

International

Algerians eager for 'change' but wary of new Arab Spring

Winds of freedom blowing over Algiers revive Tunisia memories

TUNIS: Massive protests that have gripped Algeria might resemble another Arab Spring but those seeking democratic change are mindful of history and want to avoid more upheaval, analysts say. The winds of freedom that are blowing over Algiers have revived memories of January 14, 2011 in Tunis, when thousands marched on the Tunisian capital and forced president Zine el Abidine Ben Ali to flee. After a rally of solidarity with the protests in Algeria was stopped by police in Tunis, civil society groups demanded Algerians be allowed "to finally establish a democratic regime supported by the rule of law". But Algeria, which was barely touched by the Arab Spring in 2011, has already experienced uprisings. "Algeria in some ways already went through its spring 15 years before everyone else," said Tunisian political scientist Hamza Meddeb. After bloody riots in October 1988, a new constitution opened the way for a multi-party political system. "The experience of 1988, with a popular uprising that pushed the regime to a democratic opening leading to an Islamist victory followed by a (military) coup, echoes the Egyptian experience of 2011-2013," said Meddeb.

The trauma of the devastating 1992-2002 civil war in Algeria that followed has helped to limit the domino effect of the Arab Spring in the country in 2011. But now "a brick wall of fear has fallen", said Algerian political scientist Cherif Dris. "Algerians have thrown themselves back into the political and public spheres," he told AFP, as students took to the streets of Algiers where protests had been banned since 2001.

The demonstrations ahead of April elections are calling for a more open democracy, taking aim

at ageing President Abdelaziz Bouteflika's bid for a fifth term despite chronic health problems. "We hoped that, like the Egyptians and Tunisians, those who govern us... would sacrifice their 'leader' to save a nation... rather than destroy it," Algerian journalist Ghania Mouffok wrote this week. Since the uprisings that swept away regimes previously considered irremovable, only Tunisia has stayed on the path of democratization, while some countries have descended into chaos.

The Algerian protesters are well aware of this. "Algeria is not Syria!" and "peaceful, peaceful," they have chanted in response to leaders who have raised the spectre of Syria in an effort to discourage them. "This restraint in enthusiasm is remarkable," historian Malika Rahal wrote in a blog. "These hopes, which are possible and reasonable yet contained in a bid to avoid the dangers of the past, reflect their (good grasp) of experience from history," she said.

For Meddeb, the main similarity to the uprisings in Libya, Syria, Yemen or Egypt is the rediscovery of "the people as a force for change" to finally stand up to authoritarianism. But Dris said Algeria's rulers are not as harsh as other Arab autocrats have been. "It is hybrid authoritarianism which marginalizes the opposition without stifling it or repressing it systematically," he said. The situation is heading towards a "groundswell" that has yet to chart its course, falling between fears of violence and a desire for change.

"Everyone wants the movement to keep its peaceful nature," he said. "It remains to be seen if this continues and in what form."

The restrained approach of the Algerian police



ALGIERS: Algerian police disperse a protest by lawyers and journalists against their ailing president's bid for a fifth term in power yesterday. — AFP

in dealing with the protesters contrasts with repression seen elsewhere. "It's a sign that the ruling alliance is cracking," said Meddeb. Michael Ayari, an analyst at the International Crisis Group, said it was difficult to predict what would happen next. Algerians, he said, were "torn by the

memory of their failed democratic spring" of 1988-1991 and "their hopes for freedom". To avoid violence, he said the movement for change would have to "respect the constitutional order while at the same time remaining substantial, gradual and negotiated".—AFP

Iran, France to swap ambassadors after strained ties

TEHRAN: Iran and France are set to exchange ambassadors, officials said yesterday, after months of tensions including over an alleged Iranian plot to bomb an opposition rally near Paris. Bahram Ghasemi, a former envoy to Spain and Italy and current spokesman of the foreign ministry, has been appointed as Iran's new ambassador to France, an official source in Tehran said.

In Paris, the Official Gazette on Wednesday said that Philippe Thiebaud, a former envoy to Pakistan who once represented France at the UN atomic watchdog, had been appointed as ambassador to the Islamic republic of Iran. Ghasemi and Thiebaud will fill posts that had been vacant for more than six months after a series of diplomatic fallout between France and Iran broke out last year. The previous French ambassador left Iran at the end of his mandate in August while Tehran's envoy left Paris last summer before finishing his term. No official reason was given for his abrupt departure.

In June, France accused a branch of Iran's intelli-

gence ministry of attempting to bomb a meeting of the People's Mujahedin, an Iranian opposition group, near Paris. Tehran vehemently denied the accusations and in return slammed France for hosting the group which it calls a "terrorist cult of hypocrites". Relations between France and Iran have also been strained over demands by Paris that Iran limits its ballistic missiles program—which Tehran says is purely defensive.

Iran reined in most of its nuclear program under a landmark 2015 deal with major powers—Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia and the United States—that lifted sanctions on the Iran. In May the United States withdrew from the deal and re-imposed sanctions on Tehran. France and the other European partners to the deal, have been trying to salvage the nuclear accord and set up a payment mechanism to maintain trade and business ties with Iran that would circumvent the US sanctions.

But Tehran has accused them of dragging their feet, it has also criticized France for selling advanced warplanes and other weapons to its regional rivals Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. News that Iran and France will exchange ambassadors came a day after the ultraconservative Iranian newspaper Kayhan called for the expulsion of French diplomats from the country. Kayhan claimed that Paris had expelled an Iranian diplomat last autumn. Neither the Iranian nor the French foreign ministries have denied or confirmed the expulsion.—AFP

Bahrain refugee footballer to become Australia citizen

MELBOURNE: A refugee footballer who spent over two months in Bangkok detention under threat of extradition to his native Bahrain will soon become an Australian citizen, he told local media yesterday. Hakeem al-Araibi said he will formally become an Australian at a ceremony in Melbourne on Tuesday, after completing a citizenship test. "I do the test, I pass the test, I am 90 percent a citizen. One more appointment, I will be a citizen," 25-year-old Araibi told The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald newspapers.

"The ceremony (is) next week, because I passed the test." Araibi's return to Melbourne last month ended a tense diplomatic standoff between Thailand, Australia and authorities in Bahrain—where he is accused of offences linked to 2011

Arab Spring pro-democracy protests. His detention by Thai authorities while on honeymoon had sparked worldwide outcry and intense lobbying from sports stars and the Australian government, which had granted him asylum.

Araibi has since resumed training with his second-tier club Pascoe Vale and has been outspoken out against rights abuses in Bahrain, where he claims he is still targeted for political reasons. Last week, writing in The Guardian newspaper, he called on Formula One fans to boycott this year's Grand Prix in Bahrain, claiming that authoritarian states were using sports events to raise their profile. Prime Minister Scott Morrison had told Araibi on his return from detention that his citizenship was not "too far away".—AFP