

Untiring protesters come up against elite in Algeria

Author:

Sun, 2019-12-15 00:15

PARIS: Algeria's unpopular presidential election was meant to reset the country's politics after months of crisis, but it exposed a rigid system determined to perpetuate itself, analysts say.

"You get the impression of two parallel Algerias: A ruling class which congratulates itself on organizing elections and a populace that holds protests," said Maghreb expert and historian Karima Direche.

The North African country plunged into crisis in February when veteran President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced he would seek a fifth term, sparking mass demonstrations.

Bouteflika quit under popular pressure in April, but the Hirak protest movement has kept up the pressure with weekly mass rallies to demand sweeping reforms.

Thursday's presidential vote was bitterly opposed by Hirak, which saw it as an establishment ploy to cling to power.

Anti-election rallies rocked major cities and in the Berber-dominated region of Kabylie, protesters ransacked polling stations and clashed with police.

Fewer than four out of 10 Algerian voters cast their ballots on Thursday, according to election officials. Direche suspects the real figure may be less than half that.

Officials "stuff the ballot boxes, they fix the numbers. They don't even make the effort" to hide their manipulations, she said.

On Friday, vast crowds descended onto the streets of Algiers to reject newly elected president Abdelmadjid Tebboune, a longtime government insider and former premier under Bouteflika.

But the opposition to the poll "matters little to a regime committed to a sham election intended to prolong its tenure," said Anthony Skinner, regional director at risk analysis firm Verisk Maplecroft.

Algeria's elite, dominated by army chief Ahmed Gaid Salah, sees the turnout as "enough to bestow what it sees as legitimacy on the next president," he said.

"Gaid Salah will probably still treat the election as a success."

Yet with the protest movement showing no sign of abating, that calculus may be wrong, said Jean-Pierre Filiu, a professor at Sciences Po university in

Paris.

“Gaid Salah failed in his bid to stifle popular protest through imposing this election,” said Filiiu.

The protesters on the other hand “succeeded in making participation the only real issue in this poll, rather than the identity of the future president,” he said.

“By sticking to a non-violent approach ... the Hirak is continuing to erode military decision-makers’ stranglehold on the country. There will be no going back” to the status quo.

For Direche, the poll was “a new humiliation for the Algerian people,” compounding the February decision to allow Bouteflika, 82 and partially paralyzed by a stroke, to attempt to extend his two-decade rule.

Direche said the Hirak may now change its strategy from one of peaceful Friday parades that pose little danger to the Algerian economy, to one of mass strikes and civil disobedience campaigns.

The amorphous movement may have to reconsider its strategy of having no leadership, given that the country’s political elite is “running the shop” without any limits on its power, she said.

But Direche said the Hirak has already created a shift in Algerian political life by retaking public space and encouraging citizens to take part in politics.

“It’s no longer the same Algerian society or the same country – but it’s still the same political system,” she said.

“Everything moves, but nothing changes” at the top of the state apparatus.

Algeria’s “political software” is “completely obsolete,” she added.

“While authoritarian regimes from time to time give some ground so the machine doesn’t get stuck, in Algeria, it has already completely broken down.”



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New Algerian president faces tough challenge
Algeria declares former PM Tebboune winner of presidential election

[Lebanese security forces and Hezbollah supporters clash in central Beirut](#)

Sat, 2019-12-14 18:32

BEIRUT: Clashes broke out on Saturday between Lebanese security forces and Hezbollah supporters in downtown Beirut, some of whom tried to break into a barricaded central district of Lebanon's capital.

Teargas and rubber bullets were fired at the protestors, and the Lebanese Red Cross said several members of the security forces had to be taken to hospital with injuries.

A heavy security presence was put in place central Beirut after the Hezbollah supporters tried to advance to the city's main central Martyr's square, and riot police put out calls through loudspeakers for people in the Al-Khandaq Al-Ghamiq area of central Beirut not to gather.

Hundreds of people were gathered as part of a wave of protests that have swept Lebanon since Oct. 17, furious at a ruling elite that steered the country towards its worst economic crisis in decades.

Since the protests pushed Saad Al-Hariri to resign as prime minister in late October, talks between the main parties have been deadlocked over forming a new cabinet.

Lebanon urgently needs a new government to pull it out of the crisis which has also shaken confidence in its banking system. Foreign donors say they will only help after the country gets a cabinet that can enact reforms.

State news agency NNA said the tear gas had made several people faint, while the Lebanese Red Cross said 14 people were injured, six of them badly enough to need taking to hospital.

The unrest erupted from a build-up of anger at the rising cost of living, new tax plans and the record of leaders dominating the country since the 1975-90 civil war. Protesters accuse the political class of milking the state for their own benefit through networks of patronage.







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Lebanese women march in Beirut against sexual harassment
Hezbollah says its 'arm won't be twisted' as Lebanon crisis deepens

[Morocco ex-diplomat to UN accused of visa fraud over workers](#)

Author:

Reuters

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Fri, 2019-12-13 20:49

NEW YORK: Prosecutors in New York have charged a former Moroccan ambassador to the United Nations and others with visa fraud, accusing them of bringing workers to the United States using fake employment contracts and then

exploiting them.

Abdeslam Jaidi, his ex-wife Maria Luisa Estrella and her brother Ramon Singson brought in more than 10 workers from the Philippines and Morocco since about 2006, according to the indictment filed in federal court in New York.

The visa applications said the workers would be employed as administrative or technical staff at the consulate or Moroccan UN mission, and some included fake employment contracts, it said.

Instead, the workers were used as personal drivers, domestic helpers and farmhands, the indictment said.

They were paid low wages – sometimes less than \$500 a month – and worked long hours without time off. Some had to hand over their passports, it also said.

“This case sends a strong message that diplomatic immunity does not equal impunity,” said Martina Vandenberg, head of the Washington-based Human Trafficking Legal Center.

“Even high-ranking diplomats can be called to account if there are allegations of visa fraud and exploitation.”

Jaidi served as UN ambassador from Morocco.

Other foreign diplomats in the United States have been accused in recent years over treatment of their employees.

Earlier this year, the US government suspended new visas for domestic employees of Malawian officials after one of its diplomats failed to pay \$1.1 million in damages to a woman she trafficked in the United States.

Supporters have warned that domestic workers employed by diplomats are vulnerable to abuses and even human trafficking because their visas chain them to specific employers.

Being tied to a specific employer means they cannot switch to a better job and if they quit, they typically must leave the country.

The charges, filed on Thursday in US District Court in White Plains, N.Y., were conspiracy to commit offenses and defraud and conspiracy to induce aliens to come to, enter and reside in the country.

The crimes carry maximum sentences of five and 10 years in prison, respectively.

Estrella, 60, was arrested in March, while Jaidi, 82, who lives in Rabat, Morocco, and Singson, 55, who lives in Manila, are at large.

Her lawyers declined to comment.



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[How Middle East cities can meet the sustainability challenge](#)

Fri, 2019-12-13 23:28

DUBAI: As the cities of today grow into those of the future, they will encounter daunting sustainability challenges.

Arguably, the most significant factor that all urban centers will have to take into account is climate change.

With temperatures projected to rise, new infrastructure and operational challenges will have to be tackled by city authorities.

“We need to manage our greenhouse gas emissions while managing our economy,” said Fahed Al-Hammadi, director of climate change at the UAE’s Ministry of Climate Change.

“We must understand future trends in the region and how we will be affected in different sectors. We must engage with the private sector because we can’t work as a government alone,” he added.

FASTFACT

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Percentage of its lifetime a car in the US is parked on average.

“We need to attract more ‘green’ investors, and ensure that the capacity of renewable energy we’re transitioning to can cope with the transformation.”

Speaking at a recent summit in Dubai on emerging technologies, Al-Hammadi visualized cities of the future contributing to a reduction in emissions – transportation currently contributes a third of total emissions – and thus helping governments achieve their emission-reduction targets.



Senseable City Lab at MIT collects data on car movement to improve urban transport. (Supplied)

Cities’ sustainability will prove a major challenge in the Middle East, a region with a growing population and diminishing water resources.

"Climate change is happening and there are future challenges, but it's very important, with the structure we have in modern cities, to have an understanding of the impacts and the changes we're going to experience," Al-Hammadi said.

One tool that is becoming increasingly important for urban authorities planning for future challenges is data.

Carlo Ratti, director of Senseable City Lab at MIT, said that reliable data is essential for a better understanding of the cities we live in.

He is working on collecting data from the movement of cars to understand transport patterns in a city and how it can be improved.

With the average number of car sensors today ranging from 2,000 to 3,000, Ratti told the EmTech MENA conference that the "ambient sensing platform" can be scaled up to include taxis and used for monitoring a city's "structural health" (bridges and other infrastructure). Pilot projects are currently being conducted in collaboration with Uber in Singapore, he said.

"You can radically change the way we move in a city," Ratti added. "In the US today, a car is parked on average 95 percent of the time. It uses valuable space in our cities as well. But a self-driving system can change that."

Ratti offered the example of the 1.37 million parking spots in Singapore, 70 percent of which can be cut with autonomous cars.

His work encompasses traffic lights as well, whereby cars will be able to detect intersections, removing the need for such lights.

Meanwhile, in Amsterdam self-driving boats that can be used as floating platforms for temporary bridges are being deployed to configure the city in an increasingly dynamic way.



Self-driving boats are used as temporary bridges in Amsterdam, Netherlands.
(Supplied)

“The beauty of technology isn’t about creating new needs. It’s about doing things in a different and better way,” Ratti said.

Experts have jumped to cities’ defense by trying to make them more resilient as they face the twin onslaughts of overpopulation (55 percent of the planet’s 7.4 billion people live in urban areas) and climate change (rising sea levels due to global warming threaten to wipe out many coastal cities).

The health sector will need an overhaul to cater for the evolving needs of the cities of the future.

A pioneer in this area is BioBot, a US biotech company that measures the concentration of drugs that are excreted in urine and collected in sewerage systems.

“We measure opioids in sewage to estimate consumption in cities, counties and states,” says BioBot’s website. “We map this data, empowering communities to tackle the opioid epidemic in real time.”

By mapping a city’s wastewater network and studying the demographic information associated with that data, more effective public-health policies can be created, said Newsha Ghaeli, the company’s co-founder and president.

“A human health crisis affecting communities, such as measles, polio, obesity or diabetes, is only heard about when the crisis turns into a catastrophe,” Ghaeli said.

“But it doesn’t have to be this way. We imagine a city where every person can

contribute to a database about our health and we're building it, based on a concept called wastewater epidemiology."

For instance, human urine is an important pathological sample, and so can be regarded as a rich source of information embedded in city sewers.

"You need a lot of different disciplines and industries working together to make sense of this data, like engineers, chemists, biologists, public health, urban planners, water and sewers, elected officials, data scientists and public works," Ghaeli said. "So we're the first company in the world to commercialize data from sewage."

Hardware units are installed inside manholes, hanging a few feet above the sewer flow, with tubes that capture bacteria and study the chemical profile. BioBot's team of scientists then looks at the human bacteria, viruses and chemicals.

"There's so much we can learn from wastewater," Ghaeli said. "We chose to tackle, first, the opioid epidemic, which is the leading cause of accidental death of Americans under 50."

However, recent studies have shown that less than 1 percent of those who suffer from opioid use disorder are dying.

"So it doesn't matter how you slice or dice the data, we just don't have the information," Ghaeli said. "What's clear is that we're measuring the wrong thing, so we are now measuring 30 different drugs and looking at emerging trends in drugs."

The first town to test the system was Cary in North Carolina, where overdoses decreased by 40 percent last year for the first time in half a decade, Ghaeli said.



Pavegen's tech captures energy from pedestrian footsteps to power street lighting. (Supplied)

During a six-month pilot program, BioBot was also able to create a heat map to pinpoint areas where overdoses were concentrated.

Despite such technological breakthroughs, and the fact that an estimated 33 percent of the world's energy is now derived from renewable sources, many of the world's most densely populated cities are ailing.

"Cities have been built for machines – cars and planes – and some have forgotten about the people," said Laurence Kemball-Cook, CEO of Pavegen.

The technology company has developed paving slabs to convert energy from citizens' footsteps into "energy, data and rewards."

He said: "I'm on a mission to try to make our cities greener. There is a big challenge in urban areas."

To achieve his goal, Kemball-Cook turned to kinetic energy, capturing the energy from pedestrians' footsteps to power streetlights.

So far, the kinetic-energy system has been used in Nigeria, London, Abu Dhabi Airport, Thailand and Birmingham, as well as on a running track in Hong Kong.

"We're excited about the vision of the future city," he said, adding that he hopes to take Pavegen's technology to Expo 2020 in Dubai and Neom in Saudi Arabia.

"The potential of using human power in our cities is huge. The technology in a city has to work with the people," Kemball-Cook said.

"A city isn't just about finding a new energy solution, it has to be about wellness, smart (practices), fun, sustainable and connecting into the Internet of Things data layout," he added.



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Al-Jouf: Saudi Arabia's food basket and renewable energy hub

[Appointment of a new Lebanese PM rests on upcoming 48 hours of re-consultation](#)

Author:

Fri, 2019-12-13 23:48

BEIRUT: The Free Patriotic Movement's (FPM) latest decision not to participate in the next Lebanese government has created new difficulties in resolving the political crisis.

Sources close to the President Michel Aoun told Arab News that he considered

his country in need of “a techno-political government,” but that: “The appointment of the prime minister does not need the consensus that was lost with the FPM’s boycott, but it is needed when forming the government.

“The parliamentary consultations will be held as planned, while parliamentary blocs are reviewing their decisions in light of the FPM’s withdrawal. Extensive communication is taking place between them to reach a decision in the next 48 hours.”

It is likely that the head of the caretaker government, Saad Hariri, will be reappointed as prime minister of the new government in light of the insistence of the highest Sunni authority.

Hariri is determined to form a government of experts capable of dealing with the difficult economic and financial situations the country is witnessing.

Hariri resigned on Oct. 29 following widespread protests against the government and political class.

The announcement of the International Support Group for Lebanon, from Paris last Wednesday, gave the Lebanese authorities a last and limited chance to achieve the necessary economic reforms and form a government that takes into consideration the demands of the protesters.

FASTFACT

It is likely that Saad Hariri will be reappointed as prime minister of the new government in light of the insistence of the highest Sunni authority.

A source close to the interim prime minister said: “Hariri’s position regarding the next government is clear. It is focused on forming a government distant from the traditional quotas logic and capable of addressing the fears of the protesters and the economic threats facing the country.”

“The formation of the government is a right limited to the president and the prime minister.”

Former constitutional judge Khaled Kabbani told Arab News: “The formation situation is very foggy. Everyone is overwhelmed and things are changing rapidly.

“The formation of the government is under a lot of pressure and the latest announcement of the International Support Group for Lebanon reflects that. It wants a government that wins the trust of the protesters. We have to wait and see if it will play a role in resolving the crisis.”

Protestors had considered the latest FPM decision a win for their cause, while activists on social media confirmed that they would continue their movement against the political class, and would shift focus to tax disobedience.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's Hezbollah said on Friday that the country's next government must bring all sides together so that it can tackle the country's worst economic crisis in decades.

The leader of Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, said his Iran-backed movement insists on its ally the FPM – Lebanon's largest Christian political bloc – taking part in the Cabinet.

In a televised speech, Nasrallah also said he hoped a new prime minister would be designated on Monday, but added that even so, forming a new Cabinet would not be easy.



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Lebanese PM Hariri to speak amid rumors of resignation
Pompeo says US stands with Lebanese people as Hezbollah chief warns of delay in forming government