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Algeria: Crackdown on peaceful assembly ahead of presidential elections

The forcible dispersal and arrest of dozens of peaceful protesters opposing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fourth presidential term since the beginning of March is part of a renewed crackdown on freedom of expression, association and assembly in Algeria and casts a shadow on the forthcoming elections in April, Amnesty International warned today.

In the run-up to the presidential elections and amid reports of a power struggle among the Algerian army and leadership, freedom of expression, association and assembly are essential for Algerians to debate ideas and political programmes, express views, including views critical of the authorities or various political factions and organize rallies, gatherings and protests.

The surge in arrests of peaceful protesters in Algeria since the beginning of March signals the authorities' intolerance of those daring to challenge the President's decision to seek a fourth presidential term or demanding reform.

On 1 March, from about 9am, dozens of protesters, including doctors, journalists, students, civil society and human rights activists, gathered in front of the University (*Faculté Centrale*) in Audin square (*place Audin*), in the centre of the capital Algiers. Before all protesters could gather, police officers uniformed and in plain clothes, whose numbers were reported to be far greater than the dozens of protesters already present on the site, blocked the street leading to the University, in order to prevent other protesters from joining the demonstration. Demonstrators were chanting slogans, including "No to a fourth term", "Free and democratic Algeria", "Down with Bouteflika, down with General Toufik" - in reference to Mohamed Toufik Mediène, the head of the Department for Information and Security (Département du renseignement et de la sécurité, DRS), the Algerian security services.

The police then proceeded to arrest the demonstrators, at times using force against them to drag them into police vans. While the police arrested mostly protesters, some observers who did not participate in the demonstration, including at least one human rights activist and a journalist, were also arrested. Dozens of protesters were taken to various police stations in the city and detained for several hours. They were later released after police recorded their names and contact details. A few demonstrators were questioned about the organizers of the protest and were eventually released without charge.

According to the persons detained whom Amnesty International spoke to, several dozen people were arrested, with between 10 and 30 persons forced into each of the police vans stationed near the demonstration. Some estimate the number of arrests on 1 March as high as 137.

Yacine Zaid, a human rights and trade union activist who was arrested while demonstrating, told Amnesty International:

"People started to gather from about 9 to 9.30am. The police circled the area and targeted those who initiated the protest for arrest first. There was a lot of anti-riot police personnel, but they did not wear helmets or sticks, as well as a lot of policemen in plain clothes. I was myself forcibly dragged into a police van. I and about eight to 10 young people and some journalists were taken to a police station and released at about 1pm. Other demonstrators were taken into police vans and other police stations. At the police station, our names and contact details were recorded but we were not

interrogated.”

A human rights activist who was observing the demonstration but not participating said:

“I was standing with my video camera on the pavement, observing the demonstration. A police officer asked me to stop filming, and then asked for my camera. I refused to give it to them and then the police pushed me and carried me by force into a police van. They confiscated my camera until I was released. I was taken to the police station in Cherragua with 25 to 30 other persons, activists and journalists. We were released after 2pm. It seems that the objective of the security forces was to prevent a demonstration from taking place, to prevent people express their demands freely, and to prevent observers from bearing witness to the events.”

A female protester, medical doctor Amira Bouraoui, told Amnesty International that she was taken to a police station with between 25 and 30 other persons. They were released about four hours later.

She was arrested again today in front of the Constitutional Council as a group were planning to hand in a letter against a fourth presidential term for the incumbent President. She was forcibly pushed into a police car and taken to a police station with two journalists and two other persons. The police did not give them any reason for their arrest. The group was eventually released about an hour and a half later.

The Algerian authorities regularly prevent demonstrations from taking place in Algiers, by stopping would-be protesters from reaching the gathering area and arresting participants for several hours. On 22 February, some 30 demonstrators denouncing the incumbent President’s candidacy to the April presidential elections, were arrested and briefly detained in Algiers. Other peaceful demonstrations, including those regularly held by families of disappeared during the 1990s internal conflict, are repeatedly dispersed by the police using similar tactics.

Although Algeria lifted its 21-year state of emergency in 2011 amid anti-governments demonstrations across the Middle East and North Africa, the government continues to ban protests in the capital, Algiers. Amnesty International has previously called on the Algerian authorities to amend Law No. 91-19 Governing Public Meetings and Demonstrations, which requires organizers to request authorization eight days before the event and in practice such authorization is rarely granted. The UN Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression recommended that the Law be amended to require notification for public demonstrations rather than authorization.

In addition, the Algerian authorities introduced new laws restricting the media and NGOs in 2012, stifling freedom of expression and the activities of civil society groups and human rights activists. Amnesty International has called on the Algerian authorities to repeal Law 12-06 (12 January 2012) related to associations, as it arbitrarily restricts and effectively criminalizes the exercise of the right to freedom of association.

Amnesty International urges the Algerian authorities to lift undue restrictions to freedom of expression, association and assembly and to allow peaceful protests and dissent in line with its international human rights obligations, including Articles 19, 21 and 22 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Articles 9, 10 and 11 of the African Charter of Human and Peoples’ Rights.

Background

On 22 February 2014, the candidacy of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika to the presidential elections planned for 17 April, was announced. Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in power since April 1999, is completing his third term as President. In November 2008, amendments to the Constitution abolished presidential two-term limit.

Algeria, as an elected member of the UN Human Rights Council, must “uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights,” as set out in UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251. Yet the Algerian authorities regularly crackdown on peaceful assemblies, and imposes severe restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, association and assembly, which are guaranteed under Article 41 of Algeria’s Constitution.