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CASE STUDY

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Popular mobilization in Algeria
*The campaign for the release of
Hirak detainees in 2024*

TABLE OF CONTENT

INTRODUCTION	3
I. MOBILIZATION DURING RAMADAN: A STRONG SYMBOLISM	4
II. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA	5
III. CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS IN 2024	6
IV. SYMBOLIC CONCESSIONS ?	7
CONCLUSION	8
SOURCES	9

INTRODUCTION

The Hirak is a popular peaceful protest movement born in February 2019 in Algeria, in response to the announcement of Abdelaziz Bouteflika's candidacy for a fifth presidential term. The movement quickly evolved to denounce corruption, authoritarianism and infringements of political freedoms.

In 2024, the Hirak's demands remained largely unsatisfied, repression against activists, journalists and demonstrators intensified, while more than 220 prisoners of conscience were still locked up for their association with the Hirak. They became a symbol for the opposition, and major demonstrations were held on their behalf.



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I. MOBILIZATION DURING RAMADAN: A STRONG SYMBOLISM

In April 2024, during the month of Ramadan, the campaign for the release of prisoners of conscience took on a new dimension. This period of solidarity and spiritual reflection reinforces the symbolism of the events organized during this month.

Algerian and international human rights associations launched the movement on April 3 with an appeal to the Algerian authorities to “free unjustly imprisoned detainees” and “...open up civic space”.¹

This call was made in a press release signed by some twenty international and national organizations, including the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the World Organization Against Torture (OMCT), Euromed, and Front Line Defenders, as well as Ibytkar and the National Committee for the Release of Detainees (CNLD).

The press release points out that the authorities have improperly pursued “citizens, including activists, journalists and human rights defenders, for exercising their fundamental rights, including unfounded accusations of belonging to terrorist entities. They have also multiplied arbitrary judicial actions against civil society organizations, opposition political parties, trade unions and independent media”.

The press release stresses that, “to date, more than 200 people are still in prison for expressing their opinions and exercising their fundamental rights.

Among them are Hirak figures such as Brahim Laâлами and Mohamed Tadjadit, who have accumulated almost 60 months in prison since 2019, Mohad Gasmî, detained since June 2020, and journalist Ihsane El Kadi, sentenced to seven years' imprisonment, five of which are firm. Beyond these cases, anonymous or little-known people are arbitrarily imprisoned. Many of them have been held in preventive detention for months. These detainees are in addition to long-standing cases such as Mohamed Baba Ne.”



Protest for the release of Hirak detainees.

Prisoners' families, activists and international supporters are organizing night vigils and peaceful marches after the break of the fast, calling for justice and freedom for prisoners of conscience. There is no exact figure for the number of participants to date, but the local and European press put the figure at several thousand.

¹ Riposte internationale, “Algeria: Release the detainees and open up civic space”, published on the 04/05/2024

II. THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media play a central role in the campaign. On Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, hashtags like #LibérezLesDétenus2024 and #HirakContinue2024 are massively shared in April. Digital activists organize awareness campaigns, share portraits of detainees, and publish video appeals from their families.

The Ibtlykar movement, for example, has published twelve portraits, on Facebook and through a Linktree platform, which links to specific information on emblematic detainees.

The Algerian diaspora, particularly active in France and Canada, relays this content, calling on foreign governments to put pressure on the Algerian authorities. Social networks have thus become a tool in the fight against censorship, helping to maintain media attention on the situation in Algeria.

The hashtag “Manich radi” (“I’m not satisfied”, in Arabic) burst onto social networks in December 2024. This campaign, described as “hostile” by several Algerian newspapers close to the regime,² was met by another hashtag, “Ana mâa blad” (“I’m with my country”), used by citizens to affirm their solidarity with the institutions. “We will protect this country, whose people have the blood of martyrs running through their veins”, reacted President Tebboune.



Algeria - Hirak under surveillance
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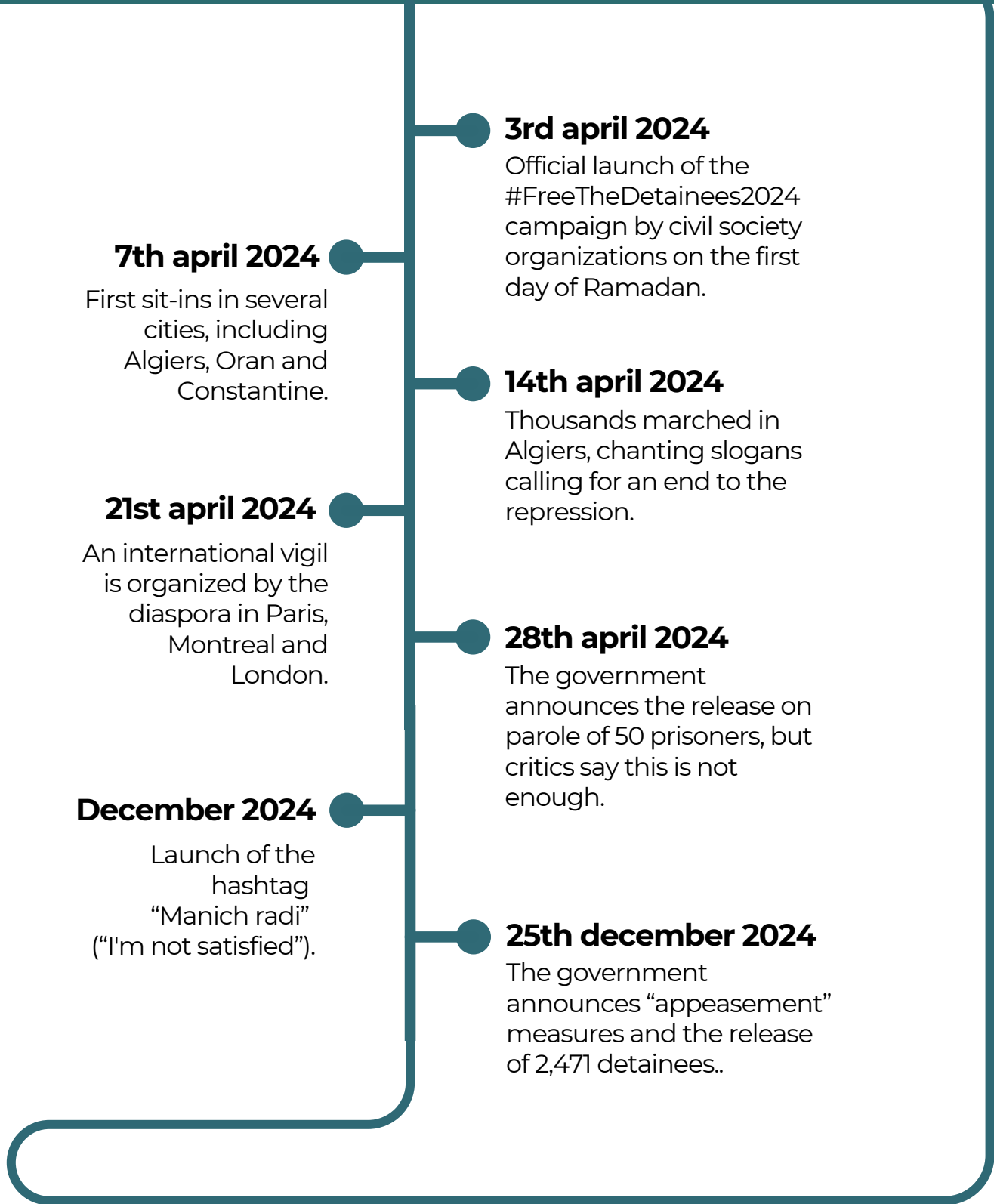
According to *Le Matin d'Alger*, the massive take-up of this hashtag has provoked “a security crackdown. Human rights organizations have documented a series of arrests and prosecutions of activists [...] Among those whose arrests have sparked controversy is political activist and journalist Abdel Ouakil Blam, who was released on Sunday evening after being interrogated for hours.”

3

² *Le Monde*, “In Algeria, President Tebboune announces “appeasement” measures and the release of 2,471 detainees”, published 12/26/2024

³ *Le Matin d'Algérie*, #Manish Radhi' (I don't agree) makes the regime panic, published on 12/25/2024

III. CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS IN 2024



IV. SYMBOLIC CONCESSIONS ?

The releases announced by the authorities in April 2024 were largely perceived as symbolic gestures. While several emblematic figures of the Hirak were released, no guarantee was offered that arbitrary arrests would stop. Many activists report that they are under surveillance or being summoned for new trials, making any progress little lasting. The government's strategy thus seems to be aimed at appeasing critics without addressing the Hirak's deep-rooted grievances.

In December 2024, more prisoners will be released. In a December 25 press release, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune announced “*presidential pardons for 2,471 detainees*” and “*appeasement measures*” for “*eight detainees [on remand] awaiting investigation and trial*”.

The communiqué does not give any names or specify the terms of these measures. It also announces sentence reductions and “*total pardons*” for fourteen individuals “*definitively convicted of crimes against public order*”. With these gestures, “*Mr. Tebboune wants above all to loosen the stranglehold after the international pressure he received in the Sansal affair*”.

and after the wave of discontent that Algerians have expressed on social networks”, believes the activist Saïd Salhi, a refugee in Belgium, for Le Monde.

“We’ve noticed that presidential ‘pardons’ don’t mean any let-up in repression,” points out Zaki Hannache. Each phase of release is followed by an even more intense wave of repression, resulting in more arrests and new detention orders.”⁴

⁴ Le Monde, “In Algeria, President Tebboune announces “appeasement” measures and the release of 2,471 detainees”, published 12/26/2024

CONCLUSION

The 2024 campaign for the release of the Hirak detainees illustrates the persistence of a citizen's movement in the face of tenacious repression. While the release announcements have yet to be followed up, they at least demonstrate the weight of massive mobilizations on social networks.

The December 2024 announcements suggest that the greater international mobilization following the arrest of journalist Boualem Sansal has forced the Algerian government to respond.

International pressure, exerted on the basis of a symbolic case, proved decisive in this reaction, and coupled with the avalanche effect of protest hashtags, secured more substantial promises of release.



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