Challenges for Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in Contemporary Maghreb: The Berber/Amazigh Movement in Morocco and Algeria

I. Introduction

Around the world, ethnocultural minorities are demanding greater recognition and accommodation of their cultural practices and identities. The nature of these minority demands and the responses to them vary considerably from culture to culture, but no culture is entirely isolated and self-contained, and so local debates are always also shaped by global debates.¹ On the one hand, there is a global discourse of multiculturalism, which is strongly shaped by Western liberal-democratic experiences of multiculturalism. The term multiculturalism first emerged in the late 1960s in several Western democracies, as a label for a series of new experiments in the accommodation of diversity.² From the late 1960s to the late 1990s, there was in fact a broad movement across the Western democracies toward building new forms of citizenship that were more accommodating of ethnic, racial and linguistic minorities. Until quite recently, these experiments in multiculturalism were generally seen as successful, at least in comparison with earlier policies of exclusion and assimilation. Indeed, these Western experiments in multicultu-

¹ For a discussion of these factors in the Arab World, see Will Kymlicka and Eva Pföstl (eds.), Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in the Arab World (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2014).

multiculturalism were seen as sufficiently successful so that, in the early 1990s, they were promoted as models for the non-Western world. Starting first in Eastern Europe and Latin America, and then in Asia, Africa and the Middle East, international organizations such as the European Union and the United Nations have begun to encourage countries around the world to adopt multiculturalism policies, often modelled on what were seen as the “best practices” of multiculturalism in the West.³ Indeed, respect for minority rights is now often seen as one of the requirements of a decent and modern state. These normative expectations are increasingly applied to Arab states. Some commentators have argued that “for every state of the Middle East, respect for minority rights has become—together with women’s rights—the barometer of its successful transition to democracy”.

On the other hand, every region of the world has its own historic traditions of ethnic coexistence, often with its own distinctive vocabularies and concepts which may differ from Western approaches.⁵ These two discourses are automatically contradictory or incompatible: the Arab states voted unanimously at the UN for the 1992 Declaration on minority rights and the 2007 Declaration on indigenous rights, as well as the 2001 UNESCO declaration on cultural diversity. Yet, it remains true that appeal to the new global discourse of minority rights is politically sensitive. Throughout the Arab world, minorities remain “marked citizens” whose political mobilization is viewed with distrust if not outright repression.⁶ This is not to deny the existence of a range of minority accommodations in various Arab countries;⁷ however, these accommodations have rarely, if ever, had the transformative and democratizing effects to which advocates of minority rights aspire.

In view of this volume’s thematic focus on Minority Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, the goal of this article is to investigate factors that help to explain this scepticism of, and resistance to, the new minority politics in the region. The first part of the article will examine the historical processes through which national identity has been defined in the Maghreb. The focus will be on (a) the legacy of the millet system, (b) colonial and neo-colonial manipulation and (c) the imperatives of post-colonial state-building. It is argued that these three factors at least partly explain the hostility to minority politics in Maghreb. However,

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⁵ Kymlicka and Pföstl, op.cit. note 1, Introduction.
⁷ For an overview, see Ofra Bengio and Gabriel Ben-Dor (eds.), Minorities and the State in the Arab World (Lynne Rienner, Boulder, CO, 1999); Maya Shatzmiller (ed.), Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies (McGill–Queens’s University Press, Toronto, 2005).