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Mass protests erupt against Algerian army's call for December elections

Last week, thousands took to the streets throughout Algeria to protest against the military-backed government of General Ahmed Gaïd Salah and interim President Abdelkader Bensalah. This 30th consecutive week of protests opposed Salah's call for presidential elections in December. Protesters demanded no election take place as long as the stooges of ousted National Liberation Front (FLN) President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, like Salah and Bensalah, remain in power.

On Friday, protesters carried banners reading "No vote as long as the gang rules the country," to denounce the interim regime. This followed student demonstrations on Tuesday and mass outpourings of opposition in various locations. At a football match in Algiers earlier last week, fans shouted, "Get rid of Bensallah."

Protests also erupted in the northeastern port city of Annaba. Exceptionally, security forces were reinforced to block November 1 Boulevard, fearing that the massive march could shift its path and march on the villa of Ahmed Gaïd Salah, who was in Annaba that day.

Protesters also criticized the arrest Wednesday night of Karim Tabbou, the leader of the Democratic and Social Union (DSU). "Free Tabou, free Tabou," one banner read. According to reports, two security agents wearing civilian clothes arrested Tabbou at his home in Douera, in the western suburbs of Algiers. A DSU statement said he "was arrested by the police without any explanation or reason given." Tabou reportedly planned to participate in a conference Monday opposing the presidential elections.

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The Algerian regime has made clear that it will make no concessions to popular anger and opposition. While mass protests continue every Friday, police are heavily deployed in the capital's main streets. Since June, the military regime has been arresting people holding ethnic Berber banners together with any protesters it declares to be a threat.

Earlier this month, Salah—who was a long-time ally of Bouteflika and supporter of his re-election bid before ousting him in the face of mass protests—reiterated that new elections would be announced by mid-September and held by December. On September 2, he told the official APS news agency he was demanding the installation of an independent body “for the organisation and surveillance of the election.” He said the electoral college should be summoned “on September 15” so the election “can be held within the deadline stipulated by the law.”

While holding open the possibility of “a revision of some texts of the electoral law,” Salah added: “There won't be a total and deep overhaul...as demanded by some,” cynically invoking time constraints.

Salah denounced opponents of new elections, accusing them of “conspiring against the people and the nation” and demanding: “Stop putting obstacles in the path of loyal men who are providing initiatives to bring the country out of the crisis!” He again threatened that the army would “not tolerate any attempt to undermine the work of state institutions.”

While moving against workers and youth, the army is also ruthlessly purging the ruling elite. Jailed politicians include Louisa Hanoune, the leader of the petty-bourgeois Workers' Party, and General Ali Ghadiri, a candidate for the presidential election, both accused of “conspiring against the state and the Army.” On June 30, police arrested 87-year-old Lakhdar Bouregâa, a veteran of Algeria's independence war against France, at his home in Algiers, four days after he said at a public meeting that Algeria's army is a collection of “militias.”

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Given popular opposition to the election, the Salah regime is reportedly considering decreeing a state of emergency to suspend constitutional rights and suppress social opposition, as during the bloody 1992-2002 Algerian civil war. In the press, many recall that the 1996 presidential elections were organized by the army under a state of emergency.

The sharpest warnings must be made about the reactionary role of the interim regime. It has worked ceaselessly to defend the privileges of Algeria's capitalist class while trying to

buy time and wind down the popular protest movement with false promises of democratic reform. However, it is preparing not democratic reforms, but a bloody confrontation with the working class in which it enjoys the support of the major imperialist powers—particularly France, the former colonial power, which fears these protests could spread to France and Europe.

The Algerian protests erupted on February 22, as Bouteflika sought a fifth term in office after being in power for two decades. It was part of a broad international resurgence of class struggle. The protests in Algeria have unfolded amid mass protests and strikes against the Sudanese regime and teachers' strikes in Tunisia and Morocco; strikes by US teachers and Mexican maquiladora workers; "yellow vest" protests against social inequality in France; strikes internationally by autoworkers including in the United States over cuts to jobs and wages; and mass protests in Hong Kong.

Workers and youth opposed Bouteflika for his attacks on living standards and democratic rights in the interest of transnational corporations and Algeria's tiny financial elite, as well as his complicity in imperialist wars in Mali, Libya and across northwest Africa. After Bouteflika's ouster, mass protests continued against the interim regime which was forced to call off July 4 elections as protesters insisted that they would persist until the military-backed regime was overthrown.

Faced with mass protests by workers and youth, the Algerian ruling elite and its imperialist allies forced Bouteflika to step down, trying to wind down the protests. Bouteflika stepped down on April 2, and elections set for April 18 were postponed. Even though Bouteflika was removed, his former allies, mainly the army, remained in power.

Despite deep popular anger at the interim regime, Algerian workers and youth face a basic problem: they cannot wage a revolutionary struggle via spontaneous protests without revolutionary leadership. The FLN regime, the Algerian unions and their petty bourgeois allies are consciously hostile to a revolutionary struggle that is aimed at them. Events have confirmed Leon Trotsky's Theory of Permanent Revolution. In countries of belated capitalist development, the bourgeoisie is incapable of establishing a democratic regime, this task can only be accomplished by the taking power of the working class on a socialist program, ultimately on an international scale.

The international resurgence of the class struggle underscores the objective possibility of a political struggle based on such a strategy. However, the critical task of developing a conscious and united international revolutionary movement requires the formation of a

Trotskyist political vanguard, sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Algeria and in countries around the world. The delay in building such a leadership only gives the imperialist powers and their allies time to advance their counterrevolutionary plotting.

On September 14, the Maghreb Intelligence web site reported—citing sources closer to the Elysee presidential palace—that a senior French foreign intelligence official was dispatched to Abu Dhabi last week to discuss Algeria with Emirati leaders. The website said this official is familiar with Algerian affairs after working closely with the military junta for a decade during the Algerian civil war. His contacts reportedly include top Algerian intelligence officials including Smaïn Lamari and the now-jailed General Toufik. While Abu Dhabi backs Salah and establishing a military regime, Paris is concerned with whether Salah can handle the crisis in its former colony, the web site claimed. If Salah fails to suppress the protest, it wrote, “The Emiratis will not hesitate to withdraw their controversial support and switch to a plan proposed by Paris to save what can be saved in Algiers.” What Paris is proposing would be a brutal dictatorship to crush mass protests and advance its predatory interests.

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