

Kabylia

Introduction

Kabylia is a region situated in the central part of North Africa, currently under the territorial governance of the Algerian state. Being a coastal area of roughly 40.000 square kilometres which is home to a population of 10 million people, Kabylia represents a significant part of what is now known as Algeria.



The Kabyle people are part of a wide range of first nations or natives known as Amazigh, whose rights are being threatened by increasing efforts of “Arabization and Islamisation” by the Algerian state after its independence in 1962, as well as government repression. Kabylia continues to suffer the same repressive policy as during French colonialism. The Kabyle struggle consists of ensuring the re-establishment of Kabyle self-

determination and self-ruling, the teaching of mother languages in schools and respect for their human rights given previous and current repressive measures by the Algerian state. The Kabyle people wish to maintain their traditions of secularism, religious tolerance and collective consciousness amongst its villages and towns in the region.

Kabylia has a very old tradition that goes back more than 9,000 years (well before the existence of modern Western empires: Greek, Roman, etc.). Kabylia is qualified as being a set of mini-republics and many historians recognise it as one of the earliest modern democracies. It has been the subject of multiple invasions and subsequent rebellions due to its strategic position. The continuity of relative self-ruling spanning across centuries has meant that the Kabyle people have maintained a separate political structure alongside their cultural identity. Starting out as a federation of villages and cities in the region, it evolved into a secular, egalitarian structure of cooperation and played a leading role in the anti-colonial struggle.

The Kabyle people mainly speak the Kabyle language (a derivative from Berber/Amazigh language), French, Algerian Arab (imposed by Algeria in the schools and all the institutions), and to a lesser extent English. The majority are Muslim, with several thousands of Christians (Protestants and Catholics) also living in the region. Overall, the movement proclaims secular beliefs.



Historical and Political Background

The Kabyle people have had a long history of resisting foreign occupation of the region, starting with the arrival of the Phoenicians from the last centuries of the 2nd millennium BC. The Roman presence spread over seven centuries in North Africa. Even if modern history speaks only of Carthage and Hannibal, the great Berber king Massinissa fought against Rome and succeeded to preserve his governance and territorial independence of the land known as NUMIDIA. The period of political domination of Rome not only marked an artificial attachment to a political decision center outside Africa; it also represented an important disruption in the history of the African continent, that is the very advanced integration of a Berber-Punic world - until then very influenced by the East - into Greco-Roman civilization.

Romans found in Africa very suitable and grew deep roots there. In a certain sense, the Roman period can be considered as an episode of these regular alternations between the northern influences and the oriental influences which seem to characterize the history of North Africa till today.

Despite eventual defeat, the Kabyle people maintained a distinctive society from other parts of what is now Algeria, most notably through a system of delegate-based democracy.

The Kabyle people's first contact with their current Arab compatriots occurred during the Arab invasions in the 7th century. Many Arabs migrated West into what is known now as Algeria; but for the most part, the growth of Arab culture and language was due to the dual processes of Arabization and Islamisation. Territories such as Kabylia were not affected by these processes, thus keeping their Kabyle language and identity, with only some parts of the population converted to Islam.

After being ruled by the Ottoman Empire, Kabylia started to develop its own modern political institutions, based on strong sense of co-operative institutional actions and a federalised model, thanks to the relative religious and political pluralism of the time. Villages remain independent in political sovereignty to this day.

French occupation and annexation to French Algeria

The Kabylia resisted for 27 years (1830 to 1857) against the attempts of French invasions and occupation of its territory by bloody wars and destructions and collective murder of its population without precedence in its recent history. During these 27 years, Kabylia was independent.

In the year 1857, after a lengthy resistance, Kabylia was annexed to Algeria by the French colonial occupation forces in Algiers - without consulting the Kabyle people. Algeria was governed as a Department and was treated as if it was part of French territory itself, rather than a colony (Roberts and Malley, 2003). Immediately since the annexation to nowadays, the Kabyle political leadership decried that this decision had been made unilaterally by the French-



ruled Algerian state, with no official treaty to grant them autonomy or independence being signed-off.

The Kabyle people were convinced to join forces with the leading Algerian nationalist factions to attempt to end French colonial rule. They played a leading role in advocating an end to colonial domination and a return to autonomy. In 1922, Kabyle political leadership joined forces with other anti-colonial Algerians in order to establish an anti-colonial alternative, the *Etoile Nord Africaine* (ENA) led by Messali Hadj. To this day, Kabyle hold great regional pride in the role they played in developing an alternative to the colonial leadership of the French, which resulted in the latter's withdrawal in 1962.

All Kabylia leaders who fought politically or militarily were assassinated one after the other: Abane Ramdane, Krim Belkacem, Ali Rabia, Mouloud Feraoun, Amar Ould Hammouda, Mbarek Ait Menguellet, Mohand Khelifati, etc. All were killed by Arab Algerian leaders.

Independent Algeria and Black Spring

With the Front de Libération Nationale's (FLN) victory over French army, Algeria declared its independence in July 1962. After the independence of Algeria, Berber populations across the country were hoping for respect of their language and Kabylia in particular to a return to autonomous self-ruling. Sadly, however, the FLN committed numerous atrocities against its rival party, the Algerian National Movement (MNA), which included the majority of Berber-speakers in Algeria including the Kabyle people. During the Algerian War, many Kabyle people paid the price for siding with the rival MNA, now led by Messali Hadj, with FLN engaging in fierce reprisal attacks against "traitors" to their cause. This amalgamation of the Kabyle people with the MNA and other rival factions continued within the FLN, leading to anti-Kabyle policies. Furthermore, Algeria declared a fierce war from 1963 to 1965 against a Kabylia party "Front des Forces Socialistes" (FFS) founded by Hocine Ait Ahmed, one of the main makers of the Algerian Independence. The FFS party revolted against the Algerian dictatorship. Around 500 Kabyle were killed as a result of this war. Among other things, the FLN conducted a policy of Arabisation to try to counter Francophone influence, neglecting Amazigh languages as a result. FLN Algerian state nationalism – a mix of Arabization and Islamisation – as well as the dictatorship nature of the FLN, severely impacted Kabyle rights and identity which is in high risk of disappearing for ever. The Kabylia spend several years under a state of siege as the presidency of Boumediene organised hunger campaigns against an already punished population.

The 1970s saw an increasing Berber political consciousness due to the very strong repression suffered for almost two decades. In 1980, in what is now known as the Berber Spring, the Kabyle people rebelled against Algerian-FLN dictatorship. Civilians barricaded themselves for over a month in their houses and general strikes swept the region. This was one of the first manifestations of Kabyle Berber identity since the end of the Algerian War. Kabyle national mobilization intensified with the prolonged rule of the pro-Arab FLN (the socio-political phenomenon in the 70s known as Arab-Baathist, common in that time in Iraq, Syria, Egypt, etc.). Kabylia continued to face and resist against its Islamist challengers during the Algerian Civil War, from early 1991 to 2006. While not directly involved, the Kabyle people influenced



the political setting by peacefully resisting the central government's refusal to teach Amazigh in schools, thereby opposing both Islamist groups and government security forces. They were further mobilised after first attempts at democratisation, in the summer of 1998, when a series of revolts over the murder of well-known Kabyle singer Matoub Lounes led to a widespread clamour for Kabyle national consciousness to be restored. (Zirem, 2013) (Mehenni, 2017)

The worst case of repression though came in the "Black Spring" of 2001, when the death of a young Kabyle student "Massinisa Guermah" in custody led to three years of protest in Kabylia. The protests later spread to Algiers, where a sizeable émigré population currently lives.

The central government's response was brutal, disproportionate repression: some 128 Kabyle protestors were killed by security forces, more than 5,000 suffered serious injuries with many more incarcerated without trial. A special inquest by the Algerian government showed that the majority of protestors had been shot in the back by Gendarmes, with real, explosive bullets.

The legacy of Black Spring can be felt throughout the new millennia. More protests were violently dispersed in the lead up to the 2004 presidential elections and Islamic fundamentalists assassinated Kabyle politicians, journalists, citizens, women who refused to wear "hijab", with little to no government follow-up on such cases of Islamist reprisals.

Current issues

Currently, the Kabyle people still feel stifled by the effects of the Black Spring government crackdown and similar acts of repression they have endured since annexation. This resulted in civil society actors and social movements being in a state of constant fear of further repressive acts if they dare advocate for their right to sovereignty and internal self-determination.

The Movement for the Auto-determination of Kabylia (MAK) rejects the Algerian government's claim to authority over the region and deems it an illegal annexation perpetrated by a colonial power with little to no official procedure, let alone popular will. It sees the current Algerian regime as a continuation of the previous colonial rule, except with even harsher measures with regards to cultural and linguistic policy as subsequent FLN governments continued to advocate Arabisation of institutions under the pretext of countering French colonial legacies.

While recent developments have been characterized as positive by human rights and democracy groups – especially compared to the times of the FLN – Algeria still maintains a 'Not Free' status on Freedom House's "Freedom in the World" index¹, with the country's lack of pluralistic institutions posing the biggest problem to democratisation.

There are thus several pressing issues for the Kabyle people with regards to the current regime in Algiers:

First, there is growing insecurity in the region, with multiple kidnappings and assassinations reported. The Algerian state has not been up to the standard required in ensuring security in

¹ Freedom House. 2018. *Freedom in the World 2018: Algeria Profile*. Available online at <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/algeria> [last accessed 14 May 2018].



the region, instead focussing on targeting civil society actors who are deemed a threat to Algerian unity.

The Algerian regime garrisoned more than 20% of its army in Kabylia under the pretext of the fight against terrorism. The regime created a climate of terror against Kabyle civil populations. Several assassinations of innocent Kabyle citizens by the Algerian military were excused as mere errors in the targets.

Second, the recognition of the Berber language and culture, in the regions where the language is prominent, is blocked. An immediate halt to assimilationist policies would be a positive step towards establishing the Algeria conceived by anti-colonialist powers before it became a nationalist project. For example, social housing built in Kabylia is almost exclusively handed to non-Kabyle people. Furthermore, the Amazigh language must be recognised alongside Arabic as an official language of the state. Although Amazigh was technically recognised as an official language of Algeria in 2016, the legal provision has not been truly implemented and the language is not treated equally with Arabic.

Third, the exercise of the right of self-determination must be exercised and must terminate the annexation of the Kabyle province since 1857, instead of opting for recognition of internal self-rule or a re-integration of Kabyle civil society. MAK has been attempting to establish Kabyle National Conventions in 2011 and 2014 to unite the various Kabyle political and social movements around one banner. This is in order to adequately represent a region that has faced continuous political marginalisation. In February 2016, MAK (Movement for self-determination of Kabylia) Congress brought together nearly a thousand delegates and representatives and a proposition of a Project for a Kabyle State (PEK) was adopted.

The demands for self-determination comes as Kabylia finds itself consistently neglected and harmed by the Algerian central government in development programmes. Kabylia is the most densely populated rural area in North Africa after the Nile region, yet it finds itself without access to the instruments that other parts of Algeria benefit from.

While there is some Kabyle representation in the central government, many are discouraged to lobby for Berber rights out of fear of losing their political position if they did, and most Berbers who do not speak Arabic or French find it difficult to participate in Algerian civil society. This is why the Kabyle people see self-determination as the only step to guarantee their political and social rights.

Finally, Kabylia is facing a demographic and economic crisis, as it fights emigration from its independent villages to either overpopulated big cities (Kabylia has a population density of 300 per square kilometre) or towards Europe and Canada for better opportunities. The Algerian government does little more than build social housing which is then occupied by government officials as part of the government's strategy to establish a political foothold in the region.



EU-Algeria Political Context

Algeria is an important trading partner of the EU, exporting mainly oil and gas resources to member-states. There is also a strong presence of EU-based multinationals in the country. (EU External Action Service, 2017)

Due to these socio-economic ties and its geographic proximity, Algeria is considered part of what is known as the European Neighbourhood and thus of the European Neighbourhood Programme (ENP). While primarily economically orientated, the ENP Instrument also works with EU neighbours to improve their human rights record, reform their justice system and other thematic areas such as climate change and energy policy. All this is executed in the framework of an Association Agreement signed in 2005.

Currently, the EU spends some 148 million euros on bilateral assistance programs with Algeria. Given this financial leverage and with a new strategy to be adopted for 2018-2020, the EU thus has a chance to adopt a “carrot and stick” policy to advocate for greater respect of Berber rights and an autonomous Kabyle region. In its current policy guidelines, however, the EU’s strategy towards Algeria does not mention protection of minorities such as the Kabyle people. While it sometimes bypasses the Algerian government to conduct in-country aid programmes, many of the institutional influence it exercises is solely focused on reforming the central government in Algiers rather than providing for the people in other parts of the country.

Conclusion

While efforts have been made to recognise the Kabyle people into Algerian society since the country’s path to democratisation, they are still the victims of marginalisation and are facing demographic, cultural and economic challenges that are not addressed by the Algerian central government. Furthermore, their right to self-determination – as enshrined in the UN Charter – has been grossly undermined. It is therefore necessary for the European Union to act against any potential infringement of these rights and assure that development projects are not restricted to pro-government areas.



About UNPO

The UNPO is an international, nonviolent, and democratic membership organization established in 1991. Its members are indigenous peoples, minorities, and territories who have joined to protect and promote their human rights through nonviolent solutions.

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