

Violence and media frenzy around Western Sahara: the region needs appeasement

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The dismantling of the El-ayoune camp by Moroccan authorities on 8 November provoked outrage amongst a large part of the Western press, quick to condemn Rabat. Contrasting sharply with these passions- and sometimes these excesses- the UN has shown more reserve. Even if radicalisation may seem to the Polisario Front to be a means of opposing its disintegration, asserting itself on the international stage and undermining Morocco's proposal of regional autonomy- although the most pragmatic solution to allow all protagonists to come out with their dignity intact-, the peace process and regional stability have nothing to gain by it.



Meeting of the UN Security Council, on 9th november 2010.

On Tuesday 9 November, the fifth round of direct negotiations between Moroccan authorities and the Polisario Front under the aegis of the UN drew to a close. The talks, opened the previous day, are part of an ongoing set of discussions started in June 2007 to end the conflict in the Western Sahara, often described as "frozen" or "forgotten". Even before the opening of discussions, hopes that progress would be made in the settlement of this 35 year- old conflict seemed compromised, with the Polisario Front pushing for a referendum of self-determination, *sine qua non*, according to this movement, for any solution to the crisis, categorically refused by Morocco.

It is against this background that serious clashes took place following the dismantling of a camp in the El-ayoune territory, where thousands of Sahrawis had set up camp from 10 October to protest against deterioration in their living conditions. According to the region's prefect, it all stems from social discontent. Unemployment has hit the local population hard and locals do not always see the arrival of promised aid, whereas the "1652 rounded up" Sahrawis who returned from the Polisario camps in Tindouf received immediate assistance for their reintegration (1).

While circumstances surrounding the clashes are not yet fully understood, the dismantling of the camp has given rise to violent acts whose repercussions have rapidly crossed the Straits of Gibraltar. In spite of the Moroccan authorities' initial

choice of favouring dialogue, several Western media sources and NGOs have condemned the use of force in the name of human rights. The Spanish press notably reused a photo of Palestinian children dating from 2006 (published on a pro-Polisario website) to illustrate the consequences of the actions of the Moroccan security forces in El-ayoune. An incriminating photo... In the context of the conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front, there is, alas, nothing surprising in that the figures and the status of deaths and injuries would be the basis of a fierce battle (2). On the contrary, the fact that the media in a Western country, moreover a member of the European Union, acts as a sound box for propaganda worthy of the Cold War to stir up popular passions against a backdrop of media war is much more serious. The journalists were quick to remove the photo in question, provided by the Spanish press agency EFE. But this error serves as a reminder that modern media and means of communication are weapons in today's wars, if not the primary weapon for weak players who cannot win by military means (3).

The violence of these reactions contrasts with the reserve demonstrated by the Spanish government and the UN. Spanish Foreign Affairs Minister, Trinidad Jimenez, summoned to address the Parliament and the Senate, asked the deputies to speak with "caution" about Western Sahara as "there is no proven or confirmed data" by international organisations (4).

Like Spain, on 16 September the United Nations Security Council « deplored » the violent acts that occurred eight days earlier in El-ayoune but refused to open an investigation requested by the Polisario, who has not hesitated to speak of "massacres". After listening to the report of the number two of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, Indian Atul Khare, and the UN special correspondent for the Sahara, Christopher Ross, the fifteen member countries did not wish to go further. In fact one of the rare certainties, as Khadija Mohsen-Finan, researcher in international relations and teacher at Sciences-Po put it during an interview with *Le Monde*, is that the dissent is not individual but collective.

In any event, the intervention of Moroccan security forces has been a godsend for Polisario, faced with the obsessive fear of its decline. According to regional specialist Laurence Anmour, over the past few years several signs have pointed to the Polisario adopting a harder stance and suggest a crisis in the independence movement (5). As early as 2006, the United Nations Secretary General was charged with a complaint concerning threats made by the Polisario against the French contingent of Minurso "as a sign of reprisals against France who supports Morocco's position". More recently, following the dismantling of the Agdim Iizik camp, Polisario accused France of being responsible for the UN's decision to not follow up on its request for an investigation. This radicalisation in the Polisario's discourse is fostered by the loss of influence of the historical independence movement. Many Sahrawis are leaving the Tindouf camps to reach Mauritania and settle in the city of Zouérate, some even return to Western Sahara. The Polisario also seems increasingly disputed in its claim to represent the Sahrawis. Testimony to this is the emergence of claims to independence emanating from young Sahrawi non-members of the Polisario Front, as with the creation of the dissident movement *Khatt Achahid* (Line of martyrs) whose representative declared, in December 2009, that the leaders of the Polisario Front should open a constructive dialogue in order to determine what the people living in the camps really want. Last September, policeman Mustapha Salma Ould Sidi Mouloud, Polisario Inspector General of Safety, defected and called for the support of the plan of self-rule proposed by

Morocco before rejoining the Tindouf camps to defend Morocco's plan, resulting in his arrest once he crossed the border.

The Polisario's media treatment of the El-ayoune episode strongly resembles an attempt to regain control of internal dissent and reassert itself as a force to be reckoned with on the international stage, indeed even to impose the Sahrawi question on the global agenda in terms that are favourable to the Polisario. In terms of content, while the protagonists cannot reach an agreement concerning electoral lists and the political and ideological impasse in the refugee camps leaves little hope regarding the capacity of the Sahrawis in Algeria to vote freely, Morocco's proposal of self-government within the framework of a regionalisation process remains the most credible alternative.

This is currently the only option that will allow the protagonists to get out of a win-lose situation and to allow everyone, in particular the refugees who have chosen exile, to escape from the conflict with their dignity intact. The self-government plan proposed by Morocco envisages the creation of legislative, executive and legal organs at the local level, while allowing the state to retain exclusive jurisdiction in the sovereign domain, notably security, international cooperation, external relations, religion and the legal system. Regionalisation also offers Algeria an exit strategy. The conflict in the Western Sahara, eminently geopolitical, is based on tensions between Algeria and Morocco which stem from Algeria's zeal concerning leftist Moroccan opponents who seek refuge in Algeria and fed by a power struggle against the background of different political models and traditions (6). Without Algeria's support, the Polisario would probably have already disappeared. As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan cautioned in his 2006 report, the conflict will never be resolved unless a global solution that includes Algeria is found.

While such an approach may be difficult to adopt, one thing is certain: it cannot come from violence and radicalisation that is detrimental to dialogue. The Polisario Front and Morocco have agreed to meet in December in Geneva then New York for fresh discussions on Western Sahara. In the absence of increased trust between participants, however, their chances of making progress as the situation stands are unlikely. The region needs appeasement, not provocation. It was also in an effort to get out of the current impasse that Christopher Ross appealed to the Europeans to invest more in the Western Sahara dossier, which could be one of the priorities of the European External Action Service (7), while keeping in mind that thirty five years of tensions cannot be resolved in one day.

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(1) Isabelle Mandraud, « Au Sahara occidental, un "jour de guerre" anéantit le camp d'Agdim Izik », *Le Monde*, 12 November 2010.

(2) According to Moroccan authorities, twelve people died in the clashes (ten members of the security forces and two civilians). Polisario claims that thirty-six Sahrawis were killed and hundreds injured. Figures cited by Alexandra Geneste and Isabelle Mandraud, « L'ONU refuse d'enquêter sur les violences au Sahara occidental », *Le Monde*, 18 November 2010.

(3) A case in point, Al-Qaeda has set up its own image production company, As-Shaba, in order to provide large Western and news Arabic networks with statements from its leaders and images of struggles and martyrs (Arnaud de la Grange and Jean-Marc Balencie, *Les guerres bâtarde*, Paris, Perrin, 2008, p. 38).

(4) Quoted by Sandrine Morel, « Le gouvernement espagnol sous pression », *Le Monde*, 18 November 2010.

(5) Laurence Ammour, « À qui profite le gel du conflit au Sahara Occidental ? », *NATO Research Papers*, N°30, Novembre 2006, pp. 2-7, pp. 5-6. According to this researcher, some observers, research centres and Western secret service agencies consider that the Polisario Front is sliding into criminality, possibly even Islamist terrorism. It is notably involved in illegal trade – including the trade of small arms

– and even the trafficking of sub-Saharan migrant workers who pass through Mauritania and the Western Sahara to access the Spanish enclaves in the Mediterranean and the Canary Islands.

(6) On this subject, see Yves Lacoste, *Géopolitique de la Méditerranée*, Paris, Armand Colin, 2006, pp. 229-230 and 256-259.

(7) Special report of the Thomas More Institute, *Towards a sustainable security in the Maghreb: an opportunity for the region, a commitment for the European Union*, April 2010, available at <http://institut-thomas-more.org/mag/Fr.pdf>.
