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As political talks enter a crucial phase to end Libya's civil war, international bodies warn Libya's indigenous and ethnic minority communities are in the top 10 globally most at risk from violence. Asma Khalifa analyses why this is, how indigenous identity was systematically erased in Libya, and its authoritarian purpose.

SHORT READ • 10 MINS

SADEQINSTITUTE.ORG
18th November 2020

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS OF AUTHORITARIANISM

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Living in the shadows of authoritarianism

A recent Minority's Rights International report has ranked Libya in its top 10 in the world of indigenous and ethnic minority communities most at risk in 2020. As the UN convenes political groups and leaders from across the country for political talks in Tunisia to end the civil war, indigenous representatives met in Libya's Nafusa mountains denouncing the current political talks for their lack of representation. The political talks may end the current war, but those most at risk of violence in Libya may have some way to go before they find peace. Ethnic minorities and indigenous communities are often forgotten from Libya's history as a result of erasure produced by decades of Qaddafi era propaganda to define Libya as an 'Arab country'. Minorities have been neglected or offered piecemeal roles over years of political processes in Libya as a result of this how they challenge authoritarian identity at its core.

Unpopular misconceptions

Despite popular misconceptions, Libya is not just an "Arab" country. Libya is one of the most ethnically and culturally diverse countries in the MENA region. The country is home to at least five different ethnic groups and subnational communities, including the Amazigh, Tebu and Tuareg.

The Amazigh and Tuareg both belong to the same indigenous group, but they are distinct. While the Amazigh are often described as the sedentary Imazighen of Nafousa Mountain and Zuwarah in the west of Libya, the Tuareg are known for their nomadic tribal lifestyle in the Sahara Desert. The Tuareg are a subsection of the Amazigh and possess their own unique cultural practices that differ from the sedentary Imazighen. Another of Libya's ethnic minority communities are the Tebu, who are an entirely different ethnic group to the Amazigh with a different language, different customs and unique culture. The Tebu like the Tuareg have also mainly inhabited the deserts of Libya, often living across borders with Libya's neighbours like the Tuareg. These ethnic minority and indigenous groups together are not small. They make up between 8-10 % of the total Libya's ethnically heterogeneous and diverse population of six million people.

Despite this Libya's ethnic minorities and indigenous groups have faced decades of oppression and exclusion. Ethnic minorities and indigenous peoples who vocally demand the recognition of their identity, cultural and linguistic rights, are not only at greater risk of violence but are a direct threat to authoritarianism in Libya. Recognising ethnic and indigenous groups directly



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challenges decades of authoritarian Arab nationalist propaganda that at its heart refuses to accept a pluralist, ethnically diverse society out of fear of how this may encourage the need for participatory politics or democracy representing the inherent diversity of the country.

Why authoritarians use identity

Authoritarians often construct identities in order to rule through coercion and limit democratic participation. This phenomenon is not unique to Libya, or the Middle East and North Africa, and was also common amongst European fascists in the 1920's and 30s who eroded democratic norms and established their grip on society through constructing new ethno-centric identities and accompanying narratives.

These populist narratives allowed authoritarians to present themselves as the representatives of a pure national identity and establish a political appeal across society through propaganda and in turn the belief authoritarians are at the service of their people. This ethnocentric narrative assists authoritarians to establish a firm grip on society, and normalises authoritarian repression, by first targeting weak and vulnerable groups considered 'foreign' to the national identity. Any attempt to challenge the ruler by its citizens, becomes part of a foreign conspiracy against the nation and its people, and the authoritarian protector who serves.

The fear of Libya's ethnic and indigenous communities is not new, their communities have suffered from repressions as a result of invasions and

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conquests for hundreds of years. In post colonial times new techniques for repression have evolved. When Qaddafi grabbed power in a military coup in 1969, he sought to quickly tap into the Arab nationalist identity to gather popular political support. Inspired by Egypt's Abdel Nasser post colonial vision of Arab nationalism, he began to shape Libya's identity in Nasser's image. The regime's strategy of Arabization of language and culture was thus not inspired by a need to move past colonial influences, as has been claimed, it was an authoritarian attempt to force ethnic minorities and indigenous groups to assimilate into a new Arab identity, that began a new era of marginalization for these groups. With assimilation came Qaddafi's attempt to erase history. He wrongly argued that the Amazighs were of Arab origin and Arabic is the only language spoken in Libya, describing the diverse range of languages of the indigenous groups as “merely a dialect”. In 1973 he declared “the cultural revolution” in which he prohibited any form of publication in Libya that referred to the Amazigh. Libya's ethnic and indigenous were thus not merely forgotten, their communities suffered decades of harsh political and cultural repression.

The authoritarian legacy of Identity

Repression of ethnic minorities and indigenous groups using identity was hardly only a Libyan phenomenon. Arab nationalists spread these ideas, practices and policies across much of North Africa and the Middle East, in efforts to erase the indigenous identities that threatened their ideological projects and grip on power.

Nevertheless, Qaddafi's policies were so deeply embedded in the rubric of society, that they still managed to plague Libya long after his demise in 2011.

Qaddafi outlawed the teaching of the Amazigh language and the registration of non Arab names in the civil registrar. Which continues to be an issue occasionally in Tripoli up to this date, where civil servants refuse to register Amazigh names. Using the Green book and Libya's public education system he planted the seeds of indoctrination from an early age that continue to bear fruit in the post Qaddafi state and society in Libya. As opposed to Libyans viewing the Amazigh, Tuareg and Tebu as indigineous communities, Qaddafi shaped a perception that these groups were foreign to Libya's authentic Arab culture and sought to divide Libya. This belief continues till today. During Libya's revolution in 2011, many of its supporters viewed the Amazigh with suspicion when they raised the Amazigh flag after the liberation from Qaddafi. A myth began to spread around Libya that the Amazigh flag was “designed in France” and part of a foreign conspiracy that would lead to the division of Libya.

Arab nationalists has often tried to link the Arabic language to Islam in order to create religious legitimacy and present their new political identity as authentic. Non arab identities were presented as thinly veiled foreign attempts to attack Islam and divide muslims. This in turn reinforces the perceived need of authoritarian rule for its strength to unify the country and defend it from foreign conspiracies.

Religious institutions continue this authoritarian tradition of divisive rhetoric today. In 2019 the Dar Al Ifta religious authority in Eastern Libya, issued a fatwa demanding “Muslim Libyans” to not pray alongside the Amazigh Ibadi, who according to Salafist Arab Nationalists are not regarded as Muslims, revealing that religious institutions in Libya are not immune from authoritarian practices and narratives.

Decades of Arab nationalist populist, funded academic research speeches and exclusionary policies have established systems, structures and narratives deeply embedded into Libya’s society that are hardwired to push away any alternative authoritarian constructed identity. Over decades these policies have become a lived reality for Libyans with social norms, cultural perceptions and practices across Libya that not only politically excludes indigineous groups but keeps them socially marginalised. Recognition of this phenomenon is the foundation for social and political change. To neglect this aspect of identity conflict in Libya ensures the perpetuation of all forms of

marginalisation, and an opportunity for pan-Arabists and aspiring authoritarians to establish a political foothold in the country.

The post uprising politics of Libya’s identity

Libya’s uprising should’ve offered an optimistic political outlook for Libya’s ethnic minorities and indigenous groups. The Amazigh quickly joined the revolts, and their armed groups factions fought under Libya’s rebel government the National Transitional Council playing a pivotal role in ousting Qaddafi from power. Their role in the uprising did not translate into a meaningful role later. The Amazigh took part in Libya’s first democratic elections to elect the General National Congress. The chief of the parliament - Nuri Abusahmain - is an Amazigh of birth, giving optimism to Libya’s ethnic minorities and indigineous groups who believed this representation would end their political marginalisation. This was not the case as the chief represented the interests of his political camp in parliament and not the demands of the Amazigh community.

“A key question will be how Libyans can reconcile their differences, without addressing the systematic suffering of Libya’s ethnic and indigenous groups?”

Libya’s ethnic minorities and indigenous groups have looked beyond political posts, and focussed their political attention in the post uprising era on Libya’s constitution as the foundation to recognising their cultural and linguistic rights and establishing themselves in a meaningful way as a formal part of Libya’s identity. However in 2014, the Amazigh Supreme Council and the majority of the Amazigh community boycotted Libya’s Constitutional Drafting Assembly (CDA) due to the unfairness in distribution of seats, where Arab Libyans came out as the majority, while Tuareg and Tebu members dropped out at later different intervals for being “voted out” on a number of essential issues, including that of language.

This has left Libya’s ethnic minorities absent from a core institutional process that will define the political future of the country and the lives of all of its citizens. Libya is at a crossroads. It’s rival factions have been at war for nearly a decade, and are on the verge of a new UN brokered political process to unify the country. As part of the process grievances will be heard, and a new government established that will need to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past that led to war. A key question will be how Libyans can reconcile their differences, without addressing the systematic suffering of Libya’s ethnic and indigenous groups? Libya’s constitutional options are limited, and none of the current options can offer a meaningful route forward for ethnic and indigineous groups. Libyans may be given the option to ratify the CDA’s constitutional draft to which they were not a part, or the Kingdom of Libya’s constitution of 1950-1963 as the legal

basis and identity of Libya’s future. Irrespective of choice, these documents must be amended to acknowledge and recognize Libya’s indigenous groups as indigeneous. Not as “cultural components” or ethnic minorities, but indigenous to Libya rather than foreign as it is commonly claimed. This recognition is not to divide and separate Libyans between those who belong and those who don’t. Indigeneous is a legal term in international law that provides specific protection to different indigenous cultures, and as minority right’s international has reported, in Libya’s case it is desperately needed. This will define if Libya continues to live in the shadow of Qaddafi’s authoritarian legacy of social and political repression, or opens a new political chapter that helps Libyans together move past his rule.



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