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Socio-Political Struggles in Sudan and Algeria at Stake amid Covid-19 Crisis

Sara Creta and Sofian Philip Naceur

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has hit Sudan and Algeria during one of the most delicate phases of their respective political transitions. This study examines how authorities in both countries have exploited the pandemic for political gains. How will protest movements in Sudan and Algeria cope with their struggles, with the interplay of socio-economic deterioration and political instability playing into the hands of those in power? So far, Covid-19 has been a catalyst for counter-revolutionary dynamics in both countries, though tools and strategies used by the old regimes largely differ. This study is based on a comparative theoretical framework, featuring semi-structured interviews and qualitative research. While Algerian authorities intensified their crackdown against the movement amid the pandemic, imposing severe restrictions on freedoms and digital rights; Sudan's old elites have been using the crisis to frame themselves as the only institution able to effectively fight Covid-19 and protect public interests.

Keywords: Sudan; Algeria; Covid-19; Hirak; Uprising

Introduction

2019 has been a turbulent year for Sudan and Algeria with the onset of peaceful mass uprisings in both countries, calling for a real change of government and the ouster of some of their respective leaders. Severe structural economic crises had already significantly accelerated the socioeconomic hardship for large parts of both societies in recent years. The protest movements in Sudan and Algeria not only challenged the old elite's grip on power, but also advocated and pushed for social justice, better living conditions, economic reforms and - in the case of Sudan - an end of armed conflict. Although both protest movements forced their respective regimes to respond to popular demands, and in Sudan, even agree to a political transition, a sustainable change beyond superficial reforms has yet to materialise.

Fractions of the old elites are still in power in both Sudan and Algeria, countering attempts by opposition forces and the protest movements to consolidate a democratic roadmap and establish a fairer distribution of wealth and resources as well as economic reforms aiming at overturning economic models designed to exclude large strata of society. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has hit both countries at a critical time, undermining the struggles of the protest movements for real change as the health emergency paved the way for authorities in Khartoum and Algiers to exploit the pandemic for political gains. Authorities in Algeria launched an outright crackdown on activists, opposition figures and journalists, imposed severe restrictions

on basic freedoms and prosecuted free speech online instantly after Covid-19 hit the country. In Sudan, notorious paramilitary forces affiliated to the old regime used the crisis to frame themselves as the only institution effectively able to fight the pandemic and protect public interests, aiming to sideline their civilian counterparts within the fragile political transition.

In this study, we highlight how authorities in both states are exploiting the pandemic for political gains. The research approach is based on a comparative theoretical framework, and also refers to concepts borrowed from sociological studies. Thus, 'comparative politics' is concerned with comparing trends in and between countries, societies, political associations, and many more.¹ The comparison of institutions or segments of the political process in Sudan and Algeria allows us to develop new evidence-based explanations on how the health crisis has been exploited by those in power.

At first, we provide some background on recent developments in Sudan and Algeria since the inception of both protest movements in December 2018 and February 2019 respectively before outlining how Covid-19 has affected the movements and, additionally, how authorities responded to the health emergency. Subsequently, we illustrate how authorities and state actors in both Sudan and Algeria have exploited the pandemic for political gains. This illustration embraces both a descriptive and interpretive strand, aiming to describe diverging tools and strategies used by the old elites and discuss how both movements are coping with their struggles since the inception of the crisis.

This study is based on twelve semi-structured interviews conducted in August and September 2020 with political figures, activists, human rights defenders, journalists and protesters as well as extensive research over the past years in Sudan, Algeria and other countries in North Africa and Europe. As a significant number of interviewees raised concerns about being quoted with clear names, most interviews have been anonymized. After the data-gathering phase, systematic data cleaning and organising was conducted. We used inductive analysis to identify common ideas and patterns of belief, and highlight salient themes.

Background

In December 2018, a peaceful popular protest - later dubbed the 'Sudanese Revolution' - erupted in the northern town of Atbara. Protesters came from mixed political and economic backgrounds², including ordinary Sudanese with no strong political affiliation and who blame their dire economic plight on President Omar al-Bashir's economic mismanagement and his thirty-year dictatorship. The pillar of the mass protest movement has been the Sudanese Professionals Association (SPA), a grouping of labour and trade organisations formed in 2013 that organised a first march on the presidential palace in Khartoum on 25 December 2018 and again on 31 December 2018, demanding Bashir's resignation. The SPA arguably represents a sign of Sudan's past history of political mobilisation both in the 1964 and the 1985 uprisings³. Youth-led movements, like *g3rifna* ['We are fed up' in Arabic] were also historically at the core of protests in Sudan. Protesters were breathing a heady mix of fear and hope. The National Intelligence Security Service (NISS), renamed last July the General Intelligence Services (GIS), and its shadowy armed operational units were responsible for the first lethal crackdowns on protesters until April 2019 when al-Bashir was deposed⁴.

On 11 April 2019, a cabal of army officers pushed out the seventy-five-year-old Omar al-Bashir. Since then, Sudan has had two more of its bloodied leaders step down. In August 2019, while Sudanese protesters were still shouting *madaniyya* ['civilian' in Arabic], fearing further attacks on civilians, and under international pressure, Sudan embarked on a three-year transitional period plan, and the new transitional government - formed by the Military Council and the main opposition coalition - promised to civilians to

hold members of the Islamist regime accountable for all crimes committed during the past thirty years. The Forces for Freedom and Change (FFC) – a wide alliance of opposition groups and rebel coalitions – signed an agreement with the generals that involved abandoning its central demand for a civil administration, and inherited a vastly inflated security sector, endemic corruption, and US sanctions. A tactic of *tajility*, a refashioning of the Arabic term ‘delay’, many in Khartoum called the installation of a civilian-military power-sharing government to elude confrontation with the generals⁵.

Less than two months after the protest movement in Sudan materialised, Algeria was likewise hit by a nationwide anti-government uprising, challenging the old elite’s grip on power until today. Instantly after regime figures announced that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika would run for a fifth term in the presidential elections, originally scheduled for April 2019, small-scale protests erupted in several cities in the Kabylia region and in eastern Algeria, quickly gaining momentum across the country. Within a week, Algeria’s protest movement – mostly dubbed *Hirak* [Arabic for ‘movement’] – turned into a peaceful nationwide mass uprising, mobilising a significant part of society for more than thirteen months and calling for Bouteflika to step down and a real democratic transition.

The Hirak proved to be persistent and managed to force the regime to give in, at least regarding some demands of the movement. In April 2019, Bouteflika and the government of Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia were forced to resign after six weeks of countrywide mass protests, sit-ins and strikes. Yet, the profound political change relentlessly pushed for by the Hirak failed to materialise as the army, led at that time by Chief of Staff and Vice-Minister of Defence Ahmed Gaïd Salah, effectively took over and has been trying to prevent a genuine change of the country’s political system ever since.⁶

Following Bouteflika’s withdrawal from power, protests continued unabated across Algeria. Although the Hirak’s primary demand – Bouteflika’s resignation – was met, the movement had already turned toward more radical political goals and has now been calling for a real change of the ‘system’, a civil and not a military state, and the replacement of all remnants of the regime, including the powerful army chief Gaïd Salah - in office since 2004. The army’s meddling in politics had been outspokenly addressed and criticised by the Hirak since Bouteflika’s withdrawal from power. Unsurprisingly, the chants *dawla madaniyya, mesh askariyya* (Arabic for ‘A civil state, not a military one’) and *yetnahawga3* (Algerian Arabic for ‘You all need to go’) became among the most important slogans of the movement ever since.⁷

Protesters wanted not only those tied to Bouteflika to resign, but to overturn the whole opaque political order, composed of a regime – mostly referred to in Algeria as *le pouvoir* (French for ‘the power’) – made up of clans, struggling with each other for political influence and access to state revenues.⁸ Yet, Bouteflika and his government had been merely replaced by regime figures, considered to be rooted in clans opposed to Bouteflika. By only adopting cosmetic reforms, Gaïd Salah tried to ensure a regime-led ‘transition’, prevent any major concession to the Hirak and secure political and economic privileges for what was left of *le pouvoir*. To appease the Hirak and effectively sideline a rival clan within the regime, Gaïd Salah and the country’s law enforcement agencies launched an outright arrest campaign against Bouteflika’s allies and neutralised his clan by jailing and prosecuting dozens of former high-ranking officials including former prime ministers, ministers, police officers, businessmen and even army generals, who had aligned themselves to Bouteflika.⁹

As part of the regime-led ‘transition’ - or the ‘reconfiguration of a political system’ as the Germany-based professor Dr Rachid Ouaisa dubs it¹⁰ - presidential elections were held in December 2019 despite yet another wave of massive protests and boycott campaigns by the Hirak. Gaïd Salah appeared to have successfully taken the lead within the regime as Abdelmajid Tebboune – a staunch Gaïd Salah ally – won the election by a landslide. Election results are believed to be rigged, though Tebboune – a former prime

minister under Bouteflika and the new face of the *le pouvoir* since Gaïd Salah's surprising death in late 2019 – is formally ruling Algeria ever since and has managed to, at least publicly, mollify the struggle for power between the regime's different clans and realign the remaining fractions toward one particular goal: outmanoeuvring and undermining the Hirak. Ever since, *le pouvoir* is pursuing a carrot-and-stick-policy toward the movement, luring it in by promising political reforms while ramping up the crackdown against activists and regime opponents.

Covid-19 Strikes Sudan and Algeria at a Very Critical Time

Confinement, fear, anxiety and depression; the virus has added even more layers to the multitude of other social, political, and health challenges in both countries. Health care workers have been desperately dealing with shortage of medics and protective equipment¹¹, and even more, the coronavirus outbreak has exacerbated economic malaise that fuelled anti-government uprisings and protests. Following a year of political uncertainty and social unrest, authorities in Algeria and Sudan had the difficult task of responding to the public health crisis and pursuing structural reforms, while struggling with corruption, underfunding, and mismanagement. If before Covid-19's appearance the Sudanese and Algerian economy were already stressed, suffering from structural trade and fiscal deficits and declining oil and gas revenues, the most dramatic social and economic impact of the coronavirus has yet to come.

Covid-19 has been reported in Sudan since March 2020, and up to November 2020 there have been 15,047 confirmed cases and 1,197 deaths¹². The coronavirus has heavily hit the country during one of the most delicate phases of the civilian-military government transition, and while the fragmented and divided political elites have rushed to tackle the country's problems, in Khartoum as well as in the rest of the country, little has improved for most Sudanese. With fuel, electricity and bread shortages still causing long queues and increasing frustrations, Sudan's resistance neighbourhood networks - the committees at the heart of the uprising - have plotted protests to push the civilian-led cabinet to step up the economic and political challenges and prioritise institutional reforms, as members of the old regime are still part of the security apparatus. And despite the coronavirus lockdown, on 30 June 2020 more than one million Sudanese protesters gathered in the capital Khartoum and other Sudanese cities.

Sudan's new Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok, who survived an assassination attempt last March - still faces daunting challenges. He recently admitted that the transitional authority had to 'correct the revolution's track', as his civilian-led transitional government still needs to tackle a raft of wide-ranging legal and institutional reforms, including dismantling the inherited kleptocratic network dominated by multiple state-owned companies controlled by the military and security apparatus. When last August, hundreds of Sudanese - including resistance committees - demonstrated in front of the cabinet headquarters, demanding reforms to complete the goals of the revolution, Hamdok admitted that the legacy of the old regime still needs to be dismantled.

Medics in Khartoum have also complained about being harassed at checkpoints in the city, though they are exempted from the lockdown. The United Doctors Office, which includes the Sudanese Doctors' Central Committee, the Sudanese Physicians Syndicate, and the Specialised Consultants Committee, called on doctors to gradually stop working for three days, except for emergency cases. The Central Committee of the Sudanese Doctors (CCSD) has warned that hospitals in the country may also shut down in the absence of equipment, including protective gear. 'Corruption in local governments still represents a big obstacle for the government to succeed in implementing the plans set to confront the disease', Dr Sara Abdel Galil, head of the Sudanese Doctors Union in the UK, said¹³.

Far from the negotiating tables of Sudan's political elite and the chaos of the capital's coronavirus outbreak, protests and peaceful sit-ins have continued, from Darfur in the West to Kassala in the East, demanding security, rights, freedoms, justice, and better living conditions. Protesters also expressed displeasure at difficult agricultural conditions, the absence of roads, and the continued presence of officials affiliated to Omar al-Bashir's ousted regime. Cases of rape and sexual assaults have also increased due to the lack of humanitarian assistance during the Covid-19 lockdown. According to data from the Hospital in El-Fashir in North Darfur, rape has increased by fifty per cent, and the incidence of urinary fistula among women and girls due to gang rape and sexual violence has significantly increased. Reports of violence against civilians have continued, despite the signature of the peace agreement¹⁴ to end wars with rebel groups and deliver the democracy being called for by the Sudanese people.

The virus has added another layer to the multitude of other social, political, and health challenges Sudan is facing daily, with nine million people that require humanitarian assistance and eighty-one per cent of the population with no access to a functional health centre within two hours walk from their home. Heavy rainfall has intensified in Sudan over the past week, causing more flooding, displacement and deaths, and leading the government to declare a three-month State of Emergency in the country.

Numerous challenges remain, including increased levels of violence against civilians in Darfur and intercommunal conflicts in the eastern part of Sudan. Despite the recent signature of the Juba Peace Agreement between Sudan's transitional government and the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF), the revolutionary demands of freedom, peace and justice remain strong. While sit-ins in Ombadda in Omdurman and in Muglad and Ghubeish in West Kordofan continue to hold, the security apparatus and Mohammed Hamdan Dagolo (also known as Hemedti) - those who ordered or committed the worst atrocities in the past - continue to emphasise their democratic credentials as well as drawing the lines of the prescription for peace in former conflict areas of Darfur, Blue Nile, and South Kordofan.

In Algeria, the first Covid-19 case was confirmed in February 2020. In the following weeks, the Hirak struggled to re-position itself and recalibrate its tools of resistance amid the pandemic. Despite an increase of Covid-19 cases in Algeria, the Hirak continued to mobilise in the streets in March and responded to the looming health threat by incorporating corona into its slogans. 'Neither the coronavirus nor the cholera [a reference to the brief 2018 cholera outbreak in Algeria] is going to stop us, we're getting our freedom, come what may!' or 'The coronavirus isn't going to scare us, we were brought up in misery!', protesters chanted on 13 March in Algiers.¹⁵

However, when the number of Covid-19 infections increased across Algeria, more and more activists started warning about the pandemic. Whereas some voices considered the calls by government officials to stop gathering in public amid the health crisis as an attempt to fuel divisions within the Hirak and disrupt the movement's capability to mobilise, others vehemently pleaded for a temporary but immediate halt of protests. 'Ending the protests is by no means a defeat', the pro-Hirak news website Radio M wrote in March. 'When the coronavirus crisis is over, we will take back the public space we had fought for so long'.¹⁶ Prominent Hirak figures repeatedly urged activists to continue struggling for a real change of government, though by other means and in other forms. Yet the Hirak's peaceful weekly protests have been consistently deemed as the most powerful tool to uphold popular pressure on the regime. At the same time, persistently staging peaceful marches effectively prevented authorities from violently cracking down on the Hirak. Nevertheless, the Hirak ceased its weekly protests in mid-March amid the pandemic and sporadic calls to retake street actions have been largely ignored by the movement's supporters ever since.

However, the fear by some that le pouvoir might try to discredit the Hirak's actions in public amid the health emergency and exploit the pandemic for political gains was by no means baseless. In early March,

government officials became increasingly vocal about the dangers of staging gatherings in public. The spectrum of respective statements ranged from unrestrained verbal attacks against the Hirak to rather gentle appeals to stop the marches.¹⁷ In a televised speech on 17 March, President Tebboune framed the pandemic as a ‘national security and health issue’ which forces authorities to impose temporary restrictions of certain freedoms, announcing a general ban on rallies, marches and gatherings – a step perceived with suspicion by the Hirak as it is unclear until today if the government intends to revoke the nationwide protest ban once the Covid-19 crisis eases.

As of 21 November 2020, a total of 74,862 coronavirus cases and 2,275 deaths have been recorded in Algeria.¹⁸ The government’s crisis management, however, was by no means coherent. The authorities’ response to the pandemic appears primarily driven by political factors and considerations and not health concerns – at least in the beginning of the crisis. Ever since the pandemic struck Algeria, the government has portrayed itself as a successful crisis manager, though the aggravation of the situation in public hospitals in March triggered already well-known patterns of Algeria’s elites as they started covering up the lack of means in health facilities and embellishing the state’s crisis response.

Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerrad, President Tebboune and Health Minister Abderrahmane Benbouzid had repeatedly ensured the public that the supply of hospitals with equipment such as protective gear and disinfectant is secured. However, those claims were countered by statements of health care unions and health sector workers in the local and international press or on social media, sounding the alarm about understaffed and undersupplied hospitals and denouncing the government’s misleading assertions.¹⁹ Ever since, countless reports about a significant lack of sanitary supply in hospitals have been published in the local and international press or on social media while hospital staff has repeatedly staged strikes in several Algerian cities to protest the lack of means.²⁰ Yet the health care system did not collapse, as predicted by some. However, after official infection rates had been gradually going down between July and September 2020, a second wave of the pandemic is now hitting the country since October 2020. Meanwhile, authorities continue to use Covid-19 as a pretext to pursue political goals, push for a regime-led ‘transition’ and outmanoeuvre the Hirak amidst a severe socioeconomic crisis that is expected to accelerate significantly in 2021.

Authorities in Sudan and Algeria Exploit Covid-19 for Political Gains

Authorities and state actors in Sudan and Algeria have been continuously exploiting Covid-19 for political gains since the pandemic’s onset in early 2020, though by largely different means and tools and with diverging goals and considerations. The popular uprisings in both countries had forced certain fractions of the old elites to step aside and partly give up political and economic privileges. These old elites, however, have been keen to maintain their grip on power at least partly, preventing radical ruptures of the respective country’s political order and outmanoeuvring their civilian counterparts whenever possible. Authorities in both countries used Covid-19 to regain control of public spheres and discourses and, especially in the case of Sudan, to frame themselves as the only institution able to effectively tackle the pandemic.

While Sudan’s old elites are tied to their civilian opponents through an ongoing political transition, Algeria’s ruling class managed to avoid any tangible power-sharing deal with the Hirak and remains the only actor formally holding executive power. Hence, after the protest movement halted its anti-government marches, Algeria’s old elites bluntly rejected the truce offered by the Hirak and intensified the crackdown on the movement by significantly tightening already prevalent repressive policies against activists and government opponents. Hundreds of activists, opposition figures, Hirak supporters and journalists have

been temporarily arrested, summoned for interrogations, intimidated, jailed or condemned to prison sentences since the Hirak ceased its protests in March.²¹ Moreover, authorities imposed severe restrictions on basic freedoms and digital rights, launching a surveillance campaign on social media, prosecuting those who criticise state officials online, blocking news websites critical of the government, banning public gatherings and adopting laws that could potentially criminalise free speech.²²

Sudan Militia Leader and His Shadow over Sudan's Hopes

Sudan's political and economic cooperation with Gulf countries has been a looming shadow over Khartoum, but it also consolidated the position of Mohamed Hamdan (also known as Hemedti), the Vice-President of Sudan's Transitional Military Council (TMC). Hemedti is also known as the agent and the proxy of the United Arab Emirates²³, a key player thanks to his ability to buy off potential dissenters and competitors. His forces, also known as the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), are seen as a rival to the regular army, and its deployment to the wars in Yemen and Libya has consolidated Hemedti support among the Gulf states – one of a number of foreign influences on the transition.

Hemedti's grip on Sudan's vital gold trade illustrates the magnitude of the challenges to rescue an economy destroyed by decades of corruption, mismanagement and war. He's omnipresent nowadays, like in a prelude of an election campaign. In North Darfur's provincial capital of El Fasher - where elderly people were dying at astonishing rates of a 'mysterious disease', suggesting that many Covid-19 deaths are not counted as such - his quick medical intervention preceded the government one.

While disagreements soon emerged between the Sovereign Council and the Health Ministry over how to fight Covid-19, the Rapid Support Forces' power and political influence appear to be on the rise. With the Canada-based lobbying firm Dickens & Madson helping to boost his image and pave the way for a general election, Hemedti's influence is growing. His adviser Faris al-Noor, a prominent activist who helped organise the anti-government protests, considers that it's important to encourage and support the political transition; 'if Hemedti will run for the election, it will be in a democratic way', he added.²⁴

The Rapid Support Forces – the militia that emerged from Darfur's Janjaweed – led by Hemedti has been taking centre stage in leading the campaign against Covid-19, running quarantine centres, disinfecting the streets and distributing equipment and medical advice. Revolutionary activists in Sudan believe that the RSF has become one of the main obstacles to democratisation of the country, skilfully reinventing themselves as defenders of the people, burnishing their fighters' damaged image. While the transitional government has struggled to deal with the inherited fragile health system, the RSF are key players in Sudan's response to the pandemic.

Delays in Bringing Justice to Sudan

The lack of accountability and the inertia of justice are also rocking Sudan's delicate political transition. On 30 June 2020, Sudan witnessed the *Millioniyah* or the March of the Millions. Across Sudan, hundreds of thousands protested, united in their calls for civilian rule, peace, retribution for protesters killed during demonstrations, better living conditions²⁵, and dismantling the remnants of Omar al-Bashir's regime. Activists consider that the Kezan - al-Bashir's regime - is still in power. 'We experience power cuts of ten hours per day and gas shortage. We ask the government to solve our inherited economic crisis. We want a more transparent government and peace within our borders', Ibrahim Algerfawi, member of the Committee of Resistance of the Bayt Al-Mal said.²⁶

The civilian cabinet led by Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok is confronted with immense challenges, exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis. In July, he announced a major cabinet reshuffle in hopes of defusing public discontent over economic collapse and other crises. Peace and justice activists' hopes are coming up against political realities of the wide alliance of political parties and professional associations deeply divided and struggling with a near bankrupt treasury. As the structures of the transitional period started to fall into pieces weakened by internal divisions, with the disharmony and disunity between the Forces of Freedom and Change remaining tenuous; the informal, grassroots resistance neighbourhood networks have decided to get back in the game, irritated by the established operators of Khartoum's political arena.

The self-styled resistance committees, borne secretly out of the necessity to self-organise in confrontations with the security apparatus during violent protests in previous years, are now attempting to renew impetus. The same resistance committees are also coordinating much of the government's social support on the ground, filling the gap in health service provisions at a local level. While resistance committees are gaining a lot of responsibility as well as trust; many activists captured by the grievance of the martyrs and the violence they saw on their doorstep, remain intensely critical of the government's perceived inaction to relieve the crisis. 'The revolution has been stolen. The revolutionaries must be united.', said the mother of one young revolutionary who was killed on the 3 June 2019 in Khartoum.²⁷

If the youth are not on the map of the Sudanese political transition, they in fact remain the guardians of the revolution. 'The militaries claim to be the guardians, but we feel that they have arranged the cards and still have greed for power. The revolution is at risk', Hussam Ali, a member of one of the Khartoum resistance committees, said. Frustration has also grown as delays in Sudan's massacre investigation prompted activists and victims' families to take to the street in the capital Khartoum to mark the dark anniversary of 3 June 2019 at the end of Ramadan, when the RSF – which have a well-documented record of abuses and attacks on civilians in Darfur, Southern Kordofan, and Blue Nile – stormed the peaceful sit-in in front of the military headquarters, shooting, beating and killing protesters, and gang-raping at least sixty women. Covid-19 has also caused delays to the government's attempts to bring Bashir-era officials to justice. More than twenty leaders of the previous regime have been detained for more than a year without facing trial, and their legal proceedings have been delayed further due to the coronavirus.

Repression Mounts as Algeria's Hirak Halts Protests

On 20 March 2020, Algeria witnessed its first protest-free Friday since the Hirak's inception in February 2019 as the Hirak's calls to halt weekly marches due to Covid-19 were consistently obeyed throughout the country. Only days later, however, the old elites started ramping up repressive measures against activists, government opponents, journalists and Hirak supporters. In the following weeks, some of the most outspoken and prominent Hirak figures but also ordinary protesters and activists had been arrested, detained, summoned for interrogation or sentenced to prison terms and fines.

On 24 March, an Algiers court sentenced left-wing politician Karim Tabbou to one year in prison. Tabbou, coordinator of the opposition party Union Démocratique et Social (Democratic and Social Union, UDS), was due to be released from prison only two days later after having served a six-month prison sentence, but he remained behind bars due to the new verdict. Numerous human rights groups and activists condemned the trial in the strongest possible terms, highlighting that it had violated international standards as the court session was held in the absence of Tabbou's lawyers, dubbing it as an 'arbitrary lawsuit', a 'judicial scandal' and a 'serious rights violation'.²⁸ Tabbou, one of the most popular politicians linked to

the Hirak, was arrested in September 2019 after criticising the army for its active role in politics. He was charged for ‘inciting violence’ and ‘endangering national security’.

On 27 March, authorities arrested prominent Algerian journalist Khaled Drareni, founder of the news website Casbah Tribune and correspondent of the French TV-channel TV5Monde and the human rights group Reporters Without Borders. The journalist was charged with ‘inciting an unarmed assembly’ and ‘harming national unity’ and sentenced to two years in prison in September 2020. On 6 April, a court in Algiers sentenced Abdelouhab Fersaoui, head of the youth association Rassemblement Actions Jeunesse (Youth Actions Rally, RAJ), to one year in jail on similar charges. Authorities had already prosecuted several other RAJ activists in 2019 and 2020, trying to intimidate the group as it has been one of the most outspoken civil society organisations linked to the Hirak.

While Fersaoui and Tabbou were conditionally released in May and July respectively, Drareni remains behind bars until today whereas hundreds of other activists, regime critics and journalists had been arrested, summoned for questioning, prosecuted or sentenced to prison terms the following months. Additionally, authorities ramped up their crackdown against government critics online, interrogated dozens of people about views they had expressed online, jailed others for slamming the government in social media, and blocked news websites critical of the government, including Maghreb Emergent, Radio M, TSA Algérie and Inter Lignes. Moreover, the government approved in April 2020 an amendment to the penal code, aimed at criminalising hate speech and the spread of ‘fake news’ online. Penalties for violating the new stipulations, which do not distinguish between news reports and social media posts, entail prison sentences of up to five years and hefty fines.²⁹ The amendments' vague provisions have been dubbed as a new tool for the regime to potentially silence dissident voices and criminalise free speech.

Due to this significant increase in repressive tactics pursued by the government, Algerian and international human rights organisations slammed the crackdown against free speech and regime opponents. The human rights watchdog Amnesty International called on Algerian authorities to ‘halt arbitrary prosecutions aimed at silencing Hirak activists and journalists amid the Covid-19 pandemic’, demanding ‘for everyone targeted by these sham trials to be released immediately’.³⁰ However, ‘arrests, summons and convictions aren’t the only tools of governmental repression’, Algerian human rights lawyer Salah Dabouz says.³¹ ‘There is another form of repression which is less visible. When you work for the public sector, you face sanctions when you do not follow the government’s policy’, he says, referring to the case of a judge who was suspended after he freed Hirak activists, contrary to le pouvoir’s policy at that time. ‘The dismissals or disciplinary measures imposed against state employees who speak up in support of the Hirak are real threats. Such pressure also affects teachers and others working for the public sector’, Dabouz explains.

The Hirak’s Uncertain Future

Although the Hirak had been mobilising against the government’s repressive tactics online, additionally launching health campaigns and solidarity actions amidst the pandemic,³² its hands have been effectively tied since it had halted its weekly street protests. Thus, the movement palpably lost leverage against the old elites as it has put on hold its most powerful tool to exert pressure on the authorities. Since July however, more and more small-scale protests have been staged, mainly in the Kabylia region but also in other cities across Algeria. Despite a significant wave of small and mid-sized protests across Kaylia and other cities in northern Algeria before and during the controversial constitutional referendum held on 1 November 2020, the Hirak has effectively failed so far in regaining the popular backing it managed to maintain for so long.

‘Corona had heavy effects on the Hirak and its capability to mobilise’, according to a Hirak activist based in Europe.³³ ‘It will be difficult to relaunch the Hirak on a scale similar to the movement’s successful first phase in 2019’, he says. Although activists, opposition parties and civil society organisations are constantly lobbying for a relaunch of popular marches once the pandemic eases, more and more observers of Algerian politics are increasingly wary regarding the Hirak’s ability to return to the pre-Covid-19 dynamic. ‘There were attempts to relaunch protests in several cities but the Hirak does not seem to pick up again. I don’t think people are keen to take back [to the streets]’, an Algerian journalist explains.³⁴

A major trigger for people’s reluctance to join marches in recent months is not only the uncertainty about the Covid-19 crisis, but also the internal dispute within the Hirak about its concrete goals – a matter that is becoming even more pressing the longer the movement prevails. ‘People are tired of corona, the pandemic had serious effects on the movement. People know now that protesting won’t get you anywhere. If the major demand [of the Hirak] is the departure of [President] Tebboune, many know that this is not going to happen, it’s not realistic’, the journalist says. After Bouteflika’s departure, the Hirak had already lost significant popular support, though the movement managed to revive several times, peaking again in December 2019 and in February 2020. Today however, the movement’s internal divisions are increasingly visible and create significant uncertainty about the Hirak’s concrete objectives – a fact that increasingly discourages people from joining marches or other forms of activism against the regime.

‘There is disagreement and strife’, the journalist says, referring to the tug-of-war between secularists and Islamists in the movement which he frames as a ‘pointless debate’. Salah Dabouz also warns about divisions and the rise of Islamist currents within the Hirak. ‘There are political forces that attempt to take over the Hirak and position themselves to take the place of the regime’, he claims, referring to those organised in the Rashad movement, a predominantly exiled network of former supporters of the Front Islamique du Salut (Islamic Salvation Front, FIS), a radical Islamist party that won the 1990 and 1991 elections and was subsequently removed from power after a bloody military coup in 1992. According to Dabouz, the regime effectively encourages and pushes this current to gain ground, aiming at dividing the Hirak and, thereby, significantly weakening it.

The Hirak’s lack of a consistent vision for a transition period and the uncertainty about how to tackle and channel internal ideological disparity had been a pressing issue since 2019. Yet the common goal of countering the regime’s counter-revolutionary actions and attempts by the ruling class to only superficially reform the political order glued the different currents together and preserved the Hirak as one movement. Nevertheless, ‘the blur surrounding the Hirak’s objectives killed the Hirak. The only option imposed by the “super Hirakistes” is the constitutional assembly, a demand that was never mirrored by the majority of protesters’, the journalist explains, referring to a major demand of the secular current in the Hirak, mainly represented by the Pacte de l’Alternative démocratique (Pact of the Democratic Alternative, PAD), an alliance of leftist and liberal parties and associations. ‘This is why the Hirak cannot be regenerated nor go far’, the journalist believes.

Contrary to such pessimistic outlooks regarding the Hirak’s future, others are still hoping the Hirak could rise up again – at least if certain conditions are met. ‘In order to mobilise again like before, the movement needs a reason or an event, that pulls people to go out. We need something similar to the presidential elections in December 2019’, the Europe-based activist says, referring to the significantly growing mobilisation ahead of the vote. However, he appeared uncertain if the constitutional referendum on 1 November 2020 could be a spark reviving the movement and triggering yet another wave of popular resistance almost one year after Tebboune’s election. Although small and mid-size protests erupted in

numerous cities and villages across Kabylia and northern Algeria during the referendum, the ballot did not spark a sustainable mobilisation of Hirak supporters in the streets.

Nevertheless, several boycott campaigns launched by activists and civil society organisations successfully undermined the regime's attempt to mobilise voters as the ballot witnessed a historically low turnout of only 23.7 per cent of the electorate.³⁵ Meanwhile, Hirak activists had set up a new initiative ('Nida22') ahead of the referendum, aiming at revitalising the movement online and potentially offline at a later stage. By facilitating a platform for an intra-Hirak dialogue to discuss goals and objectives, Nida22 aims at re-structuring the movement to pave the way for countering the regime's roadmap with its own roadmap for a real political transition.³⁶ As initial online events organised by Nida22 have witnessed the participation of tens of thousands of people, the Hirak's support within Algeria's society appears to still be significant despite the lasting absence of visible street actions. However, the movement has yet to prove that this online solidarity could potentially translate into another wave of popular protests once the pandemic has eased.

In contrast to such hopes, the constitutional reform process could potentially consolidate the regime as President Tebboune and other high-level officials continue to frame the constitutional amendments as a concession to the Hirak and a response to the people's demands for political change. The preamble of the new constitution even includes an explicit reference to the Hirak, framing the amendment as a project mirroring the people's aspiration for reform. However, the drafting process of the constitution – which is in fact a series of amendments to the old constitution – has been all but transparent and inclusive as it was drafted by a group of experts appointed by the president without any participation of either the opposition or the Hirak. Warnings within the movement about imposing a regime-led political 'transition' in a unilateral and authoritarian manner have been pervasive ever since.³⁷

Tebboune, however, already turned to a more appeasing discourse, fading away from the regime's hardline approach towards the Hirak. He announced to introduce a semi-presidential system through the constitutional amendment that will transfer power from the presidency to parliament. 'The national assembly will propose bills itself for the first time' and is supposed to 'provide oversight over the government's management', he promised.³⁸ Whereas the constitutional amendment appears to be yet another decoy to divide the Hirak, appease certain strata of society, and maintain a regime-controlled 'transition', many people are actually disenchanted by the movement, the constant protests in the streets, and the seemingly endless tug-of-war between those in power and the Hirak. Due to the economic crisis, which had already significantly accelerated the socioeconomic challenges for large strata of society, many appear to now prioritise political stability as the most severe phase of the economic depression is yet to come. The upcoming period post-corona is, thus, pivotal for the Hirak and the ruling class, as Algeria is either facing a new wave of street protests or the provisional end of popular resistance against the regime.

Conclusion

While people in Sudan and Algeria are still grappling with how to change entrenched power structures that allow elites connected to the old regimes to retain power, the emergence of coronavirus has further complicated the already difficult political transition in Sudan and the ongoing tug-of-war between le pouvoir and the Hirak in Algeria. Economic hardship — which triggered the anti-Bashir protests in December 2018 — remains a pressing challenge in Sudan as the inflation rate has risen further to 200 per cent in November 2020.

Although US authorities removed Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism in late October, it will not do much in the short term to alleviate the economic pain. The economic and fiscal crisis in Algeria likewise continues to be a key issue yet to be solved, though it did not yet trigger an outright economic collapse. However, Algeria's foreign reserves continue to drop at an alarming pace, fuelling fear that the state budget might implode within the upcoming two years. Against this background, social inequalities and socioeconomic hardship are expected to accelerate even further. As the regimes in both countries have been unable to implement or initiate structural economic reforms aiming to fairly distribute state resources and improve the living condition of marginalised strata of society, the protest movements in Sudan and Algeria are expected to continue their struggles for social justice and a comprehensive political transition.

However, the coronavirus pandemic clearly illustrates that authorities and remnants of the old elites in both Sudan and Algeria are not willing to give in and hand over political power to civilians not affiliated to the former regimes. Authorities in both countries deliberately exploited the Covid-19 crisis for political gains, aiming at sidelining or even neutralising their respective civilian opponents. Respective policies and actions pursued by state actors, security bodies and civilian pro-regime forces are sounding the alarm of what is yet to come as counter-revolutionary dynamics will not ease in both countries any time soon.

In Algeria, a heavy crackdown on government opponents and basic freedoms has strangled the Hirak and opposition forces since late 2019 and even more since the Covid-19 pandemic hit the country. While Sudanese civic and democratic space has partly opened, many problematic laws still exist and recent protests have been met with violence, including lethal force. Censorship and the muzzling of the press has only partly stopped³⁹ and the restrictive anti-women public order law has been repealed, although the cybercrime act - an overly broad law used by the past regime to target online critics - has been recently invoked by the army.⁴⁰ As one journalist commented, threats by the army or security forces persist, and according to the Sudanese Union of Journalists (SUJ), journalists have been repeatedly threatened.⁴¹ Journalists Lana Awad Sabil and Aida Ahmed Abdelgadir were arrested after publishing reports about the number of Covid-19 deaths in Darfur.⁴²

Since their onset in late 2018 and early 2019, the recent popular resistance movements in Sudan and Algeria have, nevertheless, taken up the complicated challenge to persistently push for a democratic and civilian transitions despite risks and major obstacles. These struggles have been also a timely reminder on how much can be achieved with non-violent campaigns against repressive and military regimes. Algerian and Sudanese activists have truly broken the wall of fear, raising political consciousness and engagement, but not without anxiety, worry and deep concerns in a regime-led political 'transition' in Sudan and a reconfiguration of the ruling elite in Algeria. Bouteflika and Bashir are gone, but the shadows of their regimes remain and the fragile political setting still hangs in the balance, further complicated by the coronavirus pandemic. Both countries, aside of cosmetic reforms, still await justice amid frail transitions. Until 'le pouvoir' in Algeria and the 'kizan' in Sudan - the old deep state - is removed or at least forced to accept a real transition, the strategies and tactics that militaries and authoritarians use to control dissent and opposition will continue, fuelled and encouraged by the pandemic.

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