Subject:

President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s illness has shrouded the Algerian political landscape in uncertainty over who will succeed him. The situation has created fierce competition between the state’s civil and security wings that rule the country. Moreover, it has led some analysts, like the American Enterprise Institute to speculate that Algeria may suffer a possible second wave of the Arab Spring, after avoiding the first one in 2011. The possibility of a second Arab Spring is related to the succession dilemma in Algeria, along with other factors facing the country such as financial crises due to a collapse in oil prices in the global market, a fall in the value of the nation’s currency, which erode the middle class, and increasing levels of poverty. In addition, tensions exasperated by the talk of scenarios for Bouteflika’s succession, including handing power to his brother and special advisor, Said Bouteflika. Despite the fact that Said does not perform a constitutionally-mandated role, he was appointed by a presidential directive not published in the Republic’s official gazette. Moreover, he has recently come to exploit his brother’s illness by becoming a central force in the President’s decision-making circles. Since President Bouteflika fell ill in 2013 and underwent treatment in France, the opposition began to discuss the succession process and the proxy rule of the country by his brother. In light of this, the opposition calls for the need to activate Article 88 of the Constitution which provides for the declaration of Presidential vacancy by virtue of a medical incapacity which means the President is incompetent to exercise his constitutional powers. Talk of Bouteflika’s succession raises questions about the ability of the next president to maintain political balance in the country and manage all the rivalries between the interest groups at the top of the pyramid of power. Yet the ruling class’ real conundrum is to find a man who is capable of maintaining its interests after President Bouteflika leaves the government. Here, questions remain about which political actors are in contention to succeed Bouteflika, and whether it will drag Algeria into a second possible wave of revolutions in the region. Moreover, what would be the role of the military, as an institution exercising key influence over political change since the country’s independence? The key players: The Algerian political system has, since 1999, witnessed many changes, giving room for striking growth in the role of interest groups. Today three interest groups have captured the state and its economic powerhouses, competing with one another for power, influence and to impose new standards, namely: Politically partisan, composed of the two largest parties in the country, namely the National Liberation Front (FLN, the President’s party) and the National Rally for Democracy (RND) led by Ahmed Ouyahia, Director of the Office of the President. Each party aspires to control the state, its institutions and community organizations in the country (unions, student organizations and sports clubs). As the strongest, it is represented by the military, which also forms the backbone of the Algerian political system. This bloc is led by General Ahmed Gaid Salah, Chief of Staff and the Deputy Minister of National Defence. Represented by businessmen who invested vast sums of money to finance electoral campaigns, its most prominent figures include Ali Haddad and Karim Kouninef, whose ambition is to reap the gains of their investments by playing major roles in the political scene. Potential candidates: With increased debate among Algerian political circles about the Presidential vacancy, those circles have
begun to spell out their predictions for possible candidates to succeed
President Bouteflika. The candidates have all previously undertaken high-level
roles in the state, and one continues to
do so. First, candidates from within the present regime: There are some potential candidates from within the current political system,
among them: Ahmed Ouyahia
(64 years old): Director of the Presidential Office and the Secretary-General of the National Rally for
Democracy, which has close ties to the intelligence service. Abdelmalek Sellal (68 years old): The incumbent Prime Minister.
However, some Algerians
see him as a bureaucrat who is not suitable for the role of president. He has
good relations with the army Chief of Staff. Said
Bouteflika (58 years old): The youngest brother of President Bouteflika and his
special advisor. Ahmed Gaid
Salah (76 years old): Chief of Staff and the Deputy Minister of National
Defence. Considered one of the frontrunners to succeed Bouteflika. He sees
Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s experience as motivation for him to
try his hand at elite politics, despite his age. His path to the presidential
palace is clear after General Mohamed Mediène (former Director of Algerian
intelligence) was prompted to retire.[2] It is possible
that the political and economic developments Algeria has witnessed in recent
years reinforce the likelihood of Said
Bouteflika being a strong candidate to succeed his brother. The appointment of
businessman Ali Haddad to the position of President of the “Forum of Directors”
and his continued political activity reveal for some the true intentions of the
administrative team in post-Bouteflika
Algeria, whether by appointing one of its trusted men or through the hereditary succession of the president’s
brother. However, it
appears that Said Bouteflika is in need of an electoral team to ensure that he
ends up in “El Mouradia Palace.” This has started to happen on the ground, with
some reports revealing the willingness of a charitable association called Fakhr
(Pride) to transform into a political party and back Said Bouteflika. Fakhr
has a membership of 150,000, mostly traders and people
in business, and boasts 30 ministers among its ranks. [3] Analysts expect the
President’s brother to take advantage of internal crises affecting the two principal political parties, the National
Liberation Front and the National Democratic Alliance. Furthermore, the involvement of the two parties' cadres in
in corruption and looting of public money also boosts Said Bouteflika’s cause. Second, candidates from outside the regime: In contrast,
a number of names from outside the presidential system have been proposed to
succeed Bouteflika, including: Ali Benflis (72 years old): President Bouteflika’s Campaign Manager in 1999,
then Head of Government in 2001 and a candidate for the presidential elections
in 2004. Mouloud Hamrouche (73 years old): Head of the former government in 1999, then a
candidate for the presidential elections in 1999. Chakib Khelil (77 years): former Minister of Energy (1999-2010), and the childhood
friend of the President. He presided over the Organization of Petroleum
Exporting Countries (OPEC) twice in a row, in 2001 and 2008. Accused of taking
bribes and kickbacks in the Sonatrach case, an international arrest warrant was
issued against him, which forced him to leave Algeria for the United States in
2013. He returned in mid-March 2016 after the case against him was dropped due to a procedural mistake. Sufi circles
have worked to improve his image, where he was honored by its elders, much to
the surprise of public opinion. This gave
the impression that Khelil was being prepared
to succeed President Bouteflika. [4]
External
factors: Foreign powers, namely the United States and France, view political
developments in Algeria, after President Bouteflika’s illness, with grave concern. This
is because of Washington and Paris’ political, economic and geopolitical interests in the country.
Moreover, both countries believe that issues of terrorism and oil in the Maghreb
region require a stable and constitutionally credible partner to tackle them. The Maghreb region is no longer a playing field reserved
solely for France, as
it was the traditional colonial ruler. Instead, an intense rivalry between
Paris and Washington has emerged, with the latter becoming more involved in
political and economic affairs of in the region.
It is against this backdrop that Washington gave implicit support to the former
energy minister, Chakib Khelil, a likely candidate to succeed President
Bouteflika. It did so by refusing to respond to demands for his extradition to
Algeria for trial on corruption charges. Some media reports indicate the
existence of a tacit agreement between the United States and some Algerian
circles of power preparing Chakib to succeed President Bouteflika after improving
his image among the Algerian public. He is one of its most active cadres who had their reputation tarnished
by Algerian intelligence, in the words of Amar Saadani, Secretary General of
the National Liberation Front previously.
As for France, under President Francois Hollande, it has had a close relationship with the President's office. This was clearly demonstrated after President Bouteflika was treated in Val de Grace military hospital during Spring 2013. Paris had prevented the activation of Article 88 of the Algerian Constitution which provides for the declaration of presidential vacancy, with health reasons preventing the exercise of constitutional powers.

Sources briefed about the French role in Algeria understand there to be a deal between the French socialists and the Algerian official team. It promises political and diplomatic support to the latter in exchange for France, in light of its debilitating economic and social crises, gaining privileged economic and financial access to the Algerian market. According to figures released by the French embassy, the country's investment in Algeria amounted to USD 2.5 billion in 2016, with 180 French companies operating inside Algeria. However, President Hollande’s announcement that he does not want to stand for a second presidential term has been met with shock by the Algerian administrative team and has since thrown matters into confusion.

The army and the future of Algeria: The future of the Algerian state is closely linked to finding a solution to two principal issues recently faced by the political system. The first is the political uncertainty over who will succeed President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, after increased speculation about the vacant presidency. The second problem is concerning what some reports perceive will be the second wave of Arab Spring revolutions affecting the country, in the light of its political, economic and social challenges.

Since the current president succession battle remains unresolved, Algerian attention is turning to influential figures from the elite military establishment to understand their position on the political developments in the country. Those influential figures do not see the next president of Algeria as the president's brother, nor the head of his office, Ahmed Ouyahia, due to their previous proximity to the intelligence apparatus. According to the same influential figures, it will also not include Police Commander, Major General Abdelghani Hamel, whom the administrative team is trying to appoint as Deputy Minister of National Defence in place of the Army Chief of Staff, in the context of succession arrangements.

It should be noted that the President of the Republic, since the death of the late President Houari Boumediene, does not have any actual authority. The position only carries symbolic authority and privileges. For historical reasons, the army in Algeria do not need the President to exercise their constitutional powers. Therefore, the final word in Algeria, about who will succeed President Bouteflika will rest with the army and no one else. If countries across the remainder of the world have armies, in Algeria the army has a state. The former predicated the latter in 1962.[6]

Many studies and research papers on rentier states have predicted widening protests in Algeria, and the inability of the system to encompass them because of a scarcity of financial resources and bankruptcy of its policy to buy social peace. If Algeria dodged the Arab Spring that began in Tunisia at the end of 2010, since then, it has been running out of its hard currency cash reserves, leading some pessimistic observers to believe the second wave will engulf the country.

However, there are obstacles to Algeria falling under a second wave of the Arab Spring. What prevented the first wave hitting Algeria in 2010 and 2011 is not the deftness of the Algerian authorities, but Algerians' awareness and understanding of the implications of conspiracies hatched against the region and their country. Therefore, the call to fight for the unknown will not echo in Algeria. To understand the extent to which the Algerian masses are enamored by the military establishment and the chiefs of staff it is sufficient to peruse social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. It is a sentiment which probably explains why the "dean" of Algerian politics, the late Abdelhamid Mehri, said during the National Reconciliation Conference in 1993: "We must seek to understand: Why do Algerians rest assured at the sight of a tanks in the streets, even after the army’s descent in 1992 and annulment of the democratic process?"
Charlotte Bozonnet, En Algérie, une multitude de prétendants à la succession de Bouteflika, LE MONDE, 06.07.2016: https://goo.gl/bcswdf

Ibid.

https://goo.gl/pzX9n8

Reports says Italian company Saipem gifted approximately 198m Euros in kickbacks to relatives of the former Minister of Energy, Chakib Khelil and his middleman, Farid Bedjaoui: https://goo.gl/GFuTw0

https://goo.gl/GttKyq