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BERBER

Estimated population: 20 million

Profile

The term 'Berber' derives from the Greek, barbaroi and the Latin barbari, and was used by the dominant Arabs to designate those who spoke a different language. In referring to themselves Berber use tribal names, or the collective 'Amazighen', which means free or noble in their Tamazight language. The many dialects of the Berber language, along with tribal forms of organization, prevented them from cooperating easily among themselves, although they constitute a majority of Morocco's population. Each group was fiercely independent and only emergencies led to ephemeral tribal confederations.

Historical context

After independence Berbers were well represented in the Moroccan army and police force but much less so in government. They very often felt isolated from central government as their patrons, under the French, lost their influence and Berber tribal groups suffered accordingly. In the first three years of independence there were two major tribal uprisings and constant rural agitation against Istiqlal, the urban nationalist group which had led the independence struggle. The uprisings were crushed by the army and were used by the monarchy as an excuse to curb the political power of Istiqlal. Berber resentment was formalized, with encouragement from the monarchy, in the formation of an explicitly Berber-based political party in 1958. The main causes of Berber resentment include economic deprivation and a sense that the central government ignores their problems. Frustration is amplified as the Berber language is reduced in importance by constant migration to cities where Arabic is an essential means of communication and where Berber social structures are eroded.

Under King Mohammed VI's reforms, in 2003 the government began introducing instruction in the Berber (Tamazight) language to first-year pupils in 317 primary schools, and announced that Berber classes would be taught at all level in all schools within ten years.

Current issues

Although Morocco has now begun teaching Tamazight in schools, the Berber language is still not official. In 2006 a Moroccan Berber organization, Constitutionnalisation et l'Officialisation de Tamazight (CNCCOT), demanded that the government accept Tamazight as an official language, adopt a new secular and democratic constitution, and respect freedom of expression.

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