

Funeral of Algerian activist draws thousands after prison death

Author:

Sat, 2019-06-01 23:03

ALGIERS: Thousands of people attended the funeral on Saturday of Algerian human rights activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar, whose death in pre-trial detention has prompted an investigation.

Fekhar, a 54-year-old doctor, was a leading advocate for the Berber-speaking Mozabite minority.

He was buried in the El-Alia cemetery in the capital Algiers, where people gathered by his coffin and a portrait of the activist.

Fekhar died in the Blida hospital south of Algiers after being transferred there "in a comatose state," his lawyer Salah Dabouz said on Tuesday.

The activist had been on hunger strike since late March, his lawyer said, when he was arrested for "attacks on institutions."

The Justice Ministry said on Wednesday it had ordered an investigation into the circumstances of Fekhar's death, following criticism from Algerian and international rights groups.

A day earlier, large crowds of Algerians took to the streets of the capital, where dozens were detained ahead of the latest protest two months after leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika resigned.

Demonstrators filled avenues in central Algiers chanting slogans against a push to hold presidential elections in July and rejecting calls by the armed forces chief for dialogue.

Memorial

Protesters on Saturday held a minute's silence for the activist before breaking into chants blaming the authorities for his death.

Fekhar's lawyer said his client had been held in Ghardaia, 480 km south of Algiers, for weeks "in inhumane conditions."

The activist was first arrested in 2015 during unrest in the M'zab Valley, where Ghardaia is the largest city, between the country's Mozabite community and Chaamba Arabs.

After serving two years in prison for public order offenses, he was released in July 2017.

Protesters are looking to keep up the pressure on the North African state's ruling body with weekly rallies despite the end of Bouteflika's two-decade rule.

Police had earlier rounded up some 50 people, mainly young men, in the heart of Algiers ahead of the planned protest.

Those detained had their IDs and mobile phones confiscated and were loaded into vans, an AFP journalist reported.

Demonstrators taking to the streets are demanding the resignation of all those tainted by ties to the former regime.

Local journalists reported that people were out in force in the country's other biggest cities of Oran, Constantine and Annaba.

Armed forces chief Ahmed Gaid Salah has become the main powerbroker after he turned on his boss Bouteflika and helped ease him from office in the face of the mass protests.

He is pushing for elections on July 4 but demonstrators insist there must be a wholesale change of top officials before a new vote can be held.

Only two little-known figures have submitted their candidacies on time for the disputed poll, raising doubts about plans to stage it.

The Constitutional Council has until June 5 to decide whether to approve the two hopefuls, who need the backing of at least 600 elected officials or 60,000 voters to get on the ballot.

The rallies that erupted across the country in February after Bouteflika announced plans to seek a new term have largely been tolerated by security officials overwhelmed by the vast crowds.

Last Friday the police made numerous arrests in central Algiers of protesters carrying placards and the national flag.

The crowd this week held a minute's silence for human rights campaigner Kamel Eddine Fekhar before breaking into chants blaming the authorities for his death in custody on Tuesday.

Fekhar, an activist from the Mozabite Berber minority, was being held in pre-trial detention for "attacks on institutions" and had been on hunger strike since March.

The justice ministry said it was probing his death after his lawyer complained he had been kept in "inhumane conditions."



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[Lebanon army chief angry at budget measures](#)

Author:

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Sat, 2019-06-01 17:51

BEIRUT: Lebanon's army chief on Saturday criticized measures in the country's austerity budget, including a recruitment freeze, warning they would have a negative impact on the military.

General Joseph Aoun's intervention, rare for a Lebanese army chief, comes after the government approved a budget aimed at unlocking billions of dollars in aid that an official source said includes a three-year army recruitment freeze.

"The ban on recruiting soldiers or cadets, and the ban on dismissal, will have negative consequences on the military institution," Aoun said in a statement published by the army.

Lebanon is one of the world's most indebted countries and the government plan is expected to trim the country's deficit this year to 7.59 percent.

Donors at the so-called CEDRE conference last year pledged \$11 billion in aid and soft loans to Lebanon, which vowed to reduce its public spending.

Aoun said the army has already been adopting a stringent approach to spending and last year returned part of its budget to the state coffers.

"The army is the backbone of Lebanon, we do not exaggerate in saying that it guarantees (the country's) security and stability. Its mission is not limited to times of war and conflicts," he said.

"Despite the current security stability, significant challenges remain, such as those at our eastern, southern or maritime borders," Aoun added.

Lebanon has been hit by repeated political deadlocks in recent years and the economic woes have been compounded by the devastating war in neighboring Syria.

It is also technically still at war with Israel, with United Nations peacekeepers stationed on the frontier.

There have been numerous protests in recent weeks against the austerity measures by Lebanese government workers, including by retired soldiers concerned about possible pension reductions.

Civil servant salaries are to be cut under the new budget, which would also introduce a 2-percent tax on imports and increase taxes on interest income from bank deposits from seven to 10 percent.

The plan still needs to be ratified by parliament, giving lawmakers an opportunity to table amendments.



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Lebanon receives Israeli response to border demarcation

[Iran willing to talk if other sides 'show respect', not ordered to negotiate: Rouhani](#)

Sat, 2019-06-01 20:19

TEHRAN: President Hassan Rouhani on Saturday suggested Iran may be willing to hold talks if the US showed it "respect," but said Tehran would not be pressured into negotiations, Fars news agency reported.

Iran and the US have been drawn into starker confrontation in the past month, a year after Washington pulled out of a deal between Iran and global powers to curb Tehran's nuclear programme in return for lifting international sanctions.

Washington re-imposed sanctions last year and ratcheted them up in May, ordering all countries to halt imports of Iranian oil. In recent weeks it has also hinted at military confrontation, saying it was sending extra forces to

the Middle East to respond to an Iranian threat.

US President Donald Trump says the 2015 nuclear deal was not strong enough and he wants to force Iran to negotiate a new agreement. Some U.S. officials have spoken of the possibility of new talks.

Trump said on Monday: "It (Iran) has a chance to be a great country with the same leadership... We aren't looking for regime change – I just want to make that clear."

Fars news agency quoted Rouhani as saying: "We are for logic and talks if (the other side) sits respectfully at the negotiating table and follows international regulations, not if it issues an order to negotiate."

Iran's top authority, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said on Wednesday Iran would not negotiate with Washington. Rouhani had previously signalled talks might be possible if sanctions were lifted.

In Saturday's speech to a group of Iranian athletes, Rouhani noted Trump's recent remarks and suggested they were a climb-down from statements last year that encouraged regime change in Iran.

"The same enemy which declared its aim last year to destroy the Islamic Republic of Iran today explicitly states that it does not want to do anything to (our) system," Rouhani said. "If we remain hopeful in the war with America, we will win."



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[Hezbollah leader says 'it's our duty' to confront Trump's Israel-Palestine deal](#)

Fri, 2019-05-31 22:44

BEIRUT: – Lebanon's Iran-backed Hezbollah movement said on Friday it was a duty to confront the US Middle East plan that President Donald Trump has touted as "the deal of the century".

"This is a religious, moral, humanitarian, jihadi duty...The deal is a historic crime," Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah said in a televised speech.



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Algerians rally for change despite arrests

Author:

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Fri, 2019-05-31 12:50

ALGIERS: Algerians took to the streets of the capital despite a spate of arrests Friday to push for further change two months after the resignation of leader Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

A thousand demonstrators in central Algiers chanted slogans decrying a push to hold presidential elections in July and rejecting calls by the armed forces chief for dialogue.

"No elections with this gang in power," the crowd shouted.

Protesters are looking to keep up the pressure on the North African state's ruling elite with weekly rallies despite the end of Bouteflika's two-decade rule.

Police had earlier rounded some 50 people, mainly young men, in the heart of Algiers ahead of the planned protest.

Those detained had their IDs and mobile phones confiscated and were loaded into vans, an AFP journalist reported.

Demonstrators taking to the streets are demanding the resignation of all those tainted by ties to the former regime.

Armed forces chief Ahmed Gaid Salah has become the main powerbroker in the country after he turned on his boss Bouteflika and helped ease him from office in the face of the mass protests.

He is pushing for elections on July 4 but demonstrators insist there must be a wholesale change at the top of the country before a new vote can be held. Only two little-known figures have submitted their candidacies on time for the disputed poll, raising doubts about plans to stage it.

The rallies that erupted across the country in February after Bouteflika announced plans to seek a new term have largely been tolerated by security officials overwhelmed by the vast crowds.

Last Friday the police made numerous arrests in central Algiers of protesters carrying placards and the national flag.



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