The Entry of New Factors into the Western Sahara Conflict

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With direct diplomatic talks between Morocco and the Polisario Front having proven unproductive since 2007, recent developments in the Western Sahara conflict have taken place mainly on the ground, partly in the disputed territory itself, and have been driven by Sahrawi protest action and Moroccan responses. A greater challenge to Moroccan rule than the intifada of 2005, the violent clashes in November 2010 can be seen as a catalyst, helping to bring a change of policy in Morocco. This vindicates the judgement of Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy that, "given the political deadlock in Western Sahara, a new factor must enter into the equation if things are to change" (Zunes and Mundy, 2010, p. 263).

While one potential 'new factor' – the withdrawal of support by one of Morocco's powerful allies – has failed to materialise, the prospects of change have been strengthened by new forms of resistance by Sahrawi activists (Shelley 2004: 206-207), presenting challenges that Morocco has been incapable of dealing with peaceably. At the same time, opposition activity has revived international interest in the Western Sahara, by applying 'heat' to a conflict long regarded externally as 'frozen.' Ultimately it is the challenge presented on the ground, in combination with rebellion and revolution elsewhere in the Arab world, that now promises to change the 'equation.'

Whereas Morocco's 2007 autonomy plan lacked credibility due to the lack of democracy in the occupying country (Garcia Lopez, 2010), the growth and generalisation of popular pressure for regime change within the Arab world (which some analysts have seen the Sahrawi movement anticipating) has brought a more far-reaching reform offer from Mohamed VI. The Moroccan monarch's speech on 9 March 2011, announcing plans to replace the 'executive monarchy' with a European-style constitutional monarchy accompanied by a devolved system of parliamentary government, could make autonomy a feasible formula at last, especially if it finds favour with Moroccan settlers in the Western Sahara as well as indigenous Sahrawis.

Although the military aspects of the conflict have remained unchanged, dramatic events on the ground have generated new dynamics affecting the future status of the disputed territory. Two of these are analysed below: first, the controversy surrounding Morocco's expulsion of Sahrawi human rights activist Aminatou Haidar on 14 November 2009; and second, Western Sahara's '48 hours of rage' that challenged Moroccan control twelve months later.

A Little Local Incident... That Became International

To many observers, the Haidar episode seemed to be a straightforward case of Moroccan violation of the rights of a pro-independence Sahrawi activist, who had received the prestigious Robert F. Kennedy human rights award in 2008 for "promoting the civil and political rights of the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara, including the freedom of speech and assembly and the right to self-determination." Refused entry at Laayoune airport when returning home from abroad on 14 November 2009, she had her Moroccan passport confiscated and was expelled to the Canary Islands for describing her nationality as Sahrawi on the landing card. Haidar's situation immediately attracted sympathy in Spain, and quickly awakened international humanitarian interest as a result of

a month-long hunger strike in Lanzarote airport in protest at not being allowed home.

After intense efforts by the Spanish government to find a solution that would be accepted by both Haidar and Morocco, it was an intervention by US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton that eventually persuaded Morocco to accept Haidar's return, but only after France and Spain had issued statements acknowledging the application of Moroccan law in the Western Sahara and after the US had reiterated its support for autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty as the basis for a solution to the regional conflict. Rabat retreated when it became clear that Haidar might die on foreign soil, become a Sahrawi martyr and cause popular pressure within Spain to bring about a rethink of the Spanish government pro-Moroccan policy.

While upsetting relations with Spain unnecessarily, Morocco's diplomatic blunder appears to have been motivated by frustration at the failure of its autonomy proposal to become a concrete basis for the UN-sponsored negotiations. Not only was the Moroccan formula being resisted by the Polisario and its supporters, Mohamed VI had also received a letter from President Barack Obama in July, differentiating his position from the unqualified pro-Moroccan stance of his predecessor, by saying that the US would work with all parties to the conflict in pursuit of a solution.

Just days before Haidar's arbitrary expulsion from Morocco, Mohamed VI had celebrated the 24th anniversary of the invasion of the Spanish Sahara by announcing plans to 'impose' autonomy on the Sahrawi population, insisting that, in relation to the conflict, "one is either a patriot or a traitor." By expelling her to Spain, with the acquiescence of the Spanish authorities, the King also seemed to be putting pressure on Madrid – notwithstanding President Zapatero's pro-Moroccan orientation – to give unambiguous support to the autonomy formula. Spanish representatives did make concessions to the Moroccan position in their efforts to overcome the crisis, but at the political cost of facing vociferous criticism from the non-governmental parties in Spain – including some frequently aligned with the minority Socialist administration. Angered by socialist efforts to persuade Haidar to end her protest and accept political asylum in Spain, parliamentary pressure on the government grew, not least through a resounding vote reaffirming the principle of self-determination for the Sahrawi people.

Haidar's expulsion quickly rebounded against Morocco, for although it was supported by many Moroccans, who saw her hunger strike as an attempt to blackmail the monarch and achieve a propaganda coup against Morocco, it was widely seen in Europe as an arbitrary act that violated her human rights. It thus placed in question the European Union's depiction of the Moroccan regime as liberal and reformist, and underlined the flimsiness of Morocco's offer of Sahrawi autonomy. The EU itself was embarrassed by the actions of its privileged southern neighbour and support grew for a proposal to add human rights monitoring to the mandate of the UN peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara (MINURSO) – a move blocked by France.

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The disapproval of Moroccan actions found practical expression in the difficulties surrounding the renewal of the EU-Morocco fishing agreement, under which Spain was the main beneficiary. Against a backcloth of European concerns over the Saharan situation, the legal services of the European Parliament proceeded to propose that either the agreement be suspended or that it exclude Western Sahara's particularly rich fishing grounds on the basis that there was no evidence of the Sahrawi population benefitting from the existing agreement. The overall outcome of the episode, which Haidar was able to exploit politically, was that the Polisario was handed a propaganda victory, the Western Sahara conflict acquired more salience on the international agenda and doubts surrounding the recently bestowed 'advanced status' of EU-Morocco relations grew within Europe. Subsequent WikiLeaks revelations showed that the US also viewed Spain's handling of the Haidar case as 'disastrous.'

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partners that his country was serious about regionalisation. The Southern Provinces would be in the forefront of devolution measures to be elaborated by an advisory committee headed by Omar Azziman, who was to be replaced as ambassador to Spain by the controversial figure of Ahmed Ould Souilem, a defector from the Polisario movement. The committee failed to report within the six months initially allowed for it to produce proposals. Thus, by the second half of the year, the Moroccan regime was once more suffering from a failure to deliver on reform promises, the consequences of which were felt both domestically and in the context of conflict resolution talks, presided over by UN envoy Christopher Ross.

Civil Society, Smashing the Ice

Morocco's refusal to discuss any proposals but its own provoked a temporary boycott of the talks by the Polisario. Increasingly, however, resistance to the policy of imposition came from civil society activism. In August 2010, NGO activists from the Canary Islands were arrested for demonstrating solidarity with the Polisario Front in the Western Sahara capital of Laayoune. Their tactics owed something to the example set by international supporters of the Palestinian population of Gaza, aimed at breaking the Israeli blockade of the occupied territory. Meanwhile, a key feature of the protest movement on the ground, which came to a head in October and November, was the absence of political identification with the Polisario. Resentment of the Moroccan occupation, exacerbated by the prospect of an imposed insubstantial autonomy, was fuelled by social and economic discontent. A variety of issues converged to ensure that the biggest demonstrations staged by Sahrawis since 1975 expressed pre-eminently social grievances. These related to: the withdrawal of subsidies traditionally received by nomadic Sahrawis (*Afkar/Ideas*, 28, 2010-11, p. 3); high levels of youth unemployment; anger over the privileged economic circumstances of many of those upholding Moroccan claims to sovereignty; and disgruntlement at the way in which the EU, despite internal opposition, still seemed intent on including Western Saharan resources in fishing agreements with Morocco.

The idea of establishing a protest camp had been trialled the previous year, but it now became a massive, high-profile activity, as the camp at Gdeim Izik, 12km to the east of Laayoune, gradually came to attract some 20,000 demonstrators. Surrounded by Moroccan police forces, the political reality of the occupation of the territory quickly entered into the confrontation, especially after a 14-year old Sahrawi boy was killed in an incident at a security checkpoint on October 24th. At the same time, the social nature of the grievances was reflected by Morocco's initial attempts to placate demonstrators by making offers of land, subsidies and benefits.

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When concessions failed to persuade the protestors to back down, the camp was broken up forcibly early on November 8th, thus pre-empting its reinforcement by several thousand supporters arriving in a fresh convoy of protest vehicles from Laayoune. Attempts by Morocco to minimise the political damage by deploying unarmed gendarmes and members of the para-police auxiliary forces ultimately meant that, while dozens of protestors were injured, the fatalities were mainly on the Moroccan side. The destruction of the camp immediately brought further Sahrawi protest action, punctuated by a number of merciless attacks by enraged opposition militants back in Laayoune itself, as police undertook house-to-house raids in search of the camp protest leaders.

Amid a Moroccan clampdown on independent news reporting, the impression that reached the outside world was of a brutal offensive against the protestors, claiming dozens of victims in the space of two days. The Polisario was quick to claim that 11 civilians had been killed; and later reported that there were 36 bodies in a hospital. The Spanish Human Rights League went further, claiming that over 100 people had been killed and more than 2000 arrested for being Sahrawi. Moroccan Foreign Minister Taieb Fassi-Fihri was later to concede that detainees may have been tortured in police stations. However, organisations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International found that Morocco's figures of

13 killed, including 11 members of the security forces and two civilians, were accurate. Human rights reports made clear that abuses had been committed on both sides: Moroccan forces had not only been resisted by civilians with Molotov cocktails and gas bottles, but also targeted by militias intent on cutting throats; meanwhile, they stood accused of a disproportionate use of force, including systematic beatings of detainees and at least one case of rape.

Overall, Morocco suffered by far the greatest loss of face. First, it had not been able to deal with the situation without eventually resorting to force. Second, its intervention to eradicate the camp was a reminder to the outside world that its presence in Western Sahara involved occupation and repression, notwithstanding the fact that some of the violence was between Sahrawi communities. Third, when it came to the crunch, the reaction of the authorities contradicted Moroccan claims to be proceeding with a process of devolution. Fourth, restrictions on media access and travel to Laayoune by concerned European groups keen to observe the events, fuelled international doubts about the extent of the regime's commitment to liberalisation and reform.

To defuse the external condemnation it received, especially from within Europe, Morocco replaced the civil governor of Laayoune with a Sahrawi. There were diversionary efforts within the Moroccan Parliament to shift the focus of international attention to the Hispano-Moroccan disputes over Ceuta and Melilla, partly in reaction to the widespread criticism of human rights violations emanating from Spain. One consequence of the events was that, under strong criticism for its conciliatory attitude towards Rabat, Zapatero's government in Madrid was finally persuaded to modify its position by joining the group of countries demanding that the UN should play a role in protecting human rights in the Western Sahara.

Reverberations in Morocco

While so-called 'demonstration' effects are complex processes, whose causes are difficult to identify (let alone prove), one may at least hypothesise that the sporadic protests seen in Morocco itself during the early months of 2011 drew some of their inspiration and possibly actually learnt from the 'hours of rage' and preceding protest campaign witnessed in the Western Sahara, along with the upheavals that were shaking neighbouring North African states at the time, in some cases much more deeply than Morocco itself. It may be that the biggest lesson – drawn especially from the fall of successive heads of state in North Africa – has been learnt by Mohamed VI himself: that the future of the monarchy in Morocco depends on much more decisive political reforms than those contemplated at the start of his reign. In March 2011, in quick succession, he first announced the creation of an independent body to monitor human rights and then, on the 9th and after receiving recommendations from Omar Azziman and his advisory committee, plans for a new constitution, involving a system of democratically-elected regional authorities.

Adding credibility to the decentralisation plans was a concurrent commitment made to reducing royal powers and giving Morocco a constitutional monarchy within a democratic framework. Although the precise implications of this for the Sahara were not immediately clear, these early indications of a forthcoming 'transition from above', encouraged by pressure from below and within the Arab world, at least imply that the offer of autonomy from Morocco is now much more meaningful, and thus a more formidable contender for popular support among Sahrawis alongside the more established cause of independence.

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