

# Western Sahara - The Polisario Front: what future?

Friday 29 April 2011, by [ABENAY Hassan](#) (Date first published: 20 December 2010).

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The United Nations has called again for the resumption of (direct or indirect) negotiations between the Moroccan Government and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario), with the aim of achieving a solution to the conflict around the region of Western Sahara.

However, none of the positions displayed indicates the possibility of a possible resolution through negotiations. Indeed, the Moroccan regime remains intransigent on the maximum threshold represented by its proposal of "autonomy". For its part, the Polisario Front is well aware that once this proposal is accepted, this is tantamount to renouncing its principal claim, total independence. As for the Algerian government - the main support for Polisario - it does not appear to be pressed to find a solution to the conflict in the Sahara and even appears to rejoice in the exhaustion of the Moroccan state with which it conducts a hostile competition in the region.

The imperialist powers will try to prevent any resurgence of violence in a region which is so close to Europe and highly strategic for international maritime traffic. Because a situation of instability could stimulate the dangers posed for them by Islamist terrorism, waves of sub-Saharan migrants, trafficking in weapons and drugs and so on. However, these powers remain linked by their interests in the region to the two states: Morocco as a historical ally of the imperialist powers and Algeria because of its financial and energy reserves which hold great attraction for a capitalism in the midst of financial crisis, all the more so in that these powers are in fierce competition for control of the world's energy resources.

There is little likelihood that negotiations will lead to a solution and no end to the conflict is on the horizon unless there is a radical change of heart on the part of the Moroccan regime or the Algerian regime, or there is an accelerated decomposition of the Polisario Front, or again an eruption of a strong militant dynamic in the region of Western Sahara.

Still the Moroccan regime will continue to attempt to reach its desired political solution through negotiations. To do this, it will proceed with a policy of recuperation and corruption of those who are ready to respond among the inhabitants of the Saharan towns. It will try to reconstruct the "Consultative Council" on Sahara and revive a "more autonomous regionalism", while developing further the Saharan regions. This will be in order to win the necessary time to ensure that the refugees in the camps lose any hope of reaching a solution that will put an end to their ordeal and

will therefore be pressured to return to the towns, even against the advice of their leadership. So, Morocco hopes to see Polisario break up. At the same time, the latter will continue its wait and see policy that builds on a possible resurgence of combative fervour in the Saharan cities and the expansion of networks of international solidarity to put pressure on the imperialist powers so that they cease to support Morocco.

### **The dangers facing the Maghreb region**

The question of Western Sahara is determinant with respect to the political situation in Morocco as well as the greater Maghreb region. Indeed, in the name of the Sahara question, the Moroccan regime has managed to maintain a national consensus with docile parties as well as social peace with the trade union bureaucracies. In the name of this same issue, this regime was able to crush the revolutionary left in the last century. It also strengthened official and clandestine links with the Zionist state and deepened its subordination to imperialist capitalism by opening up its domestic markets and by transferring the public sector to it, and so on. Again in the name of the Sahara, the project of a Maghrebian common market has been hampered, even against the interests of the national bourgeoisies in the region. In addition to this chauvinistic hostilities have been knowingly provoked between peoples, whereas in the recent past these same peoples were closely united against colonialism. Recall in this regard the solidarity demonstrations of Moroccan working people following the assassination of the Tunisian trade union leader .Farhat Hached Also, the experience of the united Maghrebian leadership of the armies of liberation will be remembered, and the mutual aid established between Maghrebian activists: the Algerians fleeing to Tunisia, the Moroccan revolutionaries in Algeria, support in money and weapons and so on. This remains a basis for a perspective of unitary Maghreb struggle, despite the fact that the revolutionaries of today are far from providing evidence of it.

The conflict in the Sahara carries a risk of slippage in the region into a real confrontation between Morocco and Algeria, despite the efforts of the imperialists to avoid this possibility. However, such a possibility cannot be ruled out and the two countries are engaged in a frightening arms races and renovation of their military apparatus, so much so that national budgets are exhausted to the detriment of the basic needs of the popular layers whose social level is increasingly degraded. Also, the hypocritical claims of “good neighbourship” and “historic ties” between the two regimes hide their active preparation for a war that will be harmful to the region unless the struggle of its peoples changes the situation. Which revolutionaries must in the first place commit themselves to.

### **The Polisario Front and the cycle of crisis**

Since the date of its foundation on May 10, 1973, the Polisario Front has never experienced a crisis that could threaten its existence to the extent of that it is currently experiencing. The only exception to note remains that of the refugee camps in 1988 when a mass insurgency was triggered following a serious split in the leadership of the organization. This insurrection could have led to Polisario falling apart and was only crushed by the intervention of its Popular Army. Among the consequences of these events, we emphasize:

- (1) a moral and psychological deterioration that persists until today;
- (2) a series of capitulations which have led a good number of cadres and leaders among the founders surrendering to Morocco.

Nevertheless, the current crisis is deeper and could have consequences that can seriously undermine the Polisario Front, which would have real repercussions on the entire question of the Sahara.

### **What are the elements of the crisis of the Polisario Front?**

It is now twenty years since the Polisario Front announced a ceasefire and accepted the plan of the UN mission for the organization of a referendum in Western Sahara. There it began a pathway of which it knew the beginning, but not the unfolding nor the ending. For its part, the Moroccan regime knew how to take advantage of this situation to weaken and erode Polisario. It skilfully manipulated the detail that would drag on any agreement, namely who among the Saharans has the right to participate in the referendum. This required a proposal to set up committees with the task of determining who had this right and drawing up lists approved by all the protagonists. During this time, the Moroccan regime transplanted thousands of people to the Sahara by providing them with significant grants and assets so that they remained there.

This ploy had as its consequence the paralysis of the referendum process, allowing the Moroccan state to impose a *fait accompli*, mobilizing significant investment in the Sahara while practising a policy of corruption of its inhabitants. In this sense, we can cite 6,000 jobs created for Sahrawi youth; vouchers allowing a monthly income; a fall in food prices; rapid urbanization with significant infrastructure; administrative positions for local notables; a legal laxity, particularly as regards looting of sand and overexploitation of fishing and smuggling; a tax exemption for businesses and so on.

But Moroccan tactics would change course with the coming to the throne of Mohamed VI. Morocco immediately abandoned the referendum plan approved since 1991 to affirm, suddenly and unilaterally, that the referendum was an unfeasible perspective and that the question of the Sahara could have only a negotiated solution. Moreover, he relied in this on the United Nations reports which attested to the impossibility of implementing the referendum and called for a political solution to this impasse. It was in this context that the proposal of "autonomy" was drawn up. It should be noted here that what was striking in all this was the ease with which Polisario slid onto the uncertain path of negotiations while sidelining the referendum. It is from this point that the extended and complex crisis of Polisario became manifest, so much so that its political future became critical.

### **The political crisis of Polisario**

Polisario sees itself as being the sole legitimate representative of the people of Western Sahara. It should be recalled that after the Madrid tripartite agreement (Spain, Mauritania and Morocco) which was intended to organise the departure of the Spanish and the partition of the Sahara between Mauritania and Morocco, Polisario chose armed struggle as the path to independence. The watchwords of its Congresses sum it up: "freedom comes through weapons", "the war of liberation is guaranteed by the masses", "Neither stability nor peace before return and total independence", "the struggle continues to impose national independence and peace.", "Patria o muerte" and so on. In a promising global context, the Front had until the end of the 1980s strong diplomatic, financial and military support from Libya, Cuba, Algeria and the countries of the former Eastern Bloc. Also, the republic declared by the Polisario Front had been recognized by more than 80 countries and was admitted as a member of the African Union. At this time Polisario won notable victories over the Moroccan Royal Forces (FAR). However, when the world context, hitherto favourable to Polisario, changed dramatically at the end of the 1980s, the Libyan regime stopped helping it and undertook agreements of collaboration with the Moroccan regime, while Cuba turned away to manage the

situation of the embargo imposed by US imperialism. Similarly, there was the decomposition of the "Eastern Bloc", while the Algerian regime sank into the crisis which triggered the civil war. Thus the Polisario found himself suddenly deprived of its supporters.

The changes in the international and regional situation exerted pressure on it. It immediately put full confidence in the UN whose neutrality and credibility it had illusions in, along with its lists drawn up for the referendum, its resolutions and its bodies. Accordingly, the Polisario Front reviewed and adapted its programme and its militant rhetoric: abandoning slogans such as "armed struggle", the "war of liberation", "independence or martyrdom" and so on. to adopt that of "international charters", "international law", and so on. On the other hand, at the structural level, the organizational dynamics of Polisario were reduced to politically dull congresses with monotonous activities of leadership bodies and a popular army atrophied through twenty years of the ceasefire; meanwhile, there was an efflorescence of the activity of embassies and ministries, which are conducive environments for the development of careerist and opportunist intrigues using tribal and family patronage. Such an atmosphere of corruption consumed the ardour of the militants.

Over the last twenty years, Polisario has dissipated all the achievements of the previous period. Also, a number of states which had accepted the Sahraoui Republic successively withdrew their recognition, aided by the corruption and treachery of the Moroccan regime. The reversal of the situation was manifested also on the ground where the Popular Army had lost control. There was also the crisis of legitimacy in terms of Polisario's role as sole legitimate leadership, in the context of the decisions with regard to the ceasefire as well as the democratic blockage and corruption proliferating to the level of the leadership.

We should note the only exception that stands out from this picture. This was the emergence of a Sahrawi independence movement - admittedly embryonic - but very active in the towns of the Sahara and Moroccan university campuses. This movement, which emerged in 2005, is essentially made up of young people, and its leadership of former Saharan political detainees, human rights activists. However, and despite the fact that it took advantage of the media apparatus of Polisario, this movement still failed to take root massively because of the psychological blockage caused by fear, a fear engendered by the years of lead of Hassan II, and the current repression of which the Sahrawi are most especially the victims. To this should be added the impact of Moroccan policies aimed at corrupting the Sahrawi. For all these reasons, it is easy to understand that Sahrawi are not motivated to engage in a national emancipation movement whose political leadership - Polisario - has fallen into an unprecedented crisis.

Six years after what was called the "uprising of independence", everything now indicates that this movement is at its end. It is exhausted because of the way in which Polisario has led it. It is sufficient to observe in this connection how its effective leading members passed from the role of combatants for the development and enlargement of the movement to that of actors concerned primarily to denounce the Moroccan repression at international meetings and conferences. This approach would be laudable in itself, if it was not at the expense of its effervescence. That said, a few scattered actions are still going on despite this situation of exhaustion.

The illusion of Polisario, which would also explain its management of the movement of 2005, lies in the fact that it had relied on the denunciation of the Moroccan regime in the hope that the United Nations would concern itself more with the human rights situation in the region. Also, in the fact that it envisaged regaining the confidence of the Saharan population after its disastrous policy of the past twenty years.

To understand the political behaviour of Polisario, it is necessary to recall that it found in the recent pro-independence movement in the areas controlled by Morocco a unique chance to circumvent the

impasse in which it found itself. Indeed, the referendum process had dragged on for twenty years and the Moroccan regime had even managed to exclude the use of such an option, while thousands of Saharans waited in the desert in desperation. Such a situation would have announced the inevitable end of Polisario if it had persisted. Thus the movement of 2005 gave the Polisario leadership room to allow new hope and other margins of manoeuvre. However the brutality of the repression imposed on the Saharans reined in the combative momentum of the movement. Those who are deeply involved are only the most dedicated youth, while their forebears - having already experienced the tyranny of Hassan II - have remained discreet. The Polisario is convinced - rightly - that once the terror has diminished, the struggles of the masses will take on an unprecedented scale. It is for this reason that Sahrawi activists will be almost exclusively determined to demand that the UN deal with the Saharan human rights situation. All the Polisario press releases of recent years as well as the statements made by Sahrawi activists residing in Morocco converge around this axis of demand..

However, the Moroccan regime categorically refuses to address the issue of violations of human rights concerning the Sahara. It knows that once the topic is open, it may see its long tradition of repression revealed, and at the same time, this could exorcize the fear among the Saharans who could more freely express their views on the conflict. The Polisario Front has ended up sowing a vacuum and has run up against the wall of illusion that it naively built itself by gambling on the role of the United Nations. Indeed, in full crisis - following the expulsion of Sahrawi activist Aminatou Haidar - the UN Security Council passed resolution number 1920, thus inflicting another defeat on Polisario. This episode prompted the latter, then in total confusion, to take a decision to question its relationship with the UN, just days after the Secretary-General of Polisario said clearly that the organization was engaged in an ongoing collaboration and good faith with the UN. The next two years will be decisive for the future of the Polisario Front and the question of the Sahara more generally. The current situation of "neither war nor peace" cannot last.

Moreover, Polisario is facing two perspectives: (1) either to declare its refusal to collaborate as long as the conditions for the organization of the referendum are not met, and possibly resuming armed struggle, something it can do only with the approval of the Algerian regime. (2) or follow the path of negotiations, which will lead to a solution other than independence, something that Polisario has always rejected. Polisario has set its Congress for the end of 2011. Unless major events occur within it, or there are significant changes in relations between the Moroccan and Algerian regimes, this coming Congress will be crucial for its future and the question of Western Sahara as a whole.

### **Polisario and the impasse of the military solution**

At the beginning of its armed struggle, the Popular Army inflicted some crushing defeats on the F.A.R., despite the fierce media censorship of the time, to such a point that the Moroccan regime had deny the detention of its soldiers by Polisario until recent years. Through reliance on guerrilla warfare, on a deep knowledge of the Saharan milieu, on its ability to adapt to hostile geographical conditions, on strong support in arms and training from Libya, Cuba, Algeria and the Eastern Bloc, and by counting on the combative spirit of the launch of armed struggle, the Polisario Front was able to take control of the vast majority of Western Saharan territory and threaten the Saharan towns with military attacks and incursions outside the contested area.

However, the relationship of military forces was reversed when the F.A.R built military barriers which total 2.720 kms in length, and surround about 87.5% of the area of Western Sahara. These barriers number six, the fifth being the longest at 670 kms. The objectives of these walls are the following: to isolate the fighters of Polisario from the rest of the population; protect the Bougraa

mines and the sea coasts; allow the F.A.R regiments to cover in defence; avoid surprise attacks from the guerrillas deploying means of radar surveillance radars and detector dogs; prevent “enemy” invasions to gain time to carry out better prepared actions by mobilizing strong resources in soldiers and equipment. These barriers are supported by more than 150,000 soldiers and seven sand belts, each three metres high. They are also reinforced by tanks, artillery, radar, barbed wire, mines, dams of sand and stone, barricades, and so on. Thus, Polisario was forced to retreat to marginal pockets of the Sahara region, whereas the areas of tension were remote from the towns. It is this military situation which explains Morocco’s mastery of the stakes of the conflict.

Twenty years of ceasefire seem to have worn out Polisario’s Popular Army. Also its numbers have decreased, many of its cadres have left and its morale has weakened. Need it be recalled that in contrast to conventional armies, popular armies soften and atrophy, which is indeed the case for the army of Polisario. That being so, the question that arises is how Polisario can impose real gains when the means by which it exerts weight is decomposing?

### **Polisario and the moral-psychological crisis**

In the mid-1970s, the Polisario Front was founded by young people, not exceeding thirty as an average age, in addition to a few activists from the Liberation Army against Spanish colonialism and a few members of the vanguard organization founded by Mohammed el-Basri. In the wake of the global wave of national liberation movements, the radicalization of youth and the general rise of the left, it initiated the fight against the Spanish occupier, who was forced to leave the region while manoeuvring to ensure its interests in its riches (phosphate and fishing). This merged with the interests of the Mauritanian regime in the region, and those of Morocco in the annexation of the Sahara. In this context, Polisario made the fatal mistake of carrying out its actions outside the cities and encouraging the inhabitants to desert them, brandishing the threat of the repression that the Moroccan forces deployed. This choice cost them dearly. It prompted them to use the territory of another state, so that political decisions became dependent on it. At the same time this choice deprived it of the support of the Saharawi masses in the towns. Despite the initial advances represented by the departure of the Spanish and the abandonment by Mauritania of its interests in the region specified by the “Algerian Pact” signed by the two protagonists, the impasse could not be avoided: to obtain independence by armed struggle while supported by another regional powers, was to leave themselves open to blackmail, and condemn themselves also to the loss of roots amongst the masses in the towns of the Sahara.

Moreover, it should be noted that most of the refugees are educated youth, and that many of them have benefited from scholarships in various countries (Algeria, Libya, Cuba and so on). Also many people live in the camps in the expectation and the hope of work abroad. Thus, young people undergo a strong pressure because of an uncertain horizon and future. Also, they find private spaces in which they can express their aspirations given the very hostile natural conditions throughout the year and the miserable conditions of life. These young people are awaiting international aid that Polisario distributes through the Red Crescent of the Sahara, or positions in the civil service, diplomacy in particular. This situation has prompted a number of cadres to prefer not to return to settle in the camps. In sum, emigration has become the sole social outcome. This state of deterioration of conditions alters significantly the commitment and enthusiasm of the inhabitants, and their ability to support life in the camps where the most basic living conditions are absent. This state of mind has challenged the credit enjoyed by Polisario as being the sole legitimate leadership. Indeed, this is understandable if we recall how anchored phenomena of corruption are; the activities of smuggling, the apparent enrichment of a few leaders; clientelism through tribal links for the allocation of responsibilities in the absence of criteria of competence; a severe restriction on



freedom to movement in a closed territory which is however open to television channels. This makes the Polisario Front a real powder keg that could explode at any time. It makes very probable the eruption of mass movements in the camps, comparable to the events of 1988 or even more so. The absence of a political outcome only reinforces this.

### **Where is Polisario going?**

Sometimes in history, a political leadership finds itself in a situation of extreme complexity where a clear line of advance becomes impossible, and anticipating future contingencies becomes a very difficult task. In such moments, a leadership is questioned as to its courage, its ability to persevere and resist disintegration while awaiting a breakthrough that will avoid disappearance. This is what happened to the Russian revolution during the Brest Litovsk negotiations. Polisario is located in a similar situation. It is torn between contradictory poles: a return to armed struggle whose difficulty we have described and the search for a solution through negotiations with the Moroccan state with all that this requires as concessions. The situation of “neither peace nor war” would lead to the erosion of the political meaning of the Polisario Front. The Polisario leadership is faced with a major historical responsibility and must decide. In this, the supreme values must be frankness and transparency towards the masses, as well as the right to self-determination. However, any attempt to use the masses as the basis for manoeuvre and an agreement behind the scenes will be regarded as treason by history.. Similarly, any contempt for the interests of the masses to serve the diplomatic agenda will be retained in the memory of future generations as collaboration. How will Polisario act? The next two years will answer this question.

**Hassan Abenay**

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**P.S.**

\* Translation International Viewpoint.

\* Hassan Abenay is a member of the editorial board of the Moroccan revolutionary Marxist monthly, Almounadil-a. This article first appeared in Arabic in Almounadil-a number 33, January 2011.