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Notes From The Field

Inside the *Hirak*: The Dynamics of a Mass Movement for Social Justice and Human Rights

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Abstract

In 2019, Algeria witnessed the emergence of the Hirak mass movement: a pro-democracy uprising marked by epic nationwide demonstrations and transformative public dialogue. Hundreds of thousands of Algerians mobilized to protest social injustices and political corruption, educate each other about their common rights, and articulate their collective goals. Through the Hirak's shared platform, people from all walks of life took to the podium to galvanize the masses through ideas and action. The Algerian Hirak was a form of public pedagogy; a grassroots expression of human rights education. Why is the Hirak so important in the history of global social movements? In this Notes from the Field article, Mr. Berrahmoun offers his analysis as a native Algerian, historian, and activist researcher. He positions the compelling story of the Hirak in the broader Algerian historical context. Finally, the author reflects on the future of Algeria's path to social justice and suggests potential steps toward transformative change.

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Where before people saw in the future a repetition of the past, human rights education helps them dare to think of new ways to grow individually and collectively in a more open future—to visualize both a better life for all and the means to achieve it.

(Bajaj et al., 2016, p. 28)

This essay addresses the phenomenon of Algeria’s 2019-2021 *Hirak* mass movement—a pro-democracy uprising marked by massive nationwide demonstrations and transformative public dialogue. From 2019 to 2021, hundreds of thousands of Algerians from all sectors of society persevered in their demands for human rights, namely: civilian-led government, equity in the distribution of wealth, separation of powers, an end to military intervention in politics, and freedom of speech, among other issues.

Participants in the *Hirak* gathered to raise collective consciousness about their lived reality; they envisioned a path to democracy that might bring about a better quality of life for themselves and future generations. Together, they mobilized to educate each other about their common rights and to articulate their collective goals. At the *Hirak*’s shared platform, people from all walks of life took the podium to galvanize the masses through ideas and action. The Algerian *Hirak* was a form of public pedagogy—a grassroots expression of human rights education.

The *Hirak* was triggered by the ailing President Bouteflika’s announced intention to continue his reign of control (Serres, 2019), backed by the Algerian military, for a fifth term of office (Benderra et al., 2020). The public outcry in response to this announcement forced Bouteflika to resign.

Both domestic and international observers detailed escalating levels of government repression against *Hirak* activists, including use of excessive force, arbitrary arrests, imprisonment, suppression of protests, obstruction of journalists covering the movement, and prosecution of anti-government dissenters (U.S. Department of State, 2020; Rupert, 2021). These and other acts of repression clearly violated tenets of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 1948).

This essay contextualizes the *Hirak* in the broader scope of Algerian history and briefly describes the longstanding struggles of Algerian citizens toward freedom and democracy. The essay then expands upon the human rights violations that were perpetrated during the repression of Algeria's *Hirak* movement and describes efforts by internal and external sources to intervene. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on the future of Algeria's path to social justice. Human rights education, I believe, holds the key to effect radical change.

Historical Context of Algeria's Struggle for Freedom and Democracy

Algeria's history is the story of cultural resiliency, struggle against tyranny, resistance, and change. The Algerian people have continuously fought for freedom, sovereignty, and democracy. In recent times Algeria made international news headlines when the *Hirak* ("movement"), a social and popular mobilization of historic proportions, first spread across Algeria beginning on February 22, 2019. Hundreds of thousands of civilians across Algeria marched every Tuesday and Friday for two years to protest the aging president's embedded power and associated corruption. The increasing strength of the protest movement came to enfold calls for peaceful democratic reform, anti-corruption measures, and demands for a civil democratic state without military involvement in politics. The *Hirak* was propelled largely by students and youth along with Algerian citizens from all walks of life. These citizens asserted their popular will to change society through peaceful protest and mass mobilization. As proposed by Giroux (2003), "Resistance must become part of a public pedagogy" (p. 14).

Mass mobilization and the fight for freedom, exemplified by the 2019 *Hirak*, have manifested throughout Algeria's turbulent colonial history and decolonization struggle. It is worth noting that a succession of events laid the groundwork for the 2019 *Hirak*, starting with the brutal 1954 War of Independence from France, considered one of the 20th century's most heroic wars of decolonization (Serres, 2019).

Algerians were joyful and optimistic in the aftermath of independence; however, their happiness was diminished by internal power struggles

as various political factions vied for control of the newly installed provisional government. Ahmed Ben Bella, elected as president in 1963, was then deposed by Colonel Houari Boumediene in a 1965 military coup. Boumediene also faced an attempted military takeover in 1967 and an assassination attempt in 1968. However, he strengthened his power and served as elected president until his death in 1978. An authoritarian party system was the norm in Algerian political life during his presidency (Layachi, 2019).

Upon Boumediene's death, the Algerian army appointed Chadli Ben Djedid as the new president. Ben Djedid's tenure during the 1980s was marked by the "Berber Spring" protests—among the first post-colonial popular uprisings. These protests were significant in demanding recognition of the linguistic and cultural rights of Algeria's indigenous Amazigh people. The suppression of the Berber Spring protests resulted in the killing and arrest of activists in northern Algeria. To this day, the Berber Spring protests symbolize Algerians' aspirations for increased political opening, social justice, cultural equity, and freedom of expression (McDougall, 2017).

President Ben Djedid's term was also characterized by shifting from a socialist model to economic liberalization. Ben Djedid's economic reforms included privatizing some state-owned companies, reducing state subsidies, and raising prices. Corrupt elites profited from the neoliberal policies while the unemployment rate increased, and anger grew among the younger generation (Layachi, 2019).

By 1988, an increasingly disenfranchised youth population revolted throughout Algeria. In the famous October 5th uprising, Algerian youth protested hogra (contempt), unemployment, corruption, and the single-party political system. More than a thousand young Algerians died in this struggle (Algeria-Watch, 2009). For the first time in post-independence Algeria, the army tortured protesters (Belkaïd, 2019).

The October 5th uprising led to the change of the Algerian constitution and ushered in a brief new era of political freedom. Dozens of political parties were formed, and free municipal elections were held. Freedom of expression, association, and the press were institutionalized. In the 1991 legislative elections, the Islamic Front of Salvation (FIS), an Islamic political party,

won the first round. The military establishment refused to accept the results of the legislative elections. They consequently forced president Chadli Ben Djedid to resign and declared a State of Emergency in 1992. Leaders and supporters of the FIS were detained and deported to military camps in the Algerian Sahara (Belkaïd, 2019). Human rights violations and extrajudicial executions radicalized the FIS supporters. A brutal civil war also known as the 'Black Decade' ensued, lasting approximately ten years. Throughout this time and until 2011, the State of Emergency remained in place.

1999 witnessed controversial presidential elections. The army's favored candidate, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, took power after other candidates withdrew their campaigns in protest of perceived election rigging.

As president in the aftermath of the Algerian Civil War, Bouteflika oversaw some controversial efforts to address amnesty and rapprochement. The Charter for Peace and Reconciliation was drafted in 2005, and a popular referendum was organized. However, the Charter was passed without full participation involving civil society or political parties. Many criticized the Charter for whitewashing the truth about the war and avoiding meaningful resolution. The Charter failed to prosecute those armed groups and Algerian security forces who were accused of human rights violations and crimes against civilians.

During the early and middle years of Bouteflika's presidency, Algeria witnessed a period of relative stability and security. However, following the 2010-2011 Arab Spring uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, waves of unrest spread across Algeria. Algerian human rights activists and opposition figures founded the National Coordination for Change and Democracy (CNCD), bringing together trade unions, associations, and political parties. The CNCD attempted to challenge the status quo and rally the people, but the ideological divisions of its leaders prevented it from implementing changes to the system (Layachi, 2019).

In 2013, President Bouteflika suffered a stroke and deteriorating health, resulting in his absence from political and public life. Despite his illness, Bouteflika maintained his presidential title while his clan continued to dominate the Algerian economic and political scene.

The Inception of the *Hirak* and Corresponding Human Rights Violations

By early 2019, the government announced the ailing president's candidacy for a fifth term amid alarming economic indicators with high rates of unemployment, inflation, and a rising trade deficit (Serres, 2019). Bouteflika's candidacy announcement provoked the Algerian peoples' mistrust of the corrupt political system; it was the tipping point that triggered nationwide anger and reaction. The *Hirak* movement erupted on February 22, 2019, and rapidly spread across Algeria.

Immediately after the *Hirak* movement got underway, the authorities in Algeria rushed to contain the responses of external players and send former Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra on a tour focused on reassuring international capitals that the Algerian situation was under control, and that the political system could overcome the crisis. Given the after-effects of the intervention in Libya, countries needed no convincing, and France was keenly aware of the antipathy of Algerian public opinion against any statement it might make. (Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 2020, p. 26)

As a direct consequence of the *Hirak*, the Algerian Secretary of Defense forced President Bouteflika to withdraw his candidacy in March 2019. *Hirak* members moved to demand radical political and economic reforms, respect for human rights, social justice, and freedoms of expression, association, and press. Most importantly, people demanded a return of the sovereignty and power guaranteed to them in Articles 7 and 8 of the Algerian Constitution (Algeria Const. art. VII & VIII).

Initially, the government appeared to respond by organizing a new presidential election and constitutional referendum. Nevertheless, as activists and journalists were imprisoned and jailed, it became clear that the government did not intend to implement fundamental reforms. Three years after the protests' inception, the same regime remained in power. Initial government actions to curb corruption and impose jail sentences were later reversed by releasing offenders back into society. The 'token' constitutional referendum of 2020, boycotted by over 75 percent of the voting public, was still

passed despite widespread opposition. Although the weekly mass marches were temporarily halted in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the *Hirak*'s goals continued to be expressed in large and small acts of resistance.

Throughout 2021, arrests and imprisonment of civil society leaders, human rights activists, lawyers, political figures, bloggers, social media activists, and journalists continued. According to the U.S. State Department's (2021) report on human rights in Algeria, "Significant human rights issues included [...] arbitrary arrest and detention; political prisoners; serious problems with the independence of the judiciary and impartiality; unlawful interference with privacy; serious restrictions on free expression and media" (p. 1).

In 2021, Algerian authorities closed public gathering spaces in Algiers to prevent *Hirak* protestors from assembling. They used excessive force and detained activists, charging them with "undermining national unity," "offence to the president and public officials," "incitement to unarmed gathering," and "impacting the army morale" (U.S. Department of State, 2021, p. 3). More than 50 people were also charged with terrorism-related allegations under Article 87bis of the Penal Code defining terrorism. These legal actions aimed to intimidate anyone daring to challenge the Algerian authorities.

Furthermore, the Algerian government intensified its crackdown on civil society organizations, political parties, and youth associations. One example is the 2021 dissolution of the Rally Youth Action (RAJ), an association whose objectives included human rights education and support of Algerians affected by civil war. The Algerian government arrested RAJ's founders and prosecuted its members.

The above violations of freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly contradict Articles 19 and 20 of the UDHR, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 (United Nations, 1948; Howie, 2018). Article 19 of the UDHR (1948) protects freedom of opinion and expression in the following terms: "Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers" (United Nations, 1948; Howie, 2018).

Article 20 of the UDHR (1948) protects the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association (United Nations, 1948).

Efforts to Address the Human Rights Issues

The United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) states that freedom of opinion and expression are “a foundation stone for every free and democratic society” (Howie, 2018, pp. 12-13). UNHRC also declares that “political discourse, commentary on one’s own and on public affairs, canvassing, discussion of human rights, journalism, cultural and artistic expression, teaching and religious discourse” (Howie, 2018, p. 13) should be protected.

In an Associated Press article (2022), the former President of the Algerian League for the Defense of Human Rights (LADDH) declared that “For the last two or three years, there have been thousands of legal cases against activists. Their only error is that they expressed their political opinions on social media and are fighting for a state of law” (Associated Press, 2022).

In the wake of escalating arrests, domestic committees were established. These groups aimed to defend activists’ rights and publicize human rights violations to both domestic and international audiences. One such committee was the National Committee for Freedom for the Detained (CNLD). CNLD has maintained a record of activists detained and jailed in Algerian prisons in connection with the *Hirak*. According to Amnesty International (2022), as of May, 2022 over 266 people are still imprisoned for voicing their political opinions (Amnesty International, 2022).

Along with the domestic committees focused on human rights issues, both Algerian and international non-governmental organizations have pressured the Algerian government to respect freedoms outlined in the UDHR (1948). In 2021, 82 local and international civil society organizations addressed a letter to the Algerian government during the 47th session of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The letter expressed the signatories’ concerns about Algeria’s worsening human rights violations. The Algerian government was urged to:

condemn the escalating crackdown on peaceful protesters, journalists, and human rights defenders, including the excessive use of force [...] amend or repeal overly broad provisions of the Penal Code and other legislation used to repress fundamental rights and freedoms, notably law 12-06 on civil society organizations and law 91-19 on public meetings and demonstrations, in line with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR). (Human Rights Watch, 2021, p. 1).

Social media campaigns were also instrumental in efforts to expose the violation of freedoms in Algeria. The hashtag #PasUnCrime (Not a Crime) was a recent online campaign launched by dozens of non-governmental organizations. The #PasUnCrime campaign aimed to draw attention to the repression inflicted upon journalists and peaceful protesters.

Most recently, current Algerian president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, elected in 2019, launched an initiative called Outstretched Hands. The initiative called for dialogue between political forces, civil society, and the Algerian government. The initiative, viewed by some as a superficial public relations scheme, was timed to coincide with the 60th anniversary of Algeria's independence. However, some Algerian opposition figures demanded the release of all jailed political prisoners before any dialogue could take place.

On the international stage, powerful nations such as France, Russia, China, and the United States (U.S.) have maintained their relations with the Algerian government, despite human rights concerns, in accord with economic and geo-strategic interests.

Analysis and Reflections

This essay has presented an overview of Algeria's historic social justice movement, the *Hirak*, and outlined the Algerian government's attempts to suppress that movement through systemic human rights violations. Further, this essay has documented intervention efforts by domestic and international sources.

Reflecting upon the trajectory of this mass movement and the events leading to it, one can observe that the 2019 *Hirak* represented a monumentally important and radically different chapter in Algeria's history of resistance to injustice. Whereas recent years witnessed localized marches and strikes (teachers, doctors, labor unions, unemployed youth, and others), the *Hirak* sprang from a national, collective sense of humiliation, frustration, and despair. People wanted to reclaim their dignity as a nation and to forge a path towards democracy. Unlike previous uprisings, the *Hirak* reached beyond Algeria's borders, drawing active support from Algerians from throughout the diaspora in Europe, Canada and the U.S. Impressively, the *Hirak* brought together all sectors of society without centralized leadership for two years, maintaining ongoing nonviolent assemblies that shared a common purpose and hope.

Algerian citizens have historically struggled to transform their socio-economic and political conditions for greater empowerment. As a mass movement, the *Hirak* has drawn important lessons from this history of struggle. Algerians lived under a brutal colonial rule; however, through valiant sacrifices they ultimately attained their freedom and dignity. In the post-independence era, Algerians lived under the repressive single-party system during the 1960s-1980s. They endured the horrors of the 1990s civil war. Throughout these and other periods, Algerians evolved a collective consciousness about the most effective methods of resisting and confronting injustice and despotism. Having experienced significant authoritarian aggression and bloodshed, Algerians have learned that violence will not lead to democracy; instead, it serves the regime's interests in retaining power and repressing opposition. Rather than resorting to violence, members of the grassroots *Hirak* movement chose to engage in more impactful peaceful protests.

In the aftermath of the *Hirak*, the international community is watching to see how the current Algerian regime will address its human rights issues and whether it will embrace change – or continue to govern by force and repression. It is advantageous for the Algerian government to project an

image of respect for human rights. This creates an opening for a new era of productive dialogue and reconciliation.

While the 2019-2021 HIRAK can be viewed as a short-lived historical phenomenon, its broader impact lies in the spontaneous yet deliberate choices of the demonstrators to struggle through peaceful action. According to Paulo Freire as explained by Aldawood (2020), “transformation of an oppressed community comes about through dialogue and the development of a critical consciousness that recognizes oppression and produces an empowered community” (p. 118).

The HIRAK’s goals of self-governance, democracy, economic equity, and freedom of speech have been sought by generations of Algerians. What does the future hold for Algeria in its quest for social justice? Transformative Human Rights Education offers a promising pathway to engage “different sectors of the population [...] and — by creating a shared understanding of human rights—renegotiate together their [...] social reality” (Bajaj et al, 2016, p. 24).

Looking Ahead: Envisioning Social Change

While it is impossible to predict the next iteration of nationwide protest in Algeria, it seems plausible that some version of the *HIRAK* will emerge in the future. Hopefully, lessons from past years will help shape a new movement that is better organized and ultimately more impactful than the *HIRAK* of 2019. Despite the outpouring of public protest over a period of two years, the *HIRAK* was unable to unseat the Algerian regime and permanently remove it from power. The military establishment, security forces, media outlets, and economic structures - all inextricably linked under the regime’s control - were powerful factors in preventing the *HIRAK* from achieving its goals. Added to that, the regime was able to consolidate its rule under the cover of the COVID-19 pandemic, which initially disturbed the power structure. At the outset of the *HIRAK*, the regime made a pretense of installing a civilian government to appease the protestors. In reality, this “New Algeria” promoted by the regime was a recycled version of the existing system, with the same repressive agenda imposed upon the population.

In order to uproot the powerful and deeply entrenched regime, the *Hirak* needed more than massive crowds and aspirations for a true democracy. Among the 2019 *Hirak's* shortcomings were lack of structure, absence of leadership, lack of consensus between diverse ideologies, and uncertain long-term strategies. What lessons can be learned from these limitations? What tactics could a new mass movement adopt to challenge and unseat the existing power structure?

The following suggestions are offered as potential steps in a process of democratic reform:

- Call for a national forum bringing together social justice movement leaders to outline the path forward. Include army officials in this political process to help ensure that political decisions will be upheld and protected.
- Encourage new leadership to emerge from the national forum; recruit candidates that reflect Algeria's diverse ideologies and population groups, including youth. This diversity would aid in replacing the current regime's aging elite.
- Establish a transitional period during which new political parties can be formed; hold public debates aimed at a participatory democracy.
- Establish a timeline for specific measures including constitutional reform, elected provisional government, and a newly elected Parliament.
- Organize elections that are observed by neutral members of the international community.
- Review /revise national history curricula at all levels of education; introduce human rights and peace education.

Whatever shape the next *Hirak* may take, the strength of a future mass movement will depend on its ability to reform the existing power structure and replace it with a more legitimate, representative system. Such a system could build consensus among diverse ideological groups, unite Algerians around

strong, intergenerational leadership, articulate clear sociopolitical goals, and galvanize transformative change.

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