

KABYLIE: REPRESSION AND A PLAN FOR AUTONOMY

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Many demonstrations are expected to take place on 20 April 2010, in Algeria, most notably in Tizi-Ouzou, Vgayet and Bouira, to commemorate the thirtieth anniversary of the ‘Berber Springtime’ which saw the region thrown into a state of unrest in the spring of 1980 and the population demand that the Tamazight language be officially recognised along with the Berber identity in Algeria. But thirty years later, where is Kabylie? Let’s move one step back and take stock of the situation.

1) The fight for a Kabyle identity since Algerian independence

Kabylie is a densely populated mountainous region located in the North of Algeria, to the East of Algiers. Surrounded by littoral plains in the West and in the East, with the Mediterranean Sea to the North and the High Plateaus in the South, it is devoid of an overall administrative existence and is the home to a Berber population: the Kabyles. There are between 3 and 3.5 million Kabyle speakers in Kabylia out of a total population of around 35 million inhabitants in Algeria. The Kabyles also number between 2 and 2.5 million in the rest of the country, particularly in Algiers, where they represent a large proportion of the population. There are a million of them as well in France and in other European countries plus Canada.

Since 1962 and the independence of Algeria, the idea of autonomy and of a political plan for Kabylie has moved along; **the FFS, or Front of Socialist Forces, challenges the authority of the single party and the fundamental laws of Algeria which conceal the Berber dimension of Algeria.** The party of Hocine Aït Ahmed led an armed insurrection which was considered to be a secessionist attempt by the authorities. In 1965, there was a military coup d’état. Despite the fact that the Revolutionary Council was essentially composed of Berbers, Berber propaganda was brutally suppressed and Algeria remained Islamic and Arab. Kabylie has always aroused the anxiety and distrust of the government for fear that its claims infect other fringe groups of the population.

At the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, the idea surfaced again even though the public fight for an Amazight identity goes back to April 1980 and the **Amazight Spring or Berber Spring**: Kabylie and the Algiers universities demonstrated for many months, demanding the rehabilitation of the Berber identity, political and trade union pluralism, the promotion of human rights, etc.

The **riots of Constantine** in 1986, then of October 2008 ‘carried forward’ the multi-party cause but caused between **500 and 800 deaths**.

The initial objective of placing the country under a state of emergency was to prevent the Islamic Salvation Front (ISF) from winning the elections. This measure, put in place in 1992, served as a pretext for 'maintaining order' but above all was used to suppress the Opposition.

Ever since then, each dramatic event which Kabylie experienced only strengthened the conviction that autonomy is the only solution to escape from the impasse which the Algerian central authority created (the school boycott of 1994-1995, the riots which followed the **murder of the singer Matoub Lounes** – a crime which remains unpunished up to the present day -, the promulgation in 1998 of a law generalising the use of the Arab language in all domains, etc.).

But it was virtually the day after the **tragic events of the Black Spring in April 2001** that the movement gained breadth and structure. **The murder of a young Kabyle student, Massinissa Guermah**, by gendarmes at Béni Douala (near Tizi-Ouzou) and the arbitrary arrest of three college students by the same police body gave rise to a profound feeling of injustice. The population rose up and the serious rioting which followed over the course of several weeks accentuated the break with the authorities.

One hundred twenty-five Kabyles were killed by the Algerian state services; thousands more were wounded and mutilated; and dozens of people disappeared.

After the insurrection, some intellectuals signed a petition demanding a status of broad autonomy for Kabylie, and the **MAK** (Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylie) was born and took shape.

The idea of autonomy has been present in the public debate in Algeria ever since the Issad Commission which was established by the President of the Algerian Republic to shed light on these tragic events held the security services and the gendarmerie responsible for many acts of violence. The commission stressed that **'the violent reaction of the population was provoked by the no less violent action of the gendarmes, which for more than two months prepared the way for the event: firing live ammunition, ransacking, pillaging, carrying out provocations of all sorts, making obscene statements and beatings;'**¹ **'The violence recorded against civilians is that of a state of war, making use of the munitions of war;'**² *The death of Guermah and the incident at Amizour were just the immediate causes of the reported disturbances. The deeper causes are to be found elsewhere: social, economic, political, identity issues and abuses of all kinds. Responsibility is with the higher-ups.*³

2) The Kabyle struggle today: RCD, FFS, MAK

Two parties in Algeria defend the plan for the 'autonomy of Kabylie': the **RCD** (Union for Culture and Democracy) and the **FFS** (Socialist Forces Front). The **FFS** came out against the absolute power of the authorities right after independence while the **RCD** fought for acceptance of linguistic diversity and the Kabyle identity.

The **MAK** is the logical consequence of the various initiatives striving for recognition of the Kabyle people and its rights. **Relying on international law and democratic action, since its creation this peaceful movement has made an effort at calm reflection and defining a clear message with realistic claims both for Kabylie and for the Kabyle people.** In June 2003, a report by the International Crisis Group (ICG) explained that the MAK was a movement which tried *'to channel the anger of Kabyle young people*

¹ Preliminary report of the Issad Commission, 29 July 2001.

² Ibidem.

³ Ibidem.

into a form of nonviolent political protest and, **this movement had shown from the very start a remarkable ability to mobilise citizens** and eclipsed the political parties of the region (...).’

The **MAK** is directed by the singer Ferhat Mehenni, who is also one of the four founders of the **RCD** from which he resigned in 1997. Ferhat Mehenni also created the Berber cultural movement MCB-National Coordination on 4 April 1993, then the **MCB-National Union** at the end of the school boycott of 1995.

- During the night of 18/19 June 2004, **Ameziane Mehenni, the son of the Kabyle leader, was murdered in Paris**. From the very start of the investigation, the police believed that the *‘had no political connections.’*⁴ Four weeks before the murder of his son, Ferhat Mehenni received death threats. Now, nearly 5 years later, the crime remains unexplained.

More generally, **these past few years various human rights organisations including ICG⁵, have warned public opinion about the worsening situation in Kabylie: ‘This conflict carries risks for the whole of Algeria insofar as it aggravates the instability of the regime and puts in question the relations between Kabylie and the nation. In a more general way, it reflects the fundamental problem of Algeria ever since its independence: the absence of appropriate political institutions allowing regular representation of interests and peaceful expression of grievances (...).’**

The report also criticises: **‘the abuses of authority which occur at all levels and the fact that the agents of the state are not accountable and can violate the law and the rights of citizens with full impunity.’** The ICG is not the only organisation to point its finger at the Algerian regime. In April 2009, a report by Amnesty International denounced the fact that: **‘the authorities are actively trying to gag discussions and criticism and they obliterate the memory of domestic conflict without looking into its consequences for the victims and for the general situation of human rights.’**⁶

3) Repression, the only response of Algiers

In March 2002, a seminar brought together in Paris many Kabyle personalities having special skills (economics, linguistics, sociology, etc.) in order to jointly brainstorm and start preparing a plan. This was also the year of the first negotiations between the Aârrouchs, the committees of villages, and the government after a wave of arbitrary arrests. The negotiations led to a revision of the constitution and to the **recognition of Tamazight as a national language though not as an official language (which means that Tamazight is not taught).**

- In January 2005, a delegation led by Belaïd Abrika, leader of the Kabyle cause immediately after the events of 2001, negotiated an end to hostilities with the central government and wrote up the full 15 claims made by the representatives of the villages and the Kabyle communes – the El-Kseur platform. **Today, 5 years later, the state has still not respected a good number of the commitments made then.** Apart from the payment of an indemnity to the parents and families of the victims of the repression of the ‘Black Spring,’ most of the other points of the agreement remain unimplemented.

⁴ L’Humanité, ‘Who killed Ameziane Mehenni, son of Ferhat ?’, 18 June 2005.

⁵ International Crisis Group, ‘Algeria: agitation and impasse in Kabylie,’ Middle East/North Africa Report, nr 15, 10 June 2003.

⁶ Amnesty International, ‘Algeria – A Culture of Impunity,’ Wednesday, 8 April 2009.

- In October 2006, **Rabah Aïssat, president since 2002 of the departmental assembly of Tizi-Ouzou and mayor of his village, was murdered in Aïn Zaya:** while he was on the terrace of a café, he was riddled with bullets to the head and abdomen by an unknown assailant. This assassination took place at the moment when his party, the FFS, was preparing for a congress and denounced the constitutional revision. Though the authorities in Algiers tried to attribute the murder of Rabah Aïssat to the GSPC (Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat), it remains no less true that: *'(...) the feeling of powerlessness of the population and its weariness with politics have enabled the regime to impose its law, and **one cannot exclude the determination (editor's note: of the regime) to deal a blow to a party which even in its weakened form remained representative. Indeed, to destabilise Kabylie, a very sensitive region where insecurity linked to kidnapping with demands for ransom and other rackets have taken a disturbing turn.**'*

During the last presidential race, all the Kabyle political forces called for a boycott of the presidential balloting on 9 April. For the first time, the recognised parties (**FFS** and **RCD**), the Aarchs (a movement born during the riots of 2001) and the MAK all rejected the presidential election.

- In 2009, the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylie spoke of the many acts of **intimidation against its leaders.**
- In August 2009, in Tadmait, Kabylie, **agents of the Algerian security forces were arrested by the population while they were about to set fire to agricultural fields.** Skirmishes broke out with the population when the Algerian Armed Forces tried to free the agents responsible for setting fires! The practice of arson (setting fire to forests, olive groves and houses) was repeated in many Kabyle villages.
- In October 2009 at Tizi-Ouzou, the worsening social situation, the exasperation of the inhabitants with difficult living conditions and the negligence of the authorities in failing to deal with recurrent problems of housing, roads, electricity outages, breaks in water and gas supply prompted **demonstrations which were harshly put down by the police forces.**
- During the night of 9 January 2010, the Protestant church of Tizi-Ouzou was set ablaze. The Algerian newspaper *El Watan* reported that the **religious site was ransacked by: '(...) persons sent by the authorities in Algiers.**⁷ These were acts of violence which are unacceptable to Kabylie, a profoundly tolerant region where the various religions have been able to coexist up until the past few years in conditions of total mutual respect.
- On 12 January 2010, on the occasion of the Amazight New Year, two major demonstrations were organised in Tizi-Ouzou and in Béjaïa. They brought together nearly 15,000 persons according to the organisers, 7,000 according to the Algerian police. These were demonstrations which once again disturbed the authorities and two days before they took place **10 leaders of the MAK were arrested and held for many hours by the special forces before finally being released during the night.** Overall, the gatherings went rather well but according to independent observers present on the ground, the forces of law and order nonetheless unleashed violence, firing rubber bullets on the crowd and many adolescents were clubbed at the sidelines of the

⁷ El Watan, 10 January 2010.

demonstrations. **Other Algerian media speak of ‘police violence’⁸ and of ‘many seriously wounded following clashes with the Algerian police.’⁹**

If general, conflagration and the mass demonstrations have become rarer these past few years in Kabylie, but it nonetheless remains true that ‘microrevolts’ have become common and, as José Garçon emphasises: *‘there is something new: muscular intervention of the forces of order and numerous arrests, often followed by sentences of imprisonment.’*¹⁰ And the journalist goes on to say: *‘A new Eldorado (editor’s note: Algeria) which has 60 billion dollars of hard currency reserves displays arrogant financial health thanks to the successive rises in the price of hydrocarbons. Negligence and the absence of the state, just like the lack of infrastructures, are nonetheless obvious there.’*

The negligence of the state is also evidenced by the exposure of the Kabyles to Islamic terrorism and crime: *‘(...) the Kabyles complain more and more about a resurgence of crime, particularly kidnappings for ransom, and, above all, the setting up of armed Islamist groups including the GSPC of Emir Droukdel, rebaptised Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Magreb (AQIM).’*¹¹ In August 2009, at Ichekalen in the area of Tadmait, four civilians were murdered in the middle of the street and before the powerless inhabitants.

It is clear that the Algerian regime is truly engaged in a struggle at many levels to curb the Kabyle demands. This is a campaign which is orchestrated both at the national and international levels.

At the national level, inciting violence and repression of the pro-autonomy movement are a constant phenomenon: arrests, exile, imprisonment, ‘unexplained murders,’ etc. The forces of law and order regularly close their eyes to acts of violence against the population. This policy also takes the form of the repressive laxity of the police, the gendarmerie and the Army with respect to crimes and offences which never stop hindering the public peace in Kabylie. Moreover, the **Algerian state is isolating Kabylie economically** by allocating government funds with a medicine dropper. This is an untenable situation and the region survives today only thanks to the financial flows arriving from the diaspora.

At the international level, all means at the disposal of the authorities are deployed to ‘empty Kabylie of all substance’: the secret services, diplomacy and disinformation – notably spread through certain media – are constantly used for this purpose. This is a campaign which nonetheless has not prevented the **Swedish authorities from ‘recognising the Kabyle cause’ and they recently gave their consent to MAK opening a ‘representation bureau’ in Stockholm.**

Today, it has to be said that the situation in Kabylie is critical. Though, on the one hand, the democratic and peaceful movement is organising and meeting with a certain success, it remains true that the resources deployed by the central state to harm the region have finally borne fruit: the security situation is disastrous, unemployment and delinquency are advancing while national and international investments are becoming **rarer**. This is an explosive cocktail which should raise awareness in the international community and, a fortiori, the European authorities before it is too late.

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⁸ Le Matin, ‘Algeria : Bouteflika suppresses a demonstration of pro-autonomy Kabyles,’ 13 January 2010.

⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰ Libération, ‘Algeria, anger at the level of daily life,’ 15 June 2006.

¹¹ Libération, ‘The Kabuyle boycott against Bouteflika.’ 7 April 2009.