Algerian army purges intelligence agencies as anti-regime protests grow

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9 April 2019

After seven weeks of mass protests demanding the fall of the Algerian military dictatorship and the army's announcement last week of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's resignation, the gulf separating the officer corps from millions of protesting workers and youth is coming to the fore.

Large sections of the Algerian population have correctly concluded that Bouteflika's resignation by itself is not the victory they were hoping to obtain. It is plainly obvious that Bouteflika, who was confined to a wheelchair and could not speak since suffering a stroke in 2013, was no longer leading the dictatorship. Now, there are growing demands for the ouster of officials who are to oversee the transition while a new president is elected, including speaker of the house Abdelkader Bensalah, and growing opposition to army chief General Ahmed Gaïd Salah.

After last Friday's protests—where workers chanted slogans like "Gaïd Salah, the people are not fooled" and "No repeat of the Egyptian scenario," referring to the 2013 military coup that crushed a wave of revolutionary struggles in Egypt that toppled Hosni Mubarak in 2011—the National Liberation Front (FLN) regime and the army are preparing the ouster of other top officials.

On Sunday, the pro-regime daily *El Moudjahid* carried an article and an editorial that raised the possibility of removing Bensalah. "Bensalah must go," constitutional law specialists were quoted as saying in the paper according to RFI, while the daily's editorial, titled "Nothing is impossible," said that a presidential transition without Bensalah is "neither unreasonable nor impossible to do."

The most prominent target within the upper ranks of the regime was intelligence chief Major General Athmane Tartag, the director of Algerian domestic intelligence. After rumors that Tartag had been removed on April 5, on April 7 it was announced that Gaïd Salah would replace him as head of the powerful Directorate of the Security Services (DRS) agency.

This was followed by Gaïd Salah's firing of Major General Boura Rezigue Abdelkader, who led the Directorate of internal Security (DSI), and General Abdelhamid Bendaoud, who led the General Directorate of External Security (DGSE). Gaïd Salah is concentrating power in his own hands, reorganizing the chain of command so that the DGSE and DSI now report directly to the general staff of the army.

Through the purge of the intelligence services, the army is above all trying to limit popular opposition to the regime and prevent the regime's crimes during the 1992-2002 Algerian civil war from becoming a focal point for working-class opposition to the army. There is already speculation in the Algerian press that Tartag's dismissal could lead to his facing charges related to his bloody record during the civil war.

Last week, relatives of prisoners disappeared during the civil war held a rally outside the main post office in Algiers, holding up pictures of their loved ones and demanding full investigations. *Mondafrique* commented, "President Bouteflika always refused to open investigations on these 'disappearances;' This protest certainly did not escape the attention of Ahmed Gaïd Salah, the head of the general staff, who is trying to ride the waves of anger and popular demands in order to lead the transition."

Relatives of the disappeared have denounced Tartag as "the monster of Ben Aknoun," one of the main centers where prisoners suspected of Islamist or other oppositional politics were taken, tortured and often shot. He directed the Ben Aknoun facility, formally known as the Principal Military Investigation Center

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(CPMI) from 1990 to 2001. He is suspected of personal involvement in the murder of FLN veteran Kasdi Merbah, who was killed in 1993 as he tried to negotiate a truce with Islamist forces. Tartag's name has also come up as one of French intelligence's main contacts in Algeria.

As workers and youth move into struggle against the Algerian regime, the critical question raised by the history of the Algerian military dictatorship in the civil war is the need for the independent political organization and the revolutionary mobilization of the working class.

No confidence can be given to Gaïd Salah or to the Algerian officer corps to lead a "democratic transition." They serve a regime that has for decades plundered Algeria's oil and gas wealth, which they sent overseas to bank accounts in France and beyond, while workers were left in poverty and unemployment and repressed by a bloody military regime. The generals are terrified of what they would have to answer for if trials could be freely held and will do all in their power to maintain a dictatorship in Algeria.

The 1992-2002 Algerian Civil War emerged from the last failed attempt to democratize the Algerian military regime, the 1988 reforms and transition to multiparty democracy. The regime suspended the Islamic Salvation Front's (FIS) 1991 electoral victory, plunging Algeria into a 10-year civil war costing 200,000 lives. While the army's ostensible targets were Islamist terrorist groups, it also infiltrated the Islamist organizations to carry out attacks and murdered a range of workers and political figures to suppress opposition to the FLN's right-wing economic and social policies.

A 2005 report issued by the Movement of Free Algerian Officers (MOAL) and Algeria Watch, titled "Algeria: the Death Machine," gives a detailed and gruesome picture of this bloody military repression and, in particular, of the operations Tartag oversaw at Ben Aknoun.

It writes, "As early as spring 1992, Tartag received orders from his chief, General Kamel Abderrahmane, to not hand over 'unredeemable fundamentalists' to the courts: this was clearly a license to kill. But before that, they were systematically tortured. There followed punitive expeditions in 1993-1994 that claimed between 10 and 40 victims per day. All-out death squads were trained in this center, that were tasked with pursuing Islamists, liquidating them, and terrorizing the population."

Another important part of Tartag's operations, according to this report, was killing top officers suspected of opposition to the FLN and the army. It describes how Tartag and his assistant, "Lieutenant Mohammed," tortured Navy Commander Mohammed Abbassa, who was electrocuted, beaten, stabbed and burned. Finally, it reports, "On the evening of the second day, it was a barely recognizable body, swollen and burned even on the eyes that passed away, murmuring a few barely audible words. The corpse was denied the right to a decent burial."

Attempts to present the Algerian military dictatorship as a democracy waiting to flourish, through the intervention of Gaïd Salah or perhaps of the FLN's state-controlled General Union of Algerian Labor (UGTA), are reactionary political frauds.

The only way to establish a democratic regime in Algeria is through a struggle led by the working class to take power, expropriating the regime's ill-gotten wealth in the context of a broad international struggle of the working class against capitalism and for the building of socialism.

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