

## **Privatization of the mining sector in Algeria: what lessons can be drawn from the experiences of Chile and South Africa?**

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### **Abstract:**

The privatization of Algeria's mining sector is part of a recent wave of economic reforms aimed at diversifying sources of growth. Despite a subsoil rich in resources (iron, phosphate, rare earths, gold, etc.), the Algerian mining sector remains marginal in terms of national GDP and dominated by under-performing state-owned companies. This article offers a comparative analysis of the Chilean and South African models, with a view to drawing lessons for successful privatization. Using a multi-criteria evaluation grid (governance, economic performance, socio-environmental impact), the study highlights success factors that are transferable to the Algerian context. It concludes with the need for a stable legal framework, strong institutions, and a balanced strategy between opening up to private capital and national sovereignty.

**Keywords:** Privatization, Mining sector, Resource governance, Foreign direct investment (FDI), Mining policy.

**JEL Classification:** L33 ; Q32 ; Q34 ; F21 ; Q38

## Introduction

Beyond the hydrocarbon sector, Algeria has a particularly rich subsoil: iron deposits at Gara Djebilet, phosphates in the Tébessa basin, gold in the southwest, zinc, lead, rare earths and barite in several Saharan basins. Yet mining's direct contribution to GDP ( $\approx 1\%$ ) and exports ( $\approx 2\%$ ) remains marginal in relation to its potential. Since 2020, the authorities have shown their determination to diversify the economy and attract foreign direct investment (FDI) in upstream mining, through a revision of the Mining Code (law 19-13) and the launch of public-private partnerships. This change of direction raises a national debate: how to open up capital without compromising sovereignty over resources considered strategic?

In recent history, several mineral-rich countries have experimented with various forms of privatization or liberalization. Chile, the world's leading copper-exporting economy, combined total openness to FDI with the maintenance of a state-owned company (Codelco) to preserve a public rent. Post-apartheid South Africa sought to redistribute mining assets through transformation policies (Black Economic Empowerment), while maintaining a sector dominated by large private groups. This policy, according to Jourdan (2012), aims to profoundly restructure the value chain by including historically marginalized groups.

**Research question:** *What specific lessons do these two experiences offer Algeria for designing a privatization process that reconciles economic efficiency, social equity and the protection of national interests?*

## Research hypotheses

We postulate that the success of mining privatization depends on the interaction of three pillars:

**H1.** A stable and predictable regulatory framework, reducing country risk and clarifying mining rights;

**H2.** Strong institutions capable of regulating, monitoring compliance with environmental standards and redistributing rents;

**H3.** A balance between private capital and public control, ensuring both industrial competitiveness and the preservation of economic sovereignty.

## Methodology

This research adopts a three-stage comparative analysis:

1. Mapping of the Algerian sector: literature review, official reports (Ministry of Energy and Mines, EITI), exploratory interviews with experts.
2. International case studies: examination of Chilean and South African trajectories via academic literature, institutional sources (Cochilco, Department of Mineral Resources and Energy), production and FDI statistics (UNCTAD, World Bank).

3. Cross-analysis: identification of convergences/divergences and extraction of "success factors" that may or may not be transferable to the Algerian context. A multi-criteria evaluation grid (governance, economic performance, socio-environmental impact) serves as an analytical framework.

#### **Article structure**

- 1- provides an overview of the Algerian mining sector and the reforms undertaken since 2020.
- 2- analyzes the "Chilean model", characterized by controlled privatization and strong economic performance.
- 3- explores the "South African model", marked by social tensions and the imperatives of redistributive justice.
- 4- draws lessons for Algeria and proposes a "hybrid" privatization scheme.

#### **Aim of the study**

By putting these elements together, this study aims to contribute to the scientific debate on the governance of natural resources, while at the same time providing Algerian decision-makers with operational guidelines for the controlled privatization of the mining sector.

### **1- Algeria's mining sector: current situation and recent reforms**

#### **1-1- Under-exploited geological potential**

As shown by Bebbington et al (2008), this situation reflects a developmental ambiguity that is common in extractive economies.

Algeria has a considerable mineral heritage, spread across its entire territory. According to data from the Ministry of Energy and Mines, there are over 1,000 listed mineral occurrences, including :

- Iron: The Gara Djebilet deposit in the Tindouf wilaya is one of the world's largest, with reserves estimated at over 3.5 billion tonnes.
- Phosphates: The Tébessa-Djebel Onk Basin holds more than 2 billion tonnes of exploitable reserves, to be used as fertilizer.
- Gold : Southern Algeria, particularly in the Tamanrasset region, is home to several gold deposits, mainly exploited by the ENOR company.
- Zinc, lead, barite, rare earths: These resources are present in various regions (Oued Amizour, Béjaïa, Tlemcen, Illizi), with growing interest linked to the energy transition.

However, most of these resources remain unexploited or are exploited on a small-scale, unprofitable basis. Investment remains insufficient, the technologies used are sometimes obsolete, and downstream integration (local processing) remains marginal.

## **1-2- Dominant but under-performing public companies**

Historically, the Algerian mining sector has been based on a centralized public structure, with a few key operators:

- Manal (Algerian public mining group): a holding company grouping together several subsidiaries (ENOF, SOMIFER, ENOR, etc.) operating in the extraction of iron, gold, barite and salt.
- Ferphos: specialized in phosphate, with operations centered in Tébessa.
- ORGM (Office national de la recherche géologique et minière): responsible for prospecting and geological mapping.

Despite their strategic role, these companies suffer from cumbersome red tape, little management autonomy, chronic under-investment and low performance by international standards. They contribute little to exports and the creation of skilled jobs. This situation has fuelled a consensus on the need for a paradigm shift.

## **1-3- An unattractive legal framework before 2020**

Before 2020, the sector was governed by the 2001 Mining Code (amended in 2014), criticized for :

- Administrative complexity (multiple authorizations, slow procedures),
- Lack of clarity on mining rights (limited legal certainty for investors),
- Fiscal instability, discouraging long-term investment,
- A lack of transparency in the granting of permits.

The implementation of local content and the technical requirements imposed on foreign investors were also perceived as barriers to entry.

## **1-4- An unattractive legal framework before 2020**

Faced with these limitations, Algeria initiated a series of reforms in 2020 aimed at modernizing and liberalizing the mining sector:

### **1-4- 1-Revision of the Mining Code (Law no. 19-13)**

Promulgated in 2019 and implemented since 2020, this reform aims to :

- Simplify administrative procedures by creating a one-stop shop,
- Provide greater legal certainty for investors (automatic renewal of titles, extended duration of permits),
- Introduce a fee proportional to production, as an incentive for companies,
- Encourage public-private partnerships, particularly in the exploration and treatment segments.

### **1-4- 2-Reactivating strategic projects**

- Gara Djebilet: relaunched in 2022 with the participation of Chinese partners, the project is targeting initial production of 2 to 3 million tonnes/year of iron ore.
- Integrated phosphate project in eastern Algeria: Algerian-Chinese consortium (Manal, Sonatrach, Wengfu) to produce fertilizer and phosphoric acid, with an investment of over 6 billion USD.
- Zinc mining project at Oued Amizour (Tala Hamza): revitalized with the contribution of Australian investors (Terramin).

#### **1-4- 3-Creation of the National Agency for Mining Activities (ANAM)**

ANAM, reactivated in 2021, is now responsible for regulation, licensing, investment monitoring and mine mapping. It embodies an attempt to separate operational and regulatory functions, in line with international best practice.

#### **1-5-Persistent limits**

Despite these advances, a number of structural obstacles remain:

- Weak digitalization of administrative procedures,
- Lack of skilled human capital in mining regions,
- Environmental risks poorly managed (absence of mandatory impact studies in some cases),
- Inadequate legal framework for local content, community royalties and rehabilitation of mining sites.

#### **1-6-A variable-geometry opening**

The privatization process remains gradual and selective. The Algerian State wishes to :

- Maintain control over certain projects deemed sensitive (e.g. gold, rare earths),
- Encourage technical and financial partnerships, without abandoning majority public ownership,
- Attract FDI while preserving national sovereignty, notably through joint ventures with state-owned companies.

Algeria's mining sector is at a crossroads. Endowed with exceptional potential, it remains poorly developed. The reforms undertaken since 2020 testify to a willingness to open up, but require a more profound change in governance, transparency and regulatory attractiveness. It is in this context that the study of international experiences (Chile, South Africa) takes on its full meaning, to avoid the mistakes of the past and appropriate models adapted to local realities.

## **2-The Chilean model: controlled privatization and economic performance**

### **2- 1-A historic shift in the copper sector**

Chile, a South American country with a strong mining tradition, holds around 25% of the world's copper reserves. The history of mining privatization in Chile is inextricably linked to the country's political development. In the 1970s, copper deposits were nationalized under the Allende government, creating the state-owned Codelco (Corporación Nacional del Cobre). However, in the 1980s, the Pinochet-led military regime made a liberal U-turn, opening up the sector to foreign private investors, while retaining Codelco as a strategic pillar of mining sovereignty.

This choice of partial and controlled privatization has enabled Chile to build a mixed model: Codelco coexists with multinationals (BHP, Anglo American, Antofagasta, Freeport-McMoRan...) operating vast deposits in partnership or under concession.

### **2- 2-The role of government: between regulation and strategic control**

The Chilean government has adopted a facilitating and regulatory stance, without withdrawing completely. Codelco, 100% state-owned, remains the country's leading copper producer and holds the most strategic deposits. It is a major source of tax revenue.

At the same time, the government has set up :

- A clear and stable Mining Code, facilitating the granting of long-term mining titles (up to 30 years),
- An attractive but balanced tax framework: corporate income tax is added to a progressive mining royalty based on copper prices,
- Robust institutions, such as SERNAGEOMIN (geological and mining service) and the Comisión Chilena del Cobre (COCHILCO), responsible for technical regulation and project assessment,
- A policy of transparency in contracts and production data.

This combination of state control and economic attractiveness has contributed to the emergence of a competitive and stable mining sector, praised by international institutions.

### **2- 3-Economic results: massive investment and sustained growth**

The Chilean model has generated spectacular results in terms of investment, production and growth:

- Chile has become the world's leading copper exporter, accounting for over 50% of its total exports.
- The mining sector accounts for around 12-15% of the country's GDP.
- Cumulative foreign investment in the mining sector will exceed \$80 billion between 1990 and 2020.

- The mining industry has served as a lever for the development of infrastructure, vocational training and regional diversification.

Codelco's role remains crucial: despite competition from private players, it continues to generate significant annual revenues for the Chilean state, sometimes exceeding those of the oil sector in other oil-producing countries.

#### **2- 4-Environmental issues and social tensions**

Poncet (2020) stresses the tensions generated by unregulated extractivism, both territorially and ecologically. The economic success of the Chilean model must not mask certain negative externalities, particularly environmental and social:

- Overexploitation of water resources: mining operations, particularly in the Atacama Desert, have placed heavy demands on groundwater, leading to conflicts with local communities.
- Pollution and environmental degradation around operating sites, despite recent progress in environmental standards.
- Weak local social benefits: mining regions often denounce the lack of redistribution of profits, exacerbating territorial inequalities.
- Social movements: strikes in the mines, protests against large multinationals and indigenous demands have multiplied, particularly in the context of the rewriting of the Constitution (2020-2022).

These factors have prompted the authorities to strengthen requirements in terms of corporate social responsibility (CSR), consultation with local populations and respect for the environment.

#### **2- 5-A perfectible but inspiring model**

The Chilean model illustrates the potential benefits of controlled privatization: it shows that a state can simultaneously :

- Attract foreign capital,
- Maintain strategic control over resources,
- Ensuring effective regulation.

However, the model is not without its limitations. It raises questions about the fair distribution of mining revenues, the environmental impact of extractivism, and over-reliance on a single export product (copper). The Chilean experience offers Algeria several valuable lessons: the need for a stable regulatory framework, the importance of retaining a strong public player (like Codelco), and the ability to attract investment while protecting national interests. However, environmental and social challenges warn against a purely technocratic or financial approach to privatization.

#### **3-The South African model: privatization, social tensions and the need for justice**

### **3- 1-Post-apartheid reforms in the mining sector**

South Africa has one of the richest mining sectors in the world, with major resources in gold, platinum, chromium, manganese, coal and diamonds. During apartheid, this sector was dominated by large white companies, and the exploitation of black workers was based on extreme structural inequality. At the end of apartheid in 1994, the new government led by the ANC (African National Congress) faced a dual challenge: to maintain the sector's economic attractiveness while correcting historical injustices. This was not privatization in the classical sense (the sector was already largely privatized), but rather an in-depth restructuring aimed at inclusive economic transformation.

### **3- 2-Major mining companies: between continuity and adaptation**

Major players such as Anglo American, Impala Platinum and Gold Fields have retained a central place in the South African mining landscape, but have had to adapt to new political and social demands. The South African government has introduced several key measures:

- South African Mining Charter from 2004, imposing quotas for black participation in mining companies,
- Partial nationalization of certain strategic resources considered but abandoned in favor of indirect control,
- Creation of the state-owned African Exploration Mining and Finance Corporation (AEMFC), but was unable to compete effectively with the private majors.

Regulation of the sector is still shared between the Department of Mineral Resources and Energy (DMRE) and development finance institutions.

### **3-3-Black Economic Empowerment (BEE): a mechanism for transformation**

This policy, according to Jourdan (2012), aims to profoundly restructure the value chain by including historically marginalized groups. The cornerstone of the South African model is the Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) policy, followed by its reinforced version, Broad Based BEE (BBBEE). The aim is to promote: According to Jourdan (2012), this policy aims to profoundly restructure the value chain by including historically marginalized groups. • The rise of black South Africans in mining companies, • Access to management positions and public contracts, • The development of suppliers and subcontractors from historically marginalized communities. The Mining Charter imposes clear obligations in terms of black shareholding (minimum 26%, then 30%), professional training, local recruitment and community development.

### **3-4-Persistent social tensions and mining conflicts**

Despite these efforts at transformation, the South African model remains deeply marked by social tensions and persistent inequalities:

- Difficult working conditions in the mines, often denounced by the unions,
- Little real redistribution of wealth to local populations,
- Violence and recurring strikes: the tragic example of Marikana in 2012, where police killed 34 striking miners, illustrated the fragility of social dialogue in this sector,
- Perception of empowerment limited to a black elite, often linked to political power, to the detriment of fundamental change.

These tensions have eroded confidence in the mining companies, and sometimes in the state itself.

### **3-5-Mining governance and community participation**

In response to this criticism, efforts have been made to improve governance in the sector:

- More stringent requirements for consultation with local communities prior to any mining project,
- Requirement for companies to file a Social and Labour Plan (SLP) detailing commitments to employment, housing, health and local development,
- Growing calls for a more evenly distributed mining royalty, the establishment of community funds and the regionalization of tax benefits. NGOs and social movements are campaigning for more responsible mining, integrating the principles of environmental justice and sustainable development.

### **3-6-A contrasting model: unfinished transformation**

The South African model represents a bold attempt to structurally transform the mining sector, without nationalizing it. It combines :

- Traditional private mining capitalism, inherited from the colonial era and apartheid,
- Social justice policies aimed at redistribution and inclusion,
- Complex state regulation, with varying degrees of success for different companies and regions. But the results remain mixed:
- The mining sector still contributes around 7-8% of GDP, with slow economic diversification,
- Racial and spatial inequalities remain acute,
- Capital flight and partial deindustrialization limit the sector's multiplier effects.

The South African example shows that privatization or the retention of private capital is not enough to ensure fair mining. Governance, local participation and social justice must be at the heart of any reform. This

model suggests to Algeria that a simple transfer of ownership without a redistributive framework or solid social dialogue could aggravate social tensions rather than alleviate them.

#### **4-Lessons for Algeria**

This multi-criteria evaluation grid, which we have drawn up ourselves, is structured according to the three dimensions set out in the methodology: governance, economic performance and socio-environmental impact. It enables us to compare the Chilean, South African and Algerian models, and to identify success factors that may or may not be transferable to Algeria.

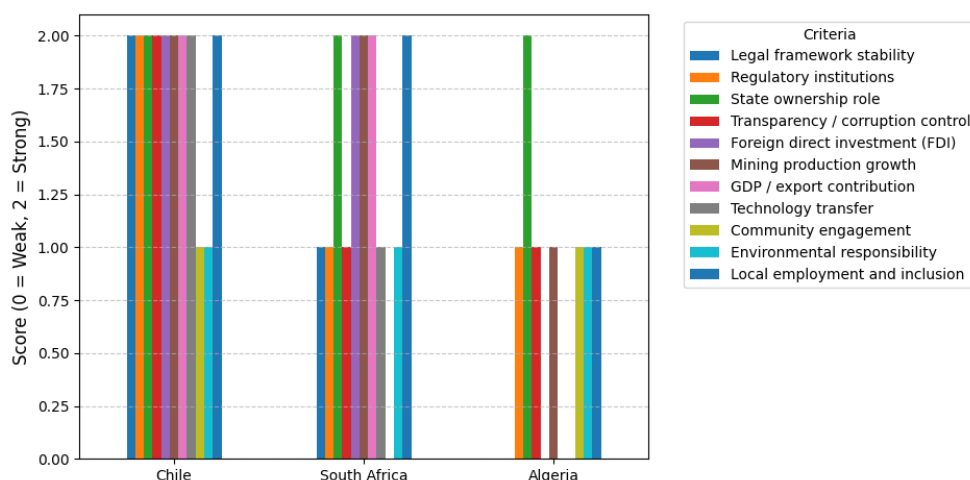
| <b>Criteria</b>                                      | <b>Chile</b>  | <b>South Africa</b>  | <b>Algeria</b>                               | <b>Comments for Algeria</b>   |
|--|---|--|--|---|
| <b>1. Governance</b>                                 |   |  |  |   |
| <b>Stable legal framework</b>                        | Very stable since 1980s                               | Evolving, made more complex by ANC and transformation laws | Recent changes, perceived instability        | Need for stability and transparency in the legal framework          |
| <b>Regulation and institutions</b>                   | Strong institutional capacity (Cochilco, Sernageomin) | Authorities present but effectiveness varies               | Institutions under construction (ANAM, etc.) | Strengthening regulatory institutions                               |
| <b>French State shareholding</b>                     | Maintaining Codelco as a strategic player             | Strong shareholding in certain companies                   | Strong State domination                      | Opportunity to maintain a strong public company (à la Codelco)      |
| <b>Transparency and the fight against corruption</b> | Good level, supported by OECD and partners            | Recurring problems in certain segments                     | Problems recognized by the authorities       | The need for an external audit system                               |
| <b>2. Economic performance</b>                       |   |  |  |   |
| <b>Foreign investment</b>                            | Highly attractive, many FDIs                          | FDI present, but held back by social uncertainties         | Low EDI to date                              | Creating a climate of incentives, taxation and regulatory stability |
| <b>Growth in mining production</b>                   | Steadily rising production                            | Growth varies by sector                                    | Untapped potential                           | Modernization of mining capacities                                  |
| <b>Contribution to GDP and</b>                       | Up to 15% of GDP, 50–60%                              | 6–8% of GDP, net exporter                                  | <1% of GDP                                   | High potential for contributing                                     |

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|                                       |  |   |                                       |   |
|---------------------------------------|--|---|---------------------------------------|---|
| exports                               | of exports                                 |   |                                       | to economic diversification                                   |
| <b>Technology transfer</b>            | Strong with the presence of multinationals | Present but sometimes limited to primary activities | Low                                   | Integrating technology transfer into joint venture agreements |
| <b>3. Socio environmental impact</b>  |  |   |                                       |   |
| <b>Dialogue with communities</b>      | Recent improvement, localized conflicts    | Frequent disputes, strong union contestation        | Limited dialogue to date              | Creating a structured local consultation framework            |
| <b>Environmental responsibility</b>   | Regulations being improved                 | Major issues (pollution, water)                     | Recent initiatives poorly implemented | Introducing green taxation and control mechanisms             |
| <b>Inclusion and local employment</b> | Regional inclusion strategies              | Empowerment policies, but effectiveness debated     | Low inclusion to date                 | Requiring local employment plans in projects                  |

**Table 1: drawn up by the researcher.**

**Multi-criteria Evaluation of Mining Privatization Models**



**Figure 1: drawn up by the researcher.**

**4-1-The need for a stable, clear and predictable legal framework**

According to Sellam (2012), privatization is a frequent political choice in the major industrial powers, part of a global logic. The Chilean example

shows that the attractiveness of the mining sector depends above all on the stability of the regulatory framework. Foreign investors are looking for a clear environment, where tax rules, mining rights, environmental obligations and dispute settlement mechanisms are clearly defined. In Algeria, the legal environment has long been perceived as unstable and opaque, marked by heavy state intervention, frequent changes in laws, and low efficiency of economic justice. The reforms initiated since 2020 are moving in the right direction (notably with the revised Mining Code), but require :

- A clear codification of the rights and obligations of private investors ;
- Guaranteed non-discrimination between public and private operators;
- A more independent role for regulators vis-à-vis political power ;
- The introduction of arbitration mechanisms in the event of disputes.

#### **4-2-Striking a balance between openness to foreign capital and national sovereignty**

Chile has preserved a form of mining sovereignty through Codelco, while encouraging private investment. South Africa, on the other hand, has allowed the private sector to dominate, but has tried to compensate with social justice policies. Algeria could adopt a middle path, combining :

- Maintaining strong public players in strategic deposits (e.g. gold, rare earths, uranium);
- Opening up to the domestic and foreign private sector in segments with lower strategic value;
- Setting up balanced joint ventures as a means of transferring skills;
- Local content clauses, to avoid simple extraction with no economic spin-offs.

The Algerian state should also be able to play an active minority shareholder role in certain projects, as sovereign wealth funds do in other countries.

#### **4-3-Strengthen public regulatory and governance institutions**

South Africa's experience shows that privatization without solid institutions risks exacerbating inequality and conflict. Algeria must strengthen :

- The Agence nationale des activités minières (ANAM) by giving it genuine operational autonomy;
- The technical and human capacities of the Ministry of Energy and Mines, to better manage projects;
- An independent observatory of mining governance, bringing together researchers, civil society and representatives of mining regions.

Such a system would strengthen the accountability of mining players and the confidence of local populations.

#### **4-4-Integrating social and environmental aspects**

Mining reform cannot be limited to economics. The social and environmental dimensions must be fully integrated right from the project design stage. This implies:

- Prior consultation of local populations (inspired by the FPIC principle - Free, Prior and Informed Consent);
- The obligation for companies to publish a social and environmental plan, validated by the authorities;
- Compensation mechanisms for affected populations (displacement, pollution, disruption of lifestyles);
- Regulations on environmental liability, including post-mining management (mine closure, clean-up, site reconversion).

These requirements are not incompatible with economic profitability: they help to avoid conflicts, ensure the social legitimacy of projects, and meet ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) standards that are increasingly demanded internationally.

#### **4-5-Towards a hybrid model adapted to Algerian realities**

Algeria can neither copy the Chilean model (centered on copper, in a liberal and stable state), nor reproduce the South African model (born of a post-apartheid context). It needs to build a hybrid model, articulating :

- Regulated industrial exploitation of major deposits through a rigorous public-private partnership;
- Supervision of mining crafts in poor regions (e.g. gold panning in the Hoggar), taking it out of the informal sector;
- Decentralization of mining governance, with more power to the wilayas and local players;
- Long-term strategic vision, integrated into a national energy transition plan, taking into account the critical metals needed for green technologies (lithium, cobalt, etc.).

#### **Conclusion**

Algeria is at a turning point in its economic history. With the model based on oil and gas rents running out of steam, the development of mining resources is emerging as a major opportunity for diversification. The partial privatization of the mining sector, which began with the reforms of 2020, is part of this drive to attract capital, modernize the extractive industries and better integrate natural resources into national development. However, as comparative analyses of the Chilean and South African cases have shown, the privatization of such a strategic and sensitive sector cannot be reduced to a simple opening up to private capital. It requires a comprehensive approach, combining strategic vision, social justice, rigorous governance

and environmental responsibility. Chile offers a model of institutional stability and economic attractiveness, where the state remains a major player while creating an environment conducive to private investment. South Africa, on the other hand, highlights social tensions and the imperatives of economic transformation in a context of historic inequality. These two experiences, though different, both underline the importance of a clear legal framework, solid institutions, and a balance between economic imperatives and socio-political stakes. For Algeria, there are many lessons to be learned:

- Stable, transparent and predictable regulations are the key to successful reform;
- The development of the mining sector must be consistent with economic sovereignty and territorial justice;
- Regulatory institutions must be strengthened to ensure compliance with standards, transparency of processes, and mediation between players;
- Consultation with local populations, environmental protection and social inclusion must be fundamental principles.

Lastly, privatization of the mining sector should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a lever for a broader industrial and environmental strategy, particularly in light of the global energy transition. Algeria has considerable geological potential (rare earths, gold, phosphate, iron, etc.), which could contribute to the emergence of new industrial sectors, while at the same time becoming part of global value chains for clean technologies. So, to make a success of its mining transition, Algeria will have to invent its own model, inspired by international best practices, but deeply rooted in its economic, social and institutional realities.

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