



The Algerian Hirak: Civil Society and the Role of Artists in a Civic Space Under Pressure

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1 INTRODUCTION

Since 22 February 2019, millions of Algerians took to the streets in all parts of the country demanding the departure of the regime, genuine democracy, the end of corruption and a fair management of resources. For more than a year, this pacific movement, called *Hirak* (Arabic for ‘movement’), demanded fundamental reforms (Benderra, 2020: 7; ICG, 2020: i, 7). The strength and perseverance of the Hirak resulted in a political crisis, which prevented President Bouteflika from running a fifth term and helped the partial dismantling of the official political elite (Boubekeur, 2020: 4; ICG, 2019: 1).

While the Hirak as a countrywide social movement came to the surprise of many observers of political developments in Algeria, civil society in Algeria (although in a difficult security and political context) was always

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present in Algeria (Dris-Aït Hamadouche, 2017: 289–306; Mattardi & Péricard, 2019).

Due to the peaceful character and the creativity with which the demonstrators expressed their demands as well as their perseverance, political commentators have dubbed the Hirak marches as Algeria's 'Revolution of Smiles' (Deglise, 2022; FDD, 2020; Ourahmoune, 2021). Artists had a major role in the Hirak—singers, graphic artists and visual artists in particular. They used their creativity to support the demonstrators' political demands, giving expression to these demands through songs and art, and helped ordinary people tap into their own creativity (Lebdjaoui, 2020: 109–116). Already prior to the Hirak, during Bouteflika's previous terms who was president since April 1999, artists undertook initiatives to access more public spaces and in which they dealt *inter alia* with socially and politically sensitive issues.

This chapter reports on a research project about civil society in a civic space under pressure as well as about the role of artists as actors of change and culture as a domain and instrument to enhance civic space. I argue that art might be, in an enabling socio-political context, a 'catharsis element' for expressing and spreading a message. However, crossing red lines drawn by the power elite, as the Hirak shows, might lead to repressive measures. This was also the case prior to the Hirak.

The paper describes the socio-political context of the Hirak, the demands and the results of the Hirak, the reaction of the power elite, the support of artists to the Hirak as well as some initiatives/projects in Algiers in the cultural domain initiated prior to the Hirak.

2 THE SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT

Several key events in modern Algerian history are important to mention to better understand the political context of the Hirak.

The first is 1962, when the Algerian people gained their independence from France after a seven-year bloody war causing hundreds of thousands of deaths. It deeply influenced the building of the state under the leadership of the National Liberation Front (FLN) in coalition with the army (Oumansour, 2019).

The second are student strikes and riots beginning in October 1988 amid an economic crisis and allegations of corruption. A violent military crackdown killed hundreds of civilians within a few weeks. The government, under pressure, agreed to 'radical' reforms of the political system.

A new constitution was drafted and passed by referendum in February 1989, creating a multi-party system, granting greater personal freedoms and minimizing the role of the military (ConstitutionNet, retrieved 11 May 2021).

Then a third moment is December 1991, when the Islamist political party Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) won the first free parliamentary elections. However, the army denied FIS its overall victory and banned the party altogether. Banning the FIS resulted in a bloody conflict between armed Islamist groups and the Algerian army with severe consequences for the civilian population. An estimated 100,000–200,000 Algerians died, and tens of thousands of people disappeared during the conflict (NPA Loiret, 2017; Oumansour, 2019). The civic space nearly closed completely during this so-called Black Decade. Human Rights Watch noted in 1994:

Whereas only three years ago Algeria seemed to be evolving from an authoritarian one-party state toward a more pluralistic and democratic system with a thriving civil society, it is now mired in a virtual civil war in which the rights of no one are inviolate and the democratic process has been all but abandoned.

The appointment of Bouteflika as president in 1999, after a sham election (*The Guardian*, 23 April 1999), temporarily solved the legitimacy problem the army had since 1992, when it cancelled the victory of the FIS. President Bouteflika furthered policies of reconciliation (Boubekeur, 2020: 3; Middle East Eye, 26 January 2016). However, behind the scenes, the army and the security services remained very influential (Boubekeur, 2020: 4; Oumansour, 2019; *The Washington Post*, 5 April 2019).

During the twenty years of Bouteflika rule, institutional corruption and social inequality amplified despite the relative economic improvement brought about by the country's oil revenues (Arslane, 2019).

3 THE HIRAK AND ITS DEMANDS

The Hirak as a nationwide peaceful protest movement and its perseverance is unique. However, it was not the only peaceful movement in the last decennium in Algeria that transcended local issues. Also, the grass-roots movement of the unemployed and the anti-shale gas protests in

the southern part of Algeria united people from many regions and with different backgrounds (ICG, 2016: 15; Serres, 2019: 7).

The prospect of a fifth Bouteflika term, with a president who was not even capable of working due to a stroke in 2013, led to the Hirak. The protests started 16 February 2019 and went on until March 2020; it stopped due to the COVID-19 pandemic but started up again a year later, in February 2021. The marches remained pacifist, popular and national. The demands of the movement remained the same: political primacy over the military, judicial independence, press freedom, democracy, the real dismantling of the ‘system’ and its representatives (Ourahmoune, 2021).

As indicated by the International Crisis Group (ICG), the structure of the Hirak is horizontal. The movement had no hierarchy as well as official spokespersons (ICG, 2020: 3). The Hirak as a movement was based, in particular, on the youth, on the educated middle class and on educated and skilled women (ARTE Reportage, 12 April 2019; *El Watan*, 28 February 2021a; *New African*, 5 March 2020). The Hirak had been spearheaded by groups that participated in various forms of protest and included students, football supporters’ groups, human rights activists including the Families of Missing People in Algeria Collective, trade union activists, bloggers, journalists and politically engaged artists such as musicians. The work of these artists influenced the slogans chanted during the protest marches and transferred through social media. The Hirak also included former leaders of the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), the traditional opposition party (ICG, 2020: 3; Serres, 2019: 11–12). The Hirak was an urban movement active in the major cities of Algeria with particular strong roots in the Kabyle region with its mainly Berber and Tamazight-speaking population. Social media played an important role in spreading the call for reform and the demands dictated by the Hirak, exchanging information and networking in general (Human Rights Watch, 2021). The Hirak received also much support from the Algerian Diaspora (*Jeune Afrique*, 19 February 2021a; Serres, 2021b).

The way the demands are presented and expressed in the Hirak tells something about the identity of the country’s population; many refer to 1962, the end of the independence war, which was both a liberation war from French colonial rule as well as a revolution (*Le Monde*, 4 July 2022). Today it is about people liberating themselves from the *issaba* (mafia). The latter is seen as a group of people having betrayed this revolution. The Hirak is also an expression of the diversity of the geographically largest country on the African continent (with a population of forty

million people), with its different landscapes, ethnicities, languages and cultures, laying out the demands in Arabic, French, Tamazight and English on placards, banners and graffiti as well as in slogans and songs (Balla, 2019).

This continuous popular public pressure had an effect. After six weeks of protests, Ahmed Gaid Salah, the Chief of Staff of the Army, forced the president to resign in April 2019. Salah also arrested some of the leading figures who had important positions in Bouteflika's regime, such as the head of the security services and some members of the president's civilian supporters, including the president's own brother and advisor (Boubekeur, 2020: 9; *Jeune Afrique*, 24 April 2019) as well as leaders of the main political parties FLN and RND (Democratic National Rally) who supported Bouteflika. The latter party leaders as well as two former prime ministers are serving prison terms (Boubekeur, 2020: 8). Presidential elections were postponed twice under the pressure of the Hirak. However, the demands to have no elections at all, a civilian state instead of a military one as well as to oust all politicians never materialized (Ghanem, 2020: 2).

The Hirak movement managed to develop and present an alternative narrative on the future nature of the Algerian state:

These include, among other things: the affirmation of ethnic and religious plurality (as opposed to the army's attempts to present Berber culture as disruptive to the national identity); the equal representation of women; national economic sovereignty (by denouncing corruption and, more recently, the law on hydrocarbons); respect for freedom of expression (by supporting associations of prisoners of conscience and demanding their release); rejection of foreign powers' support for the regime (one of the slogans suggests 'organising elections in the Emirates'); and solidarity between Algerians (by using all the same watchwords throughout the country and in the worldwide Algerian diaspora). (Boubekeur, 2019: 4)

The Hirak had cultural positive sides such as respect for minority cultures, the return of the political narrative in the cultural domain and the return of theatrical and cinematic activity (Chiheb & Northey, October 2019). The active participation of women in the Hirak and thus in public space is also regarded by some as an expression of an ongoing cultural revolution (Daoudi, 2021). The cartoonist Andalou stated:

the Hirak allowed people to free themselves, to speak up when they weren't doing it. There is a surge of freedom and we feel that people who were not used to expressing themselves are doing so today. Before, the street did not belong to us. Now, a whole people is coming out. As a result, the state panics and tries to silence him. (*Le Monde*, 11 December 2019a)

4 THE POWER ELITE'S REACTIONS

The power elite, *le pouvoir*, is the informal network of military and security officials, politicians and businessmen who run the regime (*El Watan*, 2021a, 2021b). Bouteflika's victory in April 2014, when he was already fourteen years in office, was according to the Algerian sociologist Nacer Djabi 'a reflection of the balance between the country's institutions and the political and social forces inside the Algerian political system' (Djabi, 2014: 1–2).

While the Hirak movement continued to call for profound changes of the political system, general Salah organized a new presidential election which was held on 12 December 2019 (*Al Jazeera*, 13 December 2019). The Hirak movement called for a boycott of the election because it considered it as a restauration of the old political system. Abdelmadjid Tebboune, former Minister of the Interior under Bouteflika, won the elections. He became the new Head of State, Head of the Armed Forces and Minister of Defence. The voter turnout was barely more than 39%. Nevertheless, the political and institutional crisis endured (Boubekeur, 2020: 4–7).

Tebboune presented an institutional roadmap in order to end the political crisis, which contained a constitutional referendum in November 2020 followed by parliamentary elections in June 2021. The Hirak as well as some opposition parties (*Le Point*, 2021) called people not to go to the polls. Both elections had a historically low voter turnout (Al-Ali, 4 June 2020; *Le Monde*, 17 May 2021; Middle East Eye, 2 November 2020b; Ourahmoune, 28 March 2021).

However, with the new approved constitution, the Tebboune government hardened its stance against the continuation of the Hirak. The Hirak movement as well as supporting opposition parties—the Socialist Forces Front (FFS) and the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD)—were divided between those willing to participate in the parliamentary elections and those not willing to do so. Leaders within the Hirak movement and related civil society organizations remained divided about whether

the Hirak should be restructured into a political project or not (*Le Point*, 10 May 2021; Rachidi, 2021a and 2021b: 2).

The military considered the elections as the outcome of a democratic and transparent process. Moreover, the military presented the army as the protector of the (initial) Hirak against the *issaba*, the mafia-like clan of people around former President Bouteflika who were accused of enriching themselves by taking advantage of the natural wealth of the country (El-Djeich, February 2021a).

The authorities made a distinction between the demands of the Hirak at the start (no fifth term for President Bouteflika and the removal of the power elite that supported him) and the restart of the Hirak in 2020. President Tebboune declared 22 February as an official holiday in order to celebrate the (original) Hirak as ‘a sign of cohesion between the people and the army’ (APS, 19 February 2020).

The Tebboune government and the military considered this renewal of demonstrations as an attempt to destabilize the country and its institutions. Moreover, the power elite claimed that the Hirak was infiltrated by separatist and Islamic extremists (*El Watan*, 15 June 2021b). The demand during the Hirak for a civilian state and not a military one (*Dawla Madania machi aâskaria*) was interpreted by the military as an attempt to undermine the Algerian state by undermining the stated cohesion between the army and the nation (El-Djeich, March 2021b).

Since June 2019, the Algerian authorities have increasingly repressed the Hirak. Besides locking up citizens who participated in the Hirak, the government also arrested political activists and a few respected political figures (*Al Jazeera*, 5 November 2020; Boubekeur, 2019). The Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights (LADDH) recorded at least 1000 arrests and 200 committal warrants in 2019 (Algerian Detainees, retrieved 24 May 2021; CNLD, retrieved 24 May 2021). Early March 2020, the authorities forbade any mass demonstrations due to the pandemic and Hirak leaders called off demonstrations for the same reason (Algeria Watch, 14 October 2020; Amnesty International, 27 April 2020; Carnegie, 19 January 2021a; FDD, 23 April 2020).

In the run-up to the parliamentary elections of 12 June 2021, the authorities’ stance against the Hirak demonstrations hardened (Amnesty International, 22 February 2021a, 10 June 2021b). Since the beginning of May 2021, the security grip tightened with the ban by the authorities of the demonstrations on Tuesday in Algiers and the arrest of several activists in Algiers, Oran and other cities. Moreover, the Minister of the

Interior demanded on 9 May 2021 that, henceforth, the authorities had to approve beforehand the holding of a demonstration on Friday (Algeria Watch, 16 May 2021; *Le Point*, 10 May 2021). During the 117th Hirak march, Friday 14 May, the police arrested demonstrators in Algiers. Some journalists and photographers were also arrested and detained in police stations for several hours, preventing them from covering the demonstration. Nearly 1,000 arrests were recorded all over Algeria by the LADDH during the 117th Hirak's march of 14th of May 2021. Several demonstrators were convicted to several months up to more than one year in prison for 'unarmed assembly and incitement to unarmed assembly' (LADDH, 15 May 2021; *Le Monde*, 17 May 2021). Some members of the Algerian diaspora were also accused of involvement in the Hirak and, for this reason, prosecuted (*Al Jazeera*, 22 March 2021). According to human rights organizations and lawyers, more than 250 prisoners of opinion were beginning 2022 behind bars in Algeria (Amnesty International, 1 February 2022; Liberté, 20 January 2022).

Summarising, the remaining parts of the power elite dealt with the existential crisis formed by the Hirak in several ways. The rulers gave in to certain demands of the Hirak (no fifth term for president Bouteflika and arrests among the clique of people regarded as the president's supporters) while undermining the political threat of the Hirak movement by creating a renewed democratic façade and by repressing any continued opposition. Heydemann defines this adaptive capacity as a form of authoritarian upgrading. It is a defensive response that 'involves reconfiguring authoritarian governance to accommodate and manage changing political, economic, and social conditions' (Heydemann, 2007: 1). Serres pointed out that the reaction of the Algerian power elite was in fact another round of authoritarian upgrading of 'limited reforms under military and bureaucratic control' (Serres, 2 February 2021a).

5 CIVIL SOCIETY AND THE HIRAK

Many observers see the Hirak as a social movement being an expression of the Algerian civil society (e.g. Chiheb & Northey, October 2019; London Middle East Institute, 2020). However, what kind civil society are they referring to?

Civil society is commonly understood as 'the realm of private voluntary association, from neighbourhood committees to interest groups to philanthropic enterprises of all sorts' (Foley & Edwards, 1996: 38). However,

many political analysts and activists also see civil society as an important factor in promoting democratization as well as transparency in decision taking. The role of political associations such as social movements and parties, is in this connection of importance. The focus is on civil society as a counterweight to the state. Foley and Edwards underline that the role organized groups in civil society will play depends crucially on the larger political setting. This is in particular the case in a context where ‘established political parties have been repressed, weakened or used as tools by the authoritarian state’ (Foley & Edwards, 1996: 46).

Civic space is the environment that enables civil society to play a role in the political, economic and social life of our societies (OHCHR, 2022). The NGO Civicus defines civic space as “the bedrock of any open and democratic society. When civic space is open, citizens and civil society organisations are able to organise, participate and communicate without hindrance” (Civicus, 2022). In a civic space under pressure or shrinking civic space, governments promote and use repressive laws and increase restrictions on freedoms to express, participate, assemble and associate (OHCHR, 2022).

Algeria has many associations or organizations that can be considered as being part of the broader civil society definition mentioned above (USDoS, 2020: 23). One could distinguish, as Balla does, three different categories of civil society associations in the Algerian context: First, associations that fully support state policies and doctrines and that benefit from its protection, support and opportunities; second, associations that are neutral in form but conciliate with state policies as long as it guarantees their survival; and third, associations that are in opposition to the state and critical of its policies and, as a result, experience difficulty existing (Balla, 2020). Dris-Aït Hamadouche argues that the relationship between the political authorities and most of the associations is clientelist; it contributes to the resilience of the political system (Dris-Aït Hamadouche, 2017).

Civic space was already prior to the Hirak restricted. For instance, demonstrations were forbidden in the capital Algiers, legal and administrative hurdles restricting the formation, funding and activities of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well as legal mechanisms to harass the media and censor or punish controversial reporting (Freedom House, 2020). The 1206 Association Law of 12 January 2012 makes it very difficult to defend certain causes or to tackle certain issues. The NGO

registration requirements to work legally, as well as national and international funding policies, placed many of these associations in difficult situations (Euromed Rights, 2015; Loi 1206, 2012). While in most cases these NGOs continued with their activities, they were in limbo legally and faced practical problems (USDoS, 2020: 22).

According to the LADDH—an Algerian human rights organization—NGOs working on issues related to human rights and citizenship with a critical approach (despite being active for many years in Algeria), could not register their organization. Without permission from the authorities, such organizations could not organize activities or open a bank account (*Le Monde*, 19 January 2019b). Also, other organizations that openly criticized the state and/or were actively involved in the Hirak, like the National Youth Association (RAJ) and SOS Culture Bab El Oued, faced state harassment, imprisonment of leading members and banning of their activities. The leading members were accused among others of *instigate a crowd and subverting the integrity and unity of the territory* (*Jeune Afrique*, 29 April 2021b; *Le Monde*, 18 May 2020b).

However, the case of Algeria also shows the ability of activists to resist government constrictions of civic space as well as to find new possibilities and momentum to enlarge civic space. Activists formulated a counter narrative referring to the ongoing suffering of a part of the population such as the *barga* (emigration on a makeshift boat) and the *hogra* (meaning contempt or injustice) by the political system. The call for dignity (*karama*) became a fundamental demand. These discourses were not merely dramatic but could also be humorous as expressed in the form of caricatures, songs and slogans (Serres, 2019: 8–9).

In the period 2011–2019, social protest in Algeria was fragmented. The authorities dealt with these protests, both the peaceful as well as the violent ones, by using repression and co-option as methods. What made the Hirak special was that the Hirak was a national social movement. The participating groups prioritized the peaceful occupation of public space as the best way of confronting security measures by the authorities (Serres, 2019: 12). Non-violent discipline, like in the case of Thailand (Sombatpoonsiri & Kri-aksorn, 2021: 98–101), was key to winning over the general public, including a large female participation and digital savviness contributed to growing numbers of protesters (Daoudi, 2021; Serres, 2019: 12). Essential for the initial success of the Hirak was

having a common goal or opportunity for the participating contending social forces, namely blocking the proposed fifth presidential mandate of Bouteflika (Serres, 2019: 10–12).

However, the power elite is able to reduce civic space once again, as is demonstrated in the analysis of the measures taken by the power elite in reaction to the Hirak. Moreover, leaders of the Hirak movement agreed to temporarily stop the marches due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, differences of opinion among participants of the Hirak regarding possible follow-up steps to be taken contributed to weakening the movement such as approving or disapproving the constitutional referendum and the parliamentary elections (France Inter, 16 June 2021). If, it is a *de facto* abeyance of the Hirak—see Kaftan’s discussion of this concept in the case of the Turkish women’s movement (Kaftan, 2020: 187)—due to these circumstances or the end of this informal network of social movements has to be seen.

6 CULTURE, ARTISTS AND THE HIRAK

Culture itself has also been a domain where artists, cultural entrepreneurs and some NGO’s managed to enlarge public and civic space with their activities and work around socially and politically sensitive issues.

From the start of the civil war in the 1990s, the army and security services took control of the public space, including the cultural sector. Even today, the cultural sector is under state control and almost totally state owned and financed. Moreover, as indicated by play writer Rezzak, ‘censorship applies to all stages of the projects, some theatre productions are prohibited, others are refused by the reading committee. Subsidies are not given while other producers receive all the means to set up theatre productions that have no meaning and are played in front of empty rooms’. Private cultural associations receive almost no government funding (Télérama, 9 April 2014).

The Algerian authorities invested in the cultural sector as a means to glorify their role in the independence struggle, the heroism of great men of Algeria’s past like Abdelkader and the results of their socialist policies. The power elite managed to mobilize Algerian celebrities to sing in favour of President Bouteflika’s fourth mandate at the time that he was already ill and accused of corruption and human rights violations (Ben Boubakeur, 26 January 2021).

Only gradually, while Bouteflika was president, was there some room for non-state initiatives to perform in the public space, mostly in Algiers. Prior to and during the Hirak period, artists and cultural entrepreneurs undertook initiatives to enlarge the public space for cultural initiatives making use of contemporary forms of arts to raise socio-political issues. Following, in the sidebar are some of these few initiatives such as The Picturists and Djart.

Some Cultural Initiatives in the Public Domain

The Picturists

Since 2013 some artists had taken over parts of the public space in Algiers with the exhibitions in the public space under the name *Picturie Générale*. An artist collective created independent spaces where young contemporary artists could show their work. The reason for this initiative was that the Ministry of Culture operated nearly all exhibition spaces in the country where well-known artists could exhibit (The World, 18 August 2014). Participating Algerian artists incorporated themes such as democracy, justice, equality of citizens, the fight against corruption in their works. These artists reserved in their works an important place for the collective memory of the history of Algeria. They intended to contribute to ‘a deconstruction of the past, a critical awareness of the Black Decade, a refusal to use history as an instrument in order to build a new world’ (24hdz, 7 February 2021; *Jeune Afrique*, 9 May 2016).

Djart

Djart 14 was an event in November 2014 developed and implemented by young professionals from different cultural and artistic Euro-Mediterranean associations. The goal was to promote art practices in public spaces and tackle contemporary socio-cultural issues. It was one of the first cultural events in Algiers in which local authorities, state and private cultural institutes, freelance and professional artists, cultural venues and the public participated. A wide range of activities took place touching fields such as photography, graffiti, music, collage, urban design or Do It Yourself (DIY) workshops (Djart14, August 2018).

Many artists supported the Hirak, especially singers, graphic designers and visual artists (Lebdjaoui, 2020: 109). However, there is no indication that the cultural sector as a whole was involved in the Hirak, though individual artists assisted in developing a counter narrative. The Hirak inspired

artists to express in a creative manner their support through songs, writing and in other artistic ways. Similar to civil society, artists have had different relationships with the state; there were artists not involved in the Hirak, other artists were involved (although not openly as artist) in the Hirak and there were artists who choose to openly support the Hirak. The involvement of artists in the Hirak was often due to personal initiative, rather than to collective mobilization. Moreover, the degree of involvement differed from signing petitions, participating in protests, student strikes, committees and discussion groups (Gaité, 2019: 15).

As Gaité indicated, ‘Algerian artists and protesters use their creativity as a lever for political action, materialised by popular art forms (such as music, graphic, novels, satirical cartoons and photography) and disseminated through channels accessible to all’ (ibid.), such as online platforms, unauthorized poster campaigns, underground posters and graffiti messages on walls. Ben Boubakeur states: ‘music can mobilize a crowd, animate the event and remobilize, especially in the face of police brutality’. However, it never acts alone as a lever for mobilization. In her opinion:

the song makes it possible to express ideas bullied elsewhere, to give a public voice to political opinions that can be censored by the media, to make the imagination work and unite, but a demonstration which happens needs other elements to be monitored and maintained. (Ben Boubakeur, 26 January 2021)

For Gaité, art has been most significant in its testimonial function. While the government controlled the media, artists took initiatives to memorize the Hirak—events by themselves. Algerian photographers, as engaged and concerned observers, had a major role in relaying their images with their perspective of the events to a broader and international public via social media (Gaité, 2019: 15).

A number of examples describe the kind of support individual artists provided to the Hirak:

(i) *Songs*

The first artistic input for the Hirak came from the supporters of the Algerian football club USMA, with their song ‘Casa del Mouradia’.¹ The title was inspired by the well-known Spanish television series *Casa del Papel*. It also refers to the president’s official residence; el Mouradia is an area in Algiers city. The song is about the Algerian youth’s lack of perspective and the power elite profiting from the natural richness of the country; hence, it became the lead song of the Hirak (Lebdjaoui, 2020: 109–110).

The first song about the Hirak itself was created immediately after the first march of 22 February 2019: ‘Liberéz Algérie’. A group called Ouled el Bahdja created it. According to Mina Lachtar, one of its members, the Hirak helped people feel courage to express their dismay of a fifth presidential term of Bouteflika. It is a song about the emancipation of the youth in particular. It includes messages such as ‘the youth takes its destiny in its hands’ and ‘there is one hero, the people’. It is a call for liberty and peace, and a recognition of and respect for the many differences among the Algerian people (Lebdjaoui, 2020: 110–111; *Le Figaro*, 5 March 2019).

Other artists were also inspired by the Hirak, such as Mohamed Kechacha, alias Lawzy, who in the song ‘Mille Millions’ questions the country’s income after selling oil and gas for 20 years. He also created another chaâbi (folk) song, inspired by the protest when people shouted *Makach intikhabate maâ el issabate* (meaning no elections with the gangsters) against the proposed presidential elections. Artists like Lachtar and Lawzy are of the opinion that it is their duty to accompany and support the protests (Lebdjaoui, 2020: 110–112).

Besides artists in Algeria, there were many Algerian artists abroad who gave their support to the movement, such as the rapper Soolking² in collaboration with the group Ouled el Bahdja with the song ‘La Liberté’. These and other songs are sung in dialectical Arabic, Tamazight and French. Raja Meziane,³ another Diaspora singer, accompanied the Hirak through the likewise very popular song ‘Allô Système’. In this song, she criticizes the power elite’s greed. An online concert held in May 2020 by

¹ Lyrics and translations, *El casa del Mouradia*, <https://www.musixmatch.com/lyrics/Ouled-El-Bahdja/La-Casa-Del-Mouradia/translation/english>; USMA, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYzF6y8VntQ>.

² Soolking, *La Liberté*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Foc3zwahJvM>.

³ Meziane, Raja. *Allô Système*, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9vq0lih2A0>.

Algerian musicians abroad was another initiative in support of the Hirak and the Hirak prisoners, and it was their way to voice their anger toward attacks on the freedom of expression. The concert was organized by Free Algeria, a platform of Diaspora collectives in France, the United States of America, Switzerland, Belgium, Italy and Austria (Algérie ECO, 24 May 2020).

(ii) *Placards, Banners and Graffiti*

Another way in which the demonstrators expressed their demands was by using placards and banners. The political expressions on these tools showed a lot of creativity and humour. The anonymous creators of these expressions made using humour a popular cultural expression and made caricatures, collages, slogans, etc. Every placard or banner told a story, underlined a demand, illustrated a situation or mocked a decision made by the power elite. Often these expressions by anonymous artists were reactions to speeches by the chief of staff of the military (Lebdjaoui, 2020: 114, 115).

Bencherif analysed and commented the work created by citizens in Algiers and elsewhere in Algeria and displayed on the walls during the Hirak:

The words that keep coming back are related to ethno-national values. These are put up on the wall through several language forms: words, emblematic colours, symbols, icons, etc. The entanglement of these language forms makes the walls eloquent through a power of communication stemming from civic speech. There are messages of dreams, hope, freedom and dignity. (Bencherif, 2019: 12)

The Hirak expressed itself from the beginning as a counter power voice, carrying several political demands. A core expression in Algerian Arabic was *Yetnahaw gaa* (يتنحاو فاع), in French *Dégage!* (or translated in English as ‘Get lost’). Another key word was freedom. Even though the vocabulary shapes and colours differed from a graffiti artist to another, the message—and the goal—remained the same: to change the country or even change the system. The demonstrators in their slogans did not only express the desire for change during the weekly marches but also on the banners as well as by the graffiti artists. Some slogans detailed the youth’s despair, falling for drugs and illegal emigration (*barga*) and their wish for

real change. The demonstrating Algerian citizens saw themselves united by/for a common cause: ‘a prosperous, free and democratic Algeria’. Their demands were expressed in Algerian Arabic (*derdja*, a mixture of Arabic, Tamazight and other languages, especially French) (Bencherif, 2019: 11). With the people occupying the streets during the Hirak, the language of the ordinary people, the *derdja*, became central in vocally expressing the demands (Middle East Eye, 14 January 2020a).

(iii) *Visual Arts*

The Graduate School of Fine Arts (ESBA) is reputed to be the cradle of student revolts in Algeria. In this institute, slogans and posters bearing the image of the Hirak proliferated since the start of the Hirak. According to the French newspaper *Le Monde*, after one year of Hirak, many ESBA students lost faith in the Hirak. They had participated at the beginning, but their absenteeism on Tuesdays from the institute was sanctioned with bad notes. That changed the attitude of many students (*Le Monde*, 16 January 2020a).

Hicham Gaoua alias El Moustach, a well-known Algerian pop art visual artist, made portraits of imprisoned Hirak activists as a tribute to them and a sign of solidarity (Facebook El Moustach, 29 October 2019, 21 September 2020).

The Hirak is also a frequently recurring subject in the work of some of Algeria’s well-known cartoonists: Ali Dilem, Hicham Baba Ahmed alias Le Hic and Ghilas Ainouche. The daily French newspaper *Liberté* as well as TV5 Monde publish Dilem’s cartoons. He has been threatened in the past by Islamists for his work and in 2006, was arrested and jailed by the Algerian authorities because of his drawings of President Bouteflika in 2003. There are many legal cases pending against Dilem at the court in Algiers (TV5Monde, 2 November 2020).

7 LEGAL AND OTHER MEASURES AS WELL AS ARRESTS

Abdelhamid Amine, alias Nime, another well-known cartoonist, was arrested end of November 2019 because of his work. He was convicted for ‘insulting the president of the republic and the chief of staff of the army’. He was sentenced to one-year detention but released provisionally after one month in January 2020. His cartoon ‘The Chosen One’ is

regarded as the chief criminal offense to the state. Nime suggested that Abdelmadjid Tebboune's election was arranged, with consent of the military. This contributed to the widespread protest movement, the Hirak (Cartooning for peace, 10 January 2020).

Mohamed Tadjadit, a young Hirak activist and considered as the poet of the Hirak, was arrested on 23 August 2020. He is facing ten charges (Free Muse, 2021; Lebджаoui, 2020: 109–116). He was released end January 2021 (Algerian Detainees, 2021).

7.1 *Censorship and Self-Censorship*

The play writer Rezzak, who participated in the Barakat-movement, was told in 2014 to withdraw from the movement if he wanted to receive support for his shows. The Barakat ('it is enough') movement was a civil movement protesting against the fourth presidential term of Bouteflika. People from the Ministry of Culture made it clear to Rezzak that if he was in politics, he could not work in theatre. In the middle of the election period, his show—a parody of an election in a shantytown—was deprogrammed from theatres and professional festivals (Télérama, 9 April 2014).

Self-censorship is a consequence of the restricted climate of freedom of expression. Press cartoonist Karim Bouguemra told in December 2019:

[t]his climate of restricted freedom of expression and Nime's arrest makes us think twice [...] I still want to draw, but I pay special attention now to the way I express my opinions, I try to remain subtle, to adapt to repression and to avoid confrontation. (TWMN, 16 December 2019)

In May 2020, the satirical website, *El Manchar* (the saw), established five years earlier under president Bouteflika, suspended its activities. As Nazim Baya, the founder of *El Manchar*, explained: the site had not been censored or blocked by the authorities; it was a decision taken by the editorial team. '[T]he climate of repression of freedoms, incarcerations of citizens following their activities on social networks have led us to reflect on the risks we are running' (*Courrier International*, 18 May 2020).

The cartoonist L'Andalou, whose real name is Youcef Koudil, told *Le Monde* end December 2019 the following:

Frankly, it sucks. If you talk, you go to jail. If you draw, you go to jail. We thought we were past that. But now the army is in control. Of course, that has always been the case. But we realize today that she is worse than Bouteflika. At the start of his presidency, my cartoons were published. Then he fell ill. I was fired because of a drawing that did not please a shareholder of the newspaper. Need it be said that Bouteflika's fourth term was done without him? It was not he who was in charge of the country, but his brother and people who can't stand humor. They consider drawings and caricatures an insult. (*Le Monde*, 11 December [2019a](#))

8 CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The Algerian power elite was under pressure of large segments of the population and was forced to allow more freedoms and to undertake reforms. A shared counter narrative, an agreement to protest in a non-violent way and the momentum, the proposed 5th presidential term of Bouteflika, led to a countrywide protest movement, the Hirk.

Civic space enlarged initially due to the pressure of the protesting population. However, the power elite managed—through limited reform initiatives, co-optation and repression—to regain control over the political decision-making process. The restart of the Hirk movement faced repression, and civic space was shrinking again. The underlying social problems that led to the broad based opposition of contending social forces remain largely unsolved and thus remain a potential source for future unrest.

Individual artists supported not only the political demands of the Hirk demonstrators; they visualized or vocalized these demands by using the symbols and language of the Algerian people. In this way, they contributed to a counter narrative, opposing the official image of the Algerian state as an Arab-Islamic state and nation and to the unmasking of the authoritarianism of those in power. Openly opposing the power elite led, after the initial phase of the Hirk, to harassment and even detention of activists, including artists. In this sense, the situation of these activist artists did not differ much from independent journalists, human rights and other activists.

Other socially concerned artists and cultural entrepreneurs were able in recent years to create independent spaces for their activities. They often passed on, in order to avoid social and political problems, their impressions and views in a subtle and/or disguised form on social issues through contemporary artistic work.

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