The Hirak and COVID-19
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Pandemics in an Unequal World: Learning from COVID-19
Final Paper
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Introduction

From Hong Kong to Portland to Algiers, COVID-19 has been a catalyst for change, either by driving street demonstrations against the state or by redefining how groups mobilize to voice their discontent. The large-scale protest movement in Algeria, the Hirak as it is called, serves as an example of the latter.

The Hirak began in February of 2019 as weekly protests across the country in response to the announcement that Algeria’s 81-year-old president would stand for a fifth term. But the grievances were much broader than that. Decades of political inertia, economic stagnation, repression, and other concerns related to a state military apparatus, le pouvoir, brought a huge number of people to the streets. Its hallmark accomplishment: pushing out octogenarian president Abdelaziz Bouteflika from power in April of 2019, after nearly 20 years in power. But this broad representation of Algerian society marched on for almost a year, driving for a total overhaul of the Algerian political system.

Due to COVID-19, the physical protests halted because of public health concerns. Since March, the state’s relationship with the Hirak has been marked by the arrest of journalists and protesters. The Hirak, on the other hand, has sought new ways to define itself in the absence of street demonstrations.

Looming large over the Algerian psyche as it copes with the pandemic is its complicated history of anticolonial revolution, popular mobilization and civil war.

The main research questions to be addressed here are 1) Will post-COVID-19 Algeria be different? and 2) How has the pandemic altered the structural forces in Algeria society and politics?

Although I will discuss some of the health and economic impacts of the pandemic, which are inextricably linked to inequality and the current state of affairs in Algeria, this paper will focus more on impact of the pandemic on the Hirak movement and on its ability to carry on forward.

“Never Let a Good Crisis Go to Waste”¹

With huge demonstrations taking hold across six continents, 2019 was a “year of street protest.”² Heightened awareness of social, political and economic injustice, amplified and fueled by digital

¹ de Haldevang, Max. Coronavirus has crippled global protest movements. Quartz. April 1, 2020.

² de Haldevang, Max. Coronavirus has crippled global protest movements. Quartz. April 1, 2020.
media, gave rise to “more people power [mobilizing] than any time in recorded history.”

In a 2019 *New Yorker* article, Harvard political scientist Erica Chenoweth noted that “nonviolent mass movements are the primary challenges to governments” marking “a pronounced shift in the global landscape of dissent.”

Richard Youngs, a democracy expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace writes that this phenomenon speaks to “a broader need for a new social contract between citizens and state power that goes beyond traditional political reforms, economic adjustments, or shifts in who sits at the top.”

While 2019 was marked by protests, 2020 has been defined by a global pandemic. Every aspect of society has been forced to contend and cope with COVID-19. It would make sense, then, that such a shape-shifting reality like the new coronavirus would redefine protest movements around the world. To that end, COVID-19 has raised the stakes for activism by amplifying existing tension, anxiety and inequality.

In some places, like the US, the pandemic has served to bring issues like racial inequality to the forefront, in part spurring on the resurgence of Black Lives Matter on an immense scale. In other contexts, like Algeria and Hong Kong, in-person demonstrations have ground to a halt, leaving in question the future of movements that only a few weeks before the health crisis, had authoritarian regimes on the defensive.

Journalist Max de Haldevang speaks to this context when he writes: “Covid-19 has had this kind of chilling effect on opposition movements everywhere. The world is now a long way from 2019.”

Discussing potential government roles and responses as well as the “crisis” narrative, Oren Gross from the University of Minnesota writes: “When faced with major crises—terrorist attacks, natural disasters, economic turmoil, or biological threats—we, the people, turn to our governments for protection, help, assistance, leadership, and assurance. As such, crises both raise

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6 de Haldevang, Max. *Coronavirus has crippled global protest movements*, *Quartz*, April 1, 2020.
a demand of government ‘to do something’ to overcome the crisis as well as an opportunity for the government to ‘do something.’”7

In a conversation with academic and author Janet Roitman; Sara Angeli Aguiton, Dr. Lydie Cabane and Dr. Lise Cornilleau note that “crises translate into new practices of forced austerity, violence, exclusion and economic, social, political and physical injustice in the lives of many people.”8 They also state that “claims to crisis potentially serve to reestablish the status quo.”9 It is the status quo of control that the Algerian state has sought to re-capture since the beginning of the pandemic.

**Unique Algerian Context**

The complex and sometimes contradictory history of Algeria shape the ethos of its government and the character of its relatively young population.

*Colonialism*

The ubiquitous 1943 novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus was set in Algeria. At the onset of the pandemic earlier this year, the acclaimed work of fiction received renewed attention. It returned to best-seller lists and became a favorite topic for journalists, drawing parallels between the fictional situation for residents of the seaside town of Oran depicted in the book, and the ostensibly universal experience shared by so many across the world amid COVID-19. In a BBC article about the town of Oran and how it was coping with the pandemic, Lucy Ash wrote: “Although it was published 73 years ago, today *The Plague* almost feels like a news bulletin.”10

But such commentary, according to academic Andrew Farrand, does not “consider the colonial context in which Camus was born and lived, and in which *The Plague* is set… [ Algerians] are almost entirely absent from *The Plague*.”11 This colonial legacy is still palpable in modern-day Algeria.

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The French first colonized Algeria in 1830.\textsuperscript{12} The region was different than other French colonies, treated as a province of \textit{la metropole} or mainland France. More than one million \textit{colons} settled there and exerted considerable (often brutal) influence while marginalizing the majority Arab-Berber population.\textsuperscript{13}

The modern Algerian state was born out of an eight-year war against French colonial occupation that started in 1954, with independence won in 1962.\textsuperscript{14} Along with the bloody conflict across the territory, massive (and peaceful) street demonstrations by Algerians in 1960 sent a strong political message to the French government of Algerian intentions for self-determination.\textsuperscript{15} This same revolutionary regime that overthrew the French, the FLN, has led the country since 1962.\textsuperscript{16} To this day, the war for independence still features prominently in Algeria and the state continues to leverage its revolutionary credentials for legitimacy.

\textit{The Dark Decade}

As noted above, there is a historical precedent in Algeria of largescale protests movements. A horrific civil war in the 90s, ostensibly between the state and Islamists, looms large over the country’s collective psyche to this day. Its roots go back to pro-democracy youth street protests in 1988.\textsuperscript{17} Despite bloody state repression in which hundreds died, a short-lived democratic opening, replete with press freedoms and elections, followed. But when the established Islamist party, the FIS, won the first round of parliamentary elections in 1991, the military nullified the results and put in place a military junta.\textsuperscript{18}

Throughout a good part of the 90s, civilians were terrorized by both Islamic fundamentalists and by the state in a brutal civil war. The latter was spurred on by a “radicalization of social grievances.”\textsuperscript{19} There was what Faouzia Zeraoulia called “grey zones of ambiguity” as to who perpetrated the violence. Many to this day suspect occasional, yet confounding complicities.


between the many warring parties. Throughout this “dark decade” as it is known, 200,000 people died and 15,000 were “forcibly disappeared.” Deep memories of the trauma inflicted by fundamentalists and the state run deep.

Algeria never really came to terms with the dark decade. The country’s road to “peace” was paved with what some call amnesty and others call impunity. The absence of peace and reconciliation allowed wounds to fester. It was Abdelaziz Bouteflika, put in power towards the end of the war and who would rule Algeria until his removal by the Hirak, who was, ostensibly, the architect of the “peace.” He leveraged this narrative and fear of a return to violence to stay in power for 20 years.

Post-Colonialism or “Colonial Counter Revolution”?  

Algeria is often spoken of as a country with incredible potential, but since the mid-60s it has been an authoritarian state where the military establishment and a core of powerful oligarchs manage the levers of power. This ruling class is characterized by repression, corruption, and political rot, all of which betray the revolutionary ideals that made the country the envy of the Third World at one time and a symbol of freedom from oppression.

Psychiatrist, political scientist and anti-colonial icon Franz Fanon wrote about the possibility that a post-colonial state could betray its revolutionary ideals: “Before independence, the leader, as a rule, personified the aspirations of the people—indeed, national dignity. But in the aftermath of independence, far from actually embodying the needs of the people, far from establishing himself as the promoter of the actual dignity of the people, which is founded on bread, land, and putting the country back into their sacred hands, the leader will unmask his inner purpose: to be the CEO of the company of profiteers composed of a national bourgeoisie intent only on getting the most out of the situation.”

Fanon’s words speak to the economic stagnation and political illegitimacy that would drive people to the streets in 2019. Writing 60 years later, academic Brahim Rouabah compares Algeria’s post-colonial rulers to the French colonial occupiers when he describes a “colonial

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counter revolution” since 1962: “…the colonial counter-revolution sought and continues to seek to crush, or at least discredit any emancipatory political project and ideology, even when expressed in Westphalian term…The outward looking, anti-colonial and liberatory doctrine of the Algerian army was transformed into an inward-looking, sub-colonial, and repressive doctrine. The liberation army whose raison d’être was the defense of sovereignty and self-determination of the people was turned into an army whose function was to repress the people. The ‘enemy’ was no longer northern imperialist powers, but Algerians themselves.”

Fanon and Rouabah, respectively, paint a vivid picture of what modern-day Algeria would and has become. But what does this mean empirically? The country is forced to import a large percentage of its consumer goods (often through state-controlled distributors), it suffers from high youth unemployment (27%), it has a large informal sector, there is considerable emigration to Europe; and Algeria suffers from high levels of poverty (23% of the population lives below the poverty line). This reality is starker considering the country’s vast oil and gas reserves. The economy is over-reliant on these natural resources (more than 90% of export earnings). In fact, the breakeven price for oil in Algeria was $157 per barrel in 2020. To put things in perspective, the price fell to just $20 a barrel in mid-2020. Additionally, the military, who plays an oversized role in all sectors of society, has been bolstered by the “War on Terror.” To that end, since 9/11 Algeria has been a key partner to the US.

It is this reality that the Hirak has been protesting and this reality that will be further exposed by COVID-19.

**Hirak**

The word Hirak—which means movement—holds great literal and symbolic meaning for the informal coalition of protesters that took to the streets in 2019 seeking to break with its past and carry on forward.

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Despite an enduring state of emergency since 1992, which included a ban on public gatherings, and the “traumatic memory” of the “dark decade,” public protests and other forms of civil disobedience have occurred episodically.  

As the “Arab street” rose across Northern Africa and the Middle East in 2011, pockets of the Algerian population mobilized to voice their discontent and push for change. But the government found ways to shut these down. Urban riots were harshly repressed. The pouvoir responded to more organized and coordinated protests that did arise through symbolic gestures like food and oil subsidies and nominal reforms like the elimination of a national state of emergency.

The Hirak protests that began in 2019 took off in a manner never imagined in the North African country. The initial protests were spurred on by social media in direct response to the candidacy of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Not only was Bouteflika seeking a fifth term, but he was also sick and essentially immobile. Since 2013, when he suffered a severe stroke, he had mostly been out of public view, only communicating with the public via official statements.

Robin Wright of the New Yorker writes of the scale of the demonstrations: “An estimated three million Algerians—almost ten percent of the population—turned out in the country, in February, to demand an end to President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s twenty-year rule.”

The Hirak brought out almost every segment of Algerian society: the professional class, secularists, Islamists, conservatives, communists, students, former government officials (including former revolutionaries from the 50s and 60s), youth from poor communities, Berbers, Arabs, artists, women, etc.

Brahim Rouabah writes quite eloquently about the Hirak and what it represented to so many desperate for a better future: “What the people’s movement has instilled in the Algerian collective psyche over the last 18 months is a self-determining attitude towards their future and destiny. This renewed sense of ownership over their country, expressed through such slogans as ‘this is our country and our will shall reign supreme,’ carries a message of reassurance to the people’s ancestors: should the deluge strike again, the overwhelming majority of Algerians will

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reach for buckets and not life jackets. The military oligarchy and its foreign backers can be toppled once more by the mass movement.”

The Hirak was characterized by irreverence, humor and music, and its lack of leadership structure made it hard to infiltrate (or “clone”) by the state, a common tactic used by government officials to coopt earlier protest movements. Its ubiquitous calls for “silmya” (peaceful) demonstrations sought to calm fears of a return to the violence seen, not only in the 90s in Algeria, but also in Syria and Libya following their respective revolutions.

After the removal from office of President Bouteflika and the symbolic arrest on charges of corruption of a few government officials and business leaders linked to him, the now twice-a-week protests persisted. But their demands become bolder: an overhaul of the entire political system. The new rally cry became: “they all must go!”

The Algerian government’s response to the Hirak has remained fluid as the movement has evolved. But, researcher Dominique Vidal notes that the Algerian government, though repressive, is not as brutal and egregious as the Assad regime in Syria. More subtly, le pouvoir weaponized “political maneuverings and rhetoric.” Much of this was done by framing their own narratives. Here they leveraged tools they utilized successfully following earlier protests, like nominally embracing “democracy” and “reform.” They appropriated the Hirak, at least their version of it.

To that end, after the Hirak pivoted to demand an overhaul of the entire Algerian political system, the narrative of “two Hiraks” was wielded by the state. According to those in power, there were two protest movements: the “legitimate” one that called for and succeeded in the removal of the four-term president; and the “illegitimate” one that sought chaos.

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Algeria in the Time of COVID-19

Healthcare in Algeria

According to the Borgen Project, a US-based nonprofit with a focus on global poverty: “Algeria’s public healthcare network ranked as the 173rd most secure healthcare network out of 195 nations.”43 This contextualizes why the county’s medical system, which ostensibly “allows anyone to access healthcare at no cost to themselves,” became one of the Hirak’s many grievances.44 Academics Hamza Hamouchene and Selma Oumari speak of the “dire state of the public health sector that has been hollowed by decades of underfunding and mismanagement.”45 Writer and Hirak activist Omar Benderra writes of healthcare as a symbol of “state neglect,” equating hospitals in Algeria to morgues.46 Benderra also notes the significant participation of health workers in the Hirak protests.47

COVID-19 Arrives in Algeria

Despite this fragile infrastructure, the official numbers suggest that the health impacts of COVID-19 in Algeria are seemingly manageable. As of December 12, 2020, there were approximately 91,000 total cases (fifth in Africa) and around 2500 deaths (fifth in Africa).48 Though not necessarily low, the country’s hospital system, at first glance, does not appear crippled.

In late February 2020, the Algerian government announced that an Italian man who arrived earlier in the month was the country’s first COVID-19 case, the second in Africa at the time.49 In response to an increasing number of cases, the state progressively put in place a series of measures to stem the flow of the virus.

Considering the role of the Algerian military in civilian affairs, the tense political climate in the country and the government’s history dealing with nationwide crises, it is important to note that

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48 WORLDOMETERS.INFO, Coronavirus, Algeria, December 12, 2020.
officials have not instituted a state of emergency. According to the Near East South Asian Center for Strategic Studies (NESA), a US organization: “this was probably part of a desire on the part of the state to prove the effectiveness of ‘civilian’ response in all sectors, without having to call on military resources.”

Some key measures the state did put in place during the first few months of the crisis include:

- March 12: The closure of schools, including universities and training centers.
- March 17: The closure of the country’s borders including the suspension of international flights and commercial shipping. Exempt from these restrictions were “those bringing in food, medicine and essential raw materials or repatriating citizens.”
- March 17: Ban on public gatherings, includes mosque services and street protests, to name a few prohibited events.
- March 24: Partial lockdown (namely in Algiers and Oran) or total lockdown measures (in Blida), “depending on the local epidemiological situation.”
- April 4: A partial lockdown and curfew in the rest of the country. This decree was “backed up by strict security measures: police and gendarmerie patrols and a vast awareness-raising campaign to encourage people to fully observe the instructions. Monetary and disciplinary sanctions were applied to those in violation.”
- May 20: Mask wearing was mandated.
- July 9: Travel banned to/from the 29 most affected regions.

Throughout the on-going crisis, the state tightly controlled public messaging via state media and daily press briefings.

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54 Bahri, Younes, COVID-19 IN ALGERIA: RESPONSES AND FUTURE OUTLOOK, NESA, April 2020.
Economic Impact

With 500,000 jobs lost since last March, the impact of COVID-19 on an already fragile economy has been dire due to lockdown measures, the continued drop in oil prices, and a general downturn in the global economy.59 A few additional statistics that underscore the country’s precarious finances are noted below:

- According to a May 2020 article in Marxist.com: “Foreign exchange reserves are now an estimated $55 billion, down from almost $200 billion in 2014. They are expected to fall to $44 billion by the end of 2020.”60
- The government faces a $20 billion budget deficit.61
- In May 2020, the Algerian state announced a 50% cut in public spending and the postponement of several promised economic and social projects.62

Writing about the slashing of social programs, the Brookings Institute notes: “Such moves might cause greater discontent within the ranks of the Hirak, which is demanding root-level reforms that would eradicate corruption and socioeconomic inequalities.”63

To ease the economic strain on the population, the government has enacted several policy measures. In mid-March, the state postponed the collection of income and value-added taxes for two months.64 Later in March they announced a period of paid leave for half of the public sector’s employees due to “the closure of non-essential public services” as well as the creation of a special “crisis unit” established to support the country’s fishermen.65 In April, the Bank of Algeria mandated that all financial institutions postpone client debt payments.66 Additionally, a 10,000-dinar payment (72 euros) for “needy families” and the deferral of late payment penalties for “works and services provided under public contracts” were announced in mid-April.67

59 Benali, Arezki, Belmihoub estime à 500 000 le nombre d’emplois perdus à cause de la pandémie, Algie Eco, December 1, 2020.
Is It Under control?

For some, government policy since the arrival of COVID-19 in Algeria helped shape the narrative of a state proactively managing the crisis. Algerian writer and intellectual Kamel Daoud, no friend of the ruling party (though more pragmatic than many activists), appears to give Algerian officials credit when he suggests a certain “control on the part of the government” to manage the virus.\(^6^8\) As he stated in a radio interview in the fall: “A large percentage of the population gives the government a temporary benefit of the doubt.”\(^6^9\)

A report by The Atlantic Council echoes this notion, noting that “the regime’s success in confronting the pandemic might serve to enhance its legitimacy and limit the Hirak movement.”\(^7^0\)

Disputed Numbers?

Despite this narrative, skepticism is persistent. Official statics have been questioned by activists, journalists, and health workers alike. \textit{Le Monde} points to limited testing capacity across the country and widespread accounts on social media of hospitals at or over capacity.\(^7^1\) The French daily refers to “under-reported numbers by the state” by doctors who “continue to ring the alarm-bell on social media with concerning reports of a catastrophic situation in certain hospitals.”\(^7^2\) These field accounts belie “efforts by authorities to centralize and limit [COVID] reporting strictly to the national level.”\(^7^3\) Early in the pandemic, the government established an “ad-hoc” commission, reporting to the Ministry of Health, with the sole authority to communicate COVID-19 numbers.\(^7^4\) As noted by NESA: “Any information given outside that framework is considered non-credible and perpetrators could face legal sanctions.”\(^7^5\) The government deems any numbers from unofficial (and local) channels as “fake news.”\(^7^6\)


**History Repeats Itself**

The virus has penetrated the highest levels of government, including President Abdelmadjid Tebboune who contracted COVID-19 earlier in the fall. He has been out of the public eye for 56 days and counting (through December 15). During this time, he spent more than a month and a half in a hospital in Germany for treatment. 

Here, the Bouteflika health comparison is impossible to ignore. As the Associated Press writes: “The absence of the head of state, who also serves as defense chief, recalled the long absences of his predecessor, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, for treatment in France of a stroke in 2013 and later in Switzerland for numerous medical check-ups, with lots of speculation and little information on his whereabouts or health.”

Symbolically, comparisons to the era of president Bouteflika are not the most flattering for an administration looking to demonstrate a new face. Tebboune’s treatment in Europe also belies earlier claims by the government of its strong health system. And his absence poses a political concern in that the new constitution requires that the president must be on Algerian soil to sign and ratify it himself.

**Hirak Responds**

On March 20, 2020, after 56 straight weeks of uninterrupted street protests, the in-person marches came to a stop, at least temporarily. The halt followed a government decree banning public gatherings which was reluctantly heeded by the Hirak after prominent activists agreed to pause.

As an alternative, activists attempted to amplify their online voice and, in some instances, broadened their scope of action.

Abdallah Benadouda, an Algerian journalist exiled in Providence, Rhode Island for more than six years, launched Radio Corona Internationale (RCI) in late March as a platform to carry on the Hirak “flame” during the pandemic pause.

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80 Algeria’s Tebboune makes first TV appearance in almost two months, Al Jazeera, December 13, 2020.
81 Davis, Muriam Haleh. “This is the Voice of Algeria:” Radio Corona International Carries the Torch of the Hirak, Jadaliyya, August 20, 2020.
RCI is broadcast live on Facebook and the episodes are made available as a podcast. The Tuesday and Friday broadcasts mirror the cadence of the Hirak marches. RCI attempts to re-capture the ethos of the movement.\textsuperscript{82} Just as music, sports, humor, irreverence, and of course political commentary characterized the street demonstrations, these all feature strongly on the radio program.

According to Benadouda, Hirak protests became a “kind of ritual for many, and a point of reference for some. Certain relationships and dynamics were possible thanks to the Hirak. The actors sought a public space that could be a refuge or alternative [in order] to continue this quest for a community of ideas and hope. RCI was one response to this need, even without intending to be.”\textsuperscript{83}

Benadouda himself draws parallels between RCI and Radio Caroline, the British pirate radio station founded in the 1960s to bypass the BBC’s broadcast monopoly.\textsuperscript{84} Other comparisons could be made between RCI and Radio Free Europe.

And there is a precedent in Algeria of using alternate forms of media, particularly music, in the absence of a traditional political voice. One example was a genre of North African music called Rai which served as a powerful voice of discontent in the 80s and 90s.\textsuperscript{85}

During the COVID-19 pause, there have also been examples of the Hirak pivoting to relief and solidarity in parts of the country, often to fill in gaps left by the government.

To that end, Patricia Karam from The Hill writes: “The Hirak movement has found ways to sustain itself through developing solidarity networks. Citizens and protesters stand at the frontlines of the coronavirus to mobilize resources and to distribute supplies for hotspots. They have delivered groceries to the vulnerable citizens, sanitized public areas, and sent personal protective equipment, efforts that highlight this weakness of the health care system and of the government. This shows a sense of true duty and offers people an alternative source of authority on a public health response to the pandemic emergency.”\textsuperscript{86}

\begin{itemize}
  \item Davis, Muriam Haleh. “This is the Voice of Algeria:” Radio Corona International Carries the Torch of the Hirak, Jadaliyya, August 20, 2020.
  \item Davis, Muriam Haleh. “This is the Voice of Algeria:” Radio Corona International Carries the Torch of the Hirak, Jadaliyya, August 20, 2020.
  \item Davis, Muriam Haleh. “This is the Voice of Algeria:” Radio Corona International Carries the Torch of the Hirak, Jadaliyya, August 20, 2020.
  \item Karam, Patricia. The fundamental limits of the authoritarian state of Algeria, The Hill, October 22, 2020.
\end{itemize}
This brings to mind similarities to Occupy Sandy an offshoot of Occupy Wall Street, the NY-based movement protesting inequality after the 2008 financial crash. After Superstorm Sandy devastated communities across the NYC region, Occupy Wall Street pivoted to disaster relief gaining acclaim and legitimacy in the process.

One of the more effective forms of action by the Hirak during the pandemic has been a largescale boycott of the November 1, 2020 constitutional referendum vote which the movement saw as illegitimate and far from the overhaul of the political system it was marching for. Only 23% of potential voters took part in the election.87

The State Responds

Looking back at the previous nine months, it is clear that the Algerian state has taken advantage of the pandemic by silencing activists and journalists, wielding new legal measures and re-interpreting existing laws to control the narrative.

As Akram Belkaid writes in Le Monde Diplomatique: “In the Spring, the lockdown imposed as a result of COVID-19 offered the government an unexpected opportunity to clean house.”88

According to the Algerian prisoners' rights group CNLD, “approximately 90 activists, social media users and journalists are currently in custody.”89 These including public figures like journalist Khaled Drareni who was arrested in March at the beginning of the lockdown after previously covering the Hirak protests for the French station TV5 Monde.90 He was sentenced to two years in prison on September 15, 2020.91 His charge: “inciting an unarmed gathering.”92 A respected independent journalist, Drareni has become what Le Monde Diplomatique calls “the symbol of a paranoid media clampdown.”93

89 Asala, Kizzi. 1-Year Prison Suspended Prison Sentence for Algerian Hirak Figure, AfricaNews.com, December 7, 2020.
Also arrested were Karim Tabbou, a leading Hirak activist; Walid Kechida, creator of the popular but now closed Facebook page "Hirak Memes;" as well as dozens of anonymous social media users and activists detained simply for posting online.94

Several Algerian media outlets like Maghreb Emergent, Radio M, and El Manchar have either been threatened or outright shut down. As for the international press, French TV station M6 was banned from Algerian airwaves after the running an unfavorable documentary.95 Speaking of the chilling effects of this repression, Vish Sakthivel, a fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute's Program on the Middle East says: “there is so much confusion around the arrest of these activists. People are scared.”96

By silencing independent media as well as Hirak voices, the state is seeking to take control of and shape the narrative, particularly that of the “two Hiraks” mentioned earlier.

But this could backfire, according to Heba Morayef, director of the Middle East, Northern Africa Division at Amnesty International. As she suggests, “[the Algerian state’s acts of repression] remind us that the government’s promises to listen to the protest movement do not translate to reality.”97

What does this Mean for the Future?

Austerity?

Looking forward, the complicated economic situation in Algeria, one made more dire by COVID-19, could force its currency reserves to run dry up by 2023.98 This eventuality could push the state to seek out external debt for the first time in years. The austerity that would follow and the further reduction in state services could intensify the conflict between the Hirak movement and the state.99

Contemplating this eventuality, Hamza Hamouchene and Selma Oumari write: “If Algeria continues on the path of liberalization and privatization, Algerians will definitely see more social

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95 Bounab, Youcef Oussama. As the Hirak in Algeria Goes Online Due to COVID-19, so Does Repression, Jadaliyya, May 25, 2020.
96 Sakthivel, Vish. Protest movements in Algeria, Iraq, and Lebanon during COVID-19 (podcast), Middle East Institute.
explosions and discontent. Social consensus cannot be achieved while pauperization, unemployment, and inequality continue. The recent slump in oil prices might be the final nail in the coffin of a rentier system that is highly dependent on oil and gas exports for its survival.”

*Divide and Conquer?*

A symbol of the Hirak’s strength since February 2019 has been its broad coalition of active protesters and supporters, including conservative Islamists and more secular progressives. But the COVID-19 pause seems to have facilitated what was initially pragmatic partnership between the two desperate groups.

“What made the Hirak, in part, is its identity of having broad swaths of society stand together, namely progressives and Islamists,” says Akram Belkaid. “We have recently seen divisions between these two groups. And the government is encouraging and nurturing these divisions.”

Kamel Daoud echoes this and speaks further about the complicity between the state and conservative groups: “Right now you have conservatives who are essentially in the government who are negotiating with the Islamists. The Islamists are on the ascendant. Despite high visibility in Western media, the democrats [Hirak] have no real leverage.” Daoud adds: “People are moving towards the government and the Islamists because they want solutions.”

*Limits of Online Activism*

Hirak is a street protest movement but it was social media that made its meteoric rise possible.

To that end, academic Ghazouane Arslane writes: “The actual bodies on the streets, however, are maintaining the national unity of the Hirak...What is more, it is on Facebook that the Hirak’s democratic force on the streets of the capital and many other Algerian cities is best captured and reported. Facebook here becomes a democratizing tool of disseminating news, a powerful alternative platform of reporting, representing and debating the Hirak. The latter’s organic force on the streets testifies to a mode of being-together that unifies the multiplicity of

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the people beyond any divisive discourse of identity, forcing this discourse to the margin of this continuous event week after week.”104

Since COVID-19, the Hirak has largely been driven online due to COVID-19 and as I have noted, the Algerian government has sought to silence social media activists. Even without these state restrictions though, online activism has its limitations.

In an article in The Atlantic, Antonia Malchik writes about the limits of online activism as a mode of mobilization: “Digital technology has opened up unimaginable worlds of access and connectivity, but it has also brought into question its own role in undermining the foundations of governments built by people, for people. The realities of face-to-face contact and in-person mass protests, the tools of centuries of struggle for full citizenship and rights, have become even more essential to grounding us as we navigate through a new era of humans’ relationship with technology.”105

“Online activism is not enough, Hirak needs the street,” says Akram Belkaid. “Yes, you can post online, you can write a book. Without people in the streets, you can’t do anything.”106

**Conclusion**

What has the pandemic meant for the Hirak and what does that mean for its future? The answer to the question, as Algerian political scientist Farida Souiah suggests, lies in the movement’s ability to disentangle its identity from its mode(s) of action.107 Kamel Daoud would add to this the need for the movement to evolve.108 Currently, Hirak’s only significant mode of action is street protests, which are inextricably linked to its ethos. As Akram Belkaid suggested, it is nothing without the street. And currently, because of COVID-19, Hirak and the street are socially distanced, so to speak. It’s like the body is cut off from the head.

That said, the Hirak is not dead, despite the government’s attempts to use the COVID-19 crisis to delegitimize its grievances and to silence its activists. The movement has seen some successes since the pandemic took hold. New media like Radio Corona Internationale do subtly help keep

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up its flame, to an extent. And the low voter turnout during the recent constitutional referendum underscores Hirak’s enduring (yet waning) influence, despite the pandemic.

But Hirak must evolve quickly in this next phase that will come and build legitimacy beyond the street. Kamel Daoud recognizes the movement’s influence but suggests there is a limit to what it can achieve if it does not move beyond “selfies and slogans.”109 He says Hirak must enter the “real world” through grassroots organizing and a form of political engagement. It must do so quickly because its broad coalition appears to be eroding. This is, in part, because a portion of the population favors “security over democracy.”110

Despite a show of physical and narrative force, le pouvoir has been weakened by COVID-19. The fact that President Tebboune contracted the virus has physical, symbolic and political implications for the state and the post COVID-19-world will further expose the failings of the Algerian government that gave rise to the Hirak in the first place.

The question is whether the Hirak can break through 60 years of taboo and fear to get there and reclaim the unfinished Algerian revolution.

As Franz Fanon wrote nearly 60 years ago: “A government or a party gets the people it deserves and sooner or later a people gets the government it deserves.”111

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