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Return of the Arab strongman



Nabila Ramdani

Algeria, the biggest country in Africa and potentially one of the most volatile, played an eerily subdued role in the Arab Spring. There were sizeable demonstrations to begin with but while neighbours including Libya and Tunisia exploded into revolution, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's regime remained remarkably stable.

It is only now, two years since a wave of popular uprisings spread across the Middle East and North Africa, that Algeria has become a focus of world interest. This follows the horrendous terrorist attack on the In Amenas gas facility in the isolated Saharan southeast of the country. Heavily-armed militants operating under the banner of the Signed-in-Blood Battalion, an Al-Qaeda splinter group, took dozens of hostages, before a murderous shoot-out with the Algerian army ended the siege.

Western media expressed shock at the uncompromising manner in which Algerian special forces dealt with the In Amenas attackers. This was hardly surprising. Algeria is little known to the English-speaking world. It is very hard to get reporters in there and, as a journalist of Franco-Algerian heritage, I found myself being invited in January to TV studios all over London to interpret this secretive country.

With revived interest in Algeria, there is much for the West to learn. Bouteflika spent much of the Arab Spring warning that gangster jihadists would thrive within the borders of his newly 'liberated' neighbours. Gaddafi's Libya was, in particular, seen by Bouteflika as a bulwark against armed gangs – ones which now roam over an increasingly lawless area, including the desert shared by Algeria, Libya, Mali and Tunisia.

Once a haven for smugglers, the vast wilderness is now used by vehemently anti-Western Islamists who have been



Bouteflika warned of gangster jihadists

launching ambitious operations with impunity. Just look at the kind of outrages that have blighted the region since the heyday of the Arab Spring: the French army has been forced to intervene in Mali to thwart a terrorist bid to take over the former French colony; an American ambassador has been murdered in Benghazi, cradle of the Libyan revolt; and now an Algerian gas installation, part-owned by BP, has been threatened with destruction.

Anticipating such dark consequences of the Arab uprisings, the determinedly iron-fisted Bouteflika clamped down on any sign of unrest at the beginning of 2011. As early as April – while the barricades still burned in other countries – he announced a 'reinforcement of representative democracy', finally lifting a 19-year state of emergency, and setting a date for parliamentary elections which took place last year.

The ploy, aimed at substituting violent

'The iron-fisted Bouteflika clamped down on any sign of unrest at the beginning of 2011'

revolution with at least some form of democratic expression, worked. As shown by David Cameron's visit to Algiers, the first by a serving British Prime Minister since Algerian independence in 1962, Bouteflika is viewed by the West as a legitimate ally in the war on terror – one whose battlefields have spread from Afghanistan to the Sahara-Sahel region of Africa.

There is no doubt that Bouteflika's intelligence services have been sharing information with the CIA and MI6 since the start of the 'war on terror', but this process is now becoming increasingly transparent. Bouteflika – though 75 and rumoured to be in poor health – is now seen as a strong leader who can repress dissent, and indeed wipe out enemies of the West who threaten chaos.

Could this be a turning point? When the old Arab strongmen, Mubarak in Egypt, Ben Ali in Tunisia and Libya's Gaddafi, were toppled, the West applauded the dawn of democracy. Two years on it seems the strongman may be making a comeback.

As far as the Algerian people are concerned, their attitude towards Bouteflika might be described as resigned acceptance. Remember that Algeria's war of independence from France ended in 1962 with more than 1.5 million Algerian deaths. Its civil war officially ended even more recently, in the early 2000s, with at least 250,000 deaths. Both conflicts in fact continued long after peace agreements and flimsy amnesties, with thousands more killed and wounded.

People who have suffered such unspeakable violence in living memory tend to shy away from sudden regime change, even when such calls are genuinely rooted in democracy. It is this truth that both Bouteflika and the West will exploit as they continue their war against terror.

Nabila Ramdani is winner of the Best Arab Journalist in the West Award 2012