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Algeria's power struggle intensifies ahead of the 2019 presidential elections

On 28 November the Secretary General of the Algerian Presidency Hebba el-Okbi read a message from President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to local officials during the government-walis (local governors) meeting. In the message the President criticised 'sleeper cells' and 'predators' hiding in the shadows. Bouteflika said that their plots would be foiled and the authorities will continue their work, bringing Algeria into a new dawn. According to the message, 'someone reduces the most important issue of the present and the future to the change and succession of people and officials'. Bouteflika called these people 'adventurists' who will have 'no hesitation in bringing the country into the unknown' [Hamdi Baala, *Hebba El Okbi annonce le 5e mandate à demi-mot*, 28 November 2018, Huffington Post Maghreb].

Commenting on these strong words, the Algerian press suggested that Okbi's remark was an implicit announcement that President Bouteflika is intentioned to run for a fifth mandate [Farouk Djouadi, *Présidentielle 2019: Bouteflika affiche son intention de briguer un 5em mandat*, 28 November 2018, el-Watan]. Elected in 1999 during the so-called Algerian 'black-decade', Bouteflika was re-elected for the fourth time in 2014, despite serious health issues following a stroke in 2013. Approaching the crucial presidential elections in April 2019, the country's political landscape is in turmoil. Concerns over the economic consequences of a fifth mandate have been raised by renowned think tanks and newspapers outside the country [Algeria can ill-afford more stagnation and drift, 25 November 2018, Financial Times; Breaking Algeria's Economic Paralysis, Report n.192, 19 November 2018, International Crisis Group].

Bouteflika's message also indicated the presence of internal players who oppose his re-election and have considerable leverage in the Algerian political system. It is not even clear to whom Bouteflika's message was addressed to, but it is highly unlikely that it targeted the opposition parties, divided and weakened, which are explicitly standing against the idea of a new mandate for the ageing and ailing President.

The President's remark came immediately after a serious political crisis inside the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), following the unexpected resignation on 14 November of the Secretary-General Djamel Ould-Abbès. Officially given for health reasons, Ould-Abbès's resignation came two weeks after his announcement that Bouteflika would have been FLN's official candidate in the next presidential elections. The Secretary-General has recently been at odds with the Justice Minister and senior leader of the FLN Tayeb Louh and has defended the Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia from Louh's attacks. His stance was considered suspicious, as Ouyahia is also leader of the *Rassemblement Nationale Démocratique* (RND), FLN's major ally in the coalition government but main contender in the Algerian politics, while Louh is considered a strict associate of Bouteflika. Both the FLN and the RND have expressed support for Bouteflika's fifth mandate, representing a front of continuity against the agents of change. Nevertheless, the Prime Minister is still considered the only political figure that can succeed the current President.

Ould-Abbès was replaced by an interim council led by Mouad Bouchareb, a 46-years old MP from Sétif who has been at the centre of the most severe institutional crisis that affected the Algerian politics in the last years. Indeed, at the end of October Bouchareb was appointed speaker of the *Assemblée Populaire Nationale* (APN, the lower chamber of the Algerian parliament) after a long standoff to oust the previous speaker Saïd Bouhadja. His election, deemed illegal by opposition parties, was considered a move by the FLN to rejuvenate an ageing political elite dominated by figures who fought in the independence war against France.

Even though it was facilitated by the Algerian Presidency's approval, Bouchareb's election could be considered as a recent example of the 'succession of people and officials' to which Bouteflika was referring in his last remark. His unexpected and sudden rise in prominence has led to speculations about the presence of a new strongman in the FLN's ranks who can threaten the fragile balance of power built for Bouteflika's re-election bid [Rania Hamdi, Algérie: Mouad Bouchareb, nouvel home fort du FLN a quelques mois de la présidentielle, 26 November 2018, Jeune Afrique]. However, sources from the majority coalition denied, saying that Bouchareb as instrumental to the president's agenda.

Considering the unprecedented institutional crisis and the turmoil inside the ruling party, it is clear that political manoeuvres are intensifying ahead of the presidential elections. The presidential clan is making arrangements for Bouteflika's fifth mandate, removing all the major obstacles and hurdles. In this context the recent dismissals of senior security and military officials represent another major front of the battle for the Bouteflika's re-election. For long seen as an agent of continuity, the Algerian military is now considered a threat to the 'pouvoir', so far that opposition parties are calling for its intervention in favour

of a democratic transition [*Soufiane Djillali appelle l'armée à agir en faveur de la transition démocratique*, 24 November 2018, Tout sur l'Algérie].

After the dissolution of the powerful *Département du Reinsegnement et de la Sécurité* (DRS, the former Algerian intelligence services) and the dismissal of Gen. Mohamed Mediène (also known as Toufik), the army's chief of staff Maj.-Gen. Ahmed Gaïd Salah remains the last serious obstacle in Bouteflika's path towards the re-election, despite being considered loyal to the President [*Ihsane el-Kadi, Comment Gaïd Salah est devenu l'homme qui tient le sort présidentiel entre ses mains*, 4 November 2018, Huffington Post Maghreb]. Salah's next moves could be indicative of the military stance towards a fifth mandate, as the Algerian army still holds a considerable sway in the Algerian political system.

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