



Arab Reform Brief

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The Amazigh Question and National Identity in Morocco

By, Said Bennis*

The Amazighs in Morocco have become vocal in demanding recognition of their rights and resort to diverse strategies to voice them. While the monarchy has taken progressive initiatives in support of their rights as a minority, and has come to be seen as a pioneer among regional states with an Amazigh community, public authorities continue to perceive cultural and ethnic differences as a security concern and pursue practices of deliberate discrimination and persecution. These contradictory attitudes contribute to a growing sense of cultural and linguistic alienation and exacerbate feelings of exclusion among Amazigh, thereby complicating national integration. The Amazigh groups themselves have been tempted lately by a more radical line, some have sought to internationalize their cause and a few have forged alliances with outside parties, including with Kurds and with some Israeli organizations, thus attracting harsh accusations from political and civil society actors. A sound approach to the challenges posed by the Amazigh question lies in introducing political measures consistent with those that frame Moroccan cultural and linguistic pluralism, and are in harmony with democratic values. The royal initiative is an encouraging one provided the king shows stronger political will to enforce it in face of a hostile administration and an outdated vision of national unity that still prevails among influential Moroccan elites.

***Professor, at Mohamed V University – Faculty of Literature and Social Science.**

The Amazighs in Morocco have become vocal in demanding recognition of their rights: the legalization of the Amazigh language as an official language of the country and a compulsory subject of study; the re-writing of Moroccan history, the use of the Amazigh language in public life, the authorization of Amazigh names, the development of impoverished Amazigh regions and their share of natural resources. Their leaders resort to a broad set of strategies to voice their demands: they refer to universalism, human rights and the rights of indigenous peoples but also build a discourse around mythical entities; they invoke regionalism; use the internet and develop websites; they speak of geographic entities (North Africa) instead of ethnic and linguistic entities (the Arab Maghreb); they rely on the Amazigh emigrant community abroad but also on tribalism inside; they develop identity-based relations, and some groups such as dissolved Amazigh Democratic Party build international alliances with Kurds, Darfouris and Israel.

Given these multiple strategies, the positions adopted towards the Amazigh issue by political actors in Morocco are fraught with contradictions and inconsistencies, swinging between indifference and occasional curtailment, pioneering initiatives and support, conditional acceptance open restrictions and outright rejection.

The attitudes of the political parties

Amazigh cultural and linguistic rights have been virtually absent from the platforms and agendas of Moroccan political parties, and only make a symbolic and superficial appearance during elections. Their presence was clearly in evidence in the elections of September 7th, 2007, when the Amazigh issue was raised in political and electoral platforms as a national issue common to all components of Moroccan society, and not the monopoly of any particular class or group. This shift can be understood as a positive reaction to the royal speech delivered in Ajdir, which called for the rehabilitation of

the Amazigh cultural heritage and its integration into the educational system. It also referred to the importance of cultural specificities in refuting the rhetoric of globalization.

For mainstream Moroccan parties, the Arabic language has a universal and existential hue, and linguistic and cultural specificities remain outside the scope of their political action. But the linguistic policy adopted by multi-party governments had already made of Amazigh a language of educational and cultural sociability

What is noteworthy is the emergence of a new generation of Amazigh demands that are incongruent with, and indeed exceed the parties' political platforms, such as secularism, the rights of indigenous peoples or the division of wealth. These demands explain the call to boycott the elections of June 12th, 2009 made at the national congress of the Amazigh Cultural Movement in the Moroccan University, and the Moulay Mohand Coordination Council of Amazigh Associations in the Rif. Hence, the stance of the political parties towards the Amazigh issue remains an intermittent and largely opportunistic stance dictated by the elections (with some exceptions, such as the Democratic Path Party and some of the party-affiliated newspapers, such as Al-Bayan and Al-Tajdid). Faced with this referential vacuum within the political parties, the Royal Institute has occupied itself with managing the Amazigh issue since 1994, and has come to play a role considered pioneering among regional states with an Amazigh community.

Initiatives launched by the Royal Institute

The Royal Institute made the first important move in 1994, when on August 20th the late King Hassan II called for the integration of the Amazigh language into the education system. Among the direct consequences of this step was the adoption of a televised evening news bulletin in the Amazigh dialects: Tarifit, Tamazight and Tachelhit.

In 2001, this pioneering role was confirmed through the monarch's open backing for the recognition of the linguistic and cultural rights of the Moroccan Amazigh. It was expressed at the Agadir speech in 2001, when King Mohammed VI announced the establishment of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture. This was followed in 2003 by an experiment in teaching the Amazigh language in 120 schools throughout Morocco. In the same year, the Tifinagh script was adopted at the initiative of the Royal Institute, and gained international recognition in 2004. In 2008, the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture issued a "Grammar Reference Book for the Amazigh Language." In the same year a plan was approved to establish a television channel broadcasting in Amazigh, to begin transmitting in June 2009.

All the initiatives launched by the Royal Institute helped to refute the arguments against the recognition of collective linguistic and cultural rights, and have encouraged the establishment of regional coordinating committees, such as the Rif, the Middle Atlas and sub-committees at the more local level. The initiatives of the Royal Institute are a model for North African countries and countries with Amazigh populations, as was reflected by an Algerian presidential declaration to establish an academy for the Amazigh language and a high commission for the Amazigh language. One can thus conclude that the stance of the Royal Institute towards the cultural and language rights of the Amazigh has created a new model and rationalized support for contending with the challenge of cultural pluralism.

The attitudes of the Moroccan public authorities

In spite of these progressive steps, the attitude of the public authorities is most often inconsistent with the declared official policy. In some regions the public authorities pursue practices of oppression, prohibition and confiscation. These attitudes reflect a perception of cultural and ethnic differences as a security concern. They translate into

practices such as: 1. The prohibition of some Amazigh names; 2. The Arabization of public life, and ministerial directives demanding the Arabization of official and administrative correspondence and documentation; 3. Directives by the Ministry of Education to exclude a number of Amazigh figures from the names of educational institutions; 4. The exclusion of the names of Amazigh figures and battles from the school curricula; 5. The alteration of some place names; 6. Contradictions between the directives of the Custodian Ministry and the conduct of officials responsible for the regional educational academies; 7. Deferment of the issue of the status of Amazigh language teaching in the emergency plan proposed by the Custodian Ministry; 8. The exclusion of the Amazigh language from the administrative and judicial sectors; 9. The ban on licensing some Amazigh associations; 10. Restrictions placed on Amazigh activities and activists, especially in universities in regions where there are sensitivities over identity, such as Meknes, Tanjier, Tétouan, Marrakech, etc, such as banning celebrations on Amazigh New Year, confiscating Amazigh symbols and flags.

Thus, instead of granting more freedoms and margins of democracy to the citizenry, the public authorities practice deliberate discrimination. Meanwhile, the Royal Institute uses Amazigh names in its school curricula in order to sensitize the Amazigh to their heritage. Families are sometimes prevented from choosing the names of their own children. The ban on some Amazigh names can be termed arbitrary as the registration of certain Amazigh names is permitted in some regions, while the same names are prohibited in others. Which names are banned depends on the mood of the personnel in the civil status offices.

In this context, participants in the last session of the National Coordination Committee of the Amazigh Cultural Movement held in Tétouan on November 23rd, 2008 criticized "racist rulings" issued against the movement's activists and the unjust attempts of the

“Arabist” authorities to “strangle” their identity claims and usurp their language and cultural rights, as well as their rights to expression and peaceful demonstration. Some Amazigh actors also note the clash between the much-admired approach and linguistic and cultural measures taken by the Royal Institute on one hand, and the conduct of public authority employees. These contradictions directly contribute to a growing sense of cultural and linguistic alienation and exacerbate feelings of exclusion, thereby complicating national integration.

The attitudes of Amazigh actors

In the defense of their language and cultural rights, Amazigh actors have raised slogans such as democracy, human rights, secularism, indigenous peoples’ rights and modernization. It is significant in this context that the efforts made by the Royal Institute to launch initiatives to rehabilitate the Amazigh language and culture have been met with fierce resistance from both inside and outside the Amazigh arena. The Amazigh Network for Citizenship has called for the establishment of “an independent national body capable of protecting and rehabilitating the Amazigh language, culture and heritage,” to replace the Royal Institute since 2006. The finger has also been pointed at the Royal Institute blaming it for the “catastrophic situation” in which the Amazigh language and culture finds itself six years after its creation. The network has also faced criticism for the lack of transparency in its activities, the absence of political initiatives, the incompatibility of its expertise with that of the public authorities, and its abandonment of the path of struggle.

For the Amazigh Cultural Movement, which embraces the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the demand for cultural and linguistic rights comes within the context of coexistence through equality between languages and cultures, and between men and women. Since 1991, the movement’s by-laws have stipulated the right to recognition of the “Imazighen” as a group

with its own special language, culture and identity, recognition that is not merely formal but that constitutes “official recognition” of their cultural, language and identity rights.

The Amazigh issue was internationalized in 1995 with the founding of the World Amazigh Congress, composed of organizations from several states, including Mali, Morocco, Niger, Algeria, Tunisia and the Diaspora states. This was followed by the establishment of newspapers that have demanded the legalization of the Amazigh language and culture and stressed the relevance of the Amazigh issue in any reform. A number of Amazigh radio stations also began broadcasting over the Internet.

In 2000 the Amazigh Declaration was published, signed by a large number of Amazigh activists. It emphasized the following points:

— The need for Amazigh to be recognized as an official language of the state through the constitution. — The adoption of a development program for poverty-stricken Amazigh areas. — The re-writing and “correction” of Moroccan history in school curricula. — The launch of an Amazigh television channel. — The licensing of Amazigh names.

In June 2006, the dissolved Amazigh Democratic Party addressed a memorandum to the Moroccan King demanding a revision of the Moroccan constitution and review of its preamble to enshrine the recognition of the language and cultural rights of the Amazigh people.

Regarding the demand for Amazigh names to be included in Morocco’s approved list of names, the widely spread view is that the positions of the Custodian Ministry and the relevant authorities are characterized by “state racism,” and that the “Makhzan” (the Moroccan government) has “attempted cultural pillaging” of the “Amazigh people”. In internet forums for example, the Amazigh are being urged not to give their children

Arabic names and to boycott the name “Muhammad.” Demands have also been made for the restitution of the land “that has been filled with mosques,” and the distribution of national resources.

Overall, the attitude of Amazigh actors has been to portray the case of their communities as a minority victim of discriminations of all kinds. A majority among them do not trust the reforms and initiatives undertaken by the public authorities to reduce linguistic and cultural differences. They condemn the oppression, harassment and arrest of their activists and the Royal Institute’s ineffectiveness, indeed inertia, towards certain issues, including the History content of the school curricula. Their demands are fairly homogeneous and revolve around certain key principles and stated needs such as coming together and organizing within regional committees; transitioning from cultural to political demands, where self-rule becomes the key demand; shifting from linguistic and cultural rights to claiming their rights as a people.

The above can shed light on the historic relations and new alliances that have been forged since 2007, and formalized through treaties of friendship signed with the Kurdish people and with some Israeli organizations. Not all components of the Amazigh, it should be stressed, are involved in building alliances and relations with Israel, but a minority represented by the Amazigh Democratic Party and its subsidiary associations. In addition, the security-based approach adopted by the public authorities has impelled Amazigh actors to enter into an all-out war with them to gain special standing as a group that includes a large number of victims and enjoys foreign backing. Thus the Amazigh issue is slipping from its national and contractual context to an international context, in which external parties intervene under the banner of various slogans, including human rights, secularism, indigenous peoples’ rights, self-rule, making references to myths or divided identities that differentiate between what is “common to all

Moroccans” and what is specific to the Amazigh.

These new trends and approaches pose a significant threat to political actors, and in particular Morocco’s political parties. A large number of Amazigh associations recently called for a boycott of the 2009 elections on the ground that they are far-removed from the aspirations of “the Amazigh people.” The matter culminated in a demand by the World Amazigh Congress that the European Parliament revoke the advanced status that was granted to Morocco by the Parliament on 13 October 2008.

In view of these developments the following questions arise: Will this dynamic undermine the argument for national and identity harmony in Morocco, i. e. have linguistic and cultural demands become a direct pretext for demanding multiple forms of disengagement from the state institutions and identity of the “nation,” and its replacement with multi-dimensional entities: a domestic region (the Rif, Tafilalt), the external region (North Africa) or a fictitious entity (Tamazgha) whose borders transcend states and nations? These substitute entities do not engage the Arab component, in fact they reject it as a ‘hegemonic, avaricious race’ that conflicts with their special characteristics and cultural and linguistic uniqueness.

Responses from civil society

Tracing the shifts within Moroccan civil society and its interactions with the Amazigh issue can be done through examples from the press and human rights organizations reflecting views and approaches that form the base of Moroccan public opinion, especially attitudes toward friendship with Israel.

As a general observation, the Moroccan press, both party-affiliated and independent, refuses to defend the Amazigh language arguing that the Amazigh attack and systematically exclude the Arab component from their own discourse. The advocates of Arabization go as far as portraying the advocates of Amazigh

language and cultural rights as extremists and racists.

A new terminology has emerged that has come to typify dealings with the Amazigh issue: racism, segregation, sedition and fanaticism. As a result, some components of civil society have come to reject anything related to the Amazigh. For instance, the Amazigh Network for Citizenship has condemned the “irresponsible and racist actions” of some officials at a committee against the rising cost of living in the town of al-Bida, which resulted in the expulsion of members of the network from the sit-in protest held on March 23rd, and in their being banned from carrying Amazigh symbols, as well as insults and slander against its activists.

On the other hand, the letter addressed by the president of the Amazigh Conference to the European Parliament “inciting” it against Morocco, which coincided with a campaign against Israel in the Parliament, was viewed as provocation by Moroccan public opinion. Many cautioned against the nature and motives of the letter, and called attention to “the bullying by some overseas forces who wish to impose their attitudes and choices on Morocco.”

This warning was delivered in response to three courses of action taken by some Amazigh associations as reported by the press: normalization with Israel, racist behaviour against Arabs and Arabic in favor of French speakers, and the establishment of committees and demands for self-rule that are widely seen as undermining national sovereignty. However, the Amazigh “national” movement, which represents the majority, rejected these individual approaches, adopted by certain Amazigh components such as the World Congress and the Amazigh Democratic Party. Furthermore, the demand for revocation of Morocco’s advanced status with the European Union was seen as particularly outrageous because it coincided with the campaign waged by anti-Israel activists calling for a review of Israel’s advanced status with the European Union,

thus placing Morocco in the same category as Israel. Some journalists consequently viewed this demand as a means of “destroying the principles and pillars on which the state and society stand, with the aim of weakening all, as a prelude to the domination of an alien concept that will transform Morocco and the Moroccans into a people without an identity.” Some opinion pieces also suggested that the most serious crisis currently facing Morocco is not the economic crisis, but the emergence of “advocates of sedition,” among whom they count some Amazigh associations, in particular those associated with the Amazigh-Israeli friendship groups. They called for the licenses of these associations to be repealed on the ground that Israel is an enemy state and a state with which Morocco has broken off official relations, and that establishing relations with it amounts to “provocation to the feelings of Moroccans and a deliberate campaign against Moroccan principles.”

Some Amazigh associations such as Jamiyat Sous al-Alima, have rejected relations with Israel. The organization’s deputy-president has stated that inciting the European Parliament against Morocco was incompatible with the ethics of “Moroccan citizenship,” and no more than an illegitimate means of self-assertion on the part of those he described as a “powerless minority” that represents neither the Amazigh nor the Amazigh issue. The same speaker further stated that, “The Amazigh question will not prevail through pressure from Europe or America, but by working on the ground through daily contact with the Amazigh citizen and by addressing the real issues of concern to him.”

By contrast, the Afrati Forum for Religious and Cultural Dialogue, founded in the town of Inezgane, was created to promote reconciliation between Jews and the Amazigh. However, the local authorities refused to recognize its establishment, with the blessing of some Amazigh elements, and amid denouncement by the Islamic movements and some Amazigh associations of normalization with Israel. The authorities justified the refusal to license the forum on

the ground that a town with a fragile economy like Inezgane was in need of development organizations, not one that stood to “create racial conflicts and create divisions among the components of Moroccan society.” The Afrati Forum’s founders were seen as particularly provocative because they lumped together the Hassanis/Sahraouis, along with the Jews and the Amazigh, on the pretext that Moroccan governments have marginalized the Amazigh, Jewish and Hassani cultural communities and supported and promoted the Arab community. Regarding the Palestinian cause, the founder of the Afrati Forum stated that the “Palestine has people to defend it,” and that his concern was only with the Amazigh issue. This attitude drew censure in the press and was described as vile. One article had it that “Those who ask that we not bother with the Palestinian issue are those who found friendship associations with Zionism, i.e. fraternized with the criminal and demand that we not sympathize with the victim”. The author states that they preach a “racial and criminal doctrine named Zionism,” and complains that the advocates of this friendship “feign to be Moroccans, like the rest of us.” These reactions reflect some red lines along principles that represent the cornerstone of the Moroccan identity.

In the same context, the newspaper Al-Tajdid reported that there were “Moroccans from Agadir who were traveling secretly to Israel to participate in a learning trip on the subject of “The Ajdir. earthquake and its effects on Jewish families in southern Morocco.” The article’s author goes on to state that their trip amounted to breaking the boycott of Israel. The reaction of the banned Amazigh Democratic Party was voiced by its president, who emphasized that his party unreservedly backed such relations, asserting that, “Each party goes where it pleases in the Middle East region; some of them go to Jerusalem and some to Gaza, and we go to Tel Aviv.”

Such conduct by some Amazigh actors pose a serious challenge to Morocco as a nation: should it be regarded as “deviant” or

“misguided,” or just as radically different from Moroccan principles and characteristics?

But mainstream actors say that their work in the cultural field complements the state’s strategy of rehabilitating the Amazigh identity and culture, as inaugurated by the royal speech of Ajdir in 2001 , and falls within the framework of “targeted cultural processes and the dissemination of the principles of tolerance, cultural and economic exchange among all states and in particular the Mediterranean states.” Yet some of these moderate voices describe Arabic as a language that was confined “to the walls of some educational and media institutions.” The Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange, an Amazigh organization, has also rejected all forms of Arabization, which it regards as “a violation of the unity of the nation and the people, and a provocation to national feeling.”

The Independence Party on the other hand, which has advocated tirelessly for the Arabization of public life since the 1970s, has begun to face vehement opposition from Amazigh associations. The position of the Moroccan Association for Research and Cultural Exchange can be categorized as a middle-ground position, since the organization has embraced the Arabization and Amazighation of public life, while resisting other languages, specifically French. The president of the association has praised the role of Arabic and Amazigh in the daily lives of Moroccan citizens, and asserted that the two languages “together constitute the basic components of communication in Moroccan society.” He went further by saying that anyone who does not recognize the country’s national language, i.e. Arabic, cannot appeal to nationalism, and that those who reject Amazigh fall into the same category, because nationalism “does not tolerate fragmentation.” The association does not oppose Arabic, but seeks to “defend the status of the Amazigh language in Morocco” and issues publications on its activities in Arabic.

The inconsistencies within both camps are evident. The pro-Arabization camp speaks of Arabization but supports French and sends its children to French schools and universities. The Amazigh elite uphold the use of Amazigh in the Moroccan education system while their own children attend French and American schools and institutes. It is as if both groups have a mandate or a kind of cultural and linguistic trusteeship over the other constituents of Moroccan society, with rules that they don't apply in their own private environments.

The role of human rights organizations

The International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH) published a report in 2005 drawing on the views of some Moroccan civil society organizations, including human rights organizations, Amazigh cultural movement associations, and the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture. The report coincided with the 59th session of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). It stated that Morocco has made substantial progress in combating racial discrimination; that it has taken important steps towards recognizing the Amazigh component by founding the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture and the multiple references made to the Amazigh language in the speeches of King Mohammed VI. But it also noted the continuing marginalization of the Amazigh culture in the media and administration.

The recommendations made by the CERD to the Moroccan government were to work to ensure that there is no discrimination against the Amazigh population; recognize the Amazigh component and the Amazigh language in the Moroccan constitution and consider the latter an official language of the country; and incorporate the teaching of Amazighi at all levels of education.

The 2007 annual report of the Moroccan Association for Human Rights concurred with these recommendations. It demanded the release of students from Agadir affiliated with

the Amazigh Cultural Movement, and the acceleration of the process of legalizing the Amazigh language and recognizing it as an official language alongside Arabic.

Trends in public opinion toward the Amazigh issue Public opinion has oscillated between three positions. The first position, held by a broad section of Moroccan society, regards Amazigh as a dialect or group of dialects that do not qualify to form a language. Rather, it sees it as a dialect of limited use that is unable to keep pace with scientific and global developments, as it has yet to enter a number of strategic fields, such as technical education, the judiciary, industry, the economy, etc.

The second position calls for the Amazigh language to be allowed to assume all the roles necessary for it to become a self-sustained national language. Among the problems that arise here is the adoption of a standard Amazigh language that represents regional differences, to support its legalization and recognition as an official language. This position has to contend with the issue of Amazigh multilingualism, compounded by the conflict between different ways of writing Amazigh: the characters used in Morocco are not the same characters that are used in other countries, in particular Algeria.

The third position sees the difference between Amazigh and Arabic as internal variations within the same family of Semitic languages, thereby laying the ground for an argument in favor of linguistic and cultural blending. It further contends that the coexistence of Arabic and Amazigh within the same geographic area has resulted in various overlapping elements, which are represented in the way in which Moroccans speak Arabic or Amazigh, each borrowing from the other grammatical structures, vocabulary, vocalizations and semantic concepts.

Conclusion

Attitudes based on a preoccupation with security, systematic exclusion or cultural

hostility to either of the main branches of Moroccan identity, Amazigh or Arabic, stand to undermine social cohesion, break apart human ties and prevent recognition of groups' linguistic and cultural rights. A sound approach to the challenges posed by the Amazigh question lies in introducing political measures consistent with those that frame Moroccan cultural and linguistic pluralism, and are in harmony with democratic values. The royal initiative was based on the recognition that Arabs and Amazigh share the same anthropological stock (human, linguistic and cultural) and took an integrationist (Moroccans) rather than exclusionary (Arabs/Imazighen) approach.

Moroccan uniqueness and cultural specificity are composed of two parallel and interwoven cultural and linguistic paths: Arabization and Amazighation. Political actors on all sides must embrace the logic of intermingling and regard Moroccans as two homogeneous groups, whose differences are purely linguistic, while the way they perceive values and the surrounding culture is common to all Moroccans.