

Popular revolt against Algeria's military regime spreads

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For over two months, demonstrations and street battles with security forces have spread throughout the northeastern part of Algeria. At first confined to the Berber region of Kabylie, there are now reports of protests and fighting between stone-throwing youths and the police in other parts of the country. Demonstrators in Arabic towns have shouted, “*Nous sommes tous des Kabyles*” (“We are all from Kabylie”). At least 100 people have been killed and thousands injured in the uprising.

Since Algeria became independent in 1962, the Berbers—a minority making up one third of the population—have protested over the refusal of the regime to grant them the right to use their own language. But the present movement has taken on a much broader social character. Anger at the growth of unemployment—officially 30 percent but reaching 80 percent amongst young people—the increase in poverty and the desperate housing shortage are the issues being taken up by protesters. Above all there is widespread hatred of the military-backed regime, known as “*le pouvoir*” (the “power”), and the brutality of its police and security forces.

In April, the killing of a student in a police station near Tizi Ouzou, the capital of the Greater Kabylie region, sparked off riots amongst local youths. A demonstration was organised by the Berber community that saw 20,000 people march peacefully through Algiers on May 3. Another march through the capital took place on May 31 attended by more than 200,000. As riots and protests continued throughout Kabylie, a further demonstration was called in Algiers on June 14. This time over one million marched through the streets of the capital, the biggest mobilisation of people in Algeria since independence.

According to a report in France's *Le Monde* newspaper, the march was “an immense procession, which wound

along for a dozen kilometres from the First of May Square and proceeded slowly along the sea front... They are young boys, almost entirely young boys, in the image of the country. Girls are rare. Adults are few.”

The leaders of the demonstration attempted to submit their list of demands to the presidential palace, but were met by riot police firing tear gas and water cannons. Four people were killed, including two journalists run over by a bus. Hundreds were arrested, and according to hospital authorities more than 400 people were treated for injuries, including several with bullet wounds. Two days later, the authorities released 335 of those arrested on the demonstration in what was described as a “goodwill gesture.” However, according to a human rights lawyer quoted in *Le Monde*, 110 people are still missing, who are neither in prison nor in hospital. “We suspect that they are in captivity in the buildings of the police or the military security,” he said.

There are also reports of security forces infiltrating crowds and attempting to stir up racist hostility towards the Berber demonstrators. The local newspaper *El Watan* referred to “huge manipulation by the authorities in order to discredit the citizens' movement and turn one part of the population—which had come to march peacefully—against the other.”

After the demonstration the government announced that it was banning further protests in Algiers. Within a week, however, Berber leaders meeting in Tizi Ouzou announced that the next demonstration scheduled for July 5 would go ahead.

There are now dozens of reports of clashes between youths and security forces taking place throughout the Kabylie region and beyond. In Tebessa near the Tunisian border, youth attacked public buildings. Rioting continued in towns around Bejaia, a major city in the Kabylie area. Riots over poor social conditions also took place in the towns of Guelma and Batna, as well as the main port of

Annaba.

On Monday this week, tens of thousands marched through Tizi Ouzou to commemorate the death of Lounes Matoub, a popular Berber singer and well-known opponent of the Algerian regime. Islamic terrorists supposedly gunned down Ouzou in 1998. His wife, mother and other relatives have been calling for an investigation into his death, as the suspicion is that he was killed by the regime, especially since the militant Islamic groups are known to be manipulated or infiltrated by the security forces.

Since the political parties that traditionally represented Kabylie—the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) and the Socialist Forces Front (FFS)—are totally discredited, local elders and community leaders known as the *comités de villages* (town committees) and the Lounes Matoub Foundation are calling the demonstrations. *Le Monde* states that the elders are trying to hold back the youth, but with little success. The protestors chanted “*Ulaç smah!*” (“No forgiveness” in Tamazight, the Berber language), “*Pouvoir* and Generals-Assassins”, “Bouteflika-Assassin” and “Down with the Generals”. The demonstration passed peacefully, but there was a confrontation between youth and riot police after the march ended.

The response of the regime has been to implement an even more draconian clampdown, but there is growing nervousness in the face of the popular movement. At first, rumours circulated that President Bouteflika was going to resign, that his military backers had decided that he would be made the scapegoat. Then, one week after the massive Algiers demonstration, Bouteflika made his first public appearance, admitting that there was a crisis but stating that he was not stepping down and calling for dialogue. Whilst not mentioning France by name, he suggested that a foreign power was manipulating the protesters.

The mass movement presently lacks any perspective on which to take forward a struggle against the government in defence of democratic and social rights. In the late 1980s, the huge opposition to the FLN (National Liberation Front) military regime, expressed in a series of riots and demonstrations, was led by Islamic fundamentalist tendencies. When the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front) gained a majority in the general election in 1991, the military organised a coup d'état and declared the FIS illegal. A civil war ensued in which over 100,000 people died and many fled the country. After coming to power in rigged elections in 1999, Bouteflika—with Western backing—called for an amnesty with the Islamic guerrilla groups. Although the conflict continues, it is

confined to rural areas and is on a much lower level. Islamic fundamentalism now has little support, especially in the urban and Berber regions and has not been able to win support in the current protests.

Bouteflika and the section of the army that backed him were expected to carry out a free-market style “liberalisation” of the economy, opening up state enterprises to privatisation. Algerian export earnings from gas and oil have almost doubled since 1998, and its foreign debts have been considerably reduced, making it an attractive proposition for investors. However, under pressure from the military, which could lose out under privatisation plans, as well as from the trade union bureaucracy, on May 31 Bouteflika sidelined two of the three cabinet ministers who are in favour of free market measures. A three-year economic growth package has been put forward that is supposed to use the income from gas—Algeria is the world's second largest exporter of natural gas—to deal with the poverty and unemployment produced by the collapse of other sectors of the economy. This is little more than a face-saving measure, with economists criticising the fact that it does not even contain accurate financial projections.

Having run out of patience with the resistance of the Algerian generals, Western politicians are hoping that the mass movement can be employed to put pressure on the regime to implement greater economic liberalisation by advancing such measures as a solution to poverty and democratic abuses. The *Washington Post* quotes a Western diplomat stating that Bouteflika might, “hope these young people go on making pressure, so he will be able to change things. This might help him implement his reforms.” French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine referred to the “profoundly legitimate aspirations” of the Algerian people for “political, democratic, economic and social modernisation” and the European Union put out a declaration urging Algerian leaders to take “a major political initiative to get over the crisis.” In every case, the channelling of social and political discontent behind such an economic agenda has only benefited a wealthy elite, while plunging the mass of the population into even worse destitution.



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