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Digital media, diasporic groups, and the transnational dimension of anti-regime movements: the case of Hirak in Algeria

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on the case of the Hirak movement born in Algeria in 2019, this article casts light on the mechanisms of transformation of the anti-regime movement when it comes to the transnational dimension. Based on a qualitative case-study research design, the article first unpacks the transformative dynamics of the movement when it bypasses the context of origins regarding the framing, organizational, and protesting dimensions. Then, the article looks at the effects of such changes against a background characterized by high political conflict and harsh repression. Findings show that digital media supporting transnational activism have three main effects that are deeply intertwined: they mix up the sociopolitical cleavages of the country of origin by facilitating the hybridization of actors' registers and repertoires of action at a global level; they contribute to politicizing specific issues by escalating the levels of contention; and they allow new measures of a regime's transnational repression.

KEYWORDS transnational activism; digital media; authoritarian regime; contentious politics

Introduction

On February 22, 2019, thousands of Algerians took to the streets to protest the former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika's decision to run for a fifth term in office. A heterogeneous popular movement, the Hirak (meaning "movement" in Arabic), demanded not only more freedoms and socioeconomic opportunities, but also social justice and democracy against a regime perceived as highly repressive and corrupted.¹ Despite Bouteflika stepping down under pressure in April 2019, the Hirak movement has continued to mobilize against the "corrupted clique" of generals, businessmen, and ruling party politicians who have surrounded the former president for years and are still in power.²

Digital media have played a crucial role in setting up street mobilizations, favoring the development of a new space for coordination of Algerian civil society in a context of harsh repression. Moreover, with the outbreak of COVID-19, when national authorities exploited rules to constrain the pandemic to shut down the street demonstrations, digital media represented a way to keep the social movement alive. Thus, a new wave of mobilization started, with activists running a wide range of digital media campaigns to support their struggle worldwide. The Hirak, like other movements across the world, includes a

solid diasporic component taking advantage of digital media. Thousands of Algerians living abroad played a significant role in supporting protests outside the country and keeping its saliency high, using digital media to support their claims.

While there is a considerable amount of literature on the emergence and development of transnational advocacy networks and the role of digital media in making local movements transnational, including the specificity of this relationship in authoritarian regimes, scholarly works on the effects of these processes are still missing. Drawing on semistructured interviews, participant observation, and content retrieved from social media platforms, we scrutinize how activists involved in domestic struggles against an authoritarian regime scaled their protests and claims at the transnational level. Furthermore, we illustrate how such a process of transnationalization changes the movement and the space of contention in which it acts. Findings show that the use of digital media allowed the movement to undergo a scale shift and, in so doing, to develop new framings, organizational strategies, and protest claims at the transnational level. Then, we argue that such a process of transnationalization also brought broad changes related to the space of contention of the domestic movement: the creation of new cleavages among activists and their movement organizations, including between local and diasporic communities; the politicization of specific issues such as corruption and anti-corruption; and the establishment of new practices of national authorities' transnational repression.

Digital media, diasporic groups, and the transnationalization of social movements in authoritarian regimes

Existing literature on social movements has focused extensively on the nexus between digital media and grassroots activism while also considering the role of the former in strengthening solidarity ties outside the national borders.³ As early as the late 1990s, digital media proved relevant to sustain the Global Justice Movement that developed transnationally in many countries worldwide, counting on email lists, Internet Relay Chats, and informational websites to sustain its protests.⁴ The capacity of activists to move between online and offline spaces smoothly and combining them fruitfully has aided in the creation of a transnational space of contention.⁵

The Arab Uprisings in 2011 cast light on the role of digital media in calling for anti-regime demonstrations, leading some scholars to talk about the rise of the “digital revolution.”⁶ Literature on this subject matter scrutinized the role of digital media in forcing the long-lasting regimes of Ben Ali (Tunisia) and Hosni Mubarak (Egypt) out of power.⁷ Several scholars reported how the significant diffusion of smartphones and social media platforms in authoritarian countries opened windows of opportunity for political oppositions challenging the regimes: activists became active agents as they could publish, receive, and share information, opinions, and images, as well as launch a variety of grassroots initiatives.⁸

Furthermore, scholars found digital media to be particularly relevant in supporting connections between local and diasporic communities of authoritarian countries, thus fostering a transnational dimension of contention to challenge authoritarian regimes, especially the more resilient ones, remotely.⁹ Several scholars highlighted how popular mobilizations that occurred in the Arab world since 2011 fostered diasporic political

participation, especially when protests met repression.¹⁰ In this regard, Arab scholars highlighted how in the context of Arab uprisings, activists' use of the internet has largely facilitated local actors to put forward their claims at the transnational level.¹¹ Online activities became "cyber agoras" where ideas, information, and experiences were exchanged and framed according to different strategies to defend collective interests and citizens' participation, especially in not fully democratized environments.¹²

We recognize the relevant role of digital media, entangling with diasporic groups, in supporting the transnationalization of social movements. However, we seek to go beyond a positive interpretation of digital media in social movements by also considering the challenges that they bring for activists.¹³ Rather than simply explaining how digital media enabled the transnationalization of the Hirak movement among Algerian diasporic communities, we seek to carve out problematic effects of such transnationalization.

Research design and methods

The research design centers a single case study in a specific time: the Hirak movement during the COVID-19 pandemic (from the first lockdown in spring 2020 to March 2022) and after the peak of street mobilizations in Algeria. In social movement studies, case studies have a long tradition, as they allow researchers to produce a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena such as street protests, mobilization campaigns, and social movements.¹⁴

Given the explorative nature of our investigation, we supported the stage of data collection with the creation of situational maps, an analytical tool that partially draws on grounded theory.¹⁵ As the name suggests, situational maps allow researchers to chart the situation under investigation, in our case the Hirak movement, listing and connecting one with the other plethora of human, nonhuman (such as technological devices), discursive, cultural, political, and other elements in the situation under investigation.¹⁶ Drawing and revising situational maps about the Hirak movement allowed us to grasp its complex ramifications when engaging in data collection. Overall, the heterogeneity of the Hirak movement and the transnational aspects under investigation required multi-sited data collection and a combination of different qualitative methods of data gathering.

We conducted 12 semistructured interviews with Hirak's activists living in Algeria (five activists) and France (seven activists) and held several informal conversations with leaders of the diaspora collectives in Paris. Activists interviewed have all participated in Hirak mass protests in Algeria or France, yet they have a heterogenous sociopolitical background. The interviews mirror this variety. We interviewed local actors affiliated to different spheres of engagement (associations, investigative journalism, and academia) and leaders of diasporic groups living in Paris; some of them political (see Table 1).

Table 1. Types of Hirak activists interviewed.

No. of activists interviewed	Sphere of engagement	Country of residence
2	Local associations	Algeria
2	Investigative journalism	Algeria
1	Academia	Algeria
2	Leftist collectives	France
2	Rachad movement	France
1	Investigative journalism	France

Interviews were conducted in French and Arabic and centered activists' experiences with the Hirak movement, its transnationalization, and the role of digital media in supporting their struggles across the two shores of the Mediterranean.

Second, our data set includes weekly observations of activists' actions on social media platforms from October 2020 to March 2022. The data collection includes evidence from Facebook pages of three Algerian collectives created in Paris by diasporic groups,¹⁷ as well as YouTube channels, Instagram, and Twitter profiles by three popular Hirak activists living in Europe.¹⁸ Third, our data includes impressions from participant-observations, including an online debate among local Algerians and leaders of the diaspora as well as a series of street protests in Paris organized by collective actors of the diasporic community in France.¹⁹ The latter consisted of sit-ins in Place de la République and Place de Stalingrad and several marches organized by different collectives: Coordination de l'Intercollectif des Algériens de Paris/Île de France; Collectif Débout l'Algérie; and Collectif Libérons l'Algérie.

We analyzed the data following an inductive strategy, starting at first on all those data segments that included mentions, discussions, and representations of digital media in connection to the Hirak's transnationalization. From this initial round of inductive coding, we obtained three broad dimensions: digital media and framing processes; digital media and organizational patterns; and digital media and forms of protests. As it emerged from our analysis, these three dimensions were crucial for activists, but they are also more generally recognized as relevant in the literature on social movements. Therefore, after a first inductive stage, we organized our findings along these three dimensions, contrasting them with the specific literature on the subject matter, which we briefly review in the next section.

Analytical framework

The three dimensions that emerged during the stage of inductive coding refer to three specific strands of literature that we employ as an analytical framework to support further the analysis of the Hirak movement and its transnational level.

First, drawing on Erving Goffman's conceptualization of frames as "schemata of interpretation" that enable individuals to "locate, perceive, identify and label"²⁰ social phenomena, social movement scholars consider framing as a collective action, defined as the process of the construction of beliefs and meanings driving collective action.²¹ From this perspective, movements are viewed as agents of signification, actively producing ideas, instead of being mere byproducts of existing ideologies.²² Robert D. Benford and David A. Snow identified three core framing tasks: diagnose the problem and blame those believed to be the cause of the problem; offer solutions, including specific strategies to ameliorate injustice; and explain why others should join the collective action.²³ Against this literature, some works focused on the role of diasporic groups in contributing to framing protests by proxy.²⁴

Second, literature has long dwelt on how social movements organize themselves.²⁵ In this regard, scholars also focused on the strategies to perform collective action by creating networks of communication and coordination, including forms of connective action that emerged with the diffusion of social media platforms.²⁶ Moreover, activists can organize themselves across space, appropriating both physical and digital space according to the

specific groups' identities that characterize the variety of social movement organizations that usually sustain social movements.²⁷ In this regard, the diasporic communities and subgroups within social movements that develop also transnationally might play a pivotal role in movements' organizational dynamics and their specific articulation both online and offline.

Third, social movements usually rely on a repertoire of contention from which movement organizations and activists select the most familiar ways of representing their claims and demands in public. Demonstrations, street blockades, and strikes are just some instances of the broad array of contentious performances, or forms of protest, that movement organizations and activists might decide to engage with when they mobilize. However, public forms of protest in the streets are not the only type of collective action social movements usually rely on: with the spread of digital media, activists across the world began to include digital forms of protest, and other types of collective actions, that find their most fertile ground in online spaces.²⁸

Overall, as shown in the findings section, movements' framings, organizational structure, and repertoires of contention are relevant analytical tools when it comes to the study of the transnationalization of the Hirak movement. Before analyzing this threefold process of transnationalization, we briefly discuss digital media in the Hirak movement and the relevant presence of diasporic communities outside Algeria.

The Hirak, its digital dimension, and the action diasporic communities

The Hirak movement is an anti-regime movement born in Algeria on February 22, 2019, thanks also to the symbolic and material support of diasporic communities living in Europe and the United States. The movement led to the former president Bouteflika stepping down in April 2019; yet it has continued to mobilize over the years for a less corrupted system and more human rights. As for other Arab countries witnessing a deep political change after the outbreak of massive protests, one of the most innovative aspects characterizing the Algerian mobilizations were the calls for demonstrations through hashtags against the regime.²⁹ As highlighted by an activist we interviewed:

The Movement was born entirely online: other young activists and I received a private message on Facebook from an anonymous account, launching the idea of starting protests against the regime on the streets. The reason why a private message was used is that in this way the surveillance of national authorities could have been somehow avoided.³⁰

Once the momentum started, social media helped ensure its continuity. Artists, internet influencers, rappers, football supporters, sports commentators, journalists, prominent figures in civil society, and the political opposition subsequently helped to strengthen the movement by ensuring that more and more Algerians participated in the marches. As stated by a Hirak activist:

We called for demonstrations on Facebook, via Messenger, that's the best way to organize the movement. More popular activists also use lives on Facebook to raise citizens' awareness.³¹

Activists living in France explained that as Facebook is the most widespread social media in the country, its use is effective to address "the Algerian people" and "to raise collective awareness," in that it allows them to reach the highest number of people

possible.³² Activists also used digital media to structure the Hirak movement, including interfaces allowing electronic voting and the adoption of proposals that measure the popularity and support of the initiatives proposed by local and global Algerians.³³ In addition, surveys on social media have been launched to find out who would be the best representative to organize the interlocution with the authorities.³⁴ Thus, digital media became essential in supporting the construction of new discourses, animating the citizens' debate, and promoting reflection on connections between the local and the global. Furthermore, influential personalities who belonged to the diasporic communities and who did not always have experience in the political field created online spaces for collective reflections on local political solutions (e.g., the Facebook group "Ecris ta constitution. Project citoyen pour un transition en Algérie," launched on February 26, 2019, by the popular singer Amazigh Kateb, living in France).³⁵

Other initiatives—also orchestrated with the material and symbolic support of global Algerians—have emerged to develop digital solutions to support the political transition. For example, the Algerian Center for Social Entrepreneurship launched "Hack Hirak," a hackathon to promote the use of new technologies in the service of the democratic aspirations of citizens, including those living abroad.³⁶ Moreover, it became possible to relay information on the Hirak via online news sites such as TSA or Radio M, or on social networks such as Silmiya News, a Facebook account created by students who also have the mission of leading political debates and popularization of political culture.

The flourishing of digital initiatives became even more critical when the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country. Algerian national authorities have exploited rules set to constrain the pandemic to not only ban demonstrations in the streets, but also prevent Algerians living abroad—considered the most politicized ones by the regime—from returning to their country. As a result, the center of gravity of the Hirak movement has shifted heavily to digital media, through which activists continue to voice their opposition to the regime and maintain contact between the local and the global dimensions. This also increasingly happened through the Algerian diaspora—whose most numerous representatives are in France—which had a significant role in supporting the mobilizations as it could rely on associations and collectives acting as a bridge between the country of origin and the rest of the world.

Over time, Algerian diasporic groups frequently mobilized in connection with protests that occurred in Algeria, even before the rise of the Hirak movement: though, as pointed out by other scholars, we should not consider the mobilizations outside Algeria a mere "echo" of Algerian protests.³⁷ In Paris, for instance, the organization of mobilizations predates the protest events that gave rise to the Algerian movement, although not in a systematic way. As also acknowledged by our respondents, after the beginning of street mobilizations in Algeria, diasporic collectives organized protests every Sunday, by mirroring protests taking place on Tuesdays and Fridays in Algeria. On February 12, 2019, before the outbreak of mass protests in Algeria, a young Algerian living in Paris posted a video on his Facebook page calling for a rally that Sunday in Place de la République, which turned out to be the starting point of the protest. From that moment, every Sunday, after the Tuesday marches in several Algerian cities, collectives organized sit-ins and parallel marches, mobilizing up to 3,000 Algerians. The presence of the Algerian diaspora became crucial especially in the time of COVID-19. According to Faïza

Menai (one of the activists we interviewed and cofounder of the Collective “Debout l’Algérie”), “when the regime took advantage of the pandemic to pressure and repress people and to make arbitrary arrests,” the Algerian diaspora played a pivotal role.³⁸ It is thus correct to say that the diaspora had the vital role of supporting and giving continuity to Algerian demands.

However, diasporic actors were key in the transnationalization of the movement not only in supporting protests in major cities with Arab populations outside Algeria, but also in using digital media effectively. Activists belonging to the diasporic community became increasingly active online, similarly to what happened in the case of previous protests in other countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region (e.g., Tunisia, among others).³⁹ With this regard, also in the Algerian case, the process of transnationalization was sustained by a combination of street protests and digital dissent. In the next section, we focus on the latter to explain how the online initiatives of both the Algerian diaspora and of Algeria’s activists contributed to creating a transnational space of contention that shaped the Hirak movement along three main dimensions: framing, organizing activities, and protesting.

Transposing frames, organizational structures, and repertoires of collective action

The process of transnationalization implies a shift in the primary location of contention, usually from the domestic space to a space that, while continuing to include the domestic one, also embraces other localities, which might be other countries but includes the dense online spaces where activists meet, collaborate, discuss, and protest. With this regard, and drawing from our inductive data analysis, in what follows, we present the transnational dimension of the Hirak movement as a threefold process of transposition of collective action frames, organizational patterns and infrastructures (like social movement networks), and forms of collective actions.⁴⁰ In so doing, we pay attention to how various forms of digital media, mostly managed outside Algeria by diasporic groups, entangle with this threefold process.

Diasporic groups engaged in the Hirak movement developed new frames related to the anti-regime struggle. One noteworthy digital initiative put in place at the transnational level is Wesh Derna, an information platform founded in 2017 by an Algerian activist living in France. This platform also gained prominence during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁴¹ Initially created to combat negative stereotypes associated with young Algerians, the platform began documenting the Hirak beginning on February 22, 2019. During the pandemic, the platform became a central node for informing, mobilizing, and transnationalizing the cause beyond street mobilizations. On the one hand, it aimed at raising awareness and broadcasting documentaries to learn about Algerian revolutionary history and rediscover in a certain way the origins of the Hirak. On the other hand, it focused on the formation of links between stories and places, even those very distant from each other, comparing the grievances of Algerians in different parts of the world. In short, Wesh Derna proved to be crucial in developing collective action frames that broadened the space of contention. It first created a connection with the past, activating collective memory as a powerful framing device, and then sustained a connection among different locations, even beyond the domestic context.

As for the organizational dimension in the case of the Hirk, it is essential to note that the use of encrypted instant messaging apps represented a crucial tool used by activists living outside the country to communicate with their compatriots in Algeria. As revealed by our informants, the first organizational steps of one of the most important initiatives, Nida 22 (Call 22, from February 22, the day when the Hirk movement started to operate), was “thought” through conversations that happened on instant messaging apps.⁴² More formal follow-up debates then occurred on Zoom. The initiative was formally launched in October 2020 through a live broadcast on social media platforms by activists who have joined together as the “Moubadarat 22–2” collective. The preparatory meetings of the initiative took place on Zoom meetings among a group of Algerian activists (living in Algeria, Europe, and the United States) aiming to achieve a consensual strategy for future actions that would reflect the demands of the movement. As reported by an Algerian activist living in Paris:

Nida 22 is a true experiment as it is the first project led at transnational level and in a virtual space, to trace a post-Bouteflika roadmap. The collaboration between Algerians across the world is a resource that we have to rely on thanks to the help of digital platforms.⁴³

Beyond this initiative, there are other forms of actions carried out by the diasporic community with the support of digital media that intervene directly at the organizational level of the Hirk movement. Most of these actors holding the status of political refugees in Europe were already active even before 2019, but the Hirk gave them more visibility. For instance, in the framework of the anti-corruption struggle against the regime, activists who carry out investigative journalism have contributed to creating a new transnational infrastructure to favor whistleblowing through digital media. However, as a journalist we interviewed explains, such an infrastructure is not always accessible for everyone:

Our electronic investigative journal site is often blocked and not accessible from Algeria. Readers should use a VPN (Virtual Private Network) to bypass censorship, but not everyone can. That is why we try to diffuse information through social networks, which are free and more accessible. Thanks to the broad visualizations on Facebook and YouTube (6 million Algerians), the whistleblowers living contacted us. As they are sure that everyone can hear their message.⁴⁴

While not exempt from the danger of surveillance, globally accessible digital media platforms also become part of the organizational infrastructure through which individuals and collectives can connect to the Hirk movement and expose corruption in the country. Social media platforms intervene at the organizational level of the Hirk, functioning as vectors of local contention at the global level.

Among other digital media initiatives, Radio Corona Internationale, defined by the initiators as “a pirate radio created by the virus,” was launched in March 2020 on Facebook and Soundcloud, offering a mix of music, news, and commentary in Arabic and French to support Algerians during the lockdown.⁴⁵ The founder, Abdallah Benadouda, is an Algerian who has been in exile in Rhode Island since 2014 after being harassed by national authorities for his political engagement. Originating from an idea that emerged during an online meeting with friends during the first lockdown, Radio Corona Internationale soon became a tool to support the Hirk movement in its moment of greatest crisis. When street protests had to stop because of COVID-19, Radio Corona

Internationale became a space where activists and protestors could voice their discontent online from across the world. Over time, Radio Corona Internationale's twice-weekly broadcasts replaced the prepandemic street protests on Tuesdays and Fridays, functioning as a digital container for those demands once expressed during mass demonstrations in the streets of Algerian cities. Another similar initiative is Web Radio-DZ, organized by two prominent Algerian collectives in Belgium (Collectif pour une Algérie Libre et Plurielle and the Community of Free Algerians in Belgium).⁴⁶

The overview of these digital initiatives in the framework of the Hirak movement shows how digital media played a pivotal role during the pandemic in supporting the process of transnationalization through the transposition, outside the domestic space of contention, of novel and broad collective action frames; innovative ways to organize the protests across the two shores of the Mediterranean; and the creation of digital spaces for performing contentious forms of protests. Overall, the digital media initiatives that diasporic activists developed in the framework of the Hirak movement acquired the role of "mesomobilization actors" able to sustain a process of transnationalization that nurtured connection among a variety of individual activists, informal activist groups, and more formal movement organizations located both in Algeria and in the countries where the Algeria diaspora is located.⁴⁷ However, the making of the Hirak movement as a transnational movement meant much more than a simple scale shift of domestic contention, as we argue next.

Effects of the transnationalization through digital media between the local and the global

This section highlights three main effects produced by the transnationalization of the Hirak movement supported by digital media as they have also been employed in the framework of diasporic groups of activists living outside Algeria.

(Re-)creation of new cleavages

Some scholarly works on the Tunisian and Lebanese diaspora focus on the transnational dimension's role, overstepping the national referent favoring broader solidarity beyond traditional cleavages.⁴⁸ Against this background, the case of the Hirak movement split between the two shores of the Mediterranean seems to represent a specific case study, where the process of transnationalization, sustained through digital media and diasporic groups of activists, partially contributed to creating new cleavages.

The Hirak mobilizations in Paris, in a situation defined by our interlocutors as a "diasporic context," initially evolved as a mirror of the Algerian Hirak. However, over time, the diasporic community has partially transformed narratives and repertoires of contention of the Hirak movement, leading to several ideological clashes with Algerians living in Algeria. Indeed, contrarily to streets mobilizations in Algeria, protests organized on social media platforms eventually split into different groups along ideological positions. Once held offline, usually in Place de la République, sit-ins have been characterized by a harsh polarization between two groups referred to as "Islamists" and "laics," also mentioned as "eradicators" (from the label given to anti-Islamist forces during the civil war in Algeria),⁴⁹ not necessarily reflecting the cleavages that are nowadays present in

Algeria, especially outside the capital. The main actors involved in this polarized landscape are Rachad—the movement founded in 2007 by, amongst others, former activists from the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS)—and the Mouvement Double Rupture (the “double break”), created by leftist/secular activists. Both groups are much more active abroad than in Algeria, as exiled people or political refugees founded them. Interestingly, their respective opponents accuse these groups of being linked to different regime clans, notably the Salah clan for the “Islamists” and the Tawfiq clan for the “eradicators.”⁵⁰ From this perspective, the mobilization of the diasporic square becomes an autonomous political arena, recalling traumatic events, such as the Civil War of the 1990s.⁵¹

The ideological divisions between activists sometimes made plenary sessions of the Hirak and the work of collectives increasingly tricky. For the secular wing, the shadow of “Islamist revival” weighs on the diaspora activities because, beyond the transversal agreement on the anti-regime rhetoric, there are few points of convergence. The cleavage between secular and Islamic activists is also evident when observing how activists organized the weekly sit-ins. As noted during participant observation in Paris, the Hirak groups having divergent political opinions tend to organize themselves in different square spots. The most remarkable divide in spatial terms is between leftist conservatives and some activists of the MAK (Movement for the self-determination of Kabylie). Thus, as mentioned, the transnationalization of the movement has reactivated some cleavages that do not seem to reflect the current concerns of local grassroots activists in Algeria, or at least not with the same intensity. As an activist living in Algeria underlines:

We can't waste our time and energies to fight one against the other. We must be united to fight against a system of corruption and injustice. The diaspora follows different logics of action. For instance, Hirak activists in France have a different approach than us, as they have been fully absorbed by French political cleavages based on the extreme dichotomy *l'acit /obscurantism*.⁵²

Considering this, it is essential to mention that the transnational dimension of the Hirak movement is characterized not only by solidarity ties, but also by conflictual dynamics. For instance, a conflict developed following the documentary *Algeria My Love*—directed by Moustafa Kessous, a French-Algerian journalist—which was broadcast on the France 5 channel. Many in the largely conservative Algerian society denounced the documentary for telling of the experiences that five young people had with the Hirak movement and including scenes of young men and women mingling and consuming alcohol. Several Hirak activists in Algeria protested against the distorted image of the Hirak. Notably, a trending hashtag, *#Ce_n_est_pas_mon_Hirak #France_5* (This is not my Hirak, France 5), reflected the anger of a large segment of Algerian viewers who thought the documentary distorted the actual demands of the protesters.

Politicization of contentious issues: the case of the anti-corruption struggle

The process of transnationalization through digital media and the diasporic community has contributed to politicizing specific issues within the Hirak movement, such as anti-corruption. The latter acquired a peculiar meaning after the outbreak of the Hirak, and it has become one of the major objectives amid a reconfiguration of power relations. After Bouteflika's dismissal, General Gaïd Salah launched a judicial campaign against the members of the clans of the former president and the corps general Mohamed

Médiène, better known as Tawfiq, head of the DRS (the political police) from 1990 to 2015. At the same time, the President of the National Body for the Prevention and Combating of Corruption, Tarek Kour, revealed that citizens reported nearly 1,700 corruption-related cases in 2019.

On the one hand, the fight against corruption may appear to be an area of mobilization with minimal conflict, so much so that it legitimizes national authorities' action and opposition movements simultaneously. On the other hand, it is precisely the normative character and the genericity of the concept that makes it a heterogeneous nebula appropriated in many and diverse ways by activists and organizations in the Hirak movement. Since the outbreak of the Hirak and, in particular, during the pandemic, we observed the intensification of anti-corruption initiatives occurring through digital media, with opposing groups accusing each other of creating internet trolls, fake news, fake information, and fake accounts with aims to slander and discredit the respective anti-corruption campaigns.

News bloggers and YouTubers who live abroad became pivotal anti-corruption actors by revealing corruption scandals through live streams on Facebook or their YouTube channels. One famous example is Amir Boukhors (living in Paris), better known as AMIR DZ on social media platforms, with 2 million followers on his Facebook page (which was recently banned) and 52 k followers on Instagram. He is considered close to Rachad, according to Hirakists in Paris. In his videos, the radicalization of registers goes hand in hand with populist narratives, wishing to unite the Algerian people under the same struggle against the "the corrupted elite" (also defined as the "caste"). As the following quote from a YouTube video by AMIR DZ reveals: "The problem of the Algerian people is that secret services seek to create the problem by calling people 'Islamists' as they wish; they seek to manipulate the people."⁵³ In his videos, the YouTuber shows evidence of the elites' corruption scandals by providing documents shown to the Algerian people on camera and he concludes his speech by directly addressing the political leader(s): "give back the money of the Algerian people, You, kind of thief."⁵⁴

In short, the massive use of digital media, especially during the pandemic, contributed to widening the actors' spectrum of the anti-corruption struggle, which is deeply intertwined with the domestic reconfiguration of power relations. Moreover, although platforms like Facebook (by far the most used social media platform in Algeria) have facilitated the rapid propagation of the movement, they also tended to reinforce and exacerbate individual convictions and limit exposure to more nuanced discourses and narratives.⁵⁵ Hence, we need to recognize the ambivalent role of digital media in politicizing specific issues.

Transnational repression

Activists involved in the Hirak movement made extensive use of social media platforms and other types of digital media. Nonetheless, the Algerian authorities tried to control this field of action by censoring it or diverting it from these initial objectives.⁵⁶ Moreover, given the important role of diasporic communities in shaping contentious dynamics, social media platforms have also been the means through which the Algerian national authorities started the digital control of citizens beyond the country.

Digital surveillance is not just Algerian national authorities' business. Some scholars show that the Arab Uprisings occurring in the MENA region since 2011 have relied upon digital media whose communication infrastructure was controlled by the same state and corporate authorities that civil society actors have tried to challenge.⁵⁷ A growing body of scholarly evidence confirmed that authorities hack daily the digital devices of activists and human rights defenders to surveil and repress them. For example, within the Middle East, there have been confirmed cases of digital surveillance of human rights defenders in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco. In addition, scholars highlighted how the rise of diaspora activism after the Arab Uprisings led the transnational repression of Arab regimes, both online and offline, to become more violent. Most notably, in the cases of Egypt, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, human rights activists and political dissidents have fled their home countries in fear of imminent or potential reprisal.⁵⁸

The Algerian digital counteractivism is characterized by two phases differing on the intensity and quality of repressive measures. During a first phase, initiated during the first COVID-19 lockdown in March 2020, the regime reacted to protests on the streets by shifting the repression to the digital space, shutting down blogs, websites, Facebook pages, and Twitter accounts. Nevertheless, these obstacles did not represent a setback for protesters: anti-regime activism began to use digital media even more extensively, shifting the dynamics of contention outside the national borders, with activists running new campaigns to disclose the regime's repressive strategies. The escalation of the conflict on the web led to a second stage of the regime's repressive campaign, based on a cyberwar consisting of the creation of bots, internet trolls, fake news, distorted information, and fake accounts discrediting the protests.

On the eve of the presidential elections in December 2019, two hashtags spread on Twitter: #L'Algerie_vote (Algeria does not vote) and #Ne_parle_pas_en_mon_nom (Do not speak in my name), intended to curb the abstention called by the Hirak activists and thwart the influence of the Hirak movement. According to activists we interviewed, bots have also been massively used by the national secret services to discredit the Hirak activists and diffuse fake news. Members of Hirak also accuse "electronic flies," the name they give to trolls, of defamation online, hijacking their slogans and hashtags, and massively reporting their pages, leading to their suspension or closure. Social media platforms indeed offer the possibility of "reporting" content as "indecent" or contrary to the conditions of use, but numerous reports automatically trigger a suspension whatever the content. Since the outbreak of the Hirak movement, and in particular, during the pandemic, hundreds of activists' Facebook pages denouncing the regime's violations of human rights have been frozen after being reported as "inappropriate."

A member of a local association said:

It is impossible to know who is behind these attacks, their accounts are anonymous, while Hirak activists are always visible to be reliable to the rest of the population. Therefore, all the accounts of the most popular activists are exposed to regime's censorship.⁵⁹

As also highlighted by the vice-president of Ligue algérienne de Défense des droits de l'Homme, "for activists of the Hirak a simple publication on social media can lead to prison."⁶⁰ Thus, following a round of massive closure of Hirakists' Facebook accounts,

several collectives have launched a digital campaign denouncing the policies of Facebook, accusing the company of hindering their freedom of expression, and organized sit-ins in front of company offices in Paris and Berlin. As an activist said:

Algerians rely on Facebook to share their ideas in the face of an illegitimate regime and the social media help the regime in carrying out a counter-revolution by accepting the bots' fake alerts. That's unacceptable!⁶¹

As outlined by another activist we interviewed, a diasporic group carried out a campaign asking the company to carefully consider the critical aspects of the Algerian context, including the risks faced by the Algerian diaspora:

We are also at risk, the majority of arrestations targeted Algerian activists living abroad, following their posts on social networks against the regime. ... Massive arrestations occurring in recent times and targeting bloggers, youtubers, journalists and other activists mobilizing online show that a brigade specializing in the fight against cyber-activism is systematically monitoring activities on social networks.⁶²

To thwart the cyber offensive of national authorities, several sites have been designed to fight against news manipulation aimed at exposing fake images and videos relayed on social networks. Lokman Bouider (a pseudonym) is one of the founders of the Facebook page Anti-Fake News DZ, which denounces false information on the Algerian web.⁶³ Moreover, activists we interviewed said that "Hirak's more popular influencers" decided to organize ad-hoc Facebook lives to "teach" people how to recognize the "digital counter-revolution."⁶⁴

Notwithstanding these initiatives, the boundaries between challengers and challenged remained blurred, contributing to uncertainty and suspicion that led to conspiracy theories and weakened the Hirak.

Conclusion

Drawing on the case of the Hirak, the Algerian mass movement born in 2019 against the decision of the former president Bouteflika to run for a fifth term, we cast light on the transnationalization of a substantial domestic movement through the interplay of digital media and diasporic groups. In doing so, we illustrated that when diasporic components support a local movement through digital media, it eventually undertakes a series of transformations at the levels of protests' framing, structural organization, and repertoires of action. Beyond the amplification of the political opportunities, we outlined three intertwined effects produced by such changes: the creation of new cleavages within the anti-regime mobilization; the politicization of specific issues; and the transnationalization of the regime's repression. Overall, we showed how claims and grievances taking their origins from the local could be re-appropriated, re-signified, and re-contextualized by diasporic groups at the transnational level, and why and how digital media intervene in this process. Moreover, in line with the literature on "digital authoritarianism" and extraterritorial repression, we cast light on the regime's long-distance strategies to monitor, intimidate, and harass diasporic populations abroad.⁶⁵

Against this background, at least two new paths of inquiry emerge from our findings. First, a comparative study focusing on the dynamics of digital transnationalization of

other movements located in other contexts is welcome to confirm or disconfirm the results of this research. Second, further investigation is needed to study the consequences of transformations outlined above, both at the transnational and local levels. To what extent are the movement's changes at the transnational level likely to create cross-countries synergies on a global scale? How might the transformation of the movement eventually affect its domestic outreach? What are the repercussions at the domestic level? Does the transnationalization of the movement supported by digital media play a role in reconfiguring global and domestic power relationships? These are just a few urgent questions on the nexus between digital media and transnational activism that should be addressed in future research.

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