



The Moroccan – Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic Conflict

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Abstract

The threatening forty-six-year-old plus- crisis embarked by Morocco and the armed wing of Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic Polisario Front concerning the contested land of Western Sahara, a Northwest African area of around 252, 120 km (97,000sqmiles) assumed a dangerous turn after years of no progress. In mid-November 2020, the armed wing of Saharawi Democratic Republic, a group looking for freedom for the territory put an end to a 1991 UN-brokered cease-fire accord and returned to armed conflict against Moroccan forces that had occupied the Guerguerat littoral area with Mauritania-a UN controlled area-in violation of 1991 accord. This work accounts for the Moroccan-Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic conflict that upscaled immediately Spain withdraws from the Spanish Sahara in agreement with the Madrid deal. The paper basically tries to trace the origin of the conflict and while the uprising and claim of both parties involved is lasting so long and why the actors in the international system involved took certain stands as to achieving their own interest in relation to the conflict. It is clear that Moroccan claims to the Western Sahara were confronted by the Polisario Front. The data for this work was derived from secondary sources like books, journals, diplomatic materials, Newspapers, Magazines, and internet materials. Documentary evidence was used as an analytical tool while the Marxist conflict theory was used as the theoretical framework. It was discovered that the urge for territorial consolidation and drive for natural resources was the push behind Moroccan claim while the nationalist desire for independence is the push for the Polisario Front. The prospect for a peaceful end to this conflict seems remote, at best. Based on the antecedents of the plebiscite process, it is remote that both Morocco and Polisario Front may accept to a final voter identification and implementation plan. Deducing from this, the work recommends that the international community should continue working toward the resolution of the conflict to encourage a cordial and lasting panacea to the crisis.

Keywords: Conflict, Democratic, Polisario, Republic and Saharawi

1. Introduction

The Moroccan Saharawi crisis is a still-on issue between the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic and the state of Morocco. The crisis started from an uproar by the Polisario Front against Spanish imperial forces from 1973 to 1975 and the following Western Sahara War against Morocco between 1975 and 1991 (Ahmed,2010). The conflict took a new

turn after the withdrawal of Spain from the Spanish Sahara in agreement with the Madrid deal.

No matter series of multiple peace moves through the 1990s and early 2000s, the crisis came up again as the “Independence Intifada” in 2005; a collection of agitations, clashes and anger movements, which came to the fore in May 2005 in the Moroccan-



held parts of Western Sahara, and stayed until November of that same year (Arieff, 2013). Toward the end of 2010, the protests re-emerged in the GdeimIzlik refugee camp in Western Sahara. While the riots were initially peaceful, they were later marked by violence between civilians and security forces, amounting to loss of lives on both sides. Another wave of agitations began on 26th February 2011, as a response to the inability of the police to stop anti-Saharawi looting in the city of Dakhla, Western Sahara; disturbances soon spread throughout the Western Sahara. Though sporadic agitations continue, the disturbances had largely decreased by May 2011 (Arieff, 2013).

Currently, large parts of Western Sahara are ruled by the Moroccan Government and are known as the Southern Provinces, while some 20 percent of the Western Sahara territory remains under the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), the Polisario territory with few international recognitions (Mohammed, 2020). The questions of equal recognition, Saharawi state independence and the large numbers of Saharawi refugees disorganized by the crisis are among the main problems of the ongoing Western Sahara peace initiatives (Mohammed, 2020). The motivations and justifications of the paper are why the conflict has become difficult and intractable to resolve? Why is Morocco holding tight to its claim on the territory? Why is Morocco using the Saharawi territory to settle some of her population (Green March)? And why EU, Arab League, US and Israel are either supporting or negligent of the crisis?

2. Methodology

This is a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative study. The data for the work was obtained through secondary sources like books, journals, theses, magazines', newspapers, and internet materials. The data collected was analyzed through

documentary evidence and; the Marxist conflict theory was used as a tool of explanation.

3. Theoretical Framework

This work adopted the Marxist conflict theory to explain the basis of Moroccan-Saharawi conflict. The theory owes itself to the German thinker Karl Marx, who initiated conflict theory in the 19th century to describe the link between the governing and governed classes in capitalist societies (Marx, 1975). Marx Weber, a 19th-century German sociologist and economist, were in tandem with Marx's theory that society are always in contestation over resources. Nevertheless, he believed that conflict theory is akin to power on levels other than class inequalities, including gender, race and religion.

The theory is situated on the belief that groups always compete for scarce resources and control, cursing inequalities in those groups and their related occupations. Crisis happens when lopsided amounts of resources and power exist. The people with more power and resources try to sustain them and may even do so by suppressing those with small power and fewer resources.

Conflict theory holds that; people are rational in their thinking in order to optimize their self-interest, that peoples' resources are exhaustible, that the competition generated by people in pursuing limited resources will certainly lead to crisis, and that human beings generate bad feelings against others due to struggles over scarce resources (Marx, 1975).

The conflict theory basically revolved around the exploitation of the limited Western Saharan natural resources, just as the theorists have argued. However, this conflict of interest lasted due to two reasons. Firstly, the core necessity of marine and petroleum products to the Moroccan economy has sky rocketed immensely while that of phosphates has



remained constant. Secondly, the problem has become one in which Polisario and its supporters are agitating, engendered by Morocco's starting of oil exploration and by the clear possibility that the European Union will re-start fishing in Western Saharan waters through an accord with Rabat (Wilson, 2013).

Overwhelmingly, the Moroccan people were urged to inhabit the Western Sahara in order to have the population majority of the territory. With unemployment in the territory accepted by the state to run at around 25 percent and approximated by others to be twice that, and with the government bent on helping settlers, the significance of marine resources to Rabat's project in the Western Sahara is clear (Wilson, 2013). The strategic nature of the Western Saharan waters has also grown for the Moroccan economy as a whole due to these factors: the growth of the Moroccan marine industry as a provider of in cash flow and job provider, the upsurge in the global request for marine produce, and a huge increase in the Moroccan catch due to Western Saharan waters.

From 200,000 tonnes annually, in the 1960s, Moroccan outputs rose to over a million tonnes in 2001. Most of the state investment in the Western Sahara recently has gone to the revitalization of the ports of Laayoune, Dakhla and Boujdour, indicating the increasing significance of the marine industry there to Morocco (Toby, 2023).

Despite the usefulness of the theory in explaining the Moroccan-Saharawi conflict, it was criticized by the consensus theory in sociology which is the exact opposite of the conflict theory. It opines that human beings or groups are almost as likely, if not more, to unite with each other to share limited resources justly, rather than join in crisis and attempt to oppress the other. Be that as it may, the Marxian conflict theory is well suited for the work as the contestation and issue of resources like land, phosphate, and fishery are the main basis of the Moroccan-Saharawi conflict.

4. Literature Review

Background of the Conflict

In 1884, Spain colonized the coast from Cape Boujdour to Cape Blanc. Later, the Spanish extended their portion of control. In 1958, Spain amalgamated the former separate districts of Saguia El-Hamra (in the north) and Rio de Oro (in the south) to form the area of Spanish Western Sahara (Tijani, 2023). Before, a Spanish protectorate, the land of western Sahara was attacked and occupied by Moroccan and Mauritanian troops in 1975 basing on what has come to be known as the Madrid deals, when Spain on its own withdrew from its protectorate (Ismail, 2002). With this act, both countries (Morocco and Mauritania) fall short of the 1975 International Court of Justice (ICJ) pronouncement that neither Morocco nor Mauritania have territorial rights over the Western Sahara.

The United Nations did not acknowledge the Madrid deals, and a 2002 poll of the UN office of legal Affairs made it clear that colonial states cannot simply hand over the sovereignty of one country to another. In 1976, the Polisario Front (armed wing of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic) acknowledge by the United Nations as the only legal representative of the Saharawi people proclaim (from exile in Algeria) the establishment of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as a sovereign state (Ismail, 2002). Realistically, the quarrel over Western Sahara originated from two basically divergent claims to the same land. For the Polisario Front, the territory of Western Sahara and its people are different from Morocco and should therefore be sovereign. Nevertheless, for Morocco, incorporation of Western Sahara into Morocco has become a central aim and a significant unifying force in the state.

In 1979, Mauritania made peace with the Polisario Front, left Western Sahara, and acknowledged the SADR. Morocco then



incorporated the Mauritanian portion of the land that had been relinquished by Spain (Benjadid, 2018). To stop future attacks, Morocco's armed forces subsequently built a heavily mined and monitored 2,700-kilometer barrier, one of the largest militaries embarkment structure in the world. By the time of the cease-fire in 1991, Morocco had established its control over more than two-third of Western Sahara in its Western portion along the Atlantic Ocean (Benjadid, 2018).

The United Nations supported a plebiscite on the state of Western Sahara, plus the choice of sovereignty, partial independence, or incorporation with Morocco. The plebiscite was to be arranged and carry out by the UN mission for the Plebiscite in Western Sahara (MNURSO), but it has not yet taken place. The organised plebiscite has been successively postponed due to a quarrel between Morocco and the Polisario Front over who is qualified to vote on the status of the territory (Kabir, 2022). Annoyed with years of political complexities and deadlock, the Polisario Front reverted to active struggle after the Guerguerat debacle in 2020. Since the Polisario Front is aware of the differences in military strength, one can calculate that its armed upsurge is a tactical move rather than a permanent panacea to end the annexation. Its objective is to assert power to ask for a change in the political dynamics by advocating for reinvigorated global attention to the neglected cause and terminating popular dejection (Kabir, 2020).

Annexed Western Sahara has under its soil some of the biggest phosphate reserves. It grants access to rich marine resources that run along its 690-mile littoral and contains extensive offshore hydrocarbon resources. Furthermore, Western Sahara is a spotlight of Western renewable energy corporations such as Siemens and Enel. Indeed, organised exploitation of these minerals is seen by the Saharawi as the main reason

behind the Moroccan annexation (Abu, 2022).

Morocco regards Western Sahara as part and parcel of its territory and sovereignty because of historical linkages. The ICJ acknowledge those linkages but judged that this does not amount to ownership over the Western Sahara. However, Morocco continues to maintain that it has the legal ownership to protect its territorial rights and its sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

Based on this, Morocco has cancelled Saharawi calls for independence, and has maintained only on offering Saharawis autonomy, a strategy that dates back to 2007 and has the backup of the United States and France (Abu, 2022). Not trusting the level of the assumed partial independence, considering Morocco's long origin of sophisticated political centralization, the Polisario Front immediately jettison the plan and asserted on full sovereignty for the Saharawis.

The Role of Foreign Actors

Here, we are going to look at the action of some foreign actors as it relates to Morocco-Saharawi conflict. We are going to see whether their action escalate or deescalate the conflict. The foreign actors we are going to look at are: Algeria, US, African Union, Arab League, and European Union.

Algeria, the Polisario's main supporter and unshaking proper, has criticised Morocco's pursuit to totally incorporate Western Sahara under its territory. Algeria gave some brief support to the Polisario when it was established in 1973 to fight for sovereignty against Spain's imperial rule (Idris, 2022). It was not until Morocco's inclusion of Western Sahara in 1975 that Algeria threw its full support behind the Polisario. The Moroccan-Algerian conflict originated before the problem of Western Saharan; in fact, the two nations were engaged in 1963 in a border war, known as the Sand War, over the area of Tindouf and



Bechar, causing a geopolitical crisis and dislike between the two Maghrebi powers.

Cold war geopolitics further increased these crisis and altercations since Algeria attach itself with the Soviet bloc and anti-imperial camp while the orthodox Moroccan kingdom joined with the West. Algeria asserts that her strong position on the Western Sahara crisis has not altered and that she will not accommodate the fait accompli that Morocco is aiming to impose in the last African colony. It is important to note that Algeria and Morocco are struggling for supremacy over the Maghreb region and the Western Sahara crisis is a key to getting that objective (Idris, 2022). Initially, US supported Saharawi move for independence. But suddenly, change on 10th December 2020 when they promised Morocco of support to their claim on Western Sahara in place for normalizing relations with Israel and this greatly annoyed the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (Reuben, 2023). This US decision is yet to be step down and this act increased the conflict.

The African Union, of which SADR is a pioneer member, supports the right of Saharawis to have independence. After the US action, the AU stressed the right to independence for the Saharawi people and the freedom of the territory while urging Morocco to obey colonial borders, as they were at the time of independence, as encoded in article 4 (b) of the AU Constitutive Act (Reuben, 2023). At its 54th meeting in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in March, the AU's Peace and Security Council (PSC) told the UN Security Council to totally take its responsibilities and make all necessary moves to speedily solve the Western Sahara crisis. In other gatherings, the PSC also made up their mind to strongly reconnect in the lookout for a political solution to the protracted conflict by restarting their office in Lanyone, in Western Sahara, and planning a pilot visit to the land to collect firsthand information on the current situation. Still,

no matter the AU's strong stand on the freedom of Western Sahara and its responsibility to the rights of Saharawis to self-determination, Morocco has been able to maintain some gains with many African countries in clarifying to them to open consulates in the annexed Western Saharan cities of Dakhla and Laayoune. This is a proxy support by these nations of Morocco's claims to the territory.

The PSC of the AU beckoned on the UN Secretary General to ask the UN legal counsel to provide a legal stand on the opening of diplomatic offices in the non-self-governing territory of Western Sahara. Those successes came as a result of Morocco's return to the AU in 2017 after a 33-year gap in annoyance of the African Union's recognition of SADR as a member state (Richard, 2023). Morocco realized that its lone wolf stand in the African region did not help in achieving its objective in legalizing its claim over Western Sahara. Morocco has been extending its political and economic footprint on the continent to obtain more support.

Efforts to gain allies in the Arab World for the objective of a bigger Morocco did not gain much support no matter the focus in the early 1960s to engage the Arab League for its cause. Morocco's enlargement pursuits caused hatred, plus an ephemeral rupture of relations with Tunisia. The Moroccans have been more positive with the Arab League as far as the Western Sahara issue is concerned. Unlike the Organization of African Unity (now AU) which has vehemently supported Western Sahara's right for independence, the Arab League has indicated little interest in the area. Nevertheless, Morocco has asserted that the Polisario Front gets help from Hezbollah, Iran, and al-Qaida (Richard, 2023). Although these assertions cannot be verified.

Members of European Parliament approved the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement (SFPA) in February 2019 (Isaq,



2023) which authorised an accord for European Fishing vessels to fish in Moroccan waters and laid out ways for a move towards a lasting fishing model. Although the Polisario Front was not part of the deal, the SFPA clearly approve European vessels to fish in the contested coast of the Western Sahara territory. The NGO Human Rights Watch wrote a petition to European Members of Parliament asking for a vote against the agreement, stating that Morocco has no legality to negotiate deals concerning a contested land and is thus illegitimate under international law.

While the content of the deal maintained that the fisheries will not affect the ongoing conflict,

the accord was rejected by many Saharawi groups. After the confirmation of the deal a letter of protest signed by main Saharawi activist societies in the area was sent to the EU contesting the decision, and the Polisario Front declared that it will oppose the vote in the European Court of Justice asserting that it was an open contradiction of international law. This move pushed Morocco to pass a law in January 2020 (Isaq, 2023) extending its known boundary throughout Western Saharan waters.

Peace process to resolve the conflict

The agreement ending the fight was officially ratified in 1991 (Musa, 2022). More initiatives have since been made to settle the crisis, but no sustainable agreement has been reached to date. The agreement to stop fight was sustained until 13th November 2020 when the Moroccan army invaded the buffer town of Guerguerat, and the Saharawi authorities reacted by annulling the ceasefire and the Saharawi army confronted the Moroccan army locations along the Moroccan Western Sahara Wall (Musa, 2022).

The plebiscite, originally planned for 1992, was assumed to give the local populace of Western Sahara the alternative between sovereignty and affirming integration with Morocco, but it quickly stopped. In 1997,

the Houston Agreement tried to revive the proposal for a plebiscite, but like the earlier effort has not met with success. As of 2010, agreements over the terms of any hopeful plebiscite have not resulted in any concrete action (Adebowale, 2023).

Plans by the UN special envoys to locate agreeable platform between both parties did not work. By 1999 the UN had singled out about 85,000 voters, with almost half of them in the Moroccan-ruled section of Western Sahara or Southern Morocco, and others spread between the Tindouf refugee camps, Mauritania and other places throughout the world (Adebowale, 2023). The Polisario Front agreed to this voter list, as it had done with the former list tabled by the UN (both of them originally based on the Spanish census of 1974), but Morocco rejected it. As refused voter candidates began a mass-appeals procedure, the Moroccan state persisted that each application be checked individually. Continuing conflicts between the two parties once more made the process to stop. Shortly after the Houston Agreement (1997), Morocco formally stated that it was no longer important to include an independence alternative on the ballot, offering instead partial independence (Adams, 2023).

The Baker Plan (formally, Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara) was a United Nations move led by James Baker to give independence to Western Sahara, and was made in the year 2000 (Adams, 2023). It was assumed to replace the Settlement Plan of 1991 and the Houston Agreement of 1997, which had strongly collapsed to make any sustainable improvement. Since early 2005, the UN Secretary-General has not referenced the initiative in his reports, and by now it seems completely dead. No alternative plan exists, however, and worries continues that the political space will result in continuous fighting. Morocco maintains to propose autonomy for the territory as the panacea to the crisis, while



the Polisario Front asserts on nothing other than total independence.

In 2018 the United Nations Security Council pronounced that peace talks as pertains to the Western Sahara land would continue and representatives of the Polisario Front, Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania would all be in attendance. In April 2020, the Polisario Front publicly criticised the state of the on-going peace talks maintaining that its powerlessness legalizes the intrusion of Morocco into the territory. The statement re-emphasizes the Polisario Front's desire that the UN organize a free plebiscite within Western Sahara on their self-governing position. Presently, the stand of United Nations representative to Western Sahara is void and the Security Council is seriously looking for a replacement (Hamad, 2023).

Aftermath of the Conflict for Now

Socially, there were 14,000 to 21,000 deaths between both sides. In addition, 40,000 to 80,000 refugees were dislocated as a result of the crisis; at present, most still settle in many Saharawi refugee camps throughout the Tindouf province of Algeria (Philip, 2022).

The Western Sahara crisis has resulted in severe human rights abuses, most apparent is the aerial bombardments with napalm and white phosphorus of the Saharawi refugee camps, the ejection of tens of thousands of Moroccan expatriate civilians by the Algerian government in response to the Green March. The crisis has seen many violations of human rights and serious flout of the Geneva Convention on the part of all conflictual parties- the Polisario Front, the Moroccan government and the Algerian government.

Several global human rights institutions have criticised the Moroccan government of enforcing a media blackout in the region by haunting protestors and journalist. A report by French non-profit Reporters Without Borders (RSF) which traces the oppression of journalism around the globe

reported on a strategic targeting of journalists in western Sahara and assert that the hindering of foreign media access to the region has made it hard to get flawless and permanent reporting from within the contested territory (Andrew, 2022).

In 2019 Amnesty international called for a probe into a harsh attack on protestors that took place on 19th July, in the city of Laayoune. The protests started as rejoicing for Algeria's win in the 2019 Africa cup of Nations and subsequently increased into protests for Saharawi independence and confrontations with Moroccan armed forces. Footage from the confrontations indicate armed forces using rocks, teargas and live ammunition to scatter protestors. The confrontations led to the arrest of dozens of protestors and one casualty (Andrew,2022).

In June 2019, a film of Moroccan army harshly dragging and beating prominent Saharawi journalist Wahid AL-Batal went viral in the internet. The film engendered criticisms from global rights groups who asked for a probe to be made and for AL-Batal to be freed. Moroccan government denounced the accusation saying AL-Batal had crashed into a police car and rejected arrest, however these claims were doubted in an investigation on the incident published by Washington Post. AL-Batal was imprisoned for six years (Ugo,2023).

The Polisario Front has also been indicted of oppressing media liberty within its territories. In July 2019 the Polisario Front arrested three Saharawi activists within the refugee camps for commenting on the Polisario Front's rulership in social media. Human Rights Watch called for the freedom of the political prisoners stating that they had been held in difficult situations and forced to sign confessions, a direct affront of global law (Ugo, 2023).

Economically, the Moroccan authorities is siphoning the resources of the Saharawi Arab Democratic like the phosphate, hydrocarbon deposits, and the rich marine grounds. This condition makes the



Saharawis potentially rich but practically poor. The Moroccan government has also destroyed Saharawis economic trees, farms, schools, markets, infrastructures, social amenities, domestic animals, industries, and fill up their wells-all in the name of attacking the Polisario (Abdullahi, 2023). Politically, the Moroccan government are in control of the majority of Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. Their soldiers are in charge of security. The Saharawis are kept in the lower rungs of leadership. The Saharawi leaders that will not bow to them are forcefully removed and the ‘obedient ones’ are no longer ruling according to their peoples’ desire but according to the Moroccan dictate (Abdullahi, 2023).

5. Conclusion

For over thirty years, the United Nations has tried to maintain that the Saharawis have the right to independence. Thus far, it is yet to achieve its aim. Western Sahara is a significant test case for the UN’s success as a peacekeeper in the Post-Cold War global system. If the plebiscite is held, and if both Morocco and the Polisario Front can be made to receive its results, then the United Nations could still come out victorious from its long intervention effort. Should the plebiscite not pass, then the UN’s mission in Western Sahara is likely to be stopped and its intervention judged a failure. The world body’s status and legality will be called into question, and the UN will be forced to answer for its failures in mediating the crisis.

But why is the crisis difficult to resolve? According to our findings, one, the Moroccans need the territory because of its minerals and rich marine products. Secondly, the EU and the US are interested in the minerals and rich marine resources of the region. Thirdly the Arab League saw the conflict as not worthwhile so as to attract the interest of Morocco. Fourthly, the US and Israel saw siding Morocco as a diplomatic chip to have her as an ally. Fifthly, Morocco migrated some of her

population to the territory in order to retain the territory in case of conducting referendum or plebiscite for the territory’s independence.

For the reason of regional stability and development as well as the security and interests of the larger global community, Western Sahara can no more be a neglected crisis at the edge of world affairs. No matter, whatever panacea is agreed upon, in order to be viable and sustainable over time, must of necessity be established on the principles of justice. Despite its recent diplomatic gains, Morocco has so far failed to convincingly prove the Western Sahara dossier in its favor. The Western Sahara is the last colonial enclave in Africa that requires freedom. Solving the crisis should be under the support of the United Nations. It would safeguard the North African region from further trouble and problems and help guard Europe’s southern border. Indeed, any violation of global law in the Western Sahara would lead to serious negative aftermath globally.

Just as a horse can be brought to water but cannot be forced to drink, so regional harmony and resolution depend totally on the players; no outside power will be able to work out a surprise in the absence of indigenous will. Indigenous will is the prerequisite part for a solution to the Western Sahara crisis, but as shown, external powers due to their selfish interests have played a major role in extending the conflict.

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