

Algeria: The Struggle in Kabylia

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The Kabyle people are one of several Berber or Amazigh groups indigenous to North Africa, and comprise about 7 million of the 12 million Amazighspeaking people in Algeria. They have their own language and specific identity which they are fiercely proud of.

Kabylia (Tizi Ouzou, Bejaia, Bouira and to some extent Boumerdes and Setif) has a long history of struggle before, during and after the war of independence. For historical reasons, Kabylia has been a site of rebellion and resistance in colonial times.

The land dispossessions and impoverishment it suffered led to massive migration movements to urban areas and to metropolitan France and resulted in the proletarianisation of so many Kabyle people.

In the 1920s and 30s, they were actively organised within trade unions as well as inside the nascent Algerian nationalist movement in France.

In fact, the majority of members of the nationalist party “North African Star” (founded by Messali El Hadj) were Kabyles.

After independence, the ruling FLN ignored the country’s rich cultural diversity and adopted a narrower conception of the Algerian identity.

It decided Algeria would be a monolingual Arab and Muslim country, denying any other languages and cultures.

Consequently the Berber dimension of the Algerian cultural heritage was marginalised and reduced to folkloric manifestations.

However, in 1980, during the “Berber Spring”, demonstrations and strikes demanded the recognition of Berber or Tamazight as an official language.

The movement was violently suppressed. The 1980 “Berber Spring” was not merely a cultural uprising.

It constituted the first large scale political challenge to the regime since the early 60s, where the Berbers/Amazighs of Kabylia articulated their grievances against regime authoritarianism, its disdain for rich Berber linguistic and cultural identity as well as its neglect of the region’s economy.

This true democratic mass movement inspired a decade of continuing struggle and revolts.

In April 2001, an insurrection started in Kabylia. In what is now commonly dubbed the “Black Spring”, riots took place following the killing of a young Kabyle student by gendarmes, who subsequently killed 126 people, mainly by gunfire, and severely injured or tortured thousands more. Many villages still display portraits of the victims today.

For one year and a half, a strong popular movement occupied the front of the political scene and put the question of democracy back on the agenda.

This movement organised on June 14th a huge and very impressive march on Algiers and inspired many citizens in other regions to revolt against Hogra (humiliation and social injustice).

Marches in the capital Algiers remained banned during the 18 years since the “Black Spring”, until the Hirak protest movement began in February 2019.

The Hirak has united Kabylia with the entire country for the first time in opposing the regime, whether in large urban centres, remote mountain villages or steppes and deserts of the south.

And it has resisted the divide and rule tactics of repression. The slogan “Arabs and Kabyles are Brothers and Sisters” is a testimony to this regained unity in the face of an authoritarian regime.

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