

Algerian protests continue after Bouteflika launches presidential bid

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Protests erupted in Algiers and other major Algerian cities on Sunday night and early Monday, after the state announced that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika will defy mass demonstrations demanding his removal. The ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) will run Bouteflika to secure a fifth term.

Sunday night was the deadline for all candidates to submit their candidacies. Bouteflika's aides waited until the last day to submit the papers on his behalf. The 82-year-old, who has been in power since 1999, is allegedly receiving medical treatment in Switzerland. He has been rarely seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013, and no longer appears publicly. The Algerian ambassador to France was compelled to give assurances to an interviewer on the CNews network yesterday that, "Of course, he is still alive."

A message from Bouteflika was read out on national television on Sunday evening in an attempt to limit the spread of protests. It pledged that if elected, Bouteflika would remain in office for only one year and then call new elections, which he would not contest. Different factions of the regime, which rests on the military and intelligence service, aim to select a successor in consultation with the imperialist powers.

Bouteflika's letter included an implicit threat, saluting "the national popular army for its mobilization in all circumstances in the accomplishment of its constitutional mission." In an attempt to placate growing working-class opposition, it made an empty pledge to "rapidly put in place public policies guaranteeing a more equitable redistribution of national wealth and the elimination of marginalization and social exclusion."

The announcement triggered protests late Sunday, particularly by student youth who have been at the centre of demonstrations since February 22. In Algiers,

Tlemcen, Ghardaia and other cities, demonstrators chanted, "Bouteflika, there will be no fifth mandate." Police closed down metro stations in Algiers, and riot police used water cannon to disperse students marching from the University of Science and Technology to the constitutional council building.

Protests have escalated over the past two weeks, leading to demonstrations by hundreds of thousands of people last Friday. At this point, the protests are of a socially heterogeneous character; slogans are mainly directed at the removal of Bouteflika, though they are fuelled by anger over immense social inequality in a country of 40 million people.

The great fear in the ruling class is that the protests will coalesce into a broader working-class movement raising social demands against widespread unemployment, poverty and social inequality. Social conditions in Algeria are explosive. The median age is 28, and youth unemployment is over 25 percent. The protests have been organized almost entirely through social media and were not called initially by any political party.

Millions of youth, including university graduates, have no prospect of a decent future, and thousands have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe in search of a better life. Meanwhile, a layer of billionaires and multimillionaires with close ties to the regime has continued to enrich itself.

An unconnected protest had earlier been called for today by a front organization for the agri-food and retail giant Cevital, headed by billionaire Issad Rebrab, exploiting anger over unemployment to demand lifting of government restrictions on Cevital's operations in the Kabilya region. A previous protest last December drew thousands. Yesterday, however, Cevital said it was cancelling the protest, fearing that any reference to

social issues was dangerous and explosive.

Cevital's statement said that "this is not the time for sectoral demands," adding that the demand for "regime change" must be the "sole and unique slogan" of the ongoing protests.

The mouthpieces of European imperialism are increasingly nervous that the situation in Algeria is spinning out of their control. In France, which ruled brutally over the country until 1962, *Le Monde* published an editorial yesterday after the government's announcement titled, "Abdelaziz Bouteflika: too little, too late." It argued that Bouteflika could not afford to wait a year to appoint a successor and must step down now to preserve the regime—minus its figurehead.

Le Monde noted that "the hundreds of thousands of Algerians who have taken to the streets have so far done so with a remarkable restraint," while police "clearly received orders not to respond with blind repression." Algeria, it said, "is holding its breath. It is rare in such a situation for such a responsible attitude to last." While not making public statements, French President Emmanuel Macron has mobilized his entire diplomatic machine to monitor the Algerian crisis.

The Macron government is deeply fearful over the impact of protests within France and its large Algerian immigrant population. Thousands protested in French cities on Sunday in solidarity with protests in Algeria, including 6,000 in Paris, amid seething anger in the French working class over social inequality expressed in ongoing "yellow vest" protests. The great fear of the French ruling class is of a movement uniting workers and youth in France and northern Africa.

Immense geostrategic interests are at stake. Algeria has northern Africa's largest proven reserves of gas, and total gas production last year was the highest in Africa. It is Europe's third-biggest gas supplier, after Russia and Norway, providing Spain with half of its demand.

The French state relies upon Algeria to conduct its wars and reconnaissance operations across north and western Africa. European governments also rely on the Bouteflika regime in their criminal efforts to prevent migrants fleeing conditions created by wars and imperialist oppression in Africa from reaching Europe.

In the past two years, auto giants including Peugeot-Citroen, Toyota and Volkswagen have set up assembly plants in Algeria and Morocco in anticipation of

growing auto production in Africa. France in particular has voiced concern over rising Chinese economic ties with the Algerian government. China is now the largest importer from and exporter to Algeria.

The Algerian government faces deepening economic problems rooted in the world capitalist crisis. The nationalist program of the bourgeois National Liberation Front (FLN) that took power after the defeat of French colonialism in the 1954-1962 Algerian war has been unable to resolve any of the problems resulting from Algeria's historic oppression by imperialism.

For 20 years, high world commodity prices permitted the government to fund very limited housing, healthcare and food subsidies to avert a social explosion, even as inequality grew. But oil and gas revenues, making up over 90 percent of Algerian exports, collapsed from \$74 billion in 2007 to \$24 billion in 2017, as oil prices fell after 2014. Last year, the government pledged to slash subsidies, pulling back last November in the face of mass outrage.

The regime is relying on the utterly servile character of the official bourgeois "opposition" to suppress revolutionary sentiments of the working class and oppressed masses. The Workers Party (PT), led by Louisa Hanoune, which is presented as a far-left opponent of the regime, has backed the FLN for decades. In 2014, the PT opposed calls for Bouteflika not to stand in the last elections.

The PT announced today it would boycott the April elections. It is concerned that standing would expose it too openly, under conditions where it is unclear whether the elections will actually take place, and where Bouteflika's candidacy is opposed by French imperialism.

Echoing the line of *Le Monde*, Hanoune warned the regime that Bouteflika's resignation was "the only solution to avoid the impasse." She said that if the "partisans of the status quo are so stubborn as to submit the candidacy of Bouteflika, nothing can foretell the future consequences and the reactions of the majority."



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