



Refugee Documentation Centre (Ireland)
LEGAL AID BOARD

Algeria - Researched and compiled by the Refugee Documentation Centre of Ireland on 1 July 2009

Treatment of Berbers in Algeria.

Section 2a of the *US Department of State Country Report on Human Rights Practices for Algeria*, under the heading 'Freedom of Speech and Press', states:

"Access to print and broadcast media for Amazigh culture continued to grow. As in recent years, Tamazight (the Amazigh or Berber language) programming also increased on the non-Berber language channels, as did advertisements in Tamazight on all television and radio channels. Beginning in the 2006-07 scholastic year, the Tamazight language was taught officially in primary schools, starting in the fourth grade, in 17 predominantly Berber provinces. In 2007 the government created an Academy and a Superior Council of the Tamazight language, pursuant to Article 3 of the constitution announcing that Tamazight is a national language. Both institutions are under the authority of the presidency" (US Department of State (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor) (25 February 2009) – *2008 Human Rights Report: Algeria*)

The July 2008 *Freedom House Freedom in the World* report for Algeria, under the heading 'Political Rights and Civil Liberties', states:

"Algeria's ethnic composition is a mixture of Arabs and Berbers. Those who identify themselves as Arabs have traditionally formed the country's elite. In the last few years, following outbreaks of antigovernment violence in the Berber community, officials have made more of an effort to recognize Berber cultural demands. Tamazight, the Berber language, is now a national language." (Freedom House (02 July 2008) - *Freedom in the World 2008 – Algeria*)

A May 2008 update to the 'Algeria: Berbers' entry of the *Minority Rights Group International World Directory*, under the heading 'Current issues', states:

"In 2001, years of Berber agitation for greater recognition of their Tamazight language, music and culture culminated in rioting, and dozens of deaths. The government amended the constitution in October 2001 to make Berber a 'national', but not an 'official' language. The implementation in January 2005 of further vague government concessions to Berber demands, stemming from the unrest in 2001, has been since been overshadowed by a deal between the government and Islamic extremists.

In February 2006, the cabinet of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika declared a six-month amnesty for most Islamist militants who were involved in the civil war of

the 1990s if they agreed to disarm, but by its expiration fewer than 300 militants had accepted the offer. The sweeping 'law implementing the charter on peace and national reconciliation' also criminalized discussion of the conflict. Some Berber organisations that favour a secular Algerian state, such as the Movement for Autonomy in Kabylie, feared that the Bouteflika government was getting too close to the Islamists, even as this relationship remained ambivalent. In October 2006, the president of the Popular Assembly in the Tizi Ouzou province of the Kabylie region was shot and killed. The government blamed Islamic militants for this and two other assassinations of Berber leaders over the previous 13 months.

Major Kabyle centres, especially the key wilaya (province) of Tizi Ouzou, have seen a growth in what one local commentator refers to as 'militant apathy' among the Berberophone electorate. This resulted in historically low turnouts in the legislative elections of May 2007, with a repeat looking likely in municipal elections due in November 2007. In addition, there has been an increase in local tensions within nationally based parties including the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the Socialist Forces Front (FFS). In the southern town of Berriane, three days of fighting erupted between rival Berber and Arab gangs in May 2008." (Minority Rights Group International (May 2008) - *World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Algeria: Berbers*)

A May 2008 *Reuters* news alert states:

Tensions between Mozabites -- the name given to Berbers from the M'zab valley in which Berriane is located -- and Arabs stem from economic, linguistic and religious differences and have boiled over into clashes periodically over the past 20 years.

Residents say Arabs tend to resent traditional Mozabite dominance of private commerce, while Mozabites tend to complain they are excluded from state jobs, particularly senior ones.

Mozabites speak their own Berber language, as do other Berber groups in north Africa, and practise the Ibadi form of Islam rather than Algeria's mainstream Malekite Sunni version.

Berbers are the original inhabitants of north Africa but have had tense ties with Algeria's central government and often complain of discrimination by the Arab majority.

A representative of the Mozabite community in Berriane said: "We need to teach our sons the culture of respecting differences. We are Algerian citizens and the constitution defends our right to freely practise our religion."

The Berriane unrest is so far minor compared to a mass revolt by a different group of Berbers in Kabylie east of Algiers in 2001 in which 100 people were shot dead by security forces.

But street clashes are sensitive in Algeria, a former French colony with a strong history of revolt and where youth riots in 1988 forced the authorities to abandon one-party rule.

Algerians say Arab-Berber ties are a critical issue for the country's search for stability following an undeclared civil war in the 1990s that cost more than 150,000 lives. (Writing by William Maclean; editing by Sami Aboudi)" (Reuters (18 May 2008) – *Arab-Berber clashes shake Algeria town*)

A September 2007 *Freedom House* report states:

"While many Berbers, who form Algeria's largest ethnic minority, express social and political grievances, they do not face significant discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity. Many have demanded that Tamazight be recognized as an official language that can be used in public administration. Following riots in 2001, the national gendarmerie withdrew from many parts of Kabylia. Because the gendarmerie does not have an effective presence in the region, there has been an increase in petty and organized crime. In July 2005, Bouteflika dissolved most of the municipal and local councils in the Kabylia region and ordered new, partial elections in November 2005—a decision that grew out of government negotiations with Berber leaders. Although turnout was only 30 percent, all of the Berber-based political parties participated, and the opposition parties FFS and Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD) won most of the contested seats." (Freedom House (25 September 2007) - *Countries at the Crossroads 2007 - Algeria*)

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This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the Refugee Documentation Centre within time constraints. This response is not and does not purport to be conclusive as to the merit of any particular claim to refugee status or asylum. Please read in full all documents referred to.

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Freedom House

Human Rights Watch

International Crisis Group (ICG)

IRB: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada

IRIN News

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United Kingdom: Home Office

UNHCR Refworld

United States Department of State