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Algeria's succession race warms up

On the 19th of November the Algerian army published the last issue of its monthly magazine el-Djeich. In a strong-worded editorial the Armée Nationale Populaire (ANP) denounced various attempts to divide the country and to sow the seeds of discontent. The ANP also reaffirmed its commitment to the Algerian people, the nation and the Constitution.

At first sight, the army's remarks seem to be part of a routine nationalist rhetoric. However, the statement needs to be deeply contextualised. On 7th November the Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika left the country to undergo several medical checks. He returned to France, even though relations between the two countries have been strained in the last months. Bouteflika's recent admission to a private clinic in Grenoble, where he remained for an entire week, could highlight a normalisation of the relationship between the two countries. At the same time, it raised several concerns about the health conditions of the President, which suffered a stroke in 2013 and has been on the wheelchair ever since.

The el-Djeich's editorial recalled the 2013 episode, revealing the pleas of different public figures to put into action the article 88 of the Constitution, which defines the state of impediment of the Presidency and the eventual vacancy of the office. According to the editorial, the army resisted these calls, refusing to violate the Constitution and the Algerian laws in order to obtain the power. As a result, President Bouteflika placed its candidacy for a fourth term in the 2014 presidential election, obtaining the majority of votes against Ali Benflis.

Nevertheless, Bouteflika's health conditions did not improve and the President is often absent from the public scene. As a result, talks about the succession to the Presidency became inevitable. Ever since Bouteflika's re-election, several names have been discussed in the Algerian press: among them, the former Energy Minister Chakib Khelil, recently back from his exile in the United States after being accused of corruption in Algeria; Ahmed Ouyahia, the leader of the Rassemblement National Démocratique (RND) and Abdelmalek Sellal, the current Prime Minister.

Observers also proposed two other names: Amar Saâdani and Ahmed Gaïd Salah. Saâdani was the Secretary General of the former one-party Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) and he has been considered a close associate of President Bouteflika. However, his frequent controversial remarks put him

at odds with the Presidency. A rival to Ouyahia, Saâdani vehemently criticised Mohamed Médiène, the former head of the Département pour le renseignement et la sécurité (DRS, the former Algerian intelligence agency) and Abdelaziz Belkhadem, its predecessor at the head of the FLN and a former Prime Minister. Both have been accused of serving the French interests in the country, a very offensive allegation in Algeria. As a result, Saâdani was forced to resign. He was replaced by Djamel Ould Abbès a 82 years old apparatchik, very close to the President.

In one of his first public appearances, Ould Abbès said that Bouteflika is improving and he did not rule out a fifth presidential mandate for him. However, his remark strongly contrasts with the current health conditions of the President and the reform of the Constitution approved earlier this year, which re-introduced a limit of two consecutive presidential mandates for the Presidency. It is likely that Abbès wanted to pay respect to the President, showing him the support of the FLN, in turmoil following the resignation of Saâdani and concerned by the approaching general election next year.

It is interesting to note that both the FLN and the Algerian army felt the need to reaffirm their support for Bouteflika just after Saâdani's resignation. The former leader of the FLN was also considered as a strong supporter of the Chief of Staff of the ANP and Deputy Defence Minister Gaïd Salah, whose presidential ambitions are often remarked in the country. The el-Djeich editorial could also serve to distance the army from the rumours about Salah's interest for the presidency, which could lead Algeria towards an Egyptian scenario. For all these reasons, both shows of support seem more deceptive than real, actually revealing that in the Algeria's opaque political system the succession race has just begun.

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