

Redefining the Sahrawi Political Identity

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The Western Sahara problem has two fundamental dimensions: an internal one where a great deal is at stake, considering the role this issue plays in political relations among the different actors, including the monarchy, and in terms of democratisation of institutional relations; and a regional one, because its evolution and principle mutations involve several Mediterranean States, in particular Algeria, Spain and France. Hence my interest in this topic. In this paper I will explore a particular facet of this conflict: the manner in which the social dynamic in Western Sahara is evolving and how it attempts to redefine its identity parameters. This raises a problematic issue: how did the conflict evolve in 2006 and how do those primarily concerned, the young Sahrawis comprising the 'new generation,' perceive their present and future within the framework of an identity that they must redefine in light of the major mutations undergone by the Western Sahara conflict?

The Determining Factors

The Western Sahara dispute is one of the oldest regional conflicts, dating back to 1975. It is also one of the most complex affairs due to the imbroglia of factors having directly or indirectly contributed to its evolution and destiny. This territory of 266,000 Km², colonised and held by Spain from 1885 to 1975 and thereafter annexed by Morocco, is now a territory claimed by the Algerian-backed Polisario Front. From 1975 to 1999, the Moroccan authorities adopted a dual-faceted policy: on the one hand, it was *arbitrary*, resorting to nearly systematic repression of the Sahrawi

opposition (imprisonment, disappearances, etc.); and on the other hand, it employed *cooption*, the authorities establishing relations of favouritism with important Sahrawi people.

But since the 90s, with the relative aperture of the Moroccan political regime, the imbalances engendered by the strategy of favouritism have become more evident. In terms of social implications, certain indicators have forced Morocco to reconsider some aspects of its political strategy in Western Sahara. In 2006, for instance, in El Aaiún, the capital of Western Sahara, the unemployment level was 29% of the active population, and despite the "*Plan for Saharan Economic Development, 2004-2008*" (with a budget of 650 million euros) established by the current Moroccan government, the gap between a powerful – yet increasingly contested – elite and the rest of the population is becoming increasingly consolidated. The hotbed of contention is essentially the slums, including Mâatallah, where the majority of the Sahrawi population lives in overcrowded conditions. On his last trip to Western Sahara in March 2006, King Mohammed VI insisted on visiting this slum neighbourhood. The 'inland' Moroccans suddenly discovered that the Sahrawis do not all live 'in opulence'.

It is important to emphasise that the relative aperture of the political regime initiated by King Hassan II in 1994 and continued by his successor, King Mohammed VI, was accompanied by a strengthening of the role played by civil society and a section of the independent press (2003 Committee to Protect Journalist [CPJ] Press Freedom Award laureate, *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* is the most emblematic among the country's press. In only a few years, it has managed to break a good many taboos, in particular those concerning the status and role of the Moroccan monarchy). A reinterpretation of the Moroccan political past was then effected on various levels. The role

played by the Justice and Reconciliation Commission (IER) in this process and its impact on Moroccan society and the international community cannot be underestimated (created by the current King in January 2004 and presided by Driss Benzekri, former political prisoner, this commission has nonetheless been greatly criticised by human rights militants because it does not authorise victims to state the names of those responsible for violations). This 'officialised' process of reconciliation of the State with society was done via a reinterpretation of the recent past, including the Western Sahara as a component of recent Moroccan political memory, the repression of the Moroccan State having likewise been deployed against the inhabitants of this territory. The repercussions on Sahrawi political identity, which is constantly being 'reconstructed,' are considerable.

The New Order

The young Sahrawi generation born in the 70s and having studied at Moroccan universities seems to have conceived and redefined the essence of their political identity on the basis of this recent history. The structuring of collective memory, built upon decades of contention, struggle, resistance and repression, has given rise to a construction of identity now seeking to go beyond the specificities of Sahrawi society and its conceptual mutations. The third-world ideology,

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the weight of the cold war context and decolonisation, the basic principles from which the combat for "the liberation of the Sahrawi people" drew its ideological and identity-building foundations are thus being replaced by new legitimising concepts: human rights culture, universal principles governing individual and political rights and liberties, international legality, etc. All of these concepts, both precise and generous, are in turn being grafted on a fundamental principle based on dissidence, protest and a legitimizing capacity – the principle of self-determination for the Sahrawi nation, to be attained through a referendum supervised by the United Nations.

On 25th March 2006, during a trip to El Aaiún, King Mohammed VI announced the dissolution of the Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs, created by his father in 1982 and composed of members entirely elected by the Sahrawi tribes. It was 'replaced' by a new organ called the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS). Its 141 members (important Sahrawis) are not elected but rather entirely appointed by the Head of State. Certain observers consider this form of constituting the council a 'retreat' of democratic logic and believe it could weaken the council's representativeness.

In his address at the inauguration of the new council, the King defined the main identity traits of its members: *"We appeal to you, considering the virtues of patriotism and fidelity to consecrated constants and values, to be the best interpreters for expressing your brothers' positions before organizations and other international bodies, with a view to bringing out the justice of our cause for territorial integrity."*

Action by CORCAS would thereafter be deployed within the framework of the 'official' policy culture of the State of Morocco, which perceives the Western Sahara issue from an authoritarian and stilted perspective of the Nation: a presupposed and quite vague 'unanimity' with regard to a 'just and consecrated cause.' The expressions used in the royal address of 25th March 2006 recall certain 'principles' expressed in Article 19 of the current Moroccan constitution: 'the consecrated values of the kingdom', 'territorial integrity', 'fidelity to constants', 'national unity and territorial integrity', etc.

A Dual-Faceted Dynamic

It is in the context of these 'traits,' falling under the official line of political identity, that the Moroccan State intends to implement its new strategy in Western Sahara by involving a Sahrawi political elite which it scrupulously selects and whose missions it establishes. Hence, in this same address, the CORCAS, whose faculties are strictly consultative, is entrusted by the King to engage in *"serene, in-depth reflection... (on)... the autonomy plan within the framework of the sovereignty of the Kingdom and its national unity and territorial integrity."*

The concept of an autonomy plan for Western Sahara, launched unilaterally by the King of Morocco in March of 2006, aims in reality to replace the Baker III Plan (April 2003). Considered 'obsolete' and 'outdated' by

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Moroccan diplomats, the Baker III Plan called for a referendum after five years of autonomy for Western Sahara. Nonetheless, no longer certain of the favourable results of the referendum, Morocco intends to make this 'new' autonomy plan its diplomatic hobby-horse. To uphold it in Western Sahara and before international organizations, it has involved the important personalities on the CORCAS, albeit in consultative status, while adopting a 'subtext' of 'participation' based on *"good governance (...) the expansion of space for participation in the management of local affairs and the emergence of new elites capable of assuming responsibilities, (...) mobilising the legal means and material resources necessary to concretise the afore-stated objectives, at the service of the citizens, their dignity and the common interest."* (excerpt from the Royal speech on 25th March 2006)

This 'subtext,' which is expressed through the use of different terminology in a single address, is impelled by the King and seems to indicate a certain wish for rupture in the internal management of the Western Sahara issue. The King's recourse to 'universalist' concepts such as: *'citizen', 'good governance', 'emergence of new elites', 'dignity', 'the common interest'*, and so on, is highly significant.

This official will for rupture, taking the form of a re-definition of official concepts, is deployed in parallel to the emergence of a new Sahrawi elite, which is trying to assert its visibility and political identity via new mechanisms. The protests in El Aaiún in May of 2005 succeeded in empowering the main 'personalities' of this generation, with whom many young Sahrawis identify on a political and identity level. Today, they are embodied in certain, media-hyped people conveying a legitimating discourse based essentially on international legality and a universal conception of human rights. The use of the Polisario flag during demonstrations, for instance, as well as the introduction of the term 'Intifada' into the protest movement, among other things, limit the dissidence

dynamic to the level of two actors, each referring to a different legal and political situation: on the one hand, an 'authoritarian' State (lacking legitimacy, primarily due to its acknowledged repressive past and controversial present); and on the other hand, a 'colonised' peoples (who claim their rights on the basis of international law).

Conceptual Mutations and Legitimising Discourses

The eminent 'personalities' of this power struggle have moreover gained a certain degree of militant and political legitimacy because of their condition as former prisoners of conscience. The cases of Aminatou Haidar, Mohammed El Moutawakil and Ali Salem Tamek are certainly the most emblematic. They were last sentenced to definite prison terms (ranging from seven to ten months) in December of 2005, following the May 2005 incidents in El Aaiún.

Released from prison on 17th January 2006 after a 51-day hunger strike, Aminatou Haidar was nominated for the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament during her detention. On 17th September 2006, she received the 2006 Freedom Award in Washington DC from the US Defense Forum Foundation *"for her struggle to defend human rights and the international legality of Western Sahara."*

In the face of pressure from the international community and NGOs, the Moroccan Authorities were obliged to release these activists, but once again involving the members of the CORCAS, such that the Council, playing a role approaching that of an NGO, was placed in an advantageous position. Indeed, a week after the creation of the CORCAS on 25th March 2006, the Council's first 'initiative' was to 'propose' the King grant the 'militants' imprisoned after the El Aaiún incidents of May 2005 'amnesty'; a 'proposition' that the King, of course, saw fit to accept.

The support that these militants – who are most often presented as 'human rights advocates' – receive from international civil society and semi-official organisms can be ascribed, in part, to the content of their discourse, i.e. non-violent (given they have never considered the terrorist option), legalist, universal or even a so-to-speak 'attractive' discourse essentially aimed at the West. It has a real impact on civil society and semi-official organisms.

What is the content of this discourse? It is a discourse of identification and repositioning, with marked identity

MAURITANIANS VOTE FOR A NEW CONSTITUTION

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania voted for a new Constitution on 26th June 2006 with a referendum approved by an overwhelming majority according to results announced by the Minister of Home Affairs Mohamed Ahmed Ould Mohamed Lemine.

In August 2005, while President Taya was abroad, the long-time national security chief, Col. Ely Ould Mohamed Vall led a coup that replaced Taya with a 17-member military council headed by Vall, thus ending two decades of strong-arm rule. The coup was quickly denounced by the African Union, United States, and others, but Colonel Vall immediately began liberal reforms, including the promise of free elections, and the international community started watching with interest to see if reforms were followed through.

Mauritanians generally greeted Taya's overthrow with celebration, and opposition groups with qualified approval. Colonel Vall affirmed he was not going to stand in the presidential elections that were held in March 2006.

Over 96% of votes were in favour of the new Constitution and the turnout was over 76%, close to one million registered voters, who

constitute about a third of the country's population.

The referendum paved the way for the return to civilian rule in the country after a military junta seized power in a bloodless coup in August 2005, ending two decades of strong-arm rule.

The new Constitution provides for a presidential form of government, with the President commanding significant powers, including the appointment of the prime minister. The Parliament, though, can vote for no-confidence in the government or censure it. Presidents could only serve two terms in office, each of five years instead of six and a maximum presidential age limit of 75 years is imposed. The new constitution disallows members of the present junta from running for the President's post and requires future leaders to swear on the Qur'an not to change the rules on presidential terms in order to cling to power.

The new Constitution replaced the 1991 one and the referendum led to municipal and legislative elections in November 2006.

For further information:

Ministry of Home Affairs of Mauritania: www.mipt.mr

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dimensions. Its development is legitimising, as it takes the form of nearly constant recourse to international principles and legal references, raised to the level of components of Sahrawi political identity, under redefinition. Several declarations made by the main individuals concerned express it in a clarifying manner: “We demand that our most basic rights be respected, as, for instance, the freedom of assembly. We likewise demand international law be respected, namely, our right to self-determination,” declared Aminatou Haidar, for instance, in *Le Journal Hebdomadaire* (No. 273,

14th to 20th October 2006). “*Our discourse, which is at the same time an integral part of our political identity, is clearly based on a human rights culture. The right to self-determination is part of this. Without this right, our people will have no political existence. The position of women in our society confirms that our culture is consistent with universal principles,*” asserted Mohammed El Moutawakil.

This discourse is conceived and developed to discredit Moroccan diplomatic initiatives. The latter now seems aware of this issue, and more precisely, of the role played by the notions of ‘human rights’, ‘international law’, and so forth in the ‘new’ Sahrawis activists’ redefinition of their political identity. By way of example, on 7th October 2006, a confidential report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (HCHR) revealed that the Parisian daily, *Le Monde*, had qualified the “*human rights situation (as) a matter of concern, particularly in the section of Western Sahara under Moroccan administration.*” Its publication by *Le Monde* in October 2006 called forth vivid reactions among Moroccan official circles, because now the power struggle is on the legal level and that of universal ‘principles’. It is essentially on this level that the new Sahrawi elite are redefining their political identity.