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Repression on the Rise: The Aftermath of Algeria's Mass Protest Movement

By Marissa Ephron

According to popular Algerian journalist Khaled Drareni and his lawyers, he was arrested, convicted, and imprisoned for simply doing his job.¹

On September 15, Drareni was sentenced to two years in prison for “inciting an unarmed gathering” and “endangering national unity” for his reporting on anti-government demonstrations. Drareni has become a symbol for freedom of the press in Algeria³, as his detention coincides with a rise in human rights violations and increasing repression of media and anti-government protesters.²

For much of the last two years, millions of Algerians have taken to the streets, calling for change, democracy, and respect for the rule of law in the country.² This protest movement—known as the Hirak—is the largest the country has seen in decades.⁴

Drareni was arrested on March 7 while covering a Hirak protest.⁵ He first stood trial on August 10 and was sentenced to three years in prison. Although the appeal granted Drareni a lesser sentence, prominent human rights NGO Amnesty International called the verdict “outrageous” and the trial a “sham.”²

“The Algerian authorities must immediately and unconditionally release Khaled Drareni and others who are being detained for daring to document police violence and arbitrary arrests during protests.”² said Amnesty’s Director of the Middle

EastandNorthAfrica(MENA)regionHebaMorayef.

Drareni’s coverage was instrumental in providing Algerians and the rest of the world with crucial information about the movement.⁶

Drareni launched an independent news website in 2017 named the *Casbah Tribune*. Madjeda Zouine, a journalist for the publication, admired Drareni’s work.

“Ever since the start of the Hirak, Khaled was like a compass guiding us to the truth,” she said. “He photographed and reported everything that was happening, both the Hirak protests and the pro-government demonstrations.”³

Through his reporting, Drareni exposed the government’s cruel crackdown on Algerians’ fundamental human rights, such as freedom of speech and assembly.⁶

To disperse demonstrations, police fired rubber bullets and tear gas—a chemical weapon banned in war under international law—at peaceful protesters.⁷ They used water cannons and electrical weapons for crowd control. Authorities also arbitrarily arrested hundreds of protesters, some of whom were later prosecuted and convicted under vague penal code provisions.⁸

Drareni was brave enough to reveal these abuses and criticize the government for its handling of the protests.⁶

His courage led to incarceration.

The Hirak movement began when former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced his run for a fifth consecutive term in early February, 2019. Not only had then 81-year-old Bouteflika been in power for 20 years, but he also suffered a stroke in 2013, which left him in poor health.^{8,9}

Algerians demanded an end to Bouteflika’s reign and demonstrations that lasted several months. Yet the movement continued long after Bouteflika finally resigned on April 28, 2019. For protesters, the president had been one of many obstacles in an undemocratic regime primarily controlled by the military, which remained in power.^{8,10}

After Bouteflika’s resignation, Algerian authorities scheduled a presidential election for December 2019; however, the public knew the military establishment’s favored candidate—former prime minister Abdelmadjid Tebboune—was certain to win. As a result, they boycotted the election, voicing their dissent in the streets instead of voting. Regardless, Tebboune won, though turnout was extremely low.¹¹

“[The election] brings nothing concrete to what the people’s movement wants,” said Secretary general of the Algerian Human Rights League Abdoulmoumene Khelil. Maybe it resolves an internal problem in ‘the system,’ but it doesn’t resolve the demands of the Algerian people.”¹¹

The Hirak’s demands are nothing less than a complete transformation of their political system and the removal of every member of the country’s heavily entrenched military-political elite.¹² After his election, Tebboune announced that the government would “consolidate democracy, rule of law and respect for human rights,” and that he was open to starting a dialogue with the Hirak.¹³

Despite the new president’s promises, human rights abuses in Algeria have not improved. Tebboune has pardoned thousands of prisoners but excluded Hirak detainees.⁴ In March, Human Rights Watch reported that Algerian authorities have failed to reform laws on association and assembly that are often used to repress rights.¹ In Reporters without Borders’ 2020 World Press Freedom Index, Algeria was ranked 146 out of 180

countries—much lower than just a few years ago.³

Democracy and human rights in Algeria has also weakened because of the global COVID-19 pandemic.⁴ This forced the Hirak movement to pivot from large demonstrations—their primary method of organizing for change.¹⁴ The government banned protests in March, which they claimed was to curb the spread of the virus. Since then, however, authorities have ramped up censorship of anti-government websites and arrests of peaceful protesters, Hirak leaders, and journalists who covered the demonstrations—journalists like Drareni.⁴

On April 22, the Algerian Parliament proposed “criminalizing” reporting that “threatened public order and state security,” essentially prohibiting Drareni and other journalists from doing their job.¹

After hearing the verdict of the appeal court

on September 15, Amnesty’s Deputy MENA Director Amna Guelali said, “Today’s prison sentence for prominent journalist Khaled Drareni is a mockery of justice in a country supposedly undergoing political change and transformation following mass protests.”²

In September, the Algerian Parliament proposed revisions to the constitution that intend-

ed to create a constitutional court, strengthen political freedoms, and better balance the powers between the president and prime minister. Tebboune, who spearheaded the revisions, claims they will address the movement’s demands; however, Hirak activists do not believe the revisions will bring about real change.

In response to an economic crisis and the recent government crackdowns, the Hirak is making a comeback after operating in the shadows for several months.¹⁴ Despite the ban on protests, hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets on October 5, calling for the release of the dozens of imprisoned Hirak members.¹⁵

Though the fates of Drareni and other political prisoners remain unclear, millions of Algerians and human rights organizations across the globe continue to fight for their release. Drareni is safe from Algerian democracy, and human rights depend on Hirak’s success.

“His courage led to incarceration.”