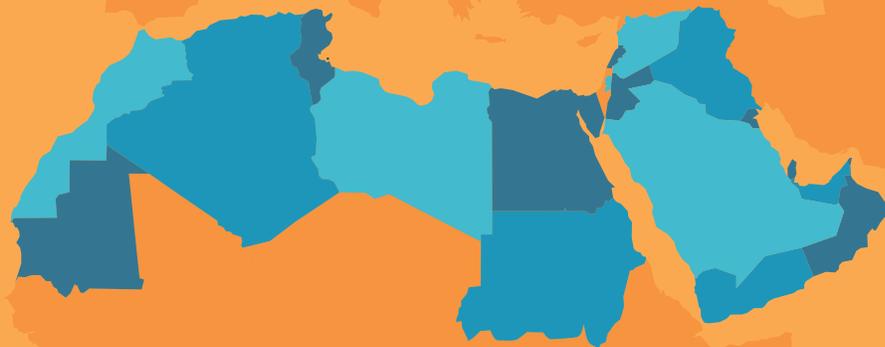




الباروميتر العربي
ARAB BAROMETER

The 2019 Algerian Protests

August 2019



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Princeton University

Executive summary

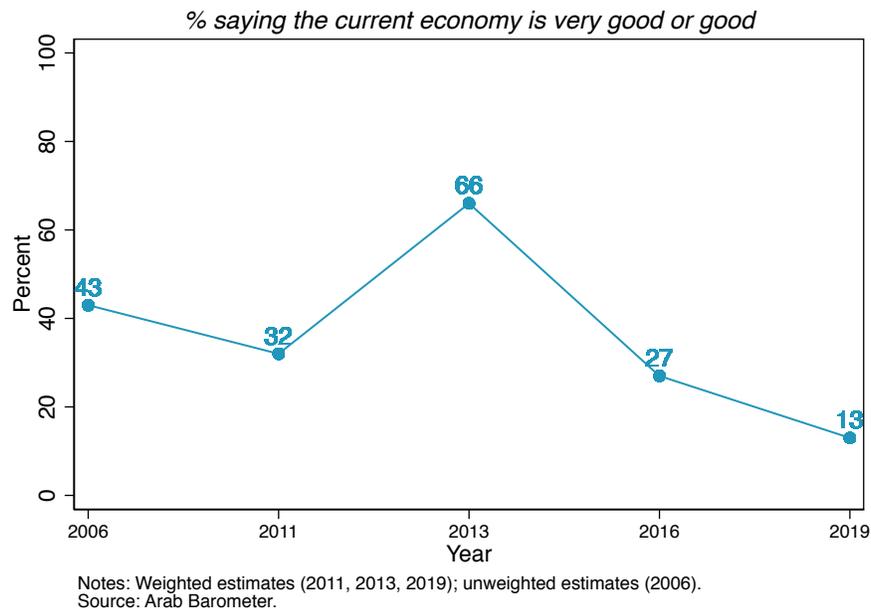
As a country that experienced few protests during the Arab uprisings of 2011, this year's demonstrations in Algeria caught most observers by surprise. The massive outpouring of public opinion, which has continued for months, has toppled a long-standing leader and continues to challenge the ruling system. The 2019 Arab Barometer public opinion survey was conducted on the eve of the protests, lending unique insight into several key questions: Were these protests to be expected? What drives the protests? And, what do Algerians want for the future?

The survey results demonstrate that declining conditions meant a breakdown of the social contract among all segments of society, which resulted in a high level of protest activity in recent years. However, these protests occurred largely outside the capital, leading many analysts to likely overlook them. Nevertheless, the survey suggests that while Algerians know what they do *not* want, they are divided on what they seek to achieve for the future, remaining skeptical of democracy and divided on the role of religion in public life. In other words, there is not a clear way forward or clear destination – instead, Algerians appear open to any system of governance that can bring improved governance and better economic outcomes.

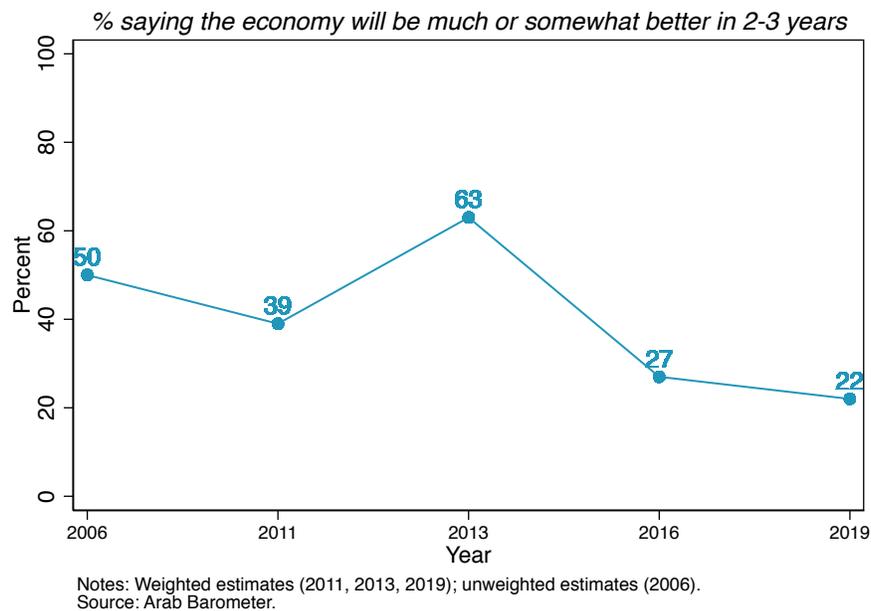
The Root Causes of the Protests

Algerians have experienced a dramatic collapse in economic outcomes over the last 15 years. The economic system, based largely on state distribution of rents from Algeria's vast oil reserves, came under pressure in the 2000s as the population expanded rapidly and many youth entered the labor force for the first time. The government failed to pay full salaries and pensions to public employees and cut back on subsidies. As a result, public ratings of economic conditions declined by 11 points from 2006 to 2011 falling to just 32 percent.

In the wake of the Arab uprisings of 2011, Algeria's leaders, like many across MENA, attempted to bolster their economic system to prevent the spread of protests to their country. Algeria's leaders responded by increasing subsidies, issuing back pay to civil servants thanks, in part, to increased revenues due to high global oil prices. This economic stimulus yielded immediate benefits, with two-thirds of Algerians rating the economy as good or very good in 2013.

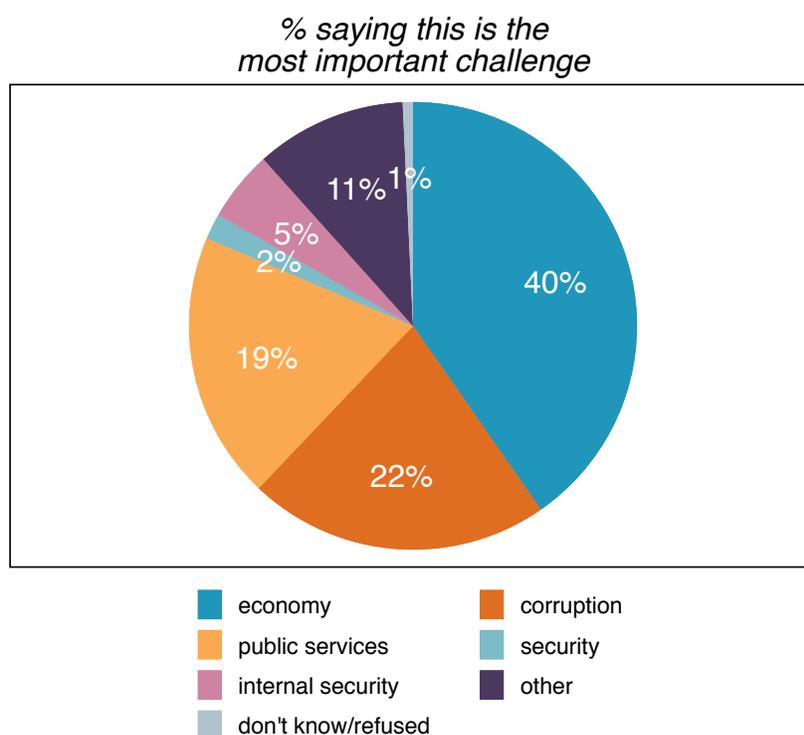


However, with the collapse in oil prices in 2014, the regime remained unable to meet new public expectations. Despite moderate economic growth, rising inflation has led to a significant decline in living conditions. In turn, since 2013, ratings of the economy have plummeted, with just a quarter (27 percent) saying they were good in 2016 and 13 percent on the eve of the protests in 2019. In short, the temporary economic stimulus could not staunch the long-term trend of deteriorating economic conditions.



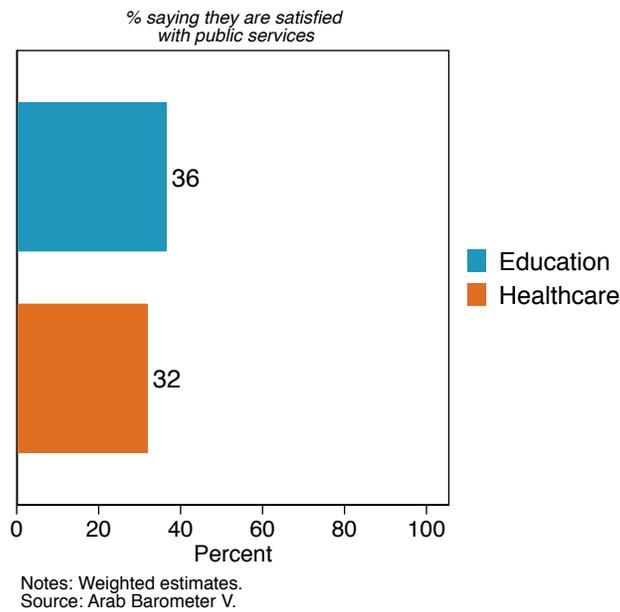
If anything, the short-term stimulus likely only served to frustrate the public that the regime’s promises of better times could not last. Economic optimism, measured by the expectation that conditions will improve in the near future, has followed a similar trend to overall ratings of the economy. Although nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of Algerians expected a better economic future in 2013, only one-in-five (22 percent) said the same in 2019.

Yet, despite the enormity of the economic problems, not even half of the population said that the economy was the country’s biggest challenge on the eve of the protests. Although four-in-ten listed the economy, while a similar percentage said either corruption (22 percent) or the state of public services (19 percent). In other words, Algerians perceived problems extending to the entirety of the existing governing system.

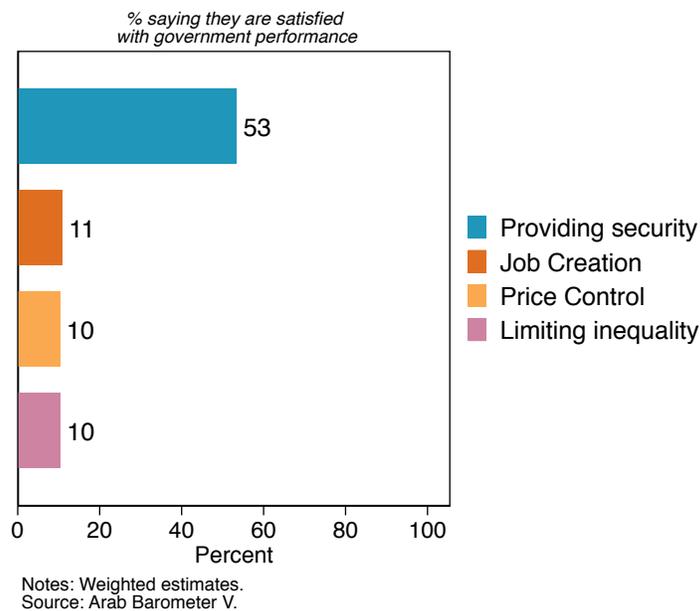


Note: Weighted estimates.
Source: Arab Barometer V.

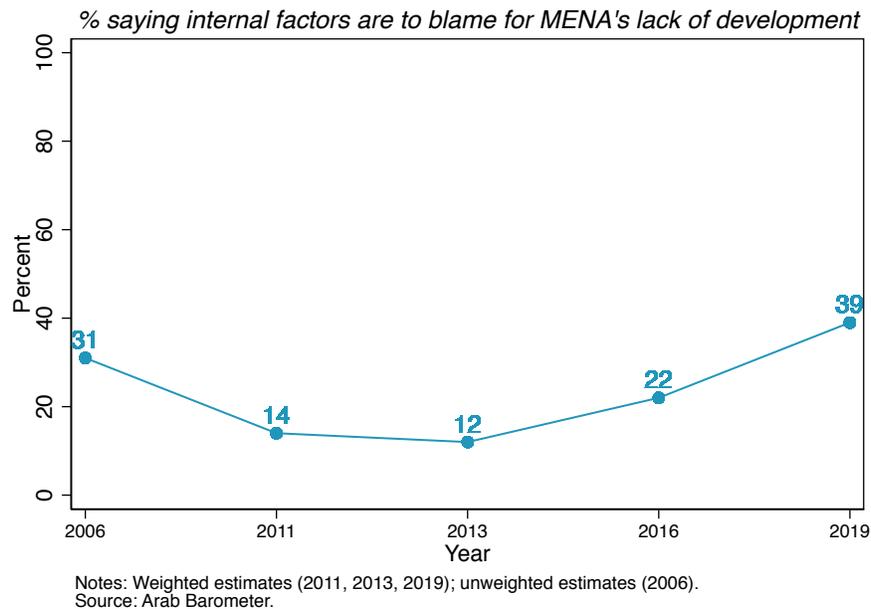
Frustration extended to the provision of public services. In early 2019, only a third were satisfied with the quality of education (36 percent) or health (32 percent) services. Frustration with these public services is especially evident in the areas outside the capital region. In and around Algiers, roughly half were satisfied with both areas, while fewer than three-in-ten said the same in other areas of the country.



At the start of the protests, Algerians placed blame squarely on Bouteflika’s regime for the country’s problems. Just one-in-ten said the government was doing a good job reducing unemployment, limiting inflation, or addressing economic inequality. Meanwhile, despite nearly two decades of peace following the civil war, only half (53 percent) said the government was doing a good job providing security. In effect, even in areas where the government was doing a relatively better job, many Algerians voiced discontent about its efforts.



The changing nature of Algerian public opinion about the country's leadership is also underscored by the fact that in early 2019 Algerians were three times more likely than in 2013 to blame a lack of development in Algeria and other MENA countries on domestic factors compared than international factors (39 percent vs. 12 percent).

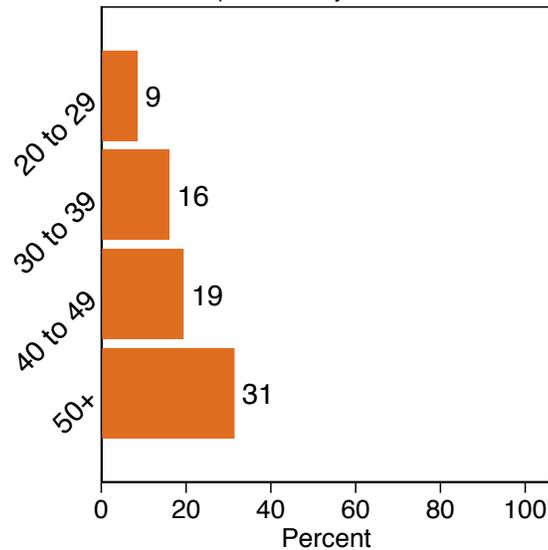


Rise of Informal Politics

Algeria's regime has offered few opportunities for ordinary citizens to be involved in the political process. In turn, just one-in-five said they have any interest in politics on the eve of the uprisings. Similarly, just 19 percent said they voted in the last parliamentary election, which is well below official statistics and far lower than in previous surveys conducted by the Arab Barometer. Citizens 50 and older are the most likely to vote (31 percent), while just 9 percent of those ages 20-29 went to the polls. Mostly, this is due to the fact that the regime can no longer convince the population that the elections are meaningful – just one-in-ten (9 percent) Algerians rate the 2017 election as being free and fair.

Vote in Algeria

*% who voted in last
parliamentary elections*

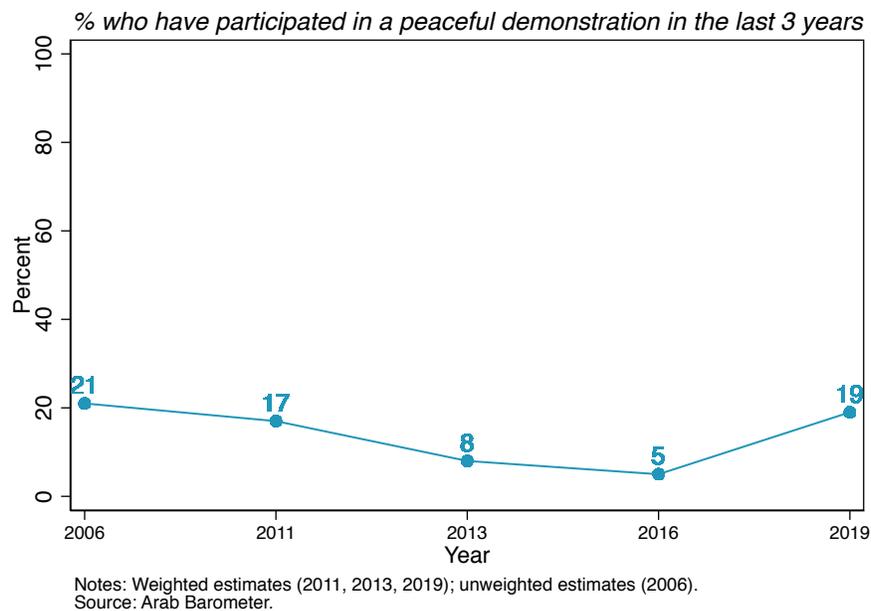


Notes: Weighted estimates.
Source: Arab Barometer V.

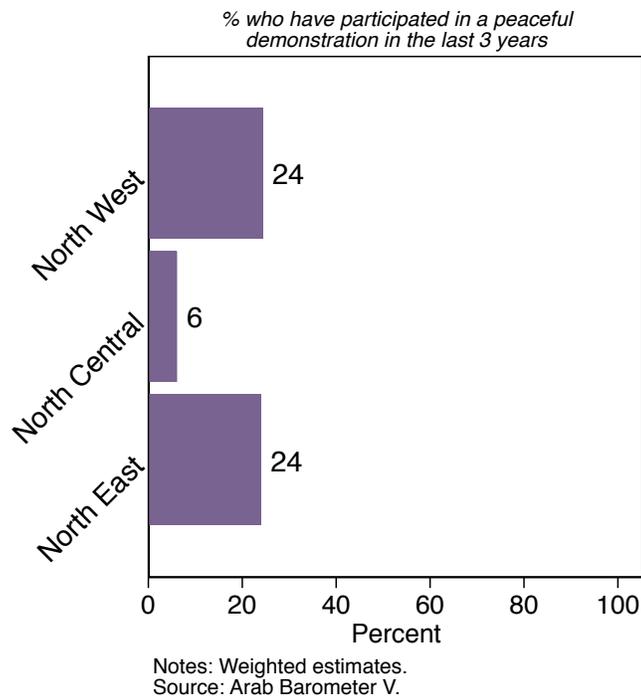
Rather than take part in the formal process, Algerians increasingly turned to non-formal political participation. Even before the outbreak of the major protests in mid-February, there had been a significant rise in protest activities. Algerians were more than 50 percent more likely to have signed a petition or participated in a political meeting over the last three years than they were in 2016 (20 percent vs. 13 percent).



Similarly, protest activity had already increased dramatically. In early 2019 (before the outbreak of the large-scale protests), Algerians were nearly four times as likely to report having participated in a peaceful demonstration within the last three years compared to the percentage in 2016 (19 percent vs. 5 percent). Algerians who are young, more highly educated and male are somewhat more likely to have demonstrated.



A key reason this increase in participation in informal politics may have been overlooked by many observers is their location.¹ Relatively little activity occurred in the capital area, with just 7 percent of those living in this region saying they had signed a petition and 6 percent having demonstrated within the last three years. By comparison, roughly a quarter of those living in the country’s northwest and northeast regions report having taken part in such activities.



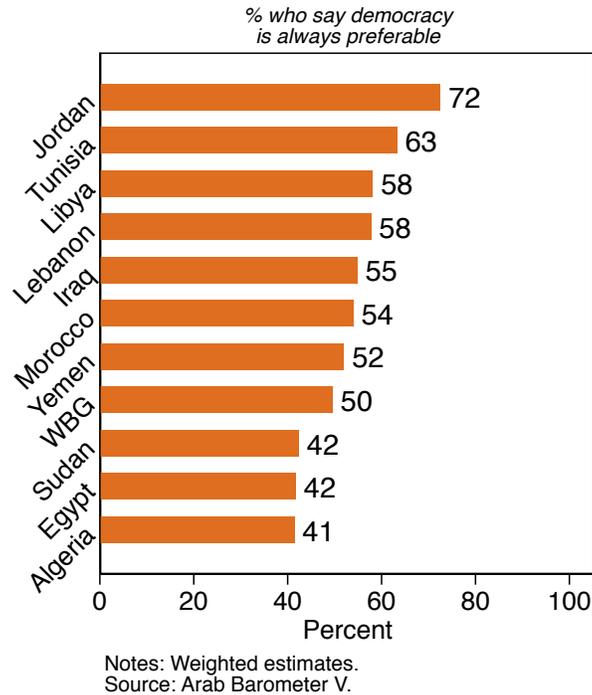
What do Algerians Want?

Algerians have taken to the streets in masses demanding changes to the existing system. Protest leaders have sought an extended period of transition whereby political parties could become established and run competitive elections. Yet, how does this accord with the desires of the Algerian public at the time of the uprisings?

Despite calls for free and fair elections, only four-in-ten Algerians (41 percent) believe that democracy is always preferable over other political systems, compared to 30 percent who say a non-democratic government may be preferable,

¹Robert Parks represents a notable exception having tracked the small scale and ongoing protests based on newspaper reports. See Parks, Robert P. “Voter Participation and Loud Claim Making in Algeria.” *Middle East report* 281, Winter 2016, 23-27.

and one-in-five (21 percent) who say it makes no difference what kind of government they have. These results makes Algerians among the least likely across the region to support democracy, along with Egyptians (42 percent) and Sudanese (42 percent). In all other countries surveyed, at least half say democracy is always preferable.

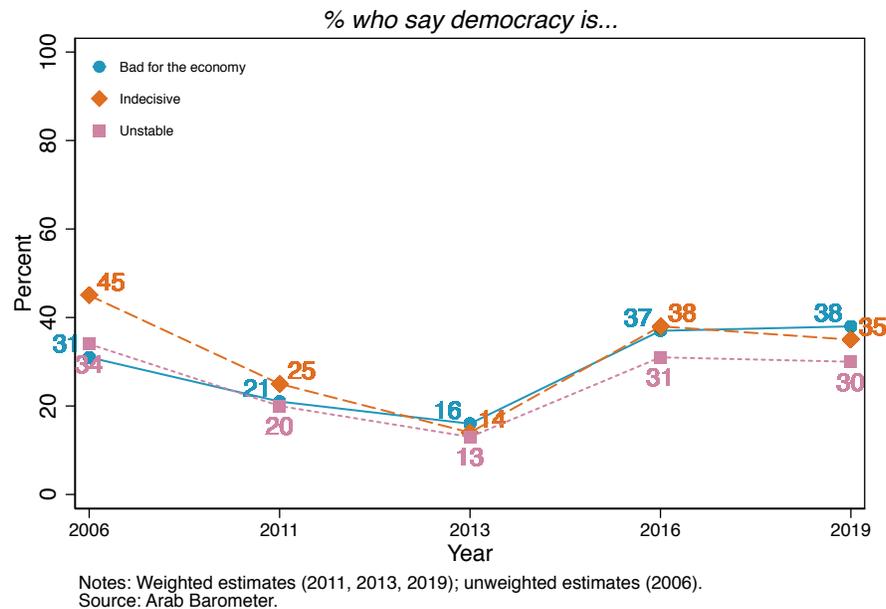


As is common across the region, those with higher levels of are more likely to support democracy in Algeria. However, there is also regional variation within Algeria. Roughly half of those in the capital area and the country’s northwest say democracy is always preferable, compared with 29 percent in the country’s northeast.

Meanwhile, relatively few Algerians understand democracy primarily in terms of elections or other procedural elements. Instead, the plurality say that democracy’s most essential characteristic is that the government ensures law and order, while roughly equal percentages say democracy is a system where the media can criticize the government (23 percent) or where the government ensures jobs for all (22 percent). In fact, just 9 percent say that the most essential characteristic of democracy are free and fair multiparty elections. Notably, these results are also true of Algerians who believe democracy is always preferable over other political systems.

At the same time, Algerians have become increasingly concerned about the

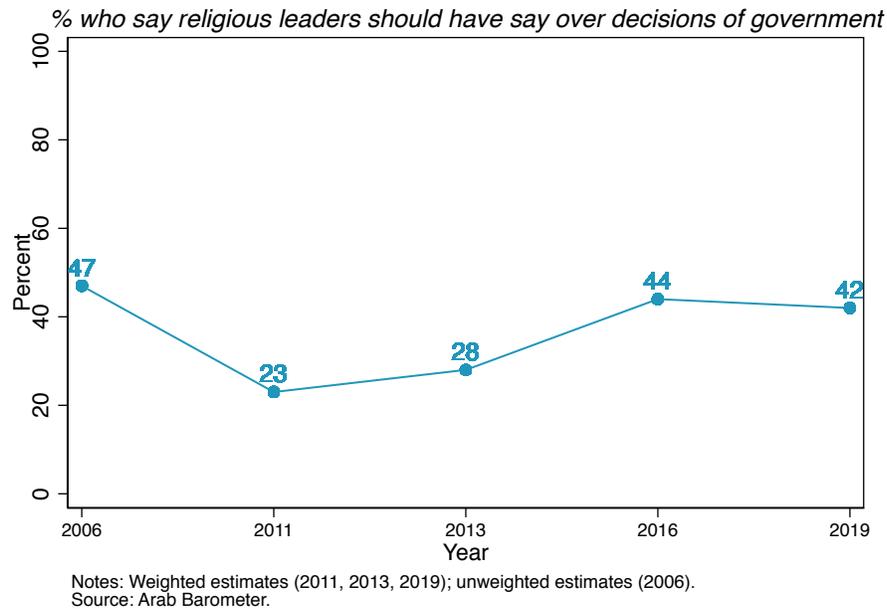
potential problems associated with democratic governance. In 2013, only 16 percent said that democracy was bad for the economy, while 14 percent said democracy was indecisive and 13 percent said it led to instability. By 2019, these percentages had increased by roughly 20 points, with 38 percent saying democracy is bad for the economy, 35 percent saying it is indecisive, and 30 percent saying it leads to instability.



While it is possible that protesters will achieve their demands of free and fair elections, these results cast doubt on the degree to which the Algerian public is committed to a democratic system. Successful transitions to democracy require all key actors, including the public, to deem democracy to be the best system for their country. At the time of the protests, only a minority of Algerians were fully committed to this system while a majority understand democracy in terms of substantive outputs instead of procedural institutions such as elections. Substantial percentages of the population remain worried about potential shortcomings of a democratic system.

At the same time, Algerians are divided on the role that religion should play in the political system, suggesting a key division from the 1990s civil conflict may remain unresolved. On the eve of the outbreak of the 2019 protests, nearly half (44 percent) of Algerians believe that the country would be better off if more devout individuals were in the government. Meanwhile, 42 percent say that religious leaders should have influence over decisions of government. At the same time, 43 percent say that religion is a private matter that should be separate from public life. These results imply that Algeria is divided between roughly equal percentages that believe religion has an important role to play in

politics and those who do not.



Conclusion

In sum, it is clear that Algerians are looking for change as a result of the Bouteflika regime failing to provide for the basic needs of its country's citizens. Algerians want more responsive governance and improved economic conditions. Although the temporary economic measures implemented by the Bouteflika regime after 2011 could quell frustration temporarily, but the decline of global oil prices limited government options, and the long-term trend of deteriorating economic conditions continued. Faced with increasing popular frustration, the regime ensured formal politics offered no way to register discontent. Lacking such avenues, Algerians turned to informal ways to voice their discontent.

Protests became more common outside the capital area, where the strength of the government was weaker, demonstrating to ordinary citizens that the government would not or did not have the capacity to repress such actions. With protesters in the country's east facing little official resistance on February 16 and 19, the those in the capital region were also emboldened.

Although the desire to change the status quo is strong, the public lacks a clear vision about Algeria's future. Without a clear commitment to representative democracy or a clear agreement to the role for religion in politics, the country is likely to remain divided. Overcoming these divides, or developing a system where these competing trends can be incorporated into a formal system will

take time. These results make a smooth transition unlikely even if the regime were to allow free and fair elections. Algerians, like citizens around the world, seek a political system that is responsive to their needs and that can deliver a better quality of life. While they are not certain about the procedural mechanisms that would deliver these outcomes, a successful transition will require a government that is committed to meeting the needs of the public.

About the Survey

The survey includes 2,332 interviews conducted face to face in the respondent's place of residence. Interviews were conducted from February 2-20, 2019 by EMRHOD Consulting. The sample was stratified by region and size of settlement and had a cooperation rate of 76.7%. The margin of error is ± 2 percent. Further details about the Arab Barometer and this survey can be found at arabbarometer.org.



About Arab Barometer

The Arab Barometer is a nonpartisan research network that provides insights into the social, political, and economic attitudes and values of ordinary citizens across the Arab world.

We have been conducting rigorous, and nationally representative face-to-face public opinion surveys on probability samples of the adult populations across the Arab world since 2006. The margin of error is ± 3 percent.

The Arab Barometer is the largest repository of publicly available data on the views of men and women in the MENA region. Our findings give a voice to the needs and concerns of Arab publics.



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