

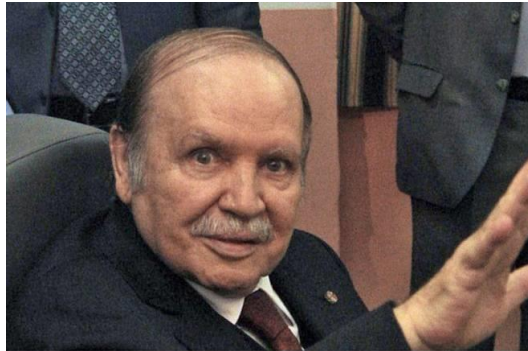
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Algeria after Bouteflika

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Abdelaziz Bouteflika

While the long-serving President's exit is a tactical victory of the popular will, it pushes the nation into uncharted territory

Abdelaziz Bouteflika's resignation as Algerian President on April 2 was a momentous development. The popular disaffection that forced him out after two decades in power was triggered by worsening socio-economic conditions largely due to lower oil and gas revenues. It can also be seen as a delayed arrival of the Arab Spring, with the youth feeling increasingly disconnected from the gerontocrats and their hogra (insolence).

Algerian peculiarities

However, the Algerian socio-political context has at least two peculiarities. First, since Algeria's independence in 1962, the country has always been ruled by an informal coalition of the National Liberation Front and army generals (collectively called le Pouvoir, or 'the Power'). While this has ensured continuity, durability and predictability, it has resisted political evolution. Second, from the late 1980s, Algeria endured a long period of socio-political crisis which resulted in the emergence of the Islamists led by the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS). This party was denied victory in the 1991-92 elections, and this led to a gruesome insurgency causing nearly 200,000 deaths. In fact, le Pouvoir brought in Mr. Bouteflika in 1999 to close this chapter and foster national reconciliation. It is because of this bitter legacy that Algerians prefer a stifling stability over any uncertainty. As a result, the recent demonstrations, though massive, were peaceful.

However, Mr. Bouteflika's attempt to seek a fifth term was the proverbial last straw. In popular perception, the country was being ruled in Mr. Bouteflika's name by le Pouvoir. The popular opprobrium against his fifth term intensified and morphed into a call for his resignation, removal of the entire old guard, and a new political structure that is more

transparent and responsive to the people. Le Pouvoir's initial response to the popular discontent was to be in denial, prevaricate and resort to tokenism. It was only recently that the army chief publicly called for Mr. Bouteflika to be declared as incapacitated. 'Boutexit' followed, paving the way to a transitional presidency, which was ratified by the National Parliament on April 9.

Although Mr. Bouteflika's exit is certainly a tactical victory for the popular will, it also pushes Algeria into uncharted territory. While nominal political institutions and processes exist in Algeria, these lack both efficacy and credibility. On the other hand, the protests were largely spontaneous, without orchestration, organisational structure and leadership. Boutexit seems to have emboldened the protesters to expand their wish list to exclude le Pouvoir from the future dispensation. Though on the defensive, le Pouvoir (and the oligarchs tagged to it) is unlikely to ride willingly into the sunset. Thus, an immediate and uncompromising pursuit of this ambitious popular agenda runs the risk of unleashing a protracted battle of attrition resulting in instability, radicalisation and/or regime repression. The substantive issues of socio-economic reforms, corruption, and the Arab-Berber divide are likely to be held in abeyance till political issues are resolved. This could further accentuate these grievances. Any long-winding transition would strengthen Gulf influence, French meddling and simmering Islamic militancy. Avoidance of such pitfalls would require everyone to show maturity and flexibility. After all, the stakes are quite high: Algeria's 42 million population is second only to Egypt's in the Arab world. It is an OPEC member, a major gas supplier to Europe, and a large importer of goods ranging from automobiles to pharmaceuticals. Protracted uncertainty in Algeria can affect Europe by disrupting energy supplies, and causing a surge in immigration and in radicalisation of the four million Algerians living in Europe.

Significance for India

For India, too, Algerian developments have multiple significance. First, Mr. Bouteflika was a friend of India and paid a state visit in 2001. His successor will, hopefully, continue the bilateral amity. Second, bilateral economic ties are robust and growing. Algeria is an important market for India's foodstuff, automobiles, farm machinery, pharmaceuticals, mobiles and cosmetics. It is also India's source for strategic commodities, especially hydrocarbons and phosphates. A number of Indian contractors have been active in Algeria, notably Larsen & Toubro, which recently won a \$1 billion hydrocarbon project from Sonatrach, the national oil company. At the political level, Algeria has been one of the few members of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation to have consistently supported India's case against terrorism. India can play a vital role in ensuring that Algeria's imminent socio-political transition is smooth by helping the country with institution-building and infrastructure.

Mahesh Sachdev was Indian Ambassador to Algeria from 1999 to 2001.