

Algeria shaken by riots

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Two weeks of rioting in Algeria's Berber-speaking region of Kabylia has left at least 80 dead and hundreds injured.

The rioting began when student Guermah Massinissa was killed in police custody and three other teenagers were beaten up. Local police had accused the three of insulting behaviour when they took part in a vigil to observe the "Berber Spring". This is an annual commemoration of the brutal arrests and killings of Berber protesters carried out by the Algerian military government in 1980. Thousands took to the streets in opposition to the military-backed regime. Young men in their teens and twenties fought with armed security forces, who responded with teargas and live ammunition.

Four youth were killed—one shot dead at point blank range—trying to storm a police station in Tizi Ouzou, the main city of the region, about 90 kilometres (55 miles) east of the capital Algiers. At the town of Bejaia, further east, a march to the police station erupted into violent clashes. As the protests were taken up by youth throughout Kabylia, at least 29 people were killed on Saturday April 28 alone.

For several days there was rioting throughout the region's towns and villages, with young men overturning vehicles, setting them alight and blocking roads. Bejaia is described as devastated with the railway station and government buildings destroyed.

About a third of the Algerian population are Berbers, who are of different ethnic origin to the majority Arab population and speak a different language, Tamazight. Reports have made clear that the motivation behind the uprising was not just opposition to the brutality of the police. There has been persistent discrimination against Berbers in employment and the allocation of scarce government housing, as well as the refusal to grant Tamazight equal status with Arabic in the region. The government insist on Arabic being used as the only

official language throughout Algeria, and encourage discrimination against the Berbers by local administrators.

Kabylia is one of the poorest and most populous regions in a country where 40 percent live below the poverty line. There is massive unemployment throughout Algeria; even the official rate is put at 30 percent, although the real figure is much higher. Young people are particularly affected, with 60 percent of the population below the age of 30 being without work.

The riots are a serious blow to the government of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who took office in 1999. Under pressure from France and the United States, Bouteflika's intended aim was to bring stability to Algeria, which has witnessed a bloody civil war with Islamic fundamentalist guerrillas that has resulted in at least 100,000 deaths since 1992, and to make the country safe for international investment.

Bouteflika, a front-man for Algeria's military elite, was already perceived by the Western powers as having made little progress in bringing in wider layers of the establishment into the government. His cabinet did contain members of the Rally for Culture and Democracy (RCD), a predominantly Berber party. But the RCD was forced to pull out of the cabinet after the riots. Its leader Said Sadi declared that a government which fired on the people did not deserve the support of democrats. The Bouteflika government had already lost any credibility in the population as a whole: The 1997 elections were so obviously rigged that the opposition candidates withdrew.

Although Bouteflika was able to negotiate a peace deal with the FIS (Islamic Salvation Front), other guerrilla groups refused to disarm and the civil war continues, albeit at a lower level. Members of the security forces who have infiltrated the guerrilla outfits are suspected of carrying out the continuing terror attacks on villagers. At least 10 people were reported

killed in such guerrilla attacks during the period of the riots.

Bouteflika's administration is a shaky coalition reflecting the contending factions within the military. According to reports in *Africa Confidential* magazine, Ali Benflis, brought in as prime minister last summer after Bouteflika sacked his previous cabinet, is attempting to carry out the programme of the “modernisers” within the elite—privatising Algeria's telecommunications and liberalising rules on foreign investment without upsetting the interests of the military rulers too much. Bouteflika also appointed Larbi Belkheir as his new chief of staff, a politician who was prominent in the Chadli regime of the 1980s. Old guard generals removed President Chadli in the 1992 coup d'etat, as they pursued the civil war with the FIS. Yet this old guard, such as the ex-army chief and leader of the 1992 coup, retired Major General Khaled Nezzar, are said to retain much influence.

As the recent rioting died down, the Socialist Forces Front (FFS), the main political party for the Berber region, called a demonstration on Thursday May 3 in Algiers. The FFS is not noted for attacking the Algerian regime. It clearly has little support amongst the youth, as its offices, along with those of the RCD, were wrecked during the riots. The fact that 20,000 marchers were able to march behind the FFS through Algiers denouncing the “terrorist government” without any attack from the security police presumably reflects the consternation in the regime that such loyal opponents could be losing support.

After making no public statement on the riots or the ensuing police suppression for over a week, Bouteflika was eventually forced to call for an inquiry into the violence. In an obvious attack on the Berber youth, he alleged that unnamed forces had been “fanning hatred, and sowing subversion and division.”

Further embarrassment for the Algerian regime came with the recent publication in Paris of “The Dirty War”, a book by a former Algerian army officer detailing the torture and murder carried out by the military against civilians during the last decades.

Given this background, the French government—usually cautious of making any public statement on African affairs—was forced to cautiously rebuke the Algerian regime for its repression of the Berbers. Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine spoke of the

“violence used to crush” the demonstrations and urged “political dialogue”.

Nevertheless, the French authorities have demonstrated their tacit support for and complicity in the oppression. French human rights activists and victims of torture have taken up criminal proceedings against retired Major General Nezzar. Instead of allowing the human rights activists to pursue what had been billed as another Pinochet affair—and would certainly have brought out French involvement—Nezzar was allowed to flee the country before a magistrate was able to summons him.



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