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Hirak 2019: A New Year of Struggle for Algerian Feminists

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Abstract

Living through and writing on a *hirak* (an organized but unstructured popular movement, with no internal hierarchy or leadership) as a historical event is a great opportunity for a feminist researcher to contribute to scientific knowledge by analyzing the terrain of mobilization and women's participation in political change in Algeria. This article is based on interviews and participant observation, and attempts to describe the role of feminists' engagement in a popular uprising, including their demands and means of mobilization. The article thus hopes to demonstrate how the *hirak* created a new impetus for the unification of feminist forces.

Keywords: Algeria, women's movements, feminist movements, protests, revolutions, equal rights, public space, women, women's rights

Introduction

Like other Arab and Maghreb countries, since 2011 Algeria has experienced political and social changes that have led to strong popular mobilizations. However, 2019 was exceptional: February 22 was the day when millions of Algerians, including the young, the old, and even children, rose up to demand that President Abdelaziz Bouteflika renounce his candidacy for a fifth term.

Women did not miss this great event, and were out on the streets in droves. As the writings of Algerian and French authors Saï (2007), Lalami (2012), Remaoun (1999), and Lacoste-Dujardin (1985) have all shown, Algerian women have always played a dominant role and participated in all

the major social and political protests and uprisings that have taken place in Algeria since independence, from the 1988 October riots¹ to the fight against terrorism in the 1990s.

This article is based on my sociological observations and interviews with feminists participating in the recent popular movement. The accompanying photographs, which I took myself, aim to enrich the reader's understanding of the current political and social realities in Algeria.

Women in the Streets of Algiers: Agents of Change

Duty has called thousands of women to demonstrate in the streets every Friday since February 22, 2019. On that date, women of all ages and from various social classes could be seen wearing the Algerian flag wrapped around their shoulders and bodies. They were shouting against a fifth term for Bouteflika. Their banners and posters included slogans such as "I don't want the fifth term, I don't want Bouteflika," and "10 years of terrorism, 20 years of Bouteflika, that's enough."

Algerians had been angered by the announcement in mid-February of Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth term. He had already been in power for 20 years, and was still very weak following a stroke that had occurred in 2013. Unable to change the political system through formal channels, Algerians were forced to take to the streets to demonstrate. As Eric Neveu notes, "collective action, which develops according to the logic of a demand, defense of a material interest, or cause" is a critical goal of real democracy (2005, p. 9, my translation). This great protest broke down the "social barriers that prevent or limit the participation" of women in particular, whether in groups or as individuals demonstrating alongside men (Dunezat, 2006, p. 117, my translation). On Hassiba ben Bouali Street, the women could be heard calling on the men to join them in order to bring down the Bouteflika regime, using this slogan: "*N'ssa wa rjel dero courage! Système dégage, dégage!*" (women and men have courage! Bring down the system!). The call for solidarity and especially unity between women and men, as seen in these slogans, was understood as part of Algerians' duty to save Algeria. According to one protester:

[Women] represent half of the population. Men must know this, and be aware of the strength that this represents. We must not make enemies, it is *our* country, the future of *our* children. So, we will have to be united and [stay] united for this rotten system to [end]. (Anonymous, personal communication)

As Quéniart and Jacques write, the engagement of various social groups in protest movements “is a practice of responsibility, seen as a part of one’s civic duty; it is also part of the possibility of giving ourselves and others a better future” (2001, p. 51, my translation). The massive participation of women and men in this mixed *hirak*² can be explained by their liberation from fear, humiliation, and despair as a result of their ability to band together against the injustices they had faced under Bouteflika’s 20-year regime.

Interestingly, much has been written at various points about Bouteflika’s support for women’s legal rights in Algeria. For example, he demanded the revision of the Family Code, and had it amended in 2005. He even established a quota law in 2012 to ensure that 30% of elected bodies would include women. In 2015, at his instruction, a revision to the Penal Code was made to protect women from all types of violence, particularly domestic violence—a legal measure that many other countries in the Maghreb, and in the Middle East more broadly, still have not passed.

However, feminists reject the idea that these legal rights were a gift given to them by Bouteflika. Instead, they argue that these rights were achieved thanks to many long years of struggle by feminists working to pressure the Algerian government to enact such laws. In the same vein, feminist researcher Fériel Lalami points out that “progress has been seen. If we just take the Family



Figure 1. Women mobilize and say no to Bouteflika’s fifth term. Algiers, February 22, 2019.

Code, it took more than 25 years of collective action for some timid changes to be made.” She goes on to say that the “fight against violence against women is [finally] starting to bear fruit after 20 years of denunciation of this *hogra* [injustice]” (2012, p. 219, my translation). The women I interviewed stressed that the street was not a foreign space to them. These were not women who had once been under the control of men, unlike those Lacoste-Dujardin’s analyzes in her work *Des mères contre les femmes* (1985).

Moreover, this movement into the public sphere, as Benzerfa-Guerroudj (1992) argues, was a result of the modernization of Algerian society, and specifically a result of the high-level education and economic integration of women. Certainly, Algerian women today are present in almost all sectors, particularly those that were traditionally closed to them. In other words, they are no longer confined to the social sector.

But despite some progress, the situation of most women and girls is evolving slowly. To date, the gender equality threshold has not been met. The numerous obstacles, legal, social, and political, seem immovable. Women’s presence in politics and decision-making positions remains weak, their unemployment rate is on the rise, and they still disproportionately suffer from various forms of violence, both at home and in public places.



Figure 2. A mixed popular movement: women and men protesting. Blida, March 1, 2019.

With this *hirak*, Algerian women must take advantage of the opportunity to demand their equal rights, which have still not been validated.

International Women's Day, 2019

In 2019, Algerian women were able to celebrate International Women's Day on March 8 in a new and even exceptional context. Usually Algerians head to female spaces (halls, tearooms, etc.) to attend a concert or a fashion show, but March 8, 2019 was different. Duty called them as Algerian citizens to go out into the streets, not only to demand radical change in the political system, but also to fight against social injustice and all the forms of oppression and domination they suffered in their daily lives at home, on the street, and/or in the workplace.



Figure 3. A mixed popular movement: women and men protesting. Blida, March 1, 2019.

In the capital, Algiers, I participated in several International Women's Day demonstrations. My participant observation allowed me to experience these events and describe the thousands of women that were marching with banners calling for social justice (Gauthier, 1984). While some banners called for the abolition of the Family Code, others demanded the removal of Algerian leaders that had been in power since independence in 1962.



Figure 4. Young girls and older women tell Bouteflika to "get out." Algiers, March 8, 2019.

El Bilad, an Algerian television channel, followed the events of International Women's Day across all 48 regions. That day, a large number of women of different origins (Kabyle, Arab, Chaoui, Terguet), different ages, and different professional categories (academics, teachers, employees, students, high-school students, unemployed people, retirees, housewives), dressed in djellabas or in jeans, with or without veils, actively took over public spaces.

In Algiers at around 1 p.m., the streets were overrun with women. Arriving in force, they made all the difference. If the rejection of a fifth mandate for Bouteflika was the initial impetus to get them onto the streets, it was their demand for the repeal of the Family Code—which assigns women secondary status in Algeria—that continued to drive them forward, among other demands. Karima, a 54 year-old feminist activist and public hospital doctor, accompanied by her mother and daughter, explained to me: “We are also here to remember the question of citizenship, which is synonymous with freedom and equal rights for all. And above all, for all.”

A group of six young girls caught my attention during the protest: they were all dressed in white, red, and green—the colors of the national flag—and each held a rose in her hand. Together they chanted: “Today we are not going to dance, we are making our demands heard, we are not liberating a country if we do not liberate women.” This chant reminded me of what Simone de Beauvoir (1989) once wrote: it is women who must liberate themselves.

Three generations of women came together on March 8, 2019 to celebrate International Women's Day. Algerian women demonstrated their ability to mobilize. They were fighting to win their place in family, economic, and political life in the “new” Algeria.

My analysis of this situation shows that this *hirak* brought about a change in the lives of Algerian women. They became freer; through the *hirak*, they made themselves more visible, and made their voices heard across protest spaces that had once been reserved for men alone. As Jacques Ion notes, in “our society of individuals, dominated groups are capable of engaging, making their voices heard” (2012, p. 220, my translation). Speech becomes “their first weapon” to

demand democracy and gender equality (Fédération Nationale des Maisons Des Potes, 2002, p. 9).

The Feminist Square

The Feminist Square, located in front of the Central Faculty of Algiers, was named as such because it became a place for feminist leaders and activists in feminist associations from different regions to meet every Friday. In order to strengthen the visibility of these feminist forces, the Feminist Square became a place for feminist organizers to highlight their demands in the protests, including the repeal of the Family Code, the right to education and work for all women, and the freedom to move in public space in complete safety.



Figure 5. A call on women who have stayed at home to come out and demand their rights. Algiers, March 8, 2019.

What facilitated the mobilization of these activists, making them a very visible part of the *hirak*, was social networking and social media platforms such as Facebook, and Voice over Internet Protocol applications such as Viber. Such platforms quickly became the dominant means of information, communication, and focus for the protesters, and were the primary mechanism by which activists communicated protest times and rendezvous points. Activists shared and exchanged information with each other, announced future events, and issued calls for meetings over social media networks and smartphone applications.



Figure 6. Young feminists demand gender equality. Algiers, March 8, 2019.

It is important to highlight that the fall of Bouteflika and his system in April 2019 could not have taken place without the strong mobilization of the women and feminists who made the Feminist Square the symbol of their movement. Nor could it have



Figure 1. Rue Didouche-Mourad, Algiers, June 28, 2019.

happened without the mobilization of the individual women and girls who participated en masse in the demonstrations every Friday. These feminist associations continue to resist and mobilize on the ground to fight gender inequalities. Their demands were illustrated in some of the signs I saw:

“Djazairiyate ahrar, ma yaqablouche el âar we newasslou el michouar hata el intissar”

(free Algerians, not accepting shame, we will continue on the road until victory); *“El dimokratia hoqouq niswya / mazalna mazalna thour”* (democracy is granting women their rights / we are always revolutionaries). This was yet another form of collective mobilization led by the very same feminists who had continued to struggle over the previous 30 years (1989–2019). I remind you



Figure 8. “Algerian women demand equality.” Algiers, June 28, 2019.

that these feminist associations have had a long history, and their history has been closely linked to the dynamics of Algerian social and political movements during the 1980s and 1990s. Since their inception, they have represented one of the most visible and active movements in Algeria. They have played a growing role in defending the rights of Algerian women over three decades, in a

particularly difficult and hostile context. These associations were behind the fight against political Islamism in 1990. They were the first to challenge several discriminatory laws in the Family Code in 2005, and in the Nationality Code. In 2012, these associations lobbied the government to establish a quota policy for women, and in 2015 to adopt a new law against violence against women.

Since the fall of Bouteflika and his clan, the demonstrations have persisted and become the places par excellence of social and political visibility for women. Today, more than one year later, these same feminist associations continue their struggle on the ground to denounce and fight against gender inequality. Their demands have once again focused specifically on the Family Code and its very conservative and patriarchal structure, under which Algerian women are secondary to men and placed under guardianship, to name just a few of the code's problematic tenets.

With the continued participation of feminists from across the country, I hope that this *hirak* will prove successful in tackling some of the major gender inequalities that still exist in Algeria today. As we continue to push toward a “new” Algeria, we can only hope that the demands of feminist activists will be taken seriously, and that the new political ruling class will not renege on its responsibility to ensure women's access to social, political, and economic benefits.



Figure 9. Feminists say, “We are still standing.” Feminist Square, Algiers, November 15, 2019.



Figure 10. Feminists protest against the unequal status of Algerian women. Algiers, November 15, 2019.



Figure 11. Feminists call for gender equality and the repeal of the Family Code. Algiers, June 28,

¹Also known as “Black October,” and widely understood as the second most defining date in Algerian history (after Algerian independence), the 1988 October riots highlighted the extreme poverty and social inequalities that plagued the country, and called for the overhaul of the then-dominant political party, the National Liberation Front, which had been in power since independence. See Allouche (2016) for more detail.

²A hirak is an organized but unstructured popular movement, with no internal hierarchy or leadership.

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