ECONOMIC TRENDS

ALGERIA
‘Huge’ Corruption Scandal

A retrial hears a damning revelation.

Former Algerian premier Ahmed Ouyahia, on trial for corruption, admitted on January 9th to receiving gold bars from Gulf donors then selling them on the black market, the official APS news agency reported.

Ouyahia and fellow ex-prime minister Abdelmalek Sellal are accused of covertly financing the 2019 election bid of then-president Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who resigned shortly afterwards amid mass anti-government protests. Their retrial opened on January 9th after the supreme court in November annulled their earlier convictions following an appeal, APS said.

Both had served under former president Abdelaziz Bouteflika. Several former ministers and other well-known figures are also on trial over the same affair.

Ouyahia was questioned over the source of assets in his bank accounts, totalling over $5m. He said some had come from black market sales “of gold bars, which he received as a gift, in his capacity as prime minister, from leaders of Gulf countries,” APS added. The 60 gold bars were estimated to be valued at some $2.5m. Ouyahia said he had previously kept quiet about the matter so as “not to undermine the relations between Algeria and certain friendly countries”. He also admitted to not having declared the sums to tax inspectors.

The trial of Ouyahia and Sellal in December 2019 was the first in a series of landmark corruption cases against Bouteflika’s inner circle following the leader’s resignation in April 2019 amid mass anti-government protests. It was also the first time since Algeria’s independence from France in 1962 that former prime ministers had been put on trial, AFP noted (9/1). However, many Bouteflika-era officials have had their convictions overturned or sentences shortened after their cases were reopened in 2020.

The headline “Huge scandal” dominated the front page of the privately owned French-language newspaper Liberté on January 10th. Privately owned website TSA called Ouyahia’s confession “incredible”. On December 31st, an appeals court confirmed hefty jail sentences for three businessmen close to Bouteflika for corruption under his rule. Brothers Reda, Noah-Tarek and Abdelkader-Karim Kouninef received prison sentences of 16, 15 and 12 years respectively, APS reported. They had been found guilty earlier in the year on charges including exerting undue influence, obtaining unfair advantages and money laundering. Their family owns KouGC Group, a firm specialising in civil engineering, hydraulics and construction.

On the same day, a prominent Algerian businesswoman, allegedly an illegitimate child of Bouteflika, was jailed for 12 years...