

Over one million protest extension of Bouteflika's term in Algeria

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Mass demonstrations took place in cities and small towns across Algeria yesterday, the fourth successive Friday of protests demanding an end to the military-backed National Liberation Front (FLN) regime and its figurehead president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

Various estimates indicate that the demonstrations were as large or larger than those of last Friday, when more than one million people gathered in the capital of Algiers alone. *El Watan* estimated that hundreds of thousands were protesting in Bejaia, located on the Mediterranean and the largest city in the country's Kabylie region. Large protests also took place in Oran, the second-biggest city.

The government sought to limit the protests in Algiers by shutting down inbound traffic to the capital. El Mouradia reported that roads were blocked for buses from Bouira, Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou, and posted pictures of young people proceeding by foot beyond the road blocks.

Nevertheless, an estimated 1.8 million people attended protests in the center of the capital. *Tout sur l'Algérie* wrote: "In central Algiers, protesters were so thick on the streets they could not even move. The streets and surrounding alleyways are 'saturated.' Everyone is so calm that children are napping, held by their parents. A festive atmosphere reigns in Algiers, no incident has been reported."

Mass transit, long-distance trains and many shops were closed in Algiers amid calls for a general strike. Workers at the National Industrial Vehicles Company (SNVI) went on strike. Workers at Sonelgaz, the national electricity and gas firm, walked off the job for an hour, and there were reports of strike action at Sonatrach, the national natural gas production monopoly.

Media reports indicated that half of the shops were

closed in Constantine, Algeria's third-largest city, and that business was totally stopped in Bejaia.

The expansion of the demonstrations reflects the repudiation of the regime's announcement via a letter in the name of Bouteflika on Sunday night of a supposed political transition that in fact preserving both the regime and its figurehead.

The letter called for the creation of a token "national conference" formed and overseen by the regime itself to draft a new constitution and set the date for new elections. The current fourth term of Bouteflika—who has not spoken publicly since 2013—is being extended and elections previously scheduled for April are postponed indefinitely.

Protesters chanted slogans or held up signs saying "Leave all of you", "We wanted elections without Bouteflika now we have Bouteflika without elections", "They tried to bury us, they didn't know we were seeds." Some slogans also directly addressed French President Emmanuel Macron, who has supported Bouteflika, saying "Take care of the yellow vests, Macron, that's enough for you" or "Get the wood ready, Macron, there will be no Algerian gas for you this year."

The regime has also dissolved the cabinet and named Noureddine Bedoui, who had been the interior minister since 2015, as the new prime minister. On Wednesday, Bedoui gave a press briefing in the capital and declared that a technocratic "government of national competency" would be formed next week. He refused to specify the date for elections and stated that the government will have "a short period."

The new deputy prime minister, Ramrane Lamamra, was foreign minister from 2013 to 2017. He is a career United Nations diplomat and was ambassador to the United States from 1996 to 1999.

Workers and youth—more than two thirds of the population is aged under 30—are being driven into struggle in opposition to their social conditions. One young person, cited by DW on March 12 stated, “We don’t want delays in the elections, we don’t want a fifth mandate [for Bouteflika]. We reject this system. We have had enough of it,” and denounced the fact that “there is no access to health care” for the population.

Youth unemployment is 30 percent. A report by the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights in 2015 estimated that 80 percent of the national wealth is held by 10 percent of the population, and found that some 14 million people live in abject poverty of less than \$1.5 per day. A survey of 4,500 households showed that their average purchasing power fell by an average of 60 percent in one year from 2014.

There is a class chasm separating the strivings of the working class from the entire political establishment, including the official opposition, and the trade unions. The latter have been terrified by the emergence of strikes over the past week, which erupted on Sunday in a nationwide strike that spread through social media largely independently of the unions. The strikes continued and expanded on Monday, and have continued in some areas, including Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou, since, with the trade unions doing everything possible to shut them down.

A political operation is underway from all the governing parties through to the official “left” opposition such as Louisa Hanoune’s Workers’ Party (PT), the Socialist Workers’ Party (PST, allied to the Pabloite New Anti-Capitalist Party in France) and the trade unions, to derail and suppress the movement of the working class. (See: Socialist Workers Party seeks to derail movement against Algerian regime)

The PT did not publish a word in response to Bouteflika’s announcement for more than 24 hours. The PT is publicly identified as a loyal faction of the regime, and Hanoune was heckled at demonstrations and forced to leave at the start of the month because of this.

The statement published by the PT’s political bureau on March 12 warned that the government’s announcement, which “would have been acceptable a year ago, has now been totally overtaken.”

It called on the government to carry out measures virtually identical to gnox already announced: “If the

president really wants to give a show of its sincerity as it restores the voice of the people, let it name a technical government which acts in total transparency, composed of compelling and patriotic men and women, capable of listening to the majority, to lead affairs until the majority decides on the nature of the regime to put in place and the date of elections.”

The other major parties, including former Prime Minister Ali Benflis of the Talaie El Hourriyet party, held a meeting on Wednesday in Algiers to discuss a joint response to the eruption of mass working-class opposition to the Bouteflika regime and its announcement. They released a statement opposing the announcement and supporting protests.

The main appeal by the opposition parties is for the military to place an alternative figurehead in power and further incorporate them into the existing regime. Benflis gave an interview to *Le Monde* yesterday in which he declared his total support for the military and General Gael Salah, stating: “I cannot imagine a situation that the army could go against the aspirations of the Algerian people.”



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