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Libya beset by ethnic tension as elections loom

Libya's minority Berber community faced persecution under Gaddafi's pan-Arabism – now they fear an Islamist takeover

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Libya's National Army wave a Berber flag during a rally in Tripoli. Many Berbers, or Imazighen, feel let down by the country's transitional leadership. Photograph: Reuters

In a villa on Libya's stunning sea coast, a sculptor finishes off a war memorial. It commemorates the 50 men from the western town of Zuwara who perished last year in the battle against Muammar Gaddafi.

The slab, which is destined for Zuwara's small concrete roundabout, is engraved in two languages: one is Arabic, the other is Tifinagh, the ancient script of North Africa's Berbers, or Imazighen (the Berbers prefer to be called Imazighen, noting that Berber originally meant "barbarian"). Before last year's uprising, anyone who spoke Berber in public could be arrested.

During his 42 years in power, Gaddafi persecuted the country's minority Berber or Amazigh community, arresting its leaders, banishing its language from schools, and having protesters beaten. His vision for Libya was as a mono-Arab state. Gaddafi insisted the "traitorous" Imazighen were an ethnolinguistic fiction, even though they make up about 600,000 of Libya's 6 million population.

Nearly a year after Gaddafi was turfed out of power, and days before the country's first democratic election this Saturday, Amazigh culture is enjoying a revival. Zuwara's secret police headquarters has been transformed into an Amazigh radio station. A beach mansion belonging to a Gaddafi loyalist is home to an artists' workshop and a recording studio where banned Tifinagh songs and poems are heard again. Amazigh activists are busy relearning their forgotten, 2,000-year-old Punic alphabet.

But there are darker rumblings too. In March, 17 people were killed after fighting erupted between Amazigh Zuwara and the neighbouring Arab towns of Riqdaleen and Al-Jamail. The two sides lobbed mortars at each other. The ethnic clashes were triggered by fresh tensions over who did what during last

year's revolution – with Zuwara accusing its neighbours of siding with Gaddafi – as well as smouldering disputes over land and smuggling routes.

This isn't post-revolutionary Libya's only conflict. In the absence of a strong central authority, ethnic quarrels have broken out in several parts of the country, most notably in the south-eastern desert town of Kufra. Here, more than 150 people have been killed in fighting between black Toubou tribesmen and their Arab Zuwayy neighbours, leading some to wonder whether the country is already beginning to fall apart.

Zuwara is 102km west of Tripoli, close to the Tunisian border. It was one of the first towns to rise up in February 2011 and the town's main high street still shows signs of last year's heavy fighting: several of the shops have punched-in upper storeys and mangled balustrades.

Local anti-Gaddafi fighters seized control of the town for 23 days. The regime sent a long column of tanks to crush resistance. It also allegedly encouraged local Arabs to take revenge. When it came under government control again, revolutionaries at night smuggled wounded soldiers and defectors to nearby Tunisia in fishing boats, a perilous journey.

Having played a leading role in overthrowing Gaddafi, with other Imazighen fighting their way down from the mountains, leaders say they now feel let down by the country's transitional leadership. And they are nervous about what role the Amazigh people will be given in Libya's new political ascendancy. Especially, they say, if Islamist parties – as seems possible, though no one quite knows what will happen this Saturday – sweep to power in Tripoli.

"We helped our brothers overthrow the dictator. But now feel we are being betrayed," Eissa al-Hammissi, an ethnic Amazigh documentary maker, says. The current government is refusing to allow Amazigh programming on state TV, he complains, and seems deaf to the community's legitimate claims for greater political representation. "We want change. We want to be treated equally. We are deprived of a lot of rights," he adds.

Hammissi is gloomy about Libya's long-term prospects. He fears the country's new leaders share the same prejudices as the old, and have proved incapable of keeping a lid on simmering ethnic conflict. Having been victims of Gaddafi's megalomanic pan-Arabism, he is now afraid of an Islamist takeover, he says.

"Look at the map. Look to our east and west. The Islamists have taken over in Tunisia and Egypt. They are going to take over Libya too," he warns. "I don't think they are going to push the country in the right direction."

Conservative religious groups see no role for the Amazigh language, he argues, and believe Arabic is the exclusive language of God and the Qur'an. Others, however, are more optimistic, noting that extremist Islamist parties had gained little traction among ordinary Libyans.

"If we are to build a new Libya, we need a new school of thought and new minds," Ayoob Sufyan, an articulate English-speaking Amazigh activist, says.

At 25, Sufyan is one of the youngest candidates to take part in Saturday's election. He believes he has a good chance of winning the Zuwara constituency. "What we are interested in is recognition for our identity and language," he says.

After Saturday's poll, Libya's new national congress will elect a government and a committee tasked with drafting a constitution. Sufyan says his community's key demand is that Tifinagh is made an official language – unthinkable under Gaddafi, and by no means guaranteed now.

He also wants Zuwarans to be able to return to their olive groves and farms next to neighbouring Arab towns. This is currently too dangerous after the bitter clashes in March.

At the revolutionary headquarters in the town of Al-Jamail, fighters say the Zuwarans are to blame for the violence in March. They admit that they had arrested 23 Zuwaran militiamen but say the men had strayed into Arab territory. They were later released after interrogation. The fighters said three people from their town were killed during the bombardment, including a woman. Asked whether they would vote on Saturday, they said they would, though they were uncertain whom to vote for.

Back at the seaside villa, the war memorial is drying in the afternoon sun. On the beach, with its palm trees and shade-providing wooden shacks, a few people are splashing about in the turquoise Mediterranean.

What had happened to the villa's former owner, a high-ranking Gaddafi politician? "He disappeared," Sufyan says. "Nobody knows. But he's probably dead."