

Discontent swells in Kabylie

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The "Berber Spring" has returned to haunt the Algerian state. 20 years after the famous uprising of the Berber people in Algeria to assert their legitimate cultural aspirations, the streets of Kabylie have once again become a theatre of confrontation and opposition to Algeria's bonapartist regime.

Since April, youth in Kabylie have been taking on the heavily armed forces of the state following the death, from bullet wounds, of a Kabyl youth at the hands of the security forces. This "accident" - the euphemism used by the government in a futile attempt to cover up what amounts to nothing more than state murder - took place in a local police station! Since then, at least 70 youth have fallen victim to the state's assassination squads.

But state repression has met with resistance from both the heroic youth, and the labour movement and community which this week mobilised 500 000 to show their opposition to the savage repression that Kabyl youth are facing. This demonstration was followed by another, this time of 20 000 angry women demanding justice for their sons and brothers and refusing the pathetic responses of the regime.

The cultural and social oppression of the Berber people has made Kabylie a centre of opposition to the Algerian state, which has frequently expressed itself in violent explosions, particularly amongst the youth.

Kabylie is a non-Arab region in the most northern part of Algeria. Its population is made up of Berbers, ethnically and culturally different from the arab majority of the country. However Berbers are a significant minority, making up around a quarter of the population. Despite this, the Algerian constitution, drafted after independence from France, refers only to the arab and islamic basis of the Algerian nation. The Berbers and their language, Tamazight, are ignored and as such do not exist in the eyes of the state.

Berbers were an important force in the heroic struggle of the Algerians against French imperialist oppression. But the regime which followed independence stamped on any demands for the recognition of the Berber people, condemning such demands as a threat to the Algerian nation. Indeed Berber activists were denounced as a fifth column within Algeria, that is, puppets of French imperialism in its attempt to destabilise the young Algerian state.

The people of the Kabyl region have stubbornly refused to be held down. They have an impressive history of struggle against the Algerian state. Kabylie is a highly industrialised region, despite its mountainous landscape. It has a strong working class and is an important base of the Front des Forces Socialistes (FFS).

The "Berber Spring", the centre of which was Tizi-Ouzo - centre of the revolt today - brought together a variety of workers' political organisations in General Assemblies which organised the political strikes that were an important feature of the struggle. In 1994, a mass school and university strike took place demanding the introduction of Tamazight in the education system.

Youth have always been at the forefront of the fight for the recognition of the Berber people. Today their struggle is even more intense and goes beyond the question of Berber identity. As one youth put it: "The future, what future? I'm 21, and tomorrow, I'll wake up 40, and nothing will have changed! I'll still have nothing. No home, no money no wife. Oulach the future! (There is no future). If this lot remain, the future is for them."

It is this sense of desperation that has compelled Kabyl youth to take to the streets, despite the savage repression of the state forces, who fired indiscriminately and without the slightest provocation - even groups of youths hanging around council estates have come under fire!

The state's response to the youth revolt has been met with widespread condemnation by the Algerian masses. The government has found itself in a difficult situation. The RCD (Movement for Culture and Democracy), the main Berber political formation, has withdrawn from the coalition that supports the government, thereby reducing the government's support to "conservative" forces - the nationalist FLN and RND and the Islamicists (MSP, Ennadha). This will further erode the legitimacy of Bouteflika's government which came to power in the late 1990's as a government of "national reconciliation" whose main task was to put an end to the war waged by the armed Islamic fundamentalist groups.

Despite the government's "Civil Agreement" aimed at "reintegrating" the armed sections of these groups into mainstream society, mainly by turning a blind eye to their crimes, massacres are still being carried out in isolated and unprotected villages. Indeed, it is not always clear who has been carrying out these atrocities - the fundamentalists or army units aiming at maintaining the tension.

On the economic front, Bouteflika has been keen to carry on with the process of selling Algeria's nationalised industries to the private sector. After Independence, 60% of Algerian industry was under state control. Today this has been reduced to 40%.

If Bouteflika has been slow to extend this creeping privatisation to the public services, this has been due to his fear of antagonising the 350 000 workers who make up this sector which, when added to the fragile political and military situation, could create an explosive cocktail. However the World Bank and the IMF have been putting pressure on the government to pursue the liberalisation of Algerian public services.

Bouteflika is well aware that the revolt in Kabylie could be the spark that lights the flame of opposition to his government, which is why his first response was to warn others that mass protest would be met by severe repression. But his tactic has had the opposite effect. It has reinforced the opposition to his regime and, having brandished the stick, he has now held out the carrot in the form of an enquiry into the actions of the state forces, and a referendum on the linguistic demands of the Berbers.

Fortunately, the workers and youth of Kabylie will not be bought off so easily. Calls have been made for a boycott of the enquiry, with the masses expressing their justified distrust of the regime's desire to present an honest account of the events. As for the referendum, the idea that the Algerian people as a whole should vote on the rights of an oppressed minority will be justifiably rejected.

The revolt in Kabylie will continue. Plans have already been made to boycott a number of state-organised events in the summer. But to succeed this movement must find a coherent political expression that can encapsulate cultural, social, economic and political demands that go beyond the issue of Berber identity and can thereby spread the struggle beyond the region.

This will entail breaking with the reformist politics of the FFS, the de facto political leadership of the Kabyls. Reformism, in its nationalist guise, has deceived the Algerian masses once before. Formal, political

independence was won, but real economic power remained in the hands of imperialism, whilst discontent was crushed by a military dictatorship.

The Algerian working class must express their own independent power. Workers and youth in Kabylie can show the way by establishing democratic committees, defended by workers and community militias, to organise an immediate general strike in the region to impose their immediate demand for the withdrawal of troops from the region.

By establishing clear, independent class methods of pursuing the struggle, the opposition to the government can be extended to the arab community and unite the Algerian masses in a movement that can fight both for the specific demands of the Berber people and the general demands of the Algerian workers and peasants around the burning economic and political questions that are crying out for a revolutionary solution.

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