

# *The Struggle for and Challenges to Berber Political Rights in Contemporary Morocco*

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**Abstract:** The Berbers are the indigenous people of Morocco. Since the 20th century, the Berbers have fought for ethnic rights through a series of democratic movements. They have gone through three stages of passively accepting government policies, fighting for cultural and educational rights, and further fighting for political rights. However, in the process of fighting for political rights, the Berbers face three dilemmas. First, there is a lack of mature political parties representing the Berbers at the bottom. Second, it is difficult to protect national and linguistic rights. Third, the threat of cross-border Berberism. This article attempts to explore the challenges of the Moroccan Berbers' struggle for political rights from the above three aspects.

## 1. Introduction

The Berbers, also known as the Amazigh, were the first inhabitants of Morocco. In the seventh century AD, Arabs entered Morocco and established the Arab Kingdom. Currently, Arabs account for 80% of Morocco's population, while Berbers account for about 20%. In recent years, the Berbers have shifted from passive participation to actively fighting for political rights and have achieved a series of results, which side by side reflect the deepening of the identity of the Berber ethnic group. But this process also faces multiple internal and external challenges.

## 2. Origin and distribution of the Berbers in Morocco

The Berbers are distributed in Morocco, Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and the Sahel region. They are the earliest indigenous people in Morocco and have their own independent national language Amazigh and a cultural tradition of nearly a thousand years. In the seventh century AD, the Arabs conquered Morocco and established the Arab Kingdom. Most of the Berbers were "Arabized" in many aspects and changed to speak Arabic while converting to Islam. Most of the existing Amazigh language was preserved by the Berbers of Tunisia through memorization of Amazigh language and reconstruction of the Tifinagh script.<sup>[1]</sup> The total population of Morocco in 2022 is 3.64 million. There are currently two opinions on the proportion of Berbers in Morocco. Scholar John L. Esposito believes that the proportion of Berbers and Arabs is 40% and 60%, and some data show that the ratio is 20%

and 80%. Although Morocco has a small number of Jews or other international immigrants, it is undeniable that the Berbers constitute a relatively large minority in Morocco.

Tartkh Ibn Khaldun once recorded, "Since ancient times, this people - the Berbers - have spread all over the plains, mountains, plateaus, villages and towns of the Maghreb... They are powerful, brave and numerous, they are a real race. "The Berbers have lived in deserts and mountains for a long time. Compared with other races, they are more resistant to cold and heat. The Moroccan Berbers mainly live in the Atlas. They live in mountainous areas, the Rif Mountains, and some desert areas, engage in agricultural production activities, and grow various wheat, grapes, olives and legume crops. Some nomadic or semi-nomadic Berbers live on the edge of grasslands or agricultural areas and raise cattle, sheep, camels, horses, etc.<sup>[2]</sup>The handicraft industry in Morocco's rural areas is mainly in the hands of the Berbers. They are mainly engaged in the production of weaving, silverware, and other handicrafts, and sell textiles and artworks in tourist areas in the form of individuals or small groups.<sup>[3]</sup> Different from the modern life of Arabs, Berber society is relatively loose, and most of them maintain settlement life. The chief is responsible for all major issues such as the distribution of family products, marriage, and foreign negotiations. Women have a higher social status.

The Berber ethnic group is the main component of Morocco's minority group and an important inheritor of Morocco's farming culture and folk culture. However, its political and cultural rights are outside the mainstream Arab society. Some Moroccan Arabs are hostile and discriminatory towards the Berber community because their customs and beliefs are different from the Arab religious culture. In recent years, with the development of human rights movements at home and abroad, the Berbers have made a series of efforts to fight for ethnic rights.

### **3. Moroccan Berber people's struggle for political rights**

The process of fighting for political rights by the Berbers in Morocco can be divided into three stages based on changes in domestic government attitudes and improvements in the international human rights environment. These three stages are respectively the period when the Berbers passively accepted government rule, the period of fighting for cultural and educational rights, and the period of further fighting for political rights.

#### **3.1. The period of passive acceptance of government policies**

After the establishment of the Alawi dynasty in 1664, it has ruled Morocco to this day. In 1912, Morocco became a protectorate of France. Later, France and Spain signed the Treaty of Madrid, which assigned parts of northern and southern Morocco to Spain. After World War II, the King Mohammed V actively supported the national liberation movement. After Morocco officially became independent in 1956, to get rid of the influence of French colonial rule, the Moroccan government simultaneously implemented the "de-Francization" and "Arabization" processes and implemented "Arabic independence". The official language policy of "respect" has weakened the rights of the Berber language.

Its main measures can be divided into three levels from top to bottom. First, the official language status of Arabic was established from a legal perspective. Article 1 of the 1961 "Basic Institutions of Morocco" stipulates that "Morocco is the Islamic Kingdom of Arabia." The subsequent constitution deleted the "Islamic Kingdom of Arabia" but retained the positioning descriptions of "Arabic is the official language of the country" and "Islam is the state religion." The Moroccan government tried to construct an official language identity in Arabic. Using the concept of representing Arab cultural characteristics as a unified identity value standard covers the national identity of all Moroccans. Secondly, some Berber language schools and university departments established during the French colonial period were banned, causing the dissemination of the Berber language to lose its public

carrier and making it impossible to achieve large-scale dissemination of the language. Sending a large number of teachers to the countryside to teach Arabic will speed up the assimilation of the Berbers and deny the Berbers and other potential audiences the opportunity to systematically learn the Berber language. Finally, the use of the Berber language in public life is prohibited, and the use of the Berber language in judicial proceedings, in the medical field, in the media and other public areas is prohibited. Until 2014, Morocco banned parents from giving their children Berber names.

Through three top-down measures, the Moroccan government has deprived the Berber language of its right to participate and speak in political, economic, cultural, and other fields. The exclusionary language policy forced the Berber language to withdraw from the public life of Moroccan society and was limited to narrow daily life almost completely. The Moroccan government's single language policy ignores the outstanding contribution of Berber culture to Moroccan culture, causing dissatisfaction among many Berbers.

In the 1960s, some Berber cultural pioneers launched the Berber Cultural Movement, hoping to revitalize Berber culture. However, due to the deep-rooted rule of the royal family in Morocco for many years, and the primary task of the newly independent nation-state is to protect national rights and interests, the voices of the Berbers were not taken seriously by the ruling authorities. From the 1960s to the late 1980s, due to the tense political situation, the Moroccan royal family further suppressed the Berber cultural movement in order to maintain its rule. Berber hotel signs were forcibly removed, and some Berber cultural activists were imprisoned. The interest demands of the Berbers could not be effectively responded to in this tense political atmosphere. At that time, some countries were still in the stage of striving for independence, and the international community paid little attention to human rights and the rights of ethnic minorities, which led to the failure of the Berber cultural movement. There is no international solidarity and support.

### **3.2. Fight for cultural and educational rights**

After Algeria gained independence in 1962, it vigorously pursued a linguistic and cultural Arabization policy, and the Berber language and culture were suppressed and marginalized. In early 1980, there were rumors that the government would shut down Berber-language radio. This caused turmoil in the Kabylia region, and later student workers went on strike one after another. The "Berber Spring" movement that started in Algeria exported Berberism to Morocco, France and other Berber communities around the world, promoting the awakening of the global Berber ethnic consciousness. With the arrival of the "Berber Spring", the international Berber cultural movement continues to escalate, and the Berbers in Morocco continue to fight for their rights.

In 1991, Morocco promulgated the "Agadir Charter" to oppose the marginalization of the Berbers, calling for the legal recognition of the Berber language and the dissemination of the Berber language through school education. In 1994, seven Berber teachers were arrested for participating in May Day demonstrations, and three were sentenced. Later, under pressure at home and abroad, the King Hassan II chose to back down, release the teachers and proposed to vigorously develop Berber education and culture in Morocco and add a Berber language channel to the television. The King and the government's timely response to the Berbers' demands for cultural rights calmed the anger of the Berbers and prevented them from developing into violence.

At the same time, the international human rights and democratic movement further developed in the 1990s, and the 1994 Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities and the 1996 "Universal Language Rights" were promulgated, which raised the awareness of countries around the world in safeguarding the language and cultural rights of ethnic minorities and encouraged Morocco. The Berber cultural movement further internationalized. In 1994, the Berber Cultural Association held a large-scale demonstration demanding that the constitution designate Berber as the

official official language. In 1998, the American Berber Cultural Association issued a declaration calling on Morocco to cancel legal documents prohibiting the use of Berber languages to register the identity of newborns. Under dual pressure at home and abroad, in order to show the government's determination to conform to the international democratic wave and better integrate into the development of globalization, in 2001, the Moroccan government officially authorized the establishment of the "Royal Academy of Sciences Berber Research Center". The main functions of this institution are to study Berber language, culture and history, publish Berber language textbooks, and disseminate Berber history and cultural traditions through television and other multimedia channels. By the 1990s, the conscious democratic struggle of Morocco's Berbers had won the right for Berber culture to enter the public eye.

### **3.3. Further fight for political rights**

Since the 21st century, the degree of democracy in Morocco and the people's awareness of human rights have continued to improve. The Berber cultural movement has evolved from an early rights protection activity dominated by the Berbers to a democratic movement involving other social forces in Morocco. In 2011, Chapter 5 of Morocco's new constitution stipulates, "Arabic is the official language, and the country is committed to protecting the Arabic language and its use. As the common wealth of all Moroccans, Berber is also an official language, and the law is determining the promotion of Berber The stage of formalizing the Berber language and ways of integrating it into the spheres of education and public life so that it can fulfill the function of an official language in the future." The winning of the official language status by Berber marked a substantial achievement for the Berber cultural movement. Progress.

Although the Berbers seem to have made some progress in fighting for language and cultural rights, they are still insufficient in fighting for political power. Since Morocco's independence, Berbers have been allowed to join the national army and hold important positions. However, due to the 1971 coup by Moroccan Berber officers, the ruling party has been on alert to the political rights of the Berbers. In 2004, several Berber students and demonstrators in Agadir, Morocco, were arrested and banned from participating in any demonstrations. The Berber Moroccan Democratic Party, which advocated Berber identity and secularism, was established in 2005. It was banned by the Moroccan authorities in 2008 and went underground. By recognizing the official status of the Berber language, King Mohammed VI of Morocco took the opportunity to make many Berber radicals loyal to the royal family, thus making the Berbers give in on reform policies, which actually further divided the Berber nation. Elites and civilians have hindered the Berbers from further pursuing their own national rights in the political field through class differentiation.

## **4. Challenges of Moroccan Berber political participation**

After 40 years of struggle, the cultural and educational demands of the Moroccan Berbers have been responded to by the government and society, and Berber culture has re-entered the public domain. Looking at the development of the Berber nation in Morocco since the 21st century, we can find that the changes in Morocco's language policy are a choice made by the government to weigh the pros and cons in response to the world's diversified development trends. However, the tolerant policy imposed by the government cannot actually fully respond to the Berber Despite the demands of the Berbers, the political participation of the Berbers still faces many challenges.

### **4.1. Lack of established political parties representing lower-class Berbers**

To safeguard the rights and interests of the nation in a modern democratic country, we must strive

for political interests, and the acquisition of political power must be marked by the emergence and development of mature political parties. A mature political party should have a developed organizational network and specialized organizational division of labor to realize party political functions. Morocco's newly revised constitution in 2011 stipulates that Morocco implements a dual constitutional monarchy, a multi-party system and a bicameral parliament. The party with the most votes in the parliamentary election appoints the prime minister, has the power to nominate and remove ministers, dissolve parliament, and form a coalition government with other parties. Currently, there are many political parties in Morocco, including the National Union of Liberals, the Party of Truth and Modernity, the Party of Independence, the Socialist Union of Popular Power, and the Popular Movement Party.

The Moroccan government is mainly composed of local political elites from parliamentary parties, of which the proportion of Berbers is significantly lower than that of Arabs. The majority of the Berbers are farmers, and the criterion is whether a political party represents the interests of the peasant class. The party that meets this criterion is the Popular Power Socialist Alliance. This political party is mainly composed of workers, farmers, petty bourgeoisie, handicrafts-men, and students. It won the House of Representatives election in 1997 and became the ruling party and came to power in 2002. Although some members of the party are farmers or handicrafts-men, the party represents more the interests of the petty and middle-class bourgeoisie and intellectuals and cannot fully represent the interests of the Berber people.

If the criteria are further tightened, it must be a party dominated by Berbers. The Berber Moroccan Democratic Party, which advocated Berber identity and secularism, was established in 2005 and was banned by the Moroccan authorities in 2008. Currently, only the People's Movement Party meets the conditions. The party was established by the Amazigh large landowner class, and its members are mostly Berber tribal chiefs, landowners, and some rich farmers. It represents the interests of the Berber tribal chiefs and the landlord class. Engaged in the movement for the autonomy of the Berber people and demanded the unification of North Africa under the auspices of the king. In the current parliament, the Moroccan royalists and traditional rural peasant parties unreservedly support the king's policies. Michel, an Italian political sociologist, believes that political parties tend to tend towards centralization in the process of maintaining their own survival and organizational interests, that is, there is a closed circle composed of elite groups within the party organization, which only contains an oligarchy of a few people group. The Popular Movement Party shows the characteristics of centralization, but since the term of Mohammed VI, the relatively strong forces in Moroccan politics have been the Justice and Development Party, the Real and Modern Party, and the Independence Party. Taking the 2021 Moroccan election as an example, the country is free The People's Alliance won 102 seats, the Authenticity and Modernity Party won 87 seats, and the Independence Party won 81 seats. The three political parties jointly formed the 34th government of Morocco. In the four elections from 2002 to 2021, the People's Movement Party's seats were 27, 41, 32, and 27 respectively. Compared with parties such as the Authenticity and Modernity Party, the People's Movement Party received fewer votes, and members from this party are rarely appointed in government agencies. This also means that although a political party occupies a certain number of seats in the parliament, it cannot implement its internal ideas through its members serving as government officials and can only serve as constituent members of the parliament.

Article 7 of the Moroccan Constitution stipulates that "political parties may not be established on the grounds of religion, language, race or region, or on any other discriminatory or violation of human rights grounds." This seems to increase the diversity of party members. In fact, the constitution, as revised in 2011, the 1996 Constitution does not provide relevant provisions on the composition of political parties, so it is impossible to determine whether there are Berber political elites in each political party. Other political parties can independently connect with the external environment

through systematic organizations and use the power resources produced within the organization or the political and economic benefits of the political party after being elected as bargaining chips for transactions. However, the less influential the political parties' control, the fewer resources they have. Compared with countries such as Algeria, the Moroccan Berbers lack strong Berber political parties, and they also lack mature party operating mechanisms and talent transfer systems. Compared to countries such as Algeria, Morocco's Berbers lack strong Berber political parties. The familial rule of tribes and chiefs within the Berber people is no longer suitable for the democratic political system. The few existing Moroccan Berber political parties lack mature party operation mechanisms and talent promotion systems, so that the Berber political parties are in a weak position in the modern national party system. To better fight for the rights and interests of the Berber people, it is necessary to form a strong political party that conforms to the modern national political system.

#### 4.2. Ethnolinguistic rights crisis

Linguistic rights generally refer to the rights of ethnic minorities to learn, use and develop their mother tongue and use their mother tongue to participate in social life. Language rights crisis usually refers to a situation in a multi-ethnic country where the language rights of a certain ethnic group are restricted and excluded due to the government's language policy, thereby threatening the use, spread and development of the language in the field of social and public life. In 2011, Morocco passed a draft amendment to the new constitution, listing Berber and Arabic as the official languages of Morocco. As a result, Morocco's official language policy changed from a "monist" policy in 1956 in which Arabic was the only language to a "dualized" policy in which both Arabic and Berber were given equal emphasis.

However, the social environment limits the implementation of Morocco's Berber language policy. On the one hand, Morocco is a traditional Islamic country, and parents are more willing to send their children to Islamic schools to study. Such people have low demand for Berber language and lack the need to learn. On the other hand, due to the large gap between the rich and the poor in urban and rural areas, there is almost no supply of educational resources in the vast rural areas of Morocco, especially in the south, south-central, and eastern regions. Compared with urban areas, the lag in rural areas is particularly serious. Compared with 2007, the total number of middle school students enrolled in rural areas increased by 19% in 2011. However, according to the report of the Ministry of Education, the completion rate of junior high school education in urban areas is 97.4%, while the enrollment rate in rural areas is only 59.1%. Although the Moroccan government claims that some rural children go to school in cities, and the enrollment rate in rural areas cannot simply represent the education status of the Berbers, it is undeniable that the poor educational resources in rural areas of Morocco reflect the majority of people living in rural areas. Most Berbers lack educational opportunities.

In order to improve this situation, the Moroccan government has established sustainable development goals for education. The plan focuses on national literacy education and multilingual promotion. The report states that the plan has three main goals. The first is to carry out Arabic literacy work, and the second is to promote French teaching in the first to third grades of primary schools and integrate French terminology. Teachers will teach in French in mathematics, physics, biology, geography and other subjects. The third is to gradually integrate English into junior high school education. The plan's language promotion focuses on strengthening the application of Arabic in daily life, and also promotes French and English, but does not include the teaching of Berber language. In the 2011 Constitution, Morocco's provisions on the two languages are: "Arabic is the official language of the country, and the country should strive to protect and develop Arabic and promote its use", "Amazigh is the official language of the country". It shows that the main language used in Morocco at this stage will still be Arabic rather than Amazigh.

In the process of ethnic interaction and development, the elimination of language will lead to the dissolution of national memory. Although the Berbers have worked hard to list Amazigh as one of the official languages of Morocco, Morocco has also announced the establishment of the Moroccan National Committee for Language and Culture, which is responsible for the protection and development of Arabic and Amazigh and various forms of Moroccan cultural expressions, but when language is decoupled from education and only exists in the communication of a small number of people, it will be difficult to improve and improve itself in social development, and it will be limited and enclosed in the narrow living space of the nation.

### 4.3. The threat of cross-border Barbarism

Since 1830, France has successively colonized Algeria, Morocco, and other North African countries, adopted a divide-and-conquer policy among the Arabs and Berbers within its borders, funded a large number of Berbers to learn French, and established a large number of schools. After the independence of Algeria and other countries, as a new country, on the one hand, the political and economic system of the new country still continued the French colonial period, and on the other hand, it hoped to rebuild the national identity of the country. In the process of independent development of each country, the ethnic conflicts between Arabs and Berbers that had been covered up by the decolonization process further emerged. The main reason is that the Berbers, as the vanguard of the anti-French colonial struggle, did not enjoy the dividends of national independence after the country's independence. Instead, their ethnic group became increasingly marginalized in the country's political rights and social resources. However, governments of various countries regard Berber nationalism as a legacy of the French colonial period and are worried that the domestic Berber civil rights movement will have an impact on national power, so they adopt repressive measures against the Berbers.

After the "Berber Spring", Algerian Berberism rose again, it opposed cultural Arabization and political pan-Arabization, and called for a head-on struggle against Arabization in North African countries. To this end, the Algerian Berbers established the Amazigh World Congress and designed a three-color Amazigh flag. The middle character YAZ represents freedom in the Berber language. The Congress is committed to promoting Amazigh culture and common Benefit. Moreover, the movement has shown a trend of trans nationalization, cooperating with Berber areas in North Africa such as Morocco and France. In 2019, Algeria officially banned the waving of the Amazigh flag, believing that it was detrimental to the national identity of its Arabs, but this behavior did not stop the spread of Berberism across regions. For example, when the Moroccan team defeated Spain in the 2022 World Cup, the Amazigh flag appeared at the competition venue and in the carnival procession. The iconic flag connected the Berbers in different regions.

Morocco's current attitude towards the Berbers has changed due to the moderate policies of King Mohammed VI, but the government is also facing pressure from two aspects. First, the Berbers have good relations with France due to historical factors, and France also attaches great importance to its influence in Africa. In his campaign platform, Macron pointed out that "France's influence has completely faded in the Maghreb and Africa." Therefore, the Macron government intends to improve the pertinence of France's aid to Africa. It has pushed for the reform of development aid, increasing its proportion of GDP from 0.43% to 0.55% within five years, and increasing free aid and cultural aid to Africa. Proportion, and at the same time evaluate the effectiveness of aid projects. In 2014, France ranked second among Morocco's import trading partners, accounting for 13.3%. There are approximately 400 French-owned enterprises in Morocco, accounting for 32% of its foreign investment scale. <sup>[4]</sup> In 2021, France's share increased to 14.2%, and Morocco is France's second largest recipient of aid. As France's influence in Morocco continues to expand, the Moroccan government fears that this policy may infiltrate a new form of colonialism. Although there has not

yet been a large-scale Berber reactionary action in Morocco, France continues to support the development of Berber political parties in Algeria and other countries, posing a certain threat to Morocco.

Second, the Algerian Berber political party has now become a secular party, one of the two major political factions. From a legalized organization to an organization with significant influence, domestic Berber nationalism has become more popular.<sup>[5]</sup> The trend of cross-border spread of Berber nationalism has intensified and continues to influence the popular actions of the Berber ethnic group in Morocco. What the government needs to consider is whether it will further shift towards politicization. This is why there are currently few Berbers political parties in Moroccan politics. The Moroccan political arena cannot bear the consequences, which in turn curbs Moroccan Berbers. The development of people's nationalism has stagnated their political participation.

## 5. Conclusions

The process of Berber political participation developed along with the development of Arab-Berber conflicts. Some scholars believe in research that the Berbers refused to use "Berber", which represents "barbarism", as their own name, and spontaneously chose "Amazigh" as their nickname. This represents the Berber the awakening of the people's national consciousness and the formation of ethnic identity. The transformation of Morocco's language policy from Arabic supremacy to a pluralistic language policy is indeed a major step forward in the fight for the cultural and linguistic rights of the Berber people.

But unlike the development of the Berber nationalist movement in countries such as Algeria, the Berber movement in Algeria is powerful and has enough power to influence national policies. Although there are a large number of Berbers in Morocco, officials have always refused to count the specific number of Berbers. The reason is that many Moroccans are already mixed with Arabs and Berbers, so accurate statistics cannot be made. But in a sense, this statement is also an Arabization of the Berber people in national life, that is, mixing Moroccan Arabs and Berbers into one, so that there is no need to discuss cultural issues that belong solely to the Berbers. The Moroccan Berbers' struggle for rights is bound to evolve further along with the strengthening of their ethnic identity.

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