

MOROCCO

The Amazigh (Berber) peoples are the indigenous peoples of North Africa. The most recent census in Morocco (2006) estimated the number of Amazigh speakers to be 28% of the population. However, the Amazigh associations strongly challenge this and instead claim a rate of 65 to 70%. This means that the Amazigh-speaking population may well number around 20 million in Morocco, and around 30 million throughout North Africa and the Sahel as a whole.

The administrative and legal system of Morocco has been highly Arabised, and the Amazigh culture and way of life is under constant pressure to assimilate. Morocco is a unitary state with a centralised authority, a single religion, a single language and systematic marginalisation of all aspects of the Amazigh identity. Recent years have seen positive changes, with the establishment of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture, recognition of the Amazigh alphabet and introduction of mother-tongue education in the Amazigh language into state schools. However, as documented in this article, this situation now seems to be deteriorating.

According to its current constitution, Morocco is an Arab country and the constitution makes no reference to Amazigh identity or language. The fact that Arabic is the official language and that the Amazigh language has no constitutional recognition means that government departments (education, information, justice, administration) and their staff are legally able to prevent the Amazigh from using their own language, on the pretext that it is not official. This is also why the teaching of the Amazigh language is not obligatory in Morocco.

The Amazigh people have founded an organisation called the “Amazigh Cultural Movement” (ACM) to advocate for their rights. There are now more than 800 Amazigh associations established throughout the whole of Morocco. It is a civil society movement based on universal values of human rights.



Regionalisation and Amazigh identity

In early 2010, the King of Morocco set up a consultative committee on regionalisation (CCR).¹ The ACM therefore decided to submit a memorandum on regionalisation to this body.² It was in this context that the member associations of the ACM organised a conference on regionalisation/federalism on 12 and 13 June 2010 in Agadir, in the south of Morocco. This conference brought together Amazigh activists and national and international experts on territorial governance and resulted in the production of a memorandum on regionalisation/federalism which was presented to the chair of the committee on regionalisation.³ This mem-

orandum revolves around two principles: the need for official recognition of the Amazigh identity and language, and the establishment of a federal system that will ensure that power, resources and values are shared.⁴

Amazigh civil and political rights

The Amazigh Democratic Party (PDA) is officially prohibited, despite the efforts of Amazigh lawyers to use tangible evidence to prove the party's legitimacy. Organised activities are not always tolerated in some regions and, on 26 June 2010, the Tangiers authorities banned a cultural activity organised by the Amazigh association "Massinisa" for no reason.

Moreover, Boubaker Lyadib, one of the leaders of the "Tamaynut" organisation, was arrested on 6 January 2010 and sentenced to six months in prison for his active involvement in the December 2009 demonstrations in Taghijit, in the south of Morocco.

In January 2010, in the town of Mrirt in the Middle Atlas, six activists, four of whom were members of the federal council of the AMC, were prosecuted and sentenced for having supported the indigenous population in their rejection of a project that failed to respect their right to prior and informed consent (see *The Indigenous World 2010*).⁵

In Errachadya, in the south-east of Morocco, a large demonstration on the part of the Amazigh population, calling for the right to work and to dignity, was severely repressed on 26 December 2010 and several activists were arrested and prosecuted.

On 17 and 18 August 2010, Morocco presented a report to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) in Geneva on its efforts to eradicate racial discrimination. At the same time, several Amazigh associations, including the AMC and Tamaynut, presented their own alternative reports to this committee.

CERD's main recommendations were supportive of the Amazigh cause: "The Committee recommends that the State party step up its efforts to promote the Amazigh language and culture, particularly through the teaching of this language and take additional steps to ensure that Amazighs are not subject to racial discrimination, in particular as regards access to employment and health services." Moreover, the committee recommended that Morocco should "consider making the Amazigh language an official language under the Moroccan Constitution, and to provide literacy training for the Amazigh in their own language."⁶

The right to choose Amazigh first names is won, despite some difficulties

Despite the government's undertaking to the UN Human Rights Committee in April 2008, in which Morocco considered that the problem of Amazigh first names had been resolved once and for all, the problem still exists in some Moroccan regions and towns. Many Moroccans living in towns and villages throughout the country and abroad who choose Amazigh first names for their children have been refused the right to register these names by the local authorities holding the civil registers.

In a directive adopted last April, the Moroccan Interior Minister indicated that Amazigh names could legally be considered "Moroccan by nature" and he published a circular for civil service officials on the right to choose Amazigh first names.⁷ On 14 December 2010, Human Rights Watch welcomed the "positive results" of Morocco's decision to recognise the legitimacy of Amazigh names.

However, some Amazigh are still enduring this ban on Amazigh first names. Even following the publication of the circular, Amazigh organisations are continuing to receive complaints from people prevented from choosing their preferred first names for their children. One example among others:

- On 12 November 2010, Aziza Boulwiha, from Sidi Slimane, a town to the north-east of Rabat, gave birth to a baby girl. Three days later, her husband, Marzou Salh, went to the registry office of the town's first district to ask if it was possible to register the child under the Amazigh name of Simane, which means "two souls". Salh told Human Rights Watch that the official told him this was impossible as the name did not appear on a list that he had checked. The child's father thus presented Circular D-3220 and documents showing cases where the first name Simane had already been approved. On 22 November, his wife went to register the child under this name but, again, the official refused, explaining that Simane was not a sufficiently common name. He proposed registering the child under the name of Imane – "faith" in Arabic, but the parents refused. Salh asked an Amazigh organisation to contact the administration. At the end of November, according to Salh, the registry official agreed to register the name of Simane but on condition that the

father sign a statement to the effect that he would be responsible for all the possible legal consequences of choosing that name.

Several Moroccan human rights associations and other Amazigh associations have sent letters and issued press releases with regard to this ban, which is in violation of fundamental civil rights.

Amazigh language teaching in crisis

In 2003, Morocco decided to begin teaching the Amazigh language, in response to demands from the Amazigh Cultural Movement. Efforts have been made to introduce it but there has also been strong resistance to the initiative.

In an opinion to be delivered to the King, dated 10 July 2010, the Higher Council for Teaching (CSE) questioned the principles and methods of Amazigh language teaching as established by the Ministry of National Education in 2003, namely:

1. The teaching of Tamazight is compulsory. It is assessed equally on a par with all other subjects.
2. The gradual spread of Tamazight teaching at all levels and in all regions of Morocco, and for all Moroccans.
3. The standardisation of the Amazigh language.
4. Tamazight teaching with its Tifinah alphabet.
5. The Amazigh organisations issued a press release to denunciate the CSE's opinion and emphasise the importance of teaching Tamazight in Morocco.

Right to information

After much prevarication, the government finally agreed, under pressure from the ACM, to launch "Tamazight TV" in January 2010, long awaited by millions of citizens. There are still, however, seven Arabic-speaking channels as opposed to only one Amazigh one in Morocco today, which does not balance out the problem of equality between cultures and languages in Morocco.

Positive Morocco

Although the situation of Amazigh rights leaves much to be desired, there is however a positive climate in Morocco, which leads to a feeling of optimism amongst the population. Morocco hosts Amazigh congresses and meetings with no problems or prohibitions (meetings of the Amazigh World Congress are banned in Algeria and Libya). The Amazigh World Congress organised its federal council meeting in Agadir on 27 and 28 November 2010, with the participation of Kabyl from Algeria and Tuareg from Mali and Niger. The Moroccan authorities facilitated their stay in Morocco, demonstrating Morocco's openness to Amazigh demands and their activities. Morocco also remains constructive towards the international activities of Amazigh organisations that participate in the UN bodies such as the Human Rights Council in Geneva or the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues in New York.

As for other civil society organisations, particularly those working on human rights, they are beginning to support Amazigh proposals, demonstrating the credibility and legitimacy of the Amazigh Cultural Movement's demands.

This latter remains a peaceful movement, demanding its rights by legitimate means. It has become a responsible partner and Morocco must listen to its appeals and engage in direct dialogue with it so that it can contribute appropriate solutions to the problems of Amazigh identity.

The 20 February 2011 Movement⁸ for change includes calls for Amazigh to be officially recognised in the Constitution, showing that the demands of the Amazigh, as the indigenous people, are gaining ground, and this also explains the keenness of the Amazigh cultural movement to build a new Morocco that reflects the country's plurality. ○

Notes

- 1 On Sunday 3 January 2010, King Mohamed VI put in place a consultative committee on regionalisation, attached to the Royal Palace. Its task is to produce a regionalisation plan, to be presented to the King.
- 2 The Amazigh associations meeting in Agadir for this conference agreed a memorandum on regionalisation that reflects the demands of the ACM. See the text of this memorandum in the July 2010 issue of *Amadal Amazigh*.
- 3 See the text of the memorandum in the July edition of *Amadal Amazigh*.

- 4 Amadal Amazigh, July 2010.
- 5 Press release from the Amazigh World Congress, published in Agraw Amazigh, January 2010.
- 6 See document at www.amazighworld.org
- 7 **Handaine Mohamed**: Les prénoms amazighs d'après les sources historiques. Ed Bourgrag, Rabat, 2010.
- 8 The 20 February 2011 Movement in Morocco is a youth protest movement that appeared in North Africa after the revolution in Tunisia.

Dr. Mohamed Handaine is the President of the Confederation of Amazigh Associations of South Morocco (Tamunt n Iffus), Agadir, Morocco. He is a university graduate, historian and writer, and board member of the Coordination Autochtone Francophone (CAF). He is a founder member of the Amazigh World Congress and has published a number of works on Amazigh history and culture. He is also the IPACC North African Regional Representative as well as a member of the steering committee of the ICCA Consortium in Geneva.