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BRIEFING PAPER:

ALGERIA / As Bouteflika's health wanes, Algeria's future in doubt

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On Friday 15th April, Algeria's president, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, delivered a long-awaited speech announcing major political and constitutional reforms. These included constitutional amendments, revisions of the electoral and political party laws, changes to the Family Code and the abolition of criminal penalties for journalists. However, it was not the measures themselves that grabbed the attention of the Algerian street, which had come to a virtual standstill to watch the televised speech. Rather, the speech's content was eclipsed by its delivery. Algerians saw a visibly frail and ailing Bouteflika, at times inaudible and incapable of looking up at the camera for the whole 22 minutes of speech. A fortnight later, the debate sparked off by the president's performance has not died down, and serious questions abound both about Bouteflika's health and what this portends for Algeria amidst the wave of uprisings across the Arab world.

Background to the announcement

Algeria is far from shielded from what is happening across its borders in Tunisia and Libya, or further afield in Egypt and beyond. Indeed the potential for unrest is very real given the state of malaise currently affecting the country. Yet, to the regime's relief, Algeria's only stirrings to date have been mostly economic in nature. Indeed, the violent uprisings that took place in late December and early January were essentially provoked by rising prices of basic food commodities, especially sugar and cooking oil. If these uprisings came to a swift end when the government intervened to lower prices, the economic disquiet has not died down. The first months of 2011 have seen hundreds of strikes, protests and sit-ins affecting almost every sector: be it the administration, the oil refineries, ports, hospitals, universities or even bakeries. Given the extent of this disquiet, the country's fragmented opposition has been decidedly unsuccessful, both in exploiting the unrest and in transforming it into popular political demands.

That said, it has been clear for some time now that politically, Algeria has reached a dead end. The country's parliament while still extant, has become a lame duck. The FLN-RND-MSP coalition's overwhelming majority there for over a decade means that it has progressively - and especially since its last elections in 2007 - ceased even fulfilling its limited roles of proposing laws and debating legislation¹. The government and ministers meanwhile, seem at times to be missing in action. Major legislation can come to a standstill for months on end in Algeria, as it did in the first five months of 2010 when the cabinet did not meet once. As the country's presidentialist constitution dictates that it is the president and not the prime minister who heads cabinet, ultimately governmental activity is at the discretion of Bouteflika. And it is the president's own inertia that ultimately explains that of the institutions. Long forgotten is the omnipresent, logorrheic Bouteflika that shook up Algerian politics following his election in 1999. That image was definitively shattered by his secretive treatment in Val-de-Grâce Hospital in Paris in 2005, and the subsequent long months of inactivity. Since then, despite winning re-election in 2009, his presidency has come to be defined by lengthy periods of absence and silence, as his health weighs ever heavier on his capacity to govern.

¹ In the last four years, the Algerian parliament has voted on just 51 laws, an average of just one per month. This is partly due to Bouteflika's fondness for passing legislation by presidential decree, bypassing both parliament and government.

Exasperated by this inertia and mindful of events elsewhere, Algerians are just as eager for political change as any other Arab population. But after the bitter civil war of the nineties, what Algerians lack is a will for violence or for testing the regime's resolve to defend itself. That said, Algerians' desire for change is real and for months expectation that the regime would react was widespread. Two announcements fuelled speculation: on February 3rd, Bouteflika broke months of silence to announce the imminent lifting of the Emergency Law²; then on March 19th, he insinuated that reforms in justice, education and administration "cannot bear fruit in the absence of political reforms." Expectations were also raised in the press in March about a series of weekly meetings, said to have taken place between the heads of all the state's top institutions at the El Mouradia presidential palace. Speculation on the strategy for reform decided at these meetings included the dissolution of the parliament and the calling of fresh elections, a Constituent Assembly being convened, and constitutional reforms creating a Vice-President or reinforcing the prime minister's powers.

Ultimately however, none of these options materialised. What Bouteflika did announce were changes to the Constitution and the law on political parties, a major revision of the electoral law and new Information legislation. While these might seem to be momentous changes for Algerian politics, the announcement caused scant excitement among politicians, commentators or the general population. In reality, it lacked credibility. Firstly, because Bouteflika fail to specify the content of any of the reforms. A constitutional amendment and changes to the election and party laws might sound promising, but no indication was given as to what articles would be amended. Secondly, no timeframe was provided for the reforms, which hardly represents a response to the accusations of inertia. Thirdly, by rejecting a Constituent Assembly and entrusting reforms to a "constitutional commission" (made up of experts and "politicians from all parties"), Bouteflika gave no guarantees that the reforms will respond to popular demands. Moreover, is unlikely that many opposition parties/personalities will cooperate, given the phoney nature of previous attempts at consultation. Even if the FFS for instance, did participate in discussions, this is no guarantee of their integrity, as the example of Algerian elections these last two decades amply shows. Finally, Bouteflika justified the reforms as "strengthening the democratic process" – a far from satisfactory claim given that it was the same pretext he used in 2008 to revoke the constitutional two-term limit and stand again for re-election.

Reaction to the announcements was predictable. The FLN and RND from the presidential camp lauded the decisions, while the RCD, FFS and other opposition personalities lamented their deficiencies. The most nuanced responses came from Louisa Hanoune's PT which hailed Bouteflika's "good intentions" but attacked his methods, notably his refusal to involve the population via referendum or fresh elections; and more surprisingly, from the junior coalition member, the Islamist MSP, which gave Bouteflika an 8-month deadline to execute the reforms, vowing to quit the coalition if the reforms "do not work"³.

² The Emergency Law in place since 9th February 1992 was finally lifted by the government on 22 February.

³ For the full MSP response, see "[Soltani: Bouteflika should execute reforms within 8 months](#)" in Echorouk, 20 April 2011.

Bouteflika's health

What did spark off major debate however was the speech's delivery. In effect, the frailty and poor health of Bouteflika was so self-evident as to raise serious questions about his intentions, and more importantly, about his ability to serve out his term. From a public relations perspective, his debilitated image was hardly one to drive home the intended message about change. Indeed for many viewers it undermined that message. Yet given that the speech was ostensibly pre-recorded and shot in several takes, did the president's advisers hope that by presenting Bouteflika thus, they would arouse the population's compassion and mollify discontent? If that was their intention, it certainly backfired. Numerous doubts have been raised since April 15th about Bouteflika's ability to continue assuming his functions. Given the official secretiveness, calls have increased in recent days for Algerians to be informed about the president's health as a matter of national interest. This is unimaginable however, given the Algerian regime's aversion to transparency.

Will Bouteflika be able to lead Algerians through the important days ahead? The answer is a mystery. Once again therefore, Algeria faces a future full of uncertainty. Far from providing a roadmap for change in these times of upheaval, Bouteflika's speech created more questions than it answered. In the months ahead, as details of the reforms become known, the population's reaction will be crucial. If the popular malaise becomes political, the stability of the Algerian domino is far from guaranteed.