to the streets, giving this movement, known as the Hirak, a strong intergenerational element.

The youth of many protesters has marked the symbols they deploy, ranging from historical figures of the 1954–62 Algerian Revolution to the action movie star Chuck Norris. Similarly, the number five—referring to Bouteflika’s reelection bid—features in many jokes. One poster invoked an iconic perfume, declaring, “Only Chanel has the right to have a No. 5.” Indeed, in the early days of the protests, the Hirak was commonly known by a second moniker: the revolution of smiles.

To understand the role of youth in these protests, as well as the insistence on peaceful methods and demonstrations of civic responsibility, one must delve into the history of the country even before it achieved independence in 1962. Humor has

long been a tool used by Algerians to navigate the absurdity—and violence—of political life, both in Algeria and in exile. One thinks, for example, of the comedian Fellag, who has been performing in France since the late 1990s; he left Algeria due to the violence of the civil war, when intellectuals, journalists, and artists were at risk of being assassinated. His humor is based on self-mockery. In his show *The Dinosaurs*, he recounts that modern civilization was born in the Mediterranean, and North Africa was traversed by the Phoenicians, who brought commercial exchange, and the Egyptians, who invented the pyramids and hieroglyphics—but in Algeria, he claims, nothing of the sort took root (*walou!*).

The Algerian people are used to being represented by others—not only by comedians, but also by historical narratives and political figures. Since February, however, Algerians have insisted on representing themselves, disproving the caricatures of a childlike population with no civic values that is incapable of governing itself. They have also insisted on representing their own history, defying the state narrative. They are struggling to reappropriate their country’s past even as they demand the right to decide their own future.

REVOLUTIONARY NARRATIVES

The Algerian War of Independence, also known as the Algerian Revolution, has a mythic status in the global history of decolonization. The 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*, directed by the Italian Gillo Pontecorvo, was inspired by the memoirs of Saadi Yacef, an Algerian nationalist who also stars in the film. It depicts the struggle for an Algerian nation-state through a particularly violent episode of the war that was concentrated in the Casbah, or “native section,” of the capital city. It focuses on both the intense repression by the

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French colonial regime and the acts of violence—sometimes against civilians—committed by the Algerian nationalist party, the National Liberation Front (FLN).

The conclusion of the film shows FLN leader Ali La Pointe and his three companions hiding out in a building, refusing to surrender to the French army. The entire building is eventually destroyed by the French, making Ali La Pointe a martyr or *shahid* for the national cause. If there is any doubt that Algerian protesters have a developed sense of historical justice, consider that images of Ali La Pointe have been displayed on posters, flags, and prominently placed graffiti on the streets of Algiers since February 22.

But in 2019, the FLN is no longer the hero of Algerian nationalism. Even though the FLN and its shadow party, the National Democratic Rally, have held a monopoly over Algerian politics and history, they are now being massively rejected. Yet the protesters find themselves in a double bind: How to criticize the FLN, which has long claimed the mantle of the Algerian nationalism, without rejecting the legacy of the revolution itself?

One way of navigating this quandary is to affirm the importance of heroes of the War of Independence who have been systematically overlooked by official historical narratives. Hirak activists are actively developing such a counternarrative.

Take Messali Hadj, the so-called father of Algerian nationalism, who came to prominence among Algerian workers in France between the two world wars. Messali was linked to the French Communist Party before breaking with it over its foot-dragging on the issue of Algeria. During the War of Independence, supporters of Messali Hadj who refused to join the FLN were systematically targeted by the nationalist party, which tolerated no rival faction. As much as the revolution pitted the French state against Algerian nationalists, it equally gave rise to a fratricidal struggle among nationalist factions. This was exemplified by the 1957 Melouza massacre, in which 374 villagers were killed by the FLN.

Even though Messali Hadj has long occupied a marginal place in Algeria's official memory, his importance has been repeatedly affirmed over the course of the Hirak. In April, his daughter Djanina Messali-Benkelfat expressed solidarity with the protests from Montreal, attracting widespread media coverage in Algeria. In June, on the 45th anniversary of Messali Hadj's death, protesters in his hometown of Tlemcen paid homage to him.

THE BERBER FACTOR

One of the essential tasks of the movement is to reconstitute a richer tapestry of Algerian nationalism than has been permitted since independence. This is a matter not only of resurrecting certain figures, but also of revisiting the very ideological basis of Algerian identity. Messali, after all, was a partisan of Algeria's Arabo-Islamic identity, another issue that has become a major source of contention for the Hirak.

One of the characteristics that distinguishes North Africa from its Arabophone cousins to the east is the presence of a large Amazigh (Berber) population, which makes up 20 to 30 percent of the Algerian population. Berbers were the original inhabitants of the region—they lived in North Africa before the Arab conquest in the second half of the seventh century.

Because the appellation "Berber" is rooted in the Greek name for North Africa, "Barbaria" (literally, "land of the barbarians"), members of this ethnic group have refused the label, calling themselves Amazigh (or the plural, Imazighen), which means "free people" in their language, Tamazight. Despite their centuries of intermixing with the Arab population, a French colonial myth asserted that the Amazigh were "more civilized" than the Arabs, whom the French believed were more influenced by Islam.

The question of whether to endorse Algeria's Islamic and Arab orientation split nationalists even before the War of Independence. The "Berber crisis" of 1949, for example, occurred when members of Messali's party (then called the Movement for the Triumph of Democratic Liberties) accused other comrades of being "Berberists" and thus encouraged a particularistic vision that undermined the unity of Algerian nationalism. Although many prominent Berber politicians—most notably Hocine Ait Ahmed—did participate in the War of Independence, fighting alongside the FLN, political and ideological divisions resurfaced soon afterward, threatening to explode into civil war. In 1963, just one year after independence, Ait Ahmed created the Socialist Forces Front (which is now Algeria's oldest opposition party), leading a guerrilla insurrection against the Algerian state's increasingly authoritarian tendencies.

The question of Berber identity has also been influenced by Algeria's relationship with France. In the 1950s, a preference for Amazigh workers meant that over half of Algerian immigrants to France came from the region of Kabylie, whose

inhabitants have been central in the struggle for linguistic and cultural recognition. Links with the Algerian diaspora in France added a transnational dimension to this struggle—many activists have historically resided in the diaspora.

The FLN's insistence on a singular Arab identity and language yielded little place for Berber cultural expression. It was only in 2002 that Tamazight was recognized as a national language, meaning that it could be taught in school. But Berber activists had to wait until 2016 for their language to achieve official status, so that it could be used in administrative documents.

Berber identity has often been framed as a threat to the territorial integrity of the Algerian nation-state. The Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylie, a group with deep links to diasporic Algerians in France, has called for self-governance. This has allowed the regime to use the specter of separatism to discredit any activists with links to Berber causes.

In June 2019, the Army chief of staff, Gâid Salah, proclaimed that only the Algerian flag would be tolerated during protests. Demonstrators carrying the Berber flag have often been punished with fines and prison sentences. The official state newspaper, *El-Moudjahid*, claimed that such displays were attempts to divide the Algerian people and introduce “identarian” slogans that threatened national unity.

Protesters are not falling for this attempt to cast plurality as an act of treason. The years after the revolution left many with the feeling that independence had been “confiscated” by political “clans” that put their own desire for power and wealth before the interests of the nation. Algerian protesters are trying to reappropriate the historical resource of the revolution to undermine this ruling elite.

THIRD-WORLDIST AMBIGUITIES

The first years of independence did not lead to stability. Ahmed Ben Bella, the only civilian president (with the exception of the ephemeral Mohamed Boudiaf), was overthrown by his defense minister, Colonel Houari Boumediène, in 1965; Ben Bella was kept under house arrest until 1980. Ben Bella's ambitious program of agricultural and industrial self-management and heady discourse of Arabo-Islamic identity gave way to Boumediène's more austere style of rule, which became increas-

ingly statist and tolerated no political or cultural expression outside of official channels.

During this period, Algeria became known as the “capital of revolutions,” offering refuge to radical movements from the Palestine Liberation Organization to the Black Panthers. In 1969, Boumediène hosted the Pan-African Festival in Algiers, bringing together international musical stars such as the South African Miriam Makeba and the American Nina Simone, as well as many other artists and intellectuals.

Algeria's revolutionary fervor was not only cultural and political but also economic. Starting with the 1962 Evian Accords, the treaty in which France granted independence, Algerian politicians rejected French attempts to hold onto the oil-rich southern territories of the Sahara Desert. Yet the provisional Algerian government still offered important concessions to French oil companies, despite its revolutionary rhetoric that the country's resources should be used to advance the interests of the Algerian people. Later, as the tide of third worldism mounted, Boumediène's rhetoric also focused on the economy. In 1971, he nationalized oil production, insisting that Algeria was “not for sale.”

This idea resurfaced on October 13, 2019, as protesters decried the interim government's move to amend the 49/51 ownership law, which requires Algerian majority ownership in all projects involving foreign investment, including the oil sector. The accusation that the regime has mismanaged and embezzled oil rents is a recurring theme for the Hirak, which insists on recovering control of the country's wealth. One well-known chant declares that the regime has “eaten the country” (*klitu al-balad*), gorging itself on the fat of the land, and cartoonists such as Dilem depict military generals as grotesquely obese.

BENEFITS OF MARTYRDOM

One way that Algerians have consistently been able to access material goods is through a form of rent very different from oil that derives from the figure of the *moudjahid*, or ex-combatant in the War of Independence. In Algeria, the president swears the oath of office not only on the Quran, but also on the blood of the martyrs of the revolution. The current electoral law stipulates that any candidates born before July 1, 1942, must prove

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their participation in the revolution. Members of later generations, who were too young to actively participate, must prove that their parents were not involved in acts deemed hostile to the revolution.

In this way, the War of Independence gave rise to a “revolutionary family” that continues to receive special economic and social benefits. The Office of National Moudjahidin (ONM), created in 1963, is responsible for determining who is a veteran of the war. This status comes with housing allotments, stipends, and access to preferential health care.

The question of who counts as a *moudjahid* has been the subject of many scandals. As the country has undergone dramatic generational changes—the number of births doubled between 2000 and 2017, and 70 percent of the population is under the age of 30—the ranks of *moudjahidin* grow every year as descendants of ex-combatants seek recognition from the state in order to qualify for the benefits associated with this status. Since 1992, quite a few “fake” *moudjahidin* have been exposed. These tangles of historical memory, bureaucracy, and corruption have contributed to a sense of revolution fatigue.

At the same time, the HIRAK has shown that the symbolism of the martyr is not completely exhausted, but rather is being used for specific political ends in 2019. The appearances of certain well-known *moudjahidaat* (female revolutionary fighters) at the protests have attracted considerable attention. Lakhdar Bouregaa—an ex-*moudjahid* who has been in prison since June for supporting the HIRAK—delivered a message to the media on October 8, highlighting his military credentials and his participation in the War of Independence. The Algerian press often refers to him as “the *moudjahid*” in articles—an indication of the weight that his historical legitimacy lends to his insistence that participation in the HIRAK is an act of patriotism. Even as the ONM urges participation in the elections scheduled for December 12—which have been rejected by the HIRAK—protesters continue to demand the release of Bouregaa, hailing him as a “great *moudjahid*.”

OCTOBER ECHOES

While the War of Independence is an inescapable touchstone for contemporary politics and protests in Algeria, the HIRAK has also highlighted

other historical events. For example, on October 5, protesters commemorated the events of October 1988, a period of protests and riots that led to both a democratic opening and a period of extreme violence. Much as in 2019, young people were at the forefront of a series of protests that decried the lack of economic opportunity and political liberties.

The conditions for revolt had been building since the early 1980s. The so-called Berber Spring (*Tafsut Imazighen*) began in March 1980 with demonstrations and strikes, advancing claims for cultural and political representation. It also posed an open challenge to the state’s monopoly on political expression after a decade in which oppositional forces—including leftists and Islamists as well as Berberists—had operated in a semi-clandestine fashion. Even though this uprising ended in violent repression, it nevertheless was a key moment of contestation that would be remembered by Berber activists in Algeria and across North Africa.

Economic frustration was epitomized by two common types: the *trabandistes*, who illegally imported items from Europe and sold them on the black market, and the *hittistes*, young unemployed men who seemed to be literally holding up the walls as they loitered

on the streets. The economic and social blockages they embodied culminated in the riots of October 1988, and transformed an unlikely item—Adidas’s “Stan Smith” sneakers—into an icon of revolt. As these tennis shoes arrived in stores, coveted by a population that could not afford them, youths started looting. In football stadiums, fans chanted, “He who doesn’t have Stan Smiths is not a man.”

The violent clashes between demonstrators and police that ensued between October 5 and 10, 1988, resulted in the deaths of 500 protesters. They were seen as a new crop of martyrs, though this time the word referred to those who had been killed by the forces of the Algerian state rather than by the French colonial army. In this context, martyrdom received no legal recognition. But Avo 88, an organization dedicated to the memory of those who were killed or disappeared during the civil war, has requested an official status for these more recent victims.

In October 2019, demonstrators repeatedly invoked the violence of October 1988, connecting their protests with those that began 31 years ear-

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lier. One organization that has been particularly targeted by the regime during the Hirak, Youth Action Rally (RAJ), was formed with the express goal of commemorating the events of 1988. The symbolism was not lost on the authorities, who began a new wave of repression at that very juncture.

The October 1988 protests led to a brief political opening that was followed by a decade-long civil war. Testifying to the depth of confusion and amnesia that marks discussion of the period, historians still debate the correct name for those years of violence. The terms “dark decade” (which has a wide consensus behind it), “national tragedy” (an official epithet), and “civil war” each have their partisans.

In February 1989, a new constitution was adopted with over 73 percent of the vote in a referendum. It introduced a system of political pluralism and liberalization of the public sphere and the media. It also gave rise to open discussions of the role of the army in politics, as well as economic reforms.

Yet this turn to liberalization also permitted the victory of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), a grouping of different Islamist tendencies, in the municipal elections of 1990 as well as in the first round of legislative elections, held in December 1991. The second round—scheduled for January 16, 1992—never occurred. Instead, the army organized a coup on January 11 in order to halt what it portrayed as an Islamist threat to democracy. FIS supporters were subjected to widespread repression; some were sent to camps in the south of the Sahara. Thousands of prisoners disappeared, and their bodies were never found.

The civil war, which left between 100,000 and 200,000 people dead, has often been narrated as a conflict between Islamic radicals and the state. More recent testimonies have complicated this narrative. Numerous musicians, journalists, and intellectuals were assassinated over these years. It is often unclear who was responsible for certain acts.

Nevertheless, the extreme violence convinced the Algerian people that any frontal confrontation with the state and the military would be imprudent and could serve as a justification for another violent crackdown. This history was often invoked to explain why Algeria did not experience the same forms of mass protest seen in Egypt and Tunisia during the so-called Arab Spring. Hirak organizers have emphasized the peaceful and orderly nature of the 2019 protests and have gone to great lengths to keep them that way.

The historical amnesia concerning the civil war is rooted in the state's efforts to close the books on the conflict. After Bouteflika was first elected president in 1999, he immediately introduced amnesty and clemency measures, which eventually resulted in the 2006 Charter for Peace and National Reconciliation. This document offered financial reparations to the families of those who were disappeared during the violence, in exchange for a written statement that the state was not responsible for their fate. It also threatened prison sentences for those who “instrumentalized the wounds of the national tragedy” or who tarnished the image of Algeria abroad.

By depoliticizing the conflict under the moniker of “national tragedy,” the state has effectively closed the door to a real understanding of what happened during those “dark” years. Bouteflika's legacy as the president who ended the civil war and brought stability to the country is embedded in this closure of historical inquiry. As the saying goes in Algeria, “*lifat mat*”—that which is over is dead. Luckily for historians, however, the notion that one can arrive at the end of history, or that it can be killed off altogether, is rarely convincing.

Groups such as SOS Disparus and the Collective of Families of the Disappeared in Algeria have continued to investigate the deaths and disappearances of loved ones. Long before the Hirak, these groups were defying the security forces' pressure to stop their regular demonstrations calling for justice and historical memory. In the current protests, alongside homages to heroes of the revolution who had been marginalized or assassinated, it is not uncommon to see protesters brandishing pictures of family members who were disappeared during the civil war. While the state has actively fashioned certain *trous de mémoires* (historical black holes), Algerians have been trying to reclaim their own history since the late 1980s.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Despite the often repressive nature of the Algerian regime, it would be a mistake to describe this system as a dictatorship or to overlook the plurality of political life, even if it is largely controlled by the state. Under Bouteflika, there were multiple parties, (largely) free elections, and a press that often critiqued the status quo. Yet these political openings were structured by the regime, which used them to incorporate potential sources of opposition into its orbit. The Algerian state has proved resourceful in manufacturing legitimacy—

from instrumentalizing Sufi networks known as *Zawiyas* to promote a less contentious form of Islam, to upgrading its image on the world stage by rebranding itself as a “reliable partner” in the war on terrorism declared by the United States after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

While the political field remained extremely fragmented, the state adopted the trappings of democratization to continue business as usual. This is why resistance has been localized and organized around specific issues in recent years. For example, the National Committee for the Defense of the Rights of the Unemployed, created in 2011, has demanded more development and a more just distribution of resources for southern Algeria. The Barakat (Enough) movement arose during Bouteflika’s run for a fourth term, but remained a largely urban presence. Its spokesperson, Mustafa Benfodil, a prominent journalist, was arrested while covering the Hirak but then quickly freed on October 8.

Others have not been so lucky. At the time of writing, it is difficult to determine how many Hirak supporters have been placed in detention, but

the number seems to be around 100. Karim Tabbou, who was a key figure in the Socialist Forces Front before participating in the founding of the Democratic and Social Union, was kidnapped by plainclothes officers on September 11 and remains in detention. There are reports that he has been held in solitary confinement. Amnesty International has expressed concern at the hardening repression of the Hirak.

Despite the enormous obstacles, the movement shows no sign of letting up. As a protester said on Facebook, “One hears that 7 months of Hirak is enough. I remind these weathervanes that the Hirak of our elders lasted for 7 years.” This idea that the Hirak is completing what could not be achieved in 1962 is often invoked.

The current revolutionary narrative is being fashioned with the memories of past struggles. In Algeria, historical interpretation has become a tool that activists are wielding with extraordinary creativity. The contemporary moment of the Hirak is thus inseparable from the historical time of revolution and decolonization. ■