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GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF SAHARAWI NATIONALISM

The Saharawi proverb "Sahara belonged neither to a king, nor to a devil, nor to a sultan" is inked in the Saharawi historical memory as a pledge of the independence of the Saharawi people against the authority of the Sultans of Morocco. Indeed, it somehow expresses the fact that Western Sahara had not been dominated before the arrival of Spain by any Moroccan king. It is this fact that characterizes modern Saharawi nationalism in terms of its discourse and arguments. That is to say, for the Saharawis the refusal of the Sultanian authority throughout history is the backbone around which the Saharawi cultural and political identity has crystallized.

With the wave of decolonization which shook all the territories of the African continent, Saharawi nationalism entered the arena of peoples who aspire to their independence by all possible and legitimate means. It should be understood from the outset that Saharawi nationalism falls into the historical category of African nationalism, having transformed a nomadic people into a people seeking its political identity within the international community. This was ultimately manifested in the creation of a new state in exile, called the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). It is through a historical perspective that began with the movement of decolonization in Africa that we can understand the origins of Saharawi nationalism.

This prompts us to ask the question, how does a nation differ from another nation, in our case, the Saharawi from the Moroccan? In other words, what is the specificity of Saharawi nationalism, which is still developing under the colonial yoke? All this, to answer a fundamental question, how could Saharawi nationalism defend the Saharawi political identity in the quest for independence, despite the Spanish and Moroccan complicity against the Saharawi people?

The theoretical framework of Saharawi nationalism

Saharawi nationalism is circumscribed within the framework of the principle of the right of peoples to dispose of themselves. As it is a non-autonomous territory registered in the list of non-autonomous territories since 1963, this principle can only be carried out following free expression of the will of the Saharawi population.

Today, the international system brings together one hundred ninety-seven states inscribed on the list of members of the United Nations, and this significant number
attests the vigour of the principle of self-determination that proclaims the right of peoples to dispose of themselves.

From a postcolonial perspective, it seems that the principle of self-determination is behind the production and proliferation of nationalism and its implications in the phenomenon of secession. However, from the beginning, it should be kept in mind that the question of the last colony in Africa, Western Sahara, is a question of outright decolonization. This is the main reason for excluding the issue of secession from our analysis. In this context, nationalism aims to obtain sovereignty over a territory for a national community.

Nationalism is a historical phenomenon, directly linked to Modernity, which has been a central element in the construction of our contemporary world. And it was one of the main vectors of modernization. However, in the era of globalization, nationalism is perceived as an archaism or as the bearer of the seeds of racism, xenophobia or even totalitarianism.

Nowadays, we are witnessing the emergence of the force of nationalism worldwide, due to many crises - economic, political, and sometimes even segregationist. For those who have already sung the hymn of the disappearance of nationalism, it may well be said that reality goes in the opposite direction.

One should know that European nationalism is the product of nations that have long been sovereign and independent states, fighting for the possession of rich natural resources, be that in Europe or around the world. The two world wars between European states began to ensure hegemony and not to ensure the existence of their nations.

While modern Saharawi nationalism is of a recent date, it goes back to the first resolutions of the General Assembly in 1963, and it was developing together with the proclamation of the Saharawi State SADR (Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic) on February 27, 1976, by the Polisario Front.

It must be emphasized that the term Saharawi is commonly used by the people of Western Sahara, and generally has nationalistic connotations for the people of this country who have not yet achieved independence, where 80% of their territory is still under the Moroccan occupation. The term Saharawi has now become almost synonymous with Western Sahara. The Saharawi is an Arabic word that means "people of the Sahara" or "people of the desert".

Several Spanish authors from the times of Spain’s control over Western Sahara deny the existence of Saharawi nationalism. In this line of authors, we find Hernández Pacheco and Caro Baroja. These authors have been guided by a single objective to glorify colonialism and turn the Saharawis into simple indigenous people who are far from understanding modernity and civilization.
However, Saharawi national identity was recognized by the verdict of the International Court of Justice on October 16, 1975.

The effective existence of the Saharawi people

It is important to highlight the opinion of the International Court of Justice since it unquestionably institutionalizes the existence of the Saharawi people, as a separate entity from the Mauritanian and Moroccan peoples. A summary study of the ICJ5 opinion constitutes a legal pillar of Saharawi nationalism.

According to the highest international judicial instance, the decolonization of Western Sahara must be carried out through the application of the General Assembly Resolution 1514, or through a referendum in which the entire population can freely participate under the supervision of the UN. The Court is very forceful in its central argument, which comes to answer quite clearly to the two questions formulated by the General Assembly: 1) At the time of the colonization of the territory, the Sahara was not terra nullius, since there was a population that, although nomadic, was socially and politically organized prior to Spain’s arrival, with its chiefs who represented it, and who were recognized by the latter through various mutual treaties, 2) Western Sahara and its population maintain some legal ties with Morocco and the tribes that inhabit Mauritania, but there are no signs of territorial sovereignty in favour of these two states. The ruling of the ICJ comes to light at a time when Western Sahara is under the administration of Spain as a colonial power, and in which it logically discusses the forms of decolonization which are to be applied, while the decolonizing process is strongly supported by the UN.

Thus, it seems absurd to propose the option of retrocession advocated by the Moroccan authorities, for a non-autonomous territory. In practice, it can be applied to colonial enclaves, such as Gibraltar, and not to a territory of Western Sahara, inhabited by an indigenous population that constitutes a homogeneous unit from the ethnic, social and religious point of view. In this context, we take a position of Walker Connor, who thinks that the failure to comply with the principle of self-determination of peoples would be a factor of destabilization and that denial of particularisms of various “nations” is the most likely path to violence.6

The Zemla cry symbol of Saharawi nationalism

Historically, Saharawi nationalism was born under the threat of extermination of the Saharawi people, mainly when the Spanish, French and Moroccan authorities discreetly agreed to carry out deadly attacks against the Saharawi population during the year of 1958, commonly called the operation of swabs.7 The Saharawi population’s memory describes it as the “year of the attack” against the existence
of the Saharawi people. Political blackmail was sealed between Morocco and Spain by an agreement in which Spain gave a slice of Western Sahara’s Tarfaya region to Morocco. When Spain gave the town of Tarfaya to Morocco in 1959, the Sahrawis felt that they were wounded in this new geopolitical equation. They tried to organize themselves to counter the Spanish colonial policy and its complacency with Morocco, but they were unsuccessful. The main cause was the lack of an organizational structure and a leader for their movement.

The other important cause was the independence of Mauritania in 1962, on the southern flank of Western Sahara, a territory that shares the same culture, same dialect and tribal ties. Saharawi nationalists were forced to reconsider their inertia by forming a movement to save the Saharawi identity from the ashes of oblivion.

In my opinion, the most important factor was the resolution 2591 of December 16, 1969, of the United Nations General Assembly, inviting the administering power to determine as soon as possible the procedures for holding a referendum under the auspices of the UN. This represents an important turning point for the future of Western Sahara and can be described as a prelude to the birth of Saharawi nationalism, because it has pushed the new generations to think about independence of Western Sahara. This is the reason why the Bassiri movement was discreetly born in 1969.

The events which took place on June 17, 1970, in the neighbourhood of Stone Houses of El Aaiun, known as the events of Zemla or "the cry of Zemla", were recorded in this context. There the intervention of the Spanish military forces resulted in twelve dead and several wounded. These events awakened in the Saharawi people a sense of adherence to the movement of Bassiri, and brought about a significant rise of nationalism among the Saharawi population, for the first time in its history since the Spanish colonization in 1884.

The manifestation of Saharawi nationalism in El Aaiun in June 1970 had a great impact on the future of the Sahrawi question because the nationalists had an unexpected success. For, even their tribal leaders and the Spanish colonial authorities were all surprised by the emergence of this movement.

The Saharawi demonstration of power was led and organized by Mohamed Bachir Uld Sidi Brahim, better known as Bassiri, founder of the avant-garde Movement for the Liberation of the Sahara. Bassiri first started to prepare for a career in journalism, which took him to Egypt and Syria from 1964 to 1966. On his return, in 1966, he founded a Saharawi nationalist newspaper in Morocco called Al-Shibab (The Torch), which quickly became an organ where the Sahrawis' wishes and their destiny were explained, envisioning a nation free and sovereign from the Spanish yoke, but also different from the Kingdom of Morocco.

As an introduction to his thought, we quote the following passage: "The Sahara has never been Moroccan, the Kingdom of Morocco cannot claim to have been a
part of the Alawite kingdom. Throughout history, Morocco has never sent a Moroccan governor to Western Sahara, and the Saharawis have never sworn allegiance to any Moroccan monarch, and there were only commercial links between the Saharawi and Moroccan traders, or the religion of Islam, which profess the two peoples". Bassiri’s fate was decided by the Spanish colonial authorities, who never shed any light on his disappearance on June 17, 1970.

The failure of Bassiri’s movement to continue a peaceful fight against the Spanish colonial rule, and his enforced disappearance, pushed the Saharawis to organize and turn to armed struggle as the only way to claim independence of the Saharawi people. This situation led to the emergence of a new Saharawi nationalist movement, the Polisario Front.

The main characteristic of Saharawi nationalism in its first phase, with the Bassiri movement, is that it had no religious basis, which gives it a specificity in comparison to nationalisms in the Maghreb region. All its members were of the Sunni Muslim religion, but religion was of secondary relevance in the movement, even though members swore an oath on the Coran.

The militants of the Polisario Front were already part of the society divided into social classes and less by family and tribal criteria. Two groups lead the movement. The first group was made up of a new generation who studied outside or inside Western Sahara, and their ideological sources were infused with the ideas of the European Enlightenment. The second group was composed of Chiuj, who represent the traditional social order, but who had lost confidence in the Spanish colonial authorities because the latter failed to respect their promise to be a guarantor of a future Saharawi nation.

The Polisario Front was born on May 10, 1973, and initially had the support of the refugees in Mauritania and Algeria, until a rapid incorporation of men of various ages. On May 20, 1973, shortly after its founding, the Polisario Front launched its first bloodless military attack against a Spanish surveillance post, located near the border with Morocco, in Janguet Quesat. In 1975, the Polisario Front took many Spanish posts under its control. The Polisario Front crowned its political-military efforts with the convention of national unity, on October 12, 1975, in the city of Ain Ben Tili, with the aim to end the tripartite agreement between Spain, Mauritania and Morocco, which had divided the territory of Western Sahara. This convention of national unity represents a mature phase of Saharawi nationalism.

**The ideological bases of Sahrawi nationalism**

The Saharawi movement for national liberation in its first phase showed sociological and cultural characteristics that are more or less identical with those
of the movements in the Maghreb countries: the emergence of the middle classes as urban allies to the rural population and the nomads, a break with the old patrimonial tribal practices, the adoption of the rhetoric of the European Enlightenment, generally in the French republican version (freedom, equality, fraternity). But, even when placed in "objectively" revolutionary situations, this movement was not anti-capitalist; from the beginning, above all, it was anti-colonialist.

The first ideological pillar of the Saharawi nationalism under the Polisario Front was pan-Arabism,¹⁴ whose founder was the Egyptian President Gamal Abd al-Nasir. Due to his charisma and Egypt's strategic and political importance in the Arab world, he was an exceptional force in mobilizing support for the Arab nationalist cause. However, after his death, pan-Arab nationalism was quarantined despite the existence of the Arab League.

According to George Antonius in his classic work, *The Arab Awakening*, the very connotation of the word Arab gradually changed in the age of pan-Arabism. It was no longer used solely to denote a member of the nomad tribes who lived in the Arabian peninsula. It gradually came to mean a citizen of the extensive Arab world—a great majority whose racial identity, even when it was not of pure Arab lineage, had become included into the tide of Arabisation; whose manners and traditions had been shaped in an Arab mould; and, most decisive of all, whose mother tongue was Arabic. The term applies to Christians as well as to Moslems, and the off-shoots of each of those creeds, the criterion being not Islamisation but the degree of Arabisation”.¹⁵ Saharawi nationalists found a refuge in the pan-Arabist ideology, and this was already materialized in the name of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

The second pillar of the Saharawi nationalism is to be found in the pan-African ideology. The pan-Africanism begins as a way to fight the situation of African slaves in the Americas, right up to the Berlin conference of 1884. For the enslaved Africans, pan-Africanism was an idea that helped them join their efforts, as victims of racism. In other words, they showed that they were enslaved because they came from the same continent and shared the same racial heritage.

Pan-Africanism has provided an ideology to unite Africans against colonialism, at home and abroad. While different African nations were gaining independence, pan-African ideology advocated that, until all African nations were free, the continent as a whole could not be considered free. In this context, the territory of Western Sahara is regarded as the last colony in Africa. That is why we find SADR’s foreign policy to be particularly interested in relations with African countries, which was manifested effectively in the recognition of SADR as a plenary member of the African Union in 1982 and a signatory of the AU’s
constitution. What is clear is that pan-Africanism – the striving for the unity and liberation of Africa and Africans – still has some relevance because many consider that Africa and Africans are not completely free or united.16

What has been innovative in Saharawi nationalism is the ideas of the Vietnamese leader Ho Chi Minh, which represents the fourth ideological basis for the Saharawi nationalists. Ho Chi Minh broadened the liberal concept of self-determination of peoples: "All the peoples of the world are born equal, each people has the right to life, to happiness and freedom". The method of Ho Chi Minh in the struggle for the independence of the Vietnamese people was an undeniable asset in the struggle of the Saharawi people.

However, a distinctive feature of Saharawi nationalism is its detachment from Islamic religion or Islamist ideology. For this reason, Saharawi nationalism has been able to develop and become the basic foundation of the Saharawi unity.

The objective of Saharawi nationalism implies the will of a community that has become aware of its historical individuality to create a nationally autonomous nation-state and develop its sovereign state. The main objective of Saharawi nationalism is the independence of the Saharawi people and the construction of a modern state, even in exile.

From nationalism to the nation: the formation of a state in exile

"The nation" has been conceived as a geographical and economic entity, but also as a great human community, characterized by the awareness of its cultural unity and the will to live in common. The concept of "nationality" generally implies the feeling of an individual to belong to a nation. However, the term "nationalism" can still denote the demands of an oppressed and dominated people who aspire to independence. This is the main objective of Saharawi nationalism.

Since the French Revolution, the concept of nation has become increasingly conspicuous in the vocabulary of social science. This was an era when people were categorised, identified and included or excluded as nations. Once people gained recognition as a nation, it became illegal to deny them the right to constitute a sovereign state. Sovereignty became the fulfilment of human destiny, as Hegel put it.

The Saharawi national state, even if it is commonly called a state in exile and exercises its sovereignty only in 20% of the territory of Western Sahara, should be seen as the final stage of Saharawi nationalism, since it has a constitution like constitutions of modern states, one that transcends tribal or regional logic and restrains logic of tyranny. However, the Saharawi nationalism is not essentially
bourgeois in the image of European historical nationalism that is deployed against feudalism. It is rather a nationalism of proletarian and student disobedience, radicalized by its armed struggle against colonial occupation and imperialism.

The Saharawi nation is defined by a common belonging to a history of the civilization of living nomads. The history of resistance to Spanish colonialism in the past, and to Moroccan colonialism today, has maintained the sense of Saharawi national identity. The Saharawi identity was materialized by the proclamation of the SADR\(^1\) on February 27, 1976, by the Polisario Front, which claims sovereignty over the territory of Western Sahara. However, the UN does not recognize either SADR or Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. For the African Union, SADR is an African state.

To conclude, if the Maghreb region fails to provide timely corrective measures for the issue of self-determination of the Saharawi people, the future of North Africa, in general, will be quarantined for some time to come. Do these people have to wait until it becomes too late to understand the cause and the effect link between the Saharawi nationalism and the geopolitics of Maghreb?


\(^{2}\) Hegemony.


\(^{5}\) For more details and to deepen your reading on the opinion of the International Court of Justice of October 16, 1975 on Western Sahara, we advise you to see, Juan Soroeta Líceras, *International law and the Western Sahara Conflict*, Wolf Legal Publishers WLP, , Netherlands, 2014, from page 79 to page 111.


\(^{9}\) To know more details about these events you can see in this sense the work of Barbulo Tomas: La historia prohibida del Sahara Espanol, Barcelona, 2002.


\(^{13}\) Jorge Alejandro Suárez Saponaro, *Nacionalismo Saharauí*, Diario el Minuto, mayo 2020: [https://elminuto.cl/el-frente-polisario-movimiento-de-liberacion-nacional/](https://elminuto.cl/el-frente-polisario-movimiento-de-liberacion-nacional/).
