

Uncertainties over Algerian transition continue

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Tunis

When Abdelaziz Bouteflika assumed the presidency of Algeria in 1999, he warned that he would not accept being “three-quarters of a president”. The independence guerrilla fighter added: “I’m not afraid to be hit by a bullet in the head.”

Almost two decades later, Bouteflika, 79, has sidelined all powerful rivals, but there is speculation whether he will extend his 20-year hold on power in 2019 or anoint a successor.

The Algerian constitution grants the president paramount power. But presidents have often sought compromises with the ruling party’s leaders, business people, regional elites and military and intelligence commanders. Those who failed to toe the line were ousted in military coups, killed or saw their mandates curtailed.

“Algeria’s problem is not only the bad government. The problem is that the alternatives to this government are all dervishes,” said political commentator Saad Okba.

Riots erupted January 2nd in the restive Berber-speaking northern town Bejaia in protest of rising food and transport prices that have come about because of budget cuts meant to address lower oil and gas revenues. Protesters set a police truck and public transport bus on fire and damaged several buildings, including a bank, but the unrest did not spread to other parts of the country.

Political commentators warned the turbulence could be a sign of

things to come, pointing out similarities with circumstances that prompted the bloody riots of October 1988 when rising prices led to political upheaval and civil war.

Bouteflika has set a longevity record as president and his leadership strength seems unchallenged since he cleared powerful contenders by embracing them as allies – for as long as it took – before dumping them.

“President Bouteflika has his own method to manage the men who accept to work for him or those who come under the illusion that they struck an alliance with him. He puts them in competition showing them they could be replaced by one another,” said Abed Charef, an Algerian journalist for Agency France-Presse.

“He, under no circumstances, tolerates their being equal to him. In some cases, such as with general Mohamed Mediene, Bouteflika manoeuvres and arranges his work to jeopardise and waits with patience for the fruit to fall,” Charef added.

Known familiarly as “General Toufik”, Mediene, 76, was one of the longest-serving secret service chiefs in the world. Trained by the Soviet KGB in the 1960s, he oversaw Algeria’s Intelligence and Security Directorate (DRS) for 25 years. Bouteflika sacked Mediene in September 2015, jolting Algeria’s political and military establishments and leaving observers outside Algeria wondering about the consequences of the move given the frail state of the president’s health and the power wielded by Mediene, whom Algerians called Rab Dzair (Algeria’s God).

Mediene took over the DRS leadership in 1992 at the beginning of an Islamist insurgency that lasted a decade and claimed more than 150,000 lives. Before firing Mediene, Bouteflika forged a strong link with



Algerian teachers, health workers and local civil servants protest in Algiers, last November, as part of a 3-day strike over plans to tighten spending and increase the retirement age. (AP)

the armed forces chief Ahmed Gaid Salah, who was on a list of generals prepared by Mediene for sacking.

Bouteflika showed the list to Gaid Salah in 2004 and kept him as an ally. This was another example of Bouteflika’s strategy of forging make-and-break alliances with influential generals and political figures, such as general Larbi Belkheir, nicknamed the “Military’s Shadow” for his role in decision-making conclaves, including when new presidents were selected, as well as Mohamed Lamari, the army chief of staff.

“There is a difference for Gaid Salah. He was pushed out before Bouteflika rescued him. As a result, Gaid Salah was ready to fight and prepared for the next battle when Bouteflika was preparing to get rid of General Mediene,” Charef said.

He and others argue that such tactics helped Bouteflika bolster his power but produced only smoke screens of change for Algerians yearning for a strong multiparty system and deep economic reforms to enable the country to diversify its economy from dependency on oil and gas exports.

“It is the same cyclical dynamic giving the illusion of a political

battle while it is indeed a machine going into freewheel. It is sufficient to remember that nothing has changed since the firing of [Mohamed] Betchine, [Tahar] Benbaibche, Larbi Belkheir, [Abdelaziz] Belkhadem, Chakib Khelil, Toufik Mediene and many others,” Charef said.

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Ali Benflis, a former prime minister and head of the opposition group Talaie el Houriat (Freedom’s Vanguard), bemoaned the country’s apparent political stalemate. “Algeria is a country with no good management and without a vision for its future and with no inclusive national project,” he said.

Noureddine Benissad, head of the Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights, said: “Our country lived under a state of emergency for 19 years since 1992. We hailed its lifting in 2011 but we see no progress on human rights.”

Bouteflika is relatively popular among sectors of the Algerian population who see him as the protector of the country’s security and stability amid fears of the repercussions of chaos in Libya, political turmoil in Tunisia and tensions with Morocco over Western Sahara.

He is credited with building a strong army that shields Algeria’s borders from radical Islamists and other threats and a guarantee of domestic security in case of troubles.

Bouteflika also freed Algeria of its burden of foreign debt; the country has huge foreign currency reserves.

Despite weak oil prices, Algeria had increased oil output to offset price declines.

Amine Mazouzi, chief of Algeria’s hydrocarbon state group Sonatrach, said in early December that oil output reached 1.135 million barrels per day since November compared to an average of 1.051 million barrels daily in 2015.

“Bouteflika is the only leader capable of tackling the country’s challenges now. He should run for a fifth mandate out of national duty,” said Amar Tou, a former cabinet minister. Other officials made similar calls.

Shifting US policy in North Africa

Viewpoint



Elissa Miller

US foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa has been preoccupied by responses to crises resulting from civil wars and protracted instability, particularly in Syria and Iraq. Yet, in several key North African countries – Egypt, Libya and Tunisia – US policies could shift under the Trump presidency to reflect a security-driven agenda. Experts can do little more than speculate until after the January 20th inauguration but an examination of US-North Africa relations over the past year offers insight into how policies may change under the new administration.

The United States’ relationship with Egypt under the Obama administration has been rocky, although in the past year there were efforts to strengthen ties. US Secretary of State John Kerry met with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry several times, and top US national security officials and congressional delegations visited Cairo to discuss regional security and counterterrorism efforts. In August, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said that “Egyptian-American relations are strategic and they have been improving”.

Still, Cairo bristles from concerns expressed by the United States over alleged human rights violations in Egypt. Those concerns, which recently focused on the restriction of public space

for non-governmental organisations to operate and the detention of Egyptian-American Aya Hegazy, were on display during meetings between Shoukry and US lawmakers in early December.

Based on US President-elect Donald Trump’s emphasis on counterterrorism and security and his presumed preference for strongmen, US-Egypt relations are expected to strengthen and prioritise national security interests; little attention will likely be paid to human rights concerns or issues of democratisation.

It is no surprise that Cairo welcomed Trump’s election or that Sisi was the first foreign leader to congratulate Trump on his victory. Trump’s emerging relationship with Sisi was recently demonstrated when the president-elect intervened through a direct phone discussion with him to convince Egypt to postpone a vote in the UN Security Council concerning Israeli settlements.

Much of Sisi’s worldview appears to be reflected in that of Trump. The US president-elect has surrounded himself with advisers who seem to make no distinction between political Islam and Islamic extremism. A designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a foreign terrorist organisation is a distinct possibility under the Trump administration, a move that would certainly be welcomed by Cairo. Trump has repeatedly praised Cairo’s counterterrorism efforts against extremists, which some observers say have been used too broadly to crack down on opponents of the government.

As for Libya, over the past year Kerry has had numerous talks

with European counterparts and officials from the UN-backed Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA) to strengthen the position of the GNA. The United States launched, following a request from the GNA, air strikes against the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Libyan city of Sirte.

Kerry’s diplomatic efforts and US military assistance came amid US President Barack Obama’s admitting that failing to prepare for the chaotic aftermath following the ouster of Muammar Qaddafi was the worst mistake of his presidency.

Future US policy in Libya is tied to Trump’s relationship with Egypt. Egypt has joined the international community many times in rhetorically recognising the GNA as the sole legitimate government of Libya and has hosted talks aimed at finding a resolution to the political stalemate in Libya.

However, Cairo has also continued to support anti-Islamist strongman Khalifa Haftar, who leads the Libyan National Army (LNA) and is allied with the House of Representatives, which refuses to endorse the GNA. Both Sisi and Haftar have moved closer to Russia, challenging Western influence in the region.

Strong ties between Trump, Sisi and Russian President Vladimir Putin could lead to a shift in US policy towards Libya in which the new US administration throws support behind Haftar and his forces. The abandonment of the UN-backed process that produced the GNA, as well as the emboldening of Haftar and his anti-Islamist forces, would deal a heavy blow to the GNA’s shaky credibility and

US-Egypt relations are expected to strengthen in the coming year.

could produce further turmoil in the country.

What closer counterterrorism cooperation between Washington, Moscow, and Cairo against Islamist forces in Egypt and Libya would mean for other countries in the broader MENA region, such as Syria, remains unclear.

Where does this leave Tunisia? The small North African country has been struggling to push forward with its democratisation process and has received significant Western support. The Obama administration designated Tunisia a major non-NATO ally in 2015 and has had several strategic dialogues with the country. The European Union has also tried to strengthen Western ties with Tunisia.

Should Trump pursue a more robust counterterrorism effort in North Africa by cooperating with Cairo and throwing support behind Haftar, Tunisia could face an escalation in threats from militants in Libya. The country was targeted in a terror attack by extremists trained in Libya. A Trump administration could, through this security-focused lens, strengthen ties with Tunisia’s army and security forces and help Tunis prevent further threat spillovers from Libya.

However, given Trump’s seeming affinity for transactional relationships and the fact that instability in Tunisia is a larger threat to Europe, it is unclear whether his administration would invest in the support that Tunisia needs.

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The new US administration could throw its support in Libya behind Haftar and his forces.