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Democracy in Algeria

# **Singer-activist Ferhat Mehenni's campaign for liberal self-government.**

- Presse -



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## **Description :**

ON THE MARGINS of the Arab world, the United States has some little noticed allies. These are ethnic or religious minorities who have never accepted the inevitability of strongman rule. Some of them have fallen on hard times&mdash;the Maronite Christians of Lebanon are scattered and defeated for now ; the Copts, in Egypt, have been lying low for decades&mdash;but others see their fortunes rising. The Kurds of northern Iraq flourished under the protection of American jets in the last years of Saddam Hussein and are throwing themselves into the rebuilding of their country. Less familiar is the story of the Kabyles of Algeria and the bard-activist Ferhat Mehenni, who is one of their better-known leaders.

The Kabyles number about 10 million. They are Berbers descended from the pre-Arab inhabitants of North Africa. Converted to Islam by the 9th century, the Berbers now make up about a third of Algeria's 30 million people. Some 5 million Kabyles are concentrated in a region called Kabylie, east of Algiers, itself a

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predominantly Kabyle city. Another 2 million Kabyles are scattered around the world, primarily in France. They have their own language, Tamazight, and a unique form of grass-roots democracy : a network of citizens' committees, called ârchs (from the word for traditional village councils) that has sprung up in the region in the last two years seeking political liberalization and regional autonomy. The Algerian government, which at first responded to the ârchs with repression, now says it will negotiate with them. After September 11, when most Arab governments were content to express formal condolences, the ârchs openly supported the United States. And this spring, they were the only organized political institutions in the Arab world to applaud the American intervention in Iraq.

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### Democracy in Algeria

*Singer-activist Ferhat Mehenni's campaign for liberal self-government.*

by Roger Kaplan

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ON THE MARGINS of the Arab world, the United States has some little noticed allies. These are ethnic or religious minorities who have never accepted the inevitability of strongman rule. Some of them have fallen on hard times—the Maronite Christians of Lebanon are scattered and defeated for now ; the Copts, in Egypt, have been lying low for decades—but others see their fortunes rising. The Kurds of northern Iraq flourished under the protection of American jets in the last years of Saddam Hussein and are throwing themselves into the rebuilding of their country. Less familiar is the story of the Kabyles of Algeria and the bard-activist Ferhat Mehenni, who is one of their better-known leaders.

The Kabyles number about 10 million. They are Berbers descended from the pre-Arab inhabitants of North Africa. Converted to Islam by the 9th century, the Berbers now make up about a third of Algeria's 30 million people. Some 5 million Kabyles are concentrated in a region called Kabylie, east of Algiers, itself a predominantly Kabyle city. Another 2 million Kabyles are scattered around the world, primarily in France. They have their own language, Tamazight, and a unique form of grass-roots democracy : a network of citizens' committees, called *ârchs* (from the word for traditional village councils) that has sprung up in the region in the last two years seeking political liberalization and regional autonomy. The Algerian government, which at first responded to the *ârchs* with repression, now says it will negotiate with them. After September 11, when most Arab governments were content to express formal condolences, the *ârchs* openly supported the United States. And this spring, they were the only organized political institutions in the Arab world to applaud the American intervention in Iraq.

Part of the explanation for this phenomenon is that the Kabyles have been battling Islamic terrorism for over 10 years. In this, of course, they are scarcely alone in Algeria. But at the same time, they've been engaged in a classic civil-rights struggle with the country's authoritarian leaders. They stress that the best way to oppose "totalitarian Islamism," as Kabyle activists have called it for years, is to create a free and democratic society. The movement in Kabylie has been mostly peaceful, but some demonstrations have gotten out of control, prompting police repression and over a hundred fatalities in the last two years, and the arrest and imprisonment of 57 *ârch* delegates.

Though the *aarouche* movement is young, the democratic aspirations of Kabylie have a long history. Singer-songwriter Ferhat, as he is popularly known, has been serving the cause for most of his 50 years, and he stands on the shoulders of earlier leaders whose fight against the French colonial regime and its authoritarian successors was rooted in aspirations for liberty. Active in the opposition since the 1970s, jailed in the 1980s, under threat of death from Islamic terrorists since the 1990s, Ferhat Mehenni was one of the founders in 2001 of the Movement for Kabyle Autonomy, which supported the formation of the *ârchs* and partakes of their work. His party calls for a federal democracy in Algeria, for which the United States provides a model. "We need to diffuse power throughout society," he says, "not to concentrate it at the top."

Forty-one years after Algeria won its independence from France, the country is still searching for a way to balance the powerful Algerian national sentiment—which many in Kabylie share and defend—with the regional diversity that remains inescapable. Part of the difficulty lies in North Africa's complicated cultural legacy of migrations, invasions, colonization, wars, civil wars, and the process we used to call the melting pot. Today, how much importance one attaches to the difference between "Arabs" and "Berbers" is a matter of perspective.

Various branches of Berbers are indigenous to the Maghreb, the region stretching from Morocco to Libya and Mali.

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Willingly or not, they played host to Romans, Vandals, Goths, Jews, and of course Arabs, who conquered the region in the 7th and 8th centuries. The hero of the Berber resistance to the Arabs, according to the great 14th-century African historian Ibn Khaldun, was a woman named Kahina, whom he identified as a Jew. Be that as it may, the Jewish contribution to Algeria is considerable. Jews got along well with their neighbors, and cities like Constantine, Fez, Annaba, Tunis, and Tlemcen became important centers of Jewish culture.

Although today's Islamist fanatics are obsessed with cleansing Islamic lands of infidels, most Muslims throughout history have been hospitable. This is not a stereotype. In the Maghreb, in particular, customs, laws, habitat, and economics conspired to make hospitality a virtue highly prized. Closely related is the virtue of neighborliness, which explains why traditionally Arabs, Jews, Kabyles, and other Berbers never thought of denying one another the right to exist and, perchance, to thrive side by side. Transcending tribal wars, clannish suspicions, and the rest of the usual run of human folly, there was and still is the assumption that if you have no quarrel with a man, you might as well be nice to him.

The French colonial system (imposed after a dreadful war of conquest in the 1830s and '40s) introduced European-style racism into Algerian politics. Some of France's leading anti-Semitic politicians represented Algerian districts in the French parliament under the Third Republic (1871-1940). And it wasn't only Jews who were despised: Their French overlords treated nine-tenths of the population as an inferior species. Not surprisingly, during World War II the overwhelming sentiment among the French in Algeria was Vichyite (at least until the arrival of a huge American army caused them to rethink their interests). Albert Camus, who grew up in Algiers, observed that the French system was bound to fail in Algeria so long as it was based on one group's denial of others' rights, and of course it did.

The Algerian war for independence, which raged with escalating cruelty from 1954 to 1962, left nearly a million dead out of a population of 12 million. The government that emerged from the struggle adopted French-style centralism—or "Jacobinism," as Ferhat Mehenni and his fellow Kabyle activists term it—perpetuating some of the worst aspects of French colonial policy. The first government of independent Algeria copied the bureaucratic and arrogant French administrative system. President Ahmed Ben Bella and his defense minister, Houari Boumédiène (who would overthrow Ben Bella), insisted on a monolithic state to galvanize Algerian nationalism. Ferhat asks why, rather than draw on the cultural resources of Algeria itself, Boumédiène and the ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) chose to appeal to a distant concept with little tangible value, the "Arab Nation."

Actually, Arab nationalism had its uses. Boumédiène decided that Arabic should be the only language in Algeria. It became a crime even to keep a Tamazight dictionary—at precisely the moment when the Berber languages, traditionally oral, were beginning to be given written expression by the generation of intellectuals, writers, and activists who influenced Ferhat in his youth. Since there were few teachers of Arabic in Algeria, Boumédiène turned the job over to narrow-minded bigots from Egypt and Syria, many of whom were influenced by or were members of the Muslim Brotherhood, the pan-Islamic organization started in the 1920s that is widely viewed as one source of today's Islamist extremism. This was not an arbitrary move. The anti-French revolution had brought together a coalition of ideologies and interests, including pan-Arabists and pan-Islamists. Thus, the National Liberation Front's slogan was "Algeria is my country, Islam is my religion, Arabic is my language." While the generally secular Kabyle leaders may not have entirely shared this sentiment, they went along with it until they realized it could be turned against them.

President Boumédiène died in 1979 and was followed by a weak successor, also a military man. It was at this time that the Berber cultural movement came to the fore. The "Berber spring" of 1980 is generally credited with being the first grass-roots, pro-democracy movement in the Maghreb since the fight for independence. It was based in the principal Kabyle city, Tizi-Ouzou, and brought together young activists from a variety of backgrounds. When the Boumédiène system cracked up in the late 1980s, the Kabyles pressed for both a democratic opening and greater cultural freedom. "We felt like strangers in our own land," Ferhat notes. "We were defined by [in effect] racist criteria, that denied our language and identity."

This seems overdrawn to many Algerians. As a group, Kabyles have done no worse than others in Algerian society. They have achieved distinction in the professions, the army, the high civil service, and politics. The current prime minister is a Kabyle, Ahmed Ouyahia, who is serving for the second time in this capacity. "Whenever the Kabyles get into trouble," a Moroccan once told me, "they wave the Berber flag, and expect us to rally around and bail them out." Yet the Berbers' frustration with the glacial pace of change is understandable. The signature demand of their movement for two decades—linguistic pluralism—was granted only last year.

FRIENDS as well as critics of the present regime in Algeria recognize that the government has faced a major distraction—the terrorist emergency. During the 1980s, as the Boumédiène government demonstrated its inability to manage Algeria's growing economic and political problems, the Islamic fundamentalists presented themselves as a force for reform and renewal. Federating their various currents under the banner of the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), the fundamentalists fought and won municipal elections in 1990, held under a new constitution hastily drafted in response to rising unrest. The FIS appeared set to win national parliamentary elections in January 1992, when the army stepped in and halted the process. Many Algerians, including leaders of the newly formed secular parties, conceded the FIS would have won, but noted that its spokesmen were openly announcing that democracy was useless and even wrong once a theocratic regime was in place.

The showdown between the Islamists and the military-backed regime spiraled into a nightmare, as Islamist hit-squads targeted representatives of the "Westernized" society they were determined to replace with a fundamentalist state, while the army battled well-trained and equipped units of the Islamic Salvation Army. By 1996, the threat of a military victory by the Islamists had receded, but terrorism continued throughout the decade and persists today. With over 100,000 killed in the civil strife, Algeria surely has earned the bitter distinction of being in the forefront of the "clash of civilizations," a clash that occurs within the Islamic world no less than between it and the West. "Kabylie," Ferhat points out, "was always in the forefront of the aspiration for democracy and modernity in the Maghreb, and it is no accident that it received special attention from the Islamic extremists."

Indeed, Ferhat himself was targeted for assassination in December 1994 when his Air France flight to Paris was hijacked by an Islamist commando, but luckily he was not recognized. He lived mostly in France in the late 1990s, making discreet visits home as the security forces battled the Armed Islamic Groups.

Throughout this ordeal, Ferhat regarded the strategy of the Algerian government with deep misgivings. Successive governments fought the armed Islamist movement while giving "moderate" Islamists ministerial positions. Defenders of this political line, both inside and outside of Algeria, point out that it is simply unrealistic to pretend that religious-based parties do not enjoy substantial support, and that it is right to distinguish between those who accept the rules of the democratic game and those who want to take over the country by force. It is probably in Kabylie that opposition to any concessions to religious politics is strongest. Using rhetoric that many Algerians consider excessive, Ferhat complained that "the government would rather make deals with people who are affiliated with bin Laden-type terrorists than with the democratic movement in Kabylie."

Ferhat Mehenni and his friends formed their Movement for Kabyle Autonomy in June 2001. In less than three months came the September 11 attacks. From the beginning, Ferhat Mehenni was in sympathy with the new direction in American policy. Regime change, after all, the decentralization of power, was something he had been working toward for over twenty years. He understood Bush's grand strategy : "The idea is to democratize all the states of the Middle East in order to eradicate the sources of terrorism and preempt a future 'clash of civilizations,' which, in time, should really converge toward mutual respect on the basis of democracy and liberty," he wrote in March 2003. "It may be naive, but the Americans at least can be thanked for laying out their goal forthrightly, and surely it's worth a shot."

This argument has not yet converted anyone in power in his country. The reflexive pan-Arabism of the Algerian leadership was demonstrated by the rather ostentatious visit the foreign minister paid to Iraq's embassy early in the

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war, and President Bouteflika's comment that the war—and especially its stated aims—represented "a dangerous precedent." (Bouteflika was relatively muted in his criticism of the United States, and embraced Bush at the recent G-8 meeting, perhaps because of enhanced cooperation against terrorism.) While few in Kabylie shed tears over the French-American split on Iraq, both the government and the public warmly welcomed French president Jacques Chirac when he visited Algiers in April—more, evidently, because of Chirac's position on Iraq than because of any supposed French-Algerian reconciliation.

In the long run, however, it is quite possible that Ferhat Mehenni's ideas will turn out to be more realistic than those of his extremist detractors, who call him an Anglo-American-Zionist agent and demand his assassination. Like many public figures in Algeria, he travels with bodyguards. It is dangerous to break ranks in the Arab world. On the other hand, in Algeria as in France, where Chirac's popularity fell sharply in the wake of the coalition victory in Iraq, the public exposure of the Baath regime's savagery has dealt a serious blow to the idea—once conventional wisdom in the Arab world—that ethnic and religious solidarity justifies the status quo.

Ferhat Mehenni believes the real hope for peace in the vast regions of the Middle East resides in facing the reality that, if there is such a thing as a specifically Arab Islam, it cannot be imposed a long way from its heartland in the Arabian peninsula, in territories that are culturally fragmented and marked by the presence of non-Arab peoples like Kabyles and Kurds—indeed, that it would be better for all concerned to junk this concept once and for all. It is precisely such a "revolution in international relations" that he hopes the United States will support in the years ahead. That is one reason for his occasional trips to the United States—to keep abreast of politics and ideas here—the other being to sing a few songs "of love and steel," as he says, at concerts organized by Kabyle émigrés.

As he put it to me recently in an e-mail, "The role of the United States in this noble endeavor is key to the future of humanity. Better a world inspired and led by one great power than a multipolar world where nuclear risks and destructive wars will proliferate. GOD BLESS AMERICA."

In 1942, a huge American army arrived in Algeria, preparing to crush the German forces in Tunisia and move on to Italy and France. A delegation of Algerian democrats approached General Eisenhower and asked him not to leave until the French had reformed their system, granting equal rights to everyone in the country. The Algerians have preserved the suite at the Aldjazair Hotel where the great commander stayed. It would be gratifying to think that the memory of the American army in North Africa—the only one since Antiquity that came not to plunder or conquer—might encourage the incipient federalist movement to stand its ground and help bring peace to Algeria and to the Arab world beyond.

*Post-scriptum :*

*Roger Kaplan is the author of "Conservative Socialism," about the political culture of contemporary France.*