

Monkey Cage Analysis

Women are deeply involved in the Algerian protests — on International Women’s Day, and all the time

They might be the reason these protests have remained peaceful.

By Aili Mari Tripp

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Unlike previous years, International Women’s Day this year was marked by demonstrations in which unprecedented numbers of women and men marched in cities throughout Algeria to demand freedom, democracy, dignity, government transparency and an end to corruption. The demonstrations came on the heels of two weeks of massive protests against President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s decision to run for a fifth term in this April’s elections, remaining in power as he has since 1999. He suffered a stroke in 2013 and has rarely been seen in public since then.

Women are central to this movement, joining men in filling the streets day after day. [Kamel Daoud](#), a noted Algerian author and journalist, said of the demonstrations on [Radio France](#) that women’s presence in the protests to reclaim their liberty is what made it a peaceful revolution and kept it from becoming a riot. As I’ve learned in my research in Algeria, this involvement of women grows out of years of activism, as I explain below.

What's going on in Algeria?

Since Feb. 22, [hundreds of thousands of people have been holding remarkably peaceful demonstrations](#) in cities throughout the country. Since independence, Algeria’s ruling party, the National Liberation Front, has systematically eliminated all democratic opposition and civil society as it solidified its position as a one-party state, despite small openings in the late 1990s and after 2011. In recent years, the party has restricted the registration of associations and closed down associations. The last time citizens protested at this scale was in October 1988, against high unemployment and government austerity measures. Women largely stayed out of those protests, which devolved into riots; more than 500 people were killed and over 1,000 wounded.

But women are deeply involved this time around — [joining in unprecedented numbers](#) and playing leadership roles. People from all walks of life, all ages and all political persuasions have turned out in these notably secular gatherings, demanding an [end to Bouteflika’s rule](#). Hundreds of thousands of women have claimed public space and, in effect, their citizenship, by joining the protests in a society in which certain places and activities were historically the exclusive reserve of men. Women have participated in past demonstrations, but never on this scale.

Women are deeply involved in this protest movement.

Some women have been highly visible in this movement. [Zoubida Assoul](#), leader of the party Union for Change and Progress and president of the Network of Arab Women Lawyers, is the spokeswoman of the nonpartisan [Mouwatana](#) (Citizen) movement, formed in 2018 to oppose Bouteflika's fifth term and call for the rule of law and democracy. In 2014, [Amira Bouraoui](#), a physician, had launched the precursor to Mouwatana, the nonpartisan Barakat (Enough) movement, to oppose Bouteflika's fourth term.

Workers' Party Secretary General [Louisa Hanoune](#), who in 2004 was the first woman in the Arab world to run for president, has sought proceedings to impeach the largely absent Bouteflika on grounds of incapacity.

And images of women are everywhere in social media, shared by and further inspiring the protesters. Those include a YouTube video of [Djamila Bouhired](#), one of the most celebrated heroines of the war of independence against France, who joined demonstrators to declare her support. Another shows a [woman](#) in jeans and pink pointed shoes striking a classic ballet pose in the middle of the street as protesters stop in amazement. For many, the photo symbolizes the possibility of freedom. Twitter feeds include many photos of women hoisted on men's shoulders, draped in Algerian flags.

A long history of resistance

These women's efforts are the culmination of decades of resistance against repression of various kinds, starting with the war of independence against France (1954-1962), in which more than 11,000 women participated as fighters. The "Black Decade" (1992-2002) — in which Islamists and government forces clashed, leaving 200,000 dead and tens of thousands missing — left the nation traumatized in ways that weigh heavily on the present. The current protests in Algeria reflect a new post-Islamist moment, since at no time has religion been politically instrumentalized in these protests. However, for women's rights activists in Algeria, this secular orientation is nothing new.

Women stood up to violent religious extremists during the Black Decade, having been among the first targeted by the Islamist fighters for working as teachers, running businesses, driving, not veiling, and engaging in the public sphere. "Women mobilized; they protested. They were in the vanguard in confronting the Islamists. Indeed, they played a big role and gained the respect of everyone, including those in power," explained one activist in an interview I conducted in Algiers in 2016. During the Black Decade, women's rights activists were among the only secular groups that questioned the power of the ruling party.

After the Black Decade, the government sought to neutralize the Islamists through repression and by signing a pact in 2006 that granted amnesty to former fighters and promised to forgive and forget all crimes committed during the Black Decade on all sides. The government foisted this quid pro quo on civil society, promising [stability](#) in exchange for their silence.

Many women's rights organizations and human rights organizations continued to call for justice and an end to impunity for the Black Decade's violence. I found that female activists have also fought for [legislation around](#)

2/6/2019 Women are deeply involved in the Algerian protests for International Women's Day and all the time. The Washington Post
violence against women, electoral quotas that would require women to be included in political posts, and reform of the Family Code. They made some important legislative gains.

In more recent women's struggles, women have been holding micro-protests against veiling and against Islamist efforts to monitor the length of women's skirts and other clothing. For instance, one woman in Algiers was verbally assaulted and beaten by a man for jogging along a beach in 2018. When the police refused to assist her, she took to social media. The next day, hundreds of women and men came to out to run with her in protest.

Rejecting government threats

The president has promised a national conference after the elections, followed by another election in which he would not run. The country's leaders are warning against continued protests, threatening the reemergence of jihadi Islamists and a Syria-like civil war. But the protests have continued, with women deeply involved.

***Aili Mari Tripp** is the Wangari Maathai Professor of Political Science and Gender & Women's Studies at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and author of the forthcoming book "Seeking Legitimacy: Why Arab Autocracies Adopt Women's Rights."*