

Emerging New Wave of Revolution

Kabylia Uprising - A Ray of Light in Algeria

The upsurge of protest and street battles against the government that broke out in the Kabylia region to the east of Algiers in April is violently shaking the political landscape in Algeria. For the first time in 13 years, and to a degree unprecedented in recent decades, the masses of people and especially the poor youth have stormed onto a political stage from which they have been excluded through a long dark night of murder, torture and enforced hopelessness. Many Algerians are calling this the "Kabylia May 1968", in reference to the events in Paris that shook the French government to its foundations.

The current spiral of upheaval began on 18 April, after Algerian gendarmes (national paramilitary police) machine-gunned an 18-year-old student who had been taken into custody in a town near the regional capital, Tizi Ouzou. When the police then attacked youth protesting this crime, fighting spread to the cities and throughout the towns and villages of Kabylia. For ten days, youth attacked buildings belonging to the government and especially police stations with rocks, Molotov cocktails and iron bars, demanding both the withdrawal of gendarmes from the region and rights for the Amazigh (Berber) people, to whom most of them belong.

The Amazigh are descendents of the occupants of North Africa before the Arab/Islamic invasion. The populations of Tunisia, Libya and Morocco as well as Algeria are heavily marked by their non-Arab roots. Although a thousand-year forced Arabisation and Islamisation has had a big impact, even today 25 per cent of Algeria are Tamazight speaking. In Morocco, the percentage is even higher, perhaps half the population. Although Berber is their more common name, it



Demonstration of 10,000 women. 24 May 2001 in Tizi Ouzou

comes from the Latin word for barbarian and is considered an insult. All these governments deny them the right to use their language (Tamazight) in public life, and their culture is suppressed. They are subject to contempt and discrimination. The gendarmes in Kabylia ride roughshod over the people, taking what they want from small shops, extorting businessmen and especially harassing, beating and sometimes murdering the youth.

Starting in April and during the months since, these youth have turned the tables on the tormentors of the Amazigh people, chanting "ulach smah" (no forgiveness) as they fight back ferociously. On 21 May, more than half a million people took part in an illegal demonstration in Tizi Ouzou,

involving urban dwellers and people who came down from the villages in the densely populated mountains. Then on 14 June, demonstrations in Algiers brought nearly a million people into the streets. Although many Amazigh people live in the country's capital and huge numbers poured in from Kabylia itself, this protest denounced the Algerian government in the name of all of the country's peoples and included a great many non-Amazigh Arabic-speaking youth from the city's slums and shanty towns. Rage and revolutionary violence overflowed as they burned down government installations and attacked the police without mercy.

The masses of people have faced a difficult political situation for years. In



Amazigh youth
clashing with
authorities on
20 June 2001.

1992, at the behest of France, to which the Algerian government is beholden, the ruling generals took power openly to prevent the election of an Islamic regime. Since then, more than 100,000 people have been killed in the context of conflict between the army and Islamic armed groups. These Islamic forces are reactionaries seeking to install a regime like that in Iran. Like their Iranian brethren, they have no use for the masses and great willingness to cut a deal with imperialism, including the US, which has maintained contacts with them. Both sides have carried out massacres in the villages and murderous attacks on sectors of the urban secular middle classes and intellectuals. It is often nearly impossible to tell whether it is the bureaucrat capitalist regime or its equally anti-people Islamic rivals who have committed the countless mass murders and assassinations that have ceaselessly afflicted the people.

It is into this gloomy situation that the people of Kabylia and the youth in general have burst like avenging rays of sunlight.

In order to divide the people, the regime slanders the Amazigh people as being "soft" on French imperialism. It is true that many Amazigh intellectuals and others have preferred to speak French as their second language, rather than the Arabic that is forced on them, and that reformist po-

litical groups in Kabylia have tried to curry French favour. It is also true that the US is circling this situation like a vulture, trying to edge out France and snatch Algeria for its own oil companies and strategic interests. A 1998 US Department of Defence report calls for the US to "welcome the expansion of consciousness by the Amazigh people". But George Bush hosted Algerian President Bouteflika in Washington on 5 July, at the height of the Algerian government's efforts to impose a clampdown, which of course is anything but a coincidence.

The fate of the Amazigh people has long been tied up with imperialism and the struggle against it. In 1871, French generals fresh from drowning in blood the revolutionary Paris Commune carried out the same kind of operation against the Great Kabylia Uprising against French colonialism. During the war for independence against France (1954-1962), Kabylia was a major bastion of the struggle, and the Amazigh peasants bore the brunt of the fighting that eventually broke France's colonial hold. Yet Algeria was not transformed by a new-democratic revolution that could smash bureaucrat capitalism (Algerian capitalists in and out of the government dependent on imperialism) and semi-feudalism. The millennium-old forced "Arabisation" and "Islamisation" of the Amazigh people was continued by the new post-inde-

pendence government as part of the overall continuation of the old social and economic relationships, which mere political independence could not end.

As long as Algeria is dependent on selling oil and gas to the imperialists, it can never be really sovereign or meet the needs of the people. During the last two years, the country's oil and gas income has doubled, whilst unemployment and poverty have skyrocketed. The last decade, during which the International Monetary Fund determined the Algerian government's policies, has been among the worst the people have ever suffered. The Amazigh upsurge has developed within that context and in turn its great promise lies in its ability to spark even greater explosions.

In this light, it is extremely important that the youth and others in the streets have, at least for the moment, slipped out of the grasp of the traditional reformist nationalist forces whose interests are jeopardised by the level of violence on the part of the people. Along with attacking gendarme barracks, youth ransacked and burnt the offices of the two main legal "opposition" parties in Tizi Ouzou. To a degree, and for a time, they have glimpsed the fact that only a thoroughgoing revolution can offer them a way out. ■