Algeria Advisory: 04 December 2019

Summary

Elections scheduled on 12 December come off the back of a year of political turmoil and social unrest in Algeria. Protests first broke out across the north of the country in February 2019, in response to long-serving President Bouteflika's intention to run for a fifth term, with demonstrations soon spreading to over 40 locations on a scale not seen since 2001.

Bouteflika's resignation in April and promise of elections failed to pacify the political unrest. Despite the subsequent resignation or arrest of a number of high profile 'Le Pouvoir' figures, planned elections were cancelled in July, and public disaffection with the five presidential candidates on offer remains high ahead of next week's vote, as further demonstrations over the past fortnight highlight.

Algeria has long been a difficult place for the media to operate, and the initial post-Bouteflika era shows no dramatic indication of change. Covering the elections and any post-election transition is likely to remain challenging for journalists. This advisory assesses areas of unrest and the safety considerations for media workers reporting on the current political developments in Algeria.
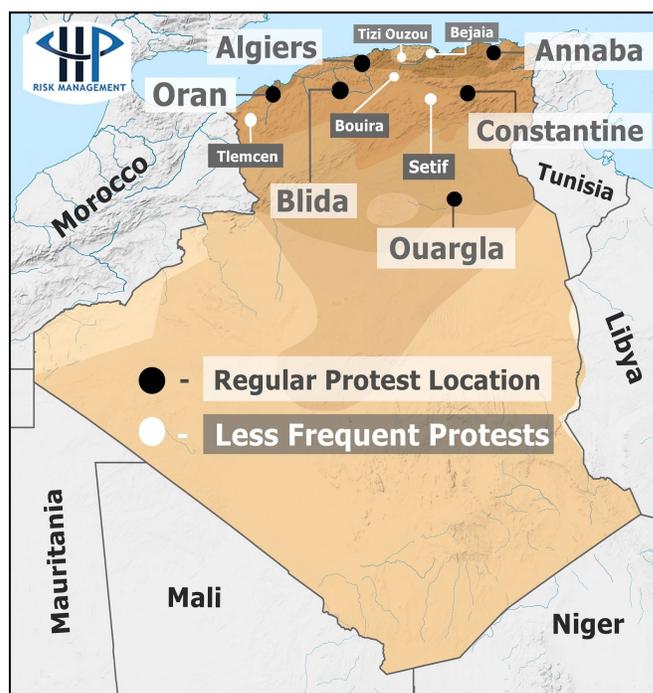
Situation Assessment

To date, protests have predominantly occurred on Tuesdays and Fridays, in what has become known as the 'Hirak' movement. The frequency of protests increased in November compared to previous months, and demonstrations will likely recur this Friday 06 December and in the days leading up to next week's vote.

Authorities have intensified their policing of protests, blocking some student rallies on campuses and intercepting vehicles transporting protesters to key locations.

One opposition newspaper estimates as many as 300-500 people have been arrested since the protests began, including prominent opposition leaders Louisa Hanoune (WP) and Karim Tabou (UDS), trade unionists, human rights activists, those disrupting political campaigning, and students. Some charges are at best spurious, such as 'harming national unity' or 'undermining the morale of the army.'

Tensions and hostility between government supporters and the opposition are high, with pro-regime supporters accusing opposition activists of being 'traitors' and 'children of France'. The few demonstrations in support of the current regime have typically been much smaller than opposition protests.

Common protest locations to date and to be aware of include the following:

- **Algiers:** Place de la Grande Poste, Place du 1er Mai, Place Maurice Audin, Rue Didouche Mourad, and the University of Algiers campus.
- **Oran:** Place de l'Armes and the University of Oran student campus.
- **Constantine:** The University of Constantine student campus.
- **Ouargla:** Place de la Rose des Sables and the provincial capital building.
- **Blida:** The University of Blida student campus.
- **Annaba:** Areas close to the theatre Medjoubi and Les Cours de la Révolution.

Though protests have been largely peaceful so far, they could escalate in the immediate aftermath of the vote, especially if the results are contested or perceived to be fraudulent. Media teams should be aware that the police have already used the following methods on a limited scale to control or disperse protesters:

- Pepper spray & water canon.
- Batons - used in the killing of Ramzi Yettou, which in turn resulted in two further deaths from the use of live ammunition.
- Tear gas.
- Rubber bullets.
- Long range acoustic devices (sound cannons).
- Suspension of the Algiers metro, police roadblocks within cities (and on roads leading into cities), as well as the cancellation of trains into key protests locations like Algiers.
- Restriction of internet services in some locations.

Media Landscape

The authorities exercise a high degree of control over media regulatory bodies, with Reporters Without Borders ranking Algeria at 141 on its World Press Freedom Index.

Journalists commonly operate under surveillance, censorship and the threat of arrest. A dozen local journalists were arrested and soon released in February for demonstrating against censorship of the anti-Bouteflika protests.

Media workers should be particularly vigilant regarding surveillance by plain-clothed officers, who are known to monitor the movements of foreigners in Algeria, and who regularly monitor and move amongst protest crowds. One foreign journalist who spoke to HP Risk Management was previously arrested after speaking to a citizen at a demonstration, and subsequently denied entry to Algeria several years later.

Obtaining journalist visas or media accreditation is notoriously slow and difficult, and commonly used to restrict foreign reporting on Algerian affairs. If planning to travel to Algeria for next week's election, it is extremely unlikely that a visa will be granted at such short notice. Summarising the media landscape:

- At least 5 journalists have been arrested and detained to date including Said Boudour, as well as political cartoonist Abdelhamid Amine.
- At least 2 foreign journalists have been deported, including from Reuters and TRT.

- Journalists have been [denied entry](#) to Algeria, with others having [difficulties](#) obtaining and/or renewing permits/accreditation.
- State media is facing [pressure](#) to refrain from reporting on the protests.
- Journalists have reported verbal intimidation and [physical attacks](#).
- Some media outlets have been [blocked online](#) and had their [social media](#) activity curtailed.
- Surveillance of social media activity by the authorities, leading to the arrest of [Fodil Boumala](#).

Algerian authorities have previously [warned](#) against attempts by foreign powers to interfere in the electoral process, and have organised demonstrations against an [EU resolution](#) on the current situation. Journalists should also be conscious of the potential threats that their fixers may face, including the risk of arrest, as shown in the [case](#) of Saïd Chitour in 2018.

Outlook

The Algerian military is deeply entrenched and very much in control of the country and its institutions, making a widespread deterioration in the security environment unlikely. The Hirak movement does not appear to favour violent revolutionary change, instead [preferring](#) a peaceful approach aimed at negotiated social and political reforms. The brutal civil conflict of the 1990's is still relatively fresh in some people's memories, which combined with a history of homegrown salafist militant groups and ongoing instability in neighbouring countries like Libya and Mali, will likely serve as a [deterrent](#) for violent conflict.

Whoever wins the upcoming election will face continuing challenges such as [socio-economic](#) discontent, systemic [corruption](#), high youth [unemployment](#), [demands](#) for greater Berber rights and ongoing [security threats](#). Gaining legitimacy amongst a sceptical public will be difficult for the winner of the poll.

The current operating environment for media workers is unlikely to change in the immediate aftermath of the vote. Although 2020 could see some alleviation of controls on media workers, this remains very much dependent on the initial outcome of the elections and the extent to which long-standing interests are willing to relax their controls on the handles of power.

Safety Advice

- Train and metro services in Algiers can be [suspended](#) without explanation, and police roadblocks erected without warning. Plan ahead and allow extra time for all journeys, and take a street map with you.
- Be vigilant about who you speak to and what you say. Plain clothes officers are known to monitor foreigners in Algeria, so pay attention to who else is close by who may be listening.
- Be aware that free movement for foreigners around large swathes of Algeria can be limited, and at times subject to being accompanied by a police escort. Travelling by road to much of the south of the country and several other regions are off-limits without a police or military escort. Ensure any necessary travel permits are in place if travelling to areas of the south and some border areas.
- Avoid working alone, and only work with trusted and reliable fixers. Ensure you check their references, and avoid putting them in situations which might put them in danger or lead to arrest.
- The only Algerian land border currently open to foreigners is with Tunisia - though there are recent reports of people crossing at the newly opened border post with Mauritania. Note that travelling

anywhere close to the land borders with Mali, Niger or Libya is extremely high risk, due to the [threat](#) from militant groups.

- Land borders might be closed during and in the immediate aftermath of the election, which should be factored into evacuation plans.
- Be aware that binoculars are illegal, and the authorities can be suspicious of those using GPS units.
- Exercise caution when exchanging money. Though a common practise to convert currency via informal money exchangers (i.e the blackmarket), it is illegal and foreigners have fallen foul of the law when using such services.
- Before traveling outside of large urban centres, check on the latest security situation with local people and other journalists who have been there, particularly if travelling close to the porous border regions with Mali, Niger and Libya, where the threat of militant activity is significant.
- Always use discretion when filming, and never use any recording equipment or cameras around sensitive sites involving the military and police, or any state infrastructure.
- Consider the necessity of PPE if reporting at protest locations, such as a tear gas mask, ballistic goggles, safety helmet and ear defenders. Be sure to check the legality of any PPE with contacts in Algeria before travel.
- Review your [digital security](#) in advance of travel and whilst in Algeria. Only communicate via devices and platforms you know are secure and that won't compromise the safety of you and your team. Audit what information is stored on your devices, including phones and computers. Anything that puts you at risk or contains sensitive information should be backed up and deleted. There are ways to recover deleted information, so anything that is very sensitive will need to be permanently erased using a specific computer program rather than just deleted.

In addition to the above, a general safety guide to reporting from protest locations can be found via the [CPJ's website](#).

HP Risk Management works with a number of newsrooms and journalist associations, providing on-call risk assessment support, safety advice and training. We continuously support journalists working in high risk and/or challenging environments worldwide.

For more information please contact **info@hpriskmanagement.com**