

The impact of the western sahara conflict



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The conflict in Western Sahara was a dispute between Western Sahara (Frente Polisario) and Morocco which constitutes a big threat to regional stability after decolonization in 1975 by Spanish powers. The war has caused thousands of lives, big numbers of prisoners of war on both sides and has led to Morocco constructing a huge fortified wall in Western Sahara (Lehtinen, 2003). This conflict has therefore had far reaching impacts on Polisario in terms of political, economical and cultural as here discussed.

Frente Polisario is a national organization of the Western Sahara that was formed with the aim of obtaining independence for Western Sahara. The main political impact that the Western Sahara conflict had was the formation of Frente Polisario. This was a political front that advanced plights of Saharawi society. Frente Polisario was therefore charged with the responsibility of championing independence of the Sahrawi people.

The conflict in the Western Sahara led to Polisario's adoption of socialist ideology in 1970s which was a common ideology at the time that was being adopted by most liberation movements in most nations. The ideology was meant to bring all Sahrawi people together as one big family and a united society to champion their independence course.

In relation to Polisario political struggle for independence of Saharawi people, it has continued to champion for peaceful liberation efforts devoid of terrorists' activities. For example, it denounced the 2003 bombing of Casablanca against civilians. In its quest for self independence from Morocco, it has advanced attack free liberation efforts. In addition, after the ceasefire in 1989, the movement committed itself to pursue peaceful

independence route as long as the Moroccan side complied with the conditions set during the ceasefire.

Further more, as a result of the persisted conflict in the Western Sahara region; Polisario signed a peace treaty that led to Mauritania assuming a neutral ground in the conflict which has been one of major political development that has given a glimpse of hope in the independence struggle of the Sahrawi people. The peace treaty has led to Morocco remaining as the sole hindrance to independence of the Saharawi people.

In terms of political relationship with other states, Polisario has had collaborative relationship with foreign countries as such as Algeria. Algeria has helped it advance its course for independence struggle against Morocco. For example, it has continued to receive unconditional support from Algeria in terms of arms and training of its forces for a period panning to 30 years. This has been useful for Polisario as it has enabled it to withstand heavy attacks from the Moroccan forces.

With the persistence of the conflict, in 1991, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed a plan that gave birth to a United Nations Mission which came to be called MINURSO. This mission was sent to Western Sahara in the same year (1991) to fulfill its mandate which included arrangement of referendum that was supposed to be held in February 1992 (International Crisis Group, 2007). However, the referendum process never took place as Morocco was opposed to referendum modalities that included process of identification of legible voters.

Economical Impacts and Issues on Polisario

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With the Spain's departure from Western Sahara in 1975, the region has undergone changed in several ways. For example, the nomadic lifestyle of the Saharawi people was altered as their main economic activity changed to mining. This became their major economic activity for their livelihood as Western Sahara was now in the top six largest phosphate exporters in the world. Abundance of phosphate and other natural minerals were among the cornerstones for Morocco's desire to control the territory. However, the economic benefits accrued from exploitation of the natural resources were for the occupying power (Morocco) but not for the indigenous Saharawi people.

Every territorial conflict comes along with huge economic impacts that negatively affect the well being of the participating states. In respects to Western Sahara Conflict, actual economical costs that the conflict has caused to the region and particularly to Polisario can not be actually quantified since reliable data on the same is absent. However, there are several issues that have taken place that have impacted negatively on economic situation of Polisario. One of the significant economic impact on Polisario has been widespread planting of landmine where by numerous parts of Polisario were given up due to suspected presence of mines (International Crisis Group, 2011).

The conflict in the region has also resulted to most of the Sahrawi people fleeing their homes and opting to live in refugee camps. This has resulted to overdependence of aid from the international community such as WFP by the Polisario people. In addition, life in refugee camps do not provide suitable

economic environment for any significant economic activities to be undertaken and this has intensified their foreign dependency.

In addition, the Polisario people being pastoralists and nomads in nature, they have been affected hugely by the conflict since their nomadic and pastoralist activities were not favored by prevalence of tensions that engulfed the disputed territory. They were again affected by the closing up of the border with Mauritania between 1997 and 2002 (International Crisis Group, 2011). The closure of the border further limited the movement of the nomad and pastoral communities of Polisario which negatively impacted their economic well being.

Furthermore, fishing activities also accounted for some significant economic well being of the Polisario people. However, with the conflict in place and Morocco being stronger in terms of organization and military might, the Moroccan military took advantage of the situation and obtained fishing license of the Sahrawi people and therefore denying the Polisario people one of their key economic endeavor.

Cultural Impacts and Issues on Polisario

Culture dimension of the Polisario people has not been spared in the Western Sahara conflict. Before the crisis, people of various tribes constituted the group that inhabited the land. During the colonial reign of Spain, Sahrawi society and culture remained intact in the entire colonial period. However, with Moroccan annexation, the Saharawi people become a minority within their own territory (Sandblast, 2011). This was due to the Moroccan policy to Moroccanize Western Sahara. Through Moroccanization of the territory,
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cultural practices of Saharawi people were washed away as new way of life of the Moroccan style was instilled. The government of Morocco settled more Moroccans in the Western Sahara territory hence diluting the cultural fabric of the Polisario people.

Barakat (2001) notes that Western Sahara comprised of seventy four thousand Sahrawis who were living in the territory but in the late 1990s, the total Sahrawi population is believed to have reached close to three hundred thousand. This population was infiltrated by their common adversary (Moroccans) hence diluting their cultural organization.

Saharawi people's cultural organization and set up have been greatly impaired as a result of the effects of the conflict. For example, the continued repression and denial of fundamental human rights like denial of freedom of expression by the Moroccan occupiers have negatively impacted on their cultural practices. In respect to this, their pastoralist and nomadic way of life as even their movement was greatly monitored and restrained by the Moroccans.

Territorial conflict in Western Sahara has resulted to war on different occasions where by Moroccan forces have gone physical with the Polisario's counterparts. In connection to this, the armed struggle has resulted to many casualties among civilians where by families and societies of the Saharawi people have been torn apart. The effects of the struggle have been wide spread. For example, there is prevalence of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancies and stigmatization which is as a result of evils committed by armed forces involved in the armed rustle.

Morocco

In the Western Sahara conflict, Morocco occupied the northern two thirds of the Sahara in the late 1975 and since then, it has fought against the Polisario (Barakat, 2001). The conflict has therefore been between the Polisario and the Moroccan side. The Western Sahara conflict has therefore had political, economical and cultural impacts on Morocco as a core actor in the feud.

Political impacts and issues on Morocco

Morocco has been impacted in two parallel ways; both negative and positive effects. Western Sahara crisis led to Morocco withdrawal from the AU in 1984 as a way of protesting against SADR admission to the AU which was one of the interested parties in the conflict. This move by Morocco tarnished its image on the international platform since it was viewed as an illegal occupying power in the disputed territory.

In addition, foreign relations of Morocco and other states suffered a blow. For example, its relations with Algeria were negatively affected as Morocco perceived Algeria to be in support of the Polisario whom Morocco considered as their subjects. Furthermore, international tensions between states have also been heightened as a result of the persisted conflict. For instance, it has impaired relationship between France and Algeria. France defends Morocco in the conflict and against Polisario while Algeria remains one to main supporter of Polisario for its independence (Norway Bergen, 2010).

Moreover, Morocco has successfully ensured that referendum is intentionally delayed. Morocco disregard of referendum in Western Sahara region is in

view to continue with the territory's occupation. Referendum was a resolution that was adopted by UN as a way of ending the crisis amicably but Morocco has adopted a delaying tactics by disagreeing on the formula of conducting the referendum process.

Furthermore, Morocco has successful gained the support of the United States over the stand off. US support of Morocco is guided by the fact that Morocco is a key ally of the US in the Arab world (Zoubir, 2010). Although America is not opposed to the Western Sahara independence, the geopolitical consideration and particularly strategic significance of Morocco in the Arab world and its long time historical cooperation with America especial in counter terrorism war and Israel-Palestinian conflict has been the guiding principle for continued support by the US to Morocco over the entire period of the conflict. Moreover, Morocco's back up from major world super powers have been one of the reasons why the conflict has persisted for too long.

France also considers Western Sahara as an integral part of Morocco and they have continued to show their opposition to independent state of Western Sahara (Haddadi, 2002). France has therefore believed that independence of Sahrawi will make them fall under influence and control of Algeria. In addition, France also considered independence of Western Sahara as a way of weakening Moroccan kingdom in which France has vested economic, political, cultural and military interests. This was a political mileage to Morocco in terms of occupation and control of the Western Sahara since it was assured of the support of major world powers in the crisis. However, this has been one of the reasons for Morocco's disregard of several UN resolutions including frustration of referendum exercise which was planned

to take place but under played by Morocco for its own partisan interests in the conflict.

Furthermore, morocco image in Africa has greatly been damaged as its being seen as an occupying power. Consequently, it has AU. In addition, its ties with other African countries continued to suffer a blow, for example, South Africa cut links with Morocco in 2004 as a result of Morocco's disregard of the Baker plan (International Crisis Group, 2011).

Morocco has been at the central stage of all political happenings in Western Sahara crisis. For example, its invasion of August 1979 to Western Sahara region led to adoption of General Assembly resolutions 34/37 of 21 November 1979 and 35/19 of 11 November 1980 where by the General Assembly reaffirmed inalienable right of the Saharawi people to self independence (Gillespie, 2010). This however deepened the problem as there was continued colonization of the region by Morocco.

Moreover, Morocco reiterated that in forthcoming negotiation over the disputed territory of Western Sahara, it will not accept anything other than its own proposal. This stand came as a result of winning support of major superpowers like the US and France. The support therefore complicated the already worse situation since on the other hand, Polisario was not ready to tame down their quest for self independence. France and US support of Morocco in the crisis only fueled the conflict instead of helping resolve it. This has resulted to many occasions where Morocco's refused to deliberate on Saharawi's proposals and has even gone a head to disregard UN

resolution of negotiations without setting some pre-conditions (Darbouche & Zoubir, 2008).

In addition, as a result of persisted conflict in the region, and with Morocco and Algeria supporting different stands of the conflict, their borders were closed in August 1994 (Zoubir, 2010). This was followed with strained relationship between the two countries as the both have partisan interests in the Western Sahara region. The closure of the border between these two states signified strained foreign relations that existed among countries in the region.

With the continued and persisted conflict in the region, Saharawi People have continued with active peaceful resistance against Morocco's occupation. This has been successful in alerting the international community of human rights issues that the Saharawi people are going through in the struggle (Zoubor, 2010). Actions such as hunger strikes have triggered international attention to the Polisario's situation and as a result a personal envoy to the UN Secretary General asked the UN Security Council to include a human rights monitoring body in the region in order to check on human rights violation being practiced by the Moroccan authorities (Cavatorta, Chari & Kritzungner, 2006).

Furthermore, the continued crisis in the region has given Morocco some of the super powers acclaim in the conflict due to its geopolitical relevance in the region. For instance, it has been recognized by France, US and Spain as legitimate occupying power of the Western Sahara territory. This geopolitical factor has been the major hindrance for the resolution of the stand off since

Morocco has refused to lessen its stand after this assurance of support and it is only prepared to accept a resolution that identifies the territory to be within its sovereignty.

Economical Impacts and Issues on Morocco

Territorial conflicts in any crisis are usually an expensive affair to participating parties and it usually impacts negatively to economical well being of the states concerned. To Morocco, “ the economic costs of staying in Western Sahara remains high” (Cordesman, 2002: 105). This comes as a result of huge spending on military facilities used in the war especially if the conflict prolongs. In relation to Western Sahara conflict, the war has spanned over beyond three decades and as a core participator, Morocco has spent a lot of resources in the territory in order to have a grip of the region.

The major cause and persistence of the Western Sahara conflict have been the desire to control natural resources that are found in the territory.

Morocco has continually cooperated with other foreign states to have control and exploit these resources by denying Western Sahara their outright self independence. This therefore implied that Morocco benefits from rich mineral resources of Western Sahara which include phosphate reserves, iron, oil and methane gas. Despite oppression of Saharawi by Morocco, it has continued to benefit crisis and has had a continued advance of its economic agenda.

In addition, Morocco considers all resources that it has spent in Western Sahara as an investment. However, since the inception of the crisis, there has been drastic increase in security costs. About a half of the Morocco’s Military budget is devoted to Morocco in its attempt to keep the region under

its control. This has at times strained its economic spending on military issues in the Western Sahara at the expense of other constructive development agenda.

Furthermore, apart from military spending, Morocco has intensively engaged in infrastructural development of the Western Sahara. For instance, over the past 30 years, Morocco has invested more than 2.4 billion dollars in basic infrastructure that included airports, sea ports and a 10,000 kilometers of road (International Crisis Group, 2011). However, despite Morocco's occupation of the territory, Moroccans have remained critical of the developments in Western Sahara since they view the move by the Moroccan authorities as an attempt to derail development in other parts of their country in the name of Western Sahara occupation.

In addition, the closure of the Morocco-Algeria border by Algerian authorities was detrimental to the economic stability of Morocco. This closure affected the economic life of the city of Oujda that heavily depended on trade and tourism from Algeria (Cavatorta, Chari, & Kritzung, 2006). These tourism activities have been one of the major economic activities that had boosted the region in its development agenda. Morocco pleaded for reopening of the border by Algeria but Algeria remained adamant in demand for Morocco to honor self-independence of Western Sahara.

Furthermore, the continued tension between Morocco and Algeria due to Morocco's continued occupation of the Western Sahara region has led to an arms race between these two countries in a show of power and might. However, an arms race is costly and each country is forced to spend a significant portion of

its national income in acquisition of the arms at the expense of other important development issues. This has in most cases led to stagnation of other crucial development projects especially to Morocco which is sacrificing everything in order to have control of the Western Sahara territory.

Cultural Impacts and Issues on Morocco

Morocco's occupation of the Western Sahara territory has at time impacted negatively to its cultural well being. For example, Moroccan authorities occupying Western Sahara have used the region as the transit point of illegal trade such as drugs and arms hence going against the cultural fabric of the Moroccan society (Boussaid, 2009). However, trafficking seems to be on increase and it is likely to in place as long as the conflict continues.

In addition, with continued occupation of Western Sahara by Morocco and considerable huge investment in the territory at expense of Morocco, developments, a gap already exists where slums have mushroomed in some parts of Morocco. This has generally affected cultural well being of the Moroccan people and most of their needs are never addressed by the authority. Slum life have therefore formed part of most Moroccan population as most live as destitute in their own country.

Algeria

Algeria has been an active participant in the Western Sahara conflict where by it has continued to support Polisario for its independence in Western Sahara conflict against the wish of Morocco. Algeria and Morocco have since then taken their battlefield to the UN where each seeks to convince the

international community of their positions over Western Sahara. However, like other interested parties in the conflict, there have been several impacts to Algeria in terms of political, economical and cultural to its well being.

Political impacts and issues on Algeria

Algeria has taken Morocco on task by advancing a political war in the UN where it has tried to convince the UN of legitimacy of their stand. On other hand, there has been continued lack of initiative by the Moroccan side to support their position in the UN. However, Algeria has continued to advance their course in the stand off by offering several resolutions in the UN platform. Algeria has maintained no territorial claim on Western Sahara conflict, it has continued to support Polisario's course for self determination through diplomatic means (Mundy, 2010).

Important to note is that the Western Sahara conflict was already in place during the cold war period. Morocco was pro Western powers since it was a key ally of France and US. Since Algeria and Morocco were two protagonists in the Western Sahara conflict, Algeria opted for the eastern block where it became an ally of Moscow in the region. In respect to this, the continued conflict in the Western Sahara has continued to exacerbate strained relationship between Morocco and Algeria.

In addition, the Western Sahara conflict strained relationship of Algeria with other states and in particular, its diplomatic relationship. Major world super powers had their own interests in the regions conflict. For example, US, France and Spain believed that Western Sahara self governance could make

Morocco unstable and therefore they were always in opposition to Algeria's stand on push for Western Sahara independence.

Economical impacts and issues on Algeria

Economic impacts on part of Algeria participation in the Western Sahara conflict are quite evident from its central role in the conflict. It is " widely assumed that Algeria foots most of the bill for Polisario's international diplomatic efforts and it has generously contributed to the humanitarian needs of the refugees near Tindouf" (Mundy, 2010). This means that Algeria has spend hundreds of millions in the Western Sahara conflict which would have been utilized in other development projects in the country such as infrastructural improvement.

In addition, Algeria has continued to support Polisario and SADR in military aid, for instance, it provided weapons support against their fierce opponent (Morocco). The military support has been intensive and have had huge economic implications since their development program has been greatly compromised to the support for the quest of Western Sahara self governance.

Algeria also faced a major economical blow when it failed to take the advantage of the Gara Djebilet iron reserves as long as the Western Sahara Conflict is still in place and as long as the tension with Morocco remains unresolved (Mundy, 2010). This was an economic set back to Algeria because of its stand that it had taken in the conflict. The stand off denied Algeria possible exploitations of the iron reserves that could have seen it advance more in their economic performance.

Furthermore, Algeria and Morocco are the two major warring parties in the conflict and they both belong to the Maghreb Union. The Western Sahara conflict has therefore had massive economic impacts in the region since it has hindered positive regional development. The conflict have even gone a head and threatened the existence of Maghreb Union since key union members hold partisan interest in the conflict and are ever suspicious of one another. The loss of earnings due to the Arab Maghreb Union's failure is on the order of 2 percent of the average annual GDP for member countries (Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Mauritania) (International Crisis Group, 2007).

Cultural Impacts and Issues on Algeria

The Western Sahara conflict has impacted heavily on Algeria in its cultural set up. For example, as a result of persisted conflict, Algeria has been the biggest refugee host of the Saharawi people. Refugees started streaming from Western Sahara in 1975 when the conflict broke out between Morocco and Polisario and by 1976; the government of Algeria estimated 165, 000 refugees of Saharawi origin that it had hosted (UNHCR, 2010). This has resulted to humanitarian crisis that puts pressure to social amenities.

Since the outbreak of the conflict and forced settlement in Tindouf, Algeria women have been forced to assume complete management of these refugee camps which are taken as their homes. This is contrary to their normal way of life and in regard with their cultural practices where men are supposed to assume leadership roles of their families. In addition, the long term exile life

experienced by women and neglect by international community has a great impact to the Saharawi people and Algeria as a host country.

Algeria continues to serve as a point of transit for refugees. However, there have been reported cases of human smuggling in the process of handling the refugees from Western Sahara territory. There are groups in Algeria that have taken advantage of the Saharawi's plight in the present crisis as they smuggle them. This have hence intensified human trafficking problem that has been reported by UNHCR in the refugee camps.

Spain

Spain is the former colonial power that had occupied Western Sahara. With increasing consensus that colonized states should be given their own self independence, Spain later recognized this right as decolonization process was gaining momentum in the international politics. Morocco which is the current occupant of Western Sahara was indeed of the crusaders for decolonization of Western Sahara.

Political impacts and issues on Spain

As a former colonial master to Western Sahara, Spain have great political impacts and issues as a result of the conflict's persistence in Western Sahara territory. It bears a huge responsibility on continued crisis that stands unresolved in the region. For instance, instead of honoring its initial commitment of self governance of the people of Western Sahara as it initially intended in its decolonization process, it has continually collaborated with Morocco and Mauritania where by in November 14, 1975, it entered into

accord with these countries that allowed them to invade Western Sahara that led to its occupation and division (Bolton, 2007,).

As a former colonial master that had already accepted to grant self independence to its former colony, Spain was charged with the responsibility of guarding independence of Western Sahara but it went contrary to the agreement and instead allowed African countries to replace it as colonial masters in its former colony. This has therefore led to persistence of Western Sahara colonization by Morocco which has exacerbated Western Sahara plights. Polisario was therefore forced to continue with the struggle for independence under an African colony.

Spain has continued to support Morocco for its occupation of the Western Sahara territory and it has recognized Morocco's occupation as legitimate. However, in the international deliberations, it pretends to support self independence of Saharawi people. This has since the commencement of the conflict portrayed Spain as a power with no reliable stand in Western Sahara crisis which has led to loss of its credibility on the issue.

Economical impacts and issues on Spain

Before Western Sahara conflict with Morocco, Spain was the legitimate occupier of the territory where it benefited from its huge natural resource base. For example, Spain exploited Western Sahara fishing sector during its colonial reign and even after its decolonization, it continued to benefit from the economic activities since it signed a pact with Morocco supporting its occupation.

Crisis in Western Sahara nationalism ranges back during the colonial times by the Spanish. It is during the Spanish rule in the region that Polisario movement was formed as a nationalist movement to advance self independence of the Western Sahara region. The Saharawi movement has therefore continued to fight for their self governance in the present Morocco colonization. Spain has also continued to enjoy from phosphate resources that are found in plenty in the region both during their colonial period and even in the Moroccan occupation as they are in agreement with Morocco.

Cultural Impacts and Issues on Spain

Spain has continued to incline to Morocco instead of supporting the independence of the Saharawi people; it destroyed good moral ties that existed between the Spanish people and the Saharawi population. Morally, the Spanish had ethical responsibility of safeguarding Western Sahara as a former colony by ensuring that another power does not occupy it after it surrender. This was not the case as Spain went a head and supported Morocco and Mauritania for their occupation. This was not a proper moral standard that was undertaken by former colonial masters and therefore, it was a breach of its moral obligations.

Spain has had close cultural and colonial ties with Western Sahara, the solidarity and human right group of Spain have actively demanded that the government of Spain pressure Morocco to hold its obligation to international law (Stephan & Jacob, 2008). Several activists who support Saharawi have staged several demonstrations in protests of inhumane acts and repression that have been committed to Saharawi people. During numerous protests

that they have engaged in, the Spanish Human Rights League have come clear on the issues and condemned Morocco and its allies including Spain for violation of Saharawi's fundamental human rights which include freedom of assembly and free speech in Western Sahara.

The failure by Spain to resolve a dispute involving its former colony and continued support of the Moroccans has portrayed Spain as a power that disregards human rights. UN has initiated several initiatives to try and settle the Western Sahara crisis which has turned into a human crisis as a result of increased refugees that have seen most of Saharawi people living as displaced people in other country.

Mauritania

Mauritania in the Western Sahara conflict was allied to Morocco. However, the country experienced a military putsch that drove out president Moktar Daddah due to the position that he had taken over the Western Sahara conflict (Bolton, 2007). This has subsequently forced the country into a tricky balancing move and it has since then embraced neutrality over the conflict.

Political impacts and issues on Mauritania

Mauritania has suffered great impacts from the Western Sahara conflict since its political leadership was reshaped as a result of the conflict. Initially, President Moktar Daddah was in support of the Moroccan side of the conflict. However, this was in contrary to the wish and will of many Mauritania nationals and thus a military putsch was taken against him which saw regime change in the Mauritania political landscape. In relation to this, the

incoming government sought to assume a central position in the conflict and withdraw completely from the Western Sahara war.

After Mauritania withdrawal from the war, it persuaded Morocco in considering withdrawal from Western Sahara and grant it self independence. In connection to this, during the OAU (presently AU) in 1981, King Hassan II of Morocco accepted the principle of self determination and even pledged his will to support a referendum exercise that could determine independence of Western Sahara (Amirah, 2008).

Consequently, Mauritania signed a peace treaty with Polisario in Algeria in 1979 5th August and condemned the war. This also led to its denouncement of territorial occupations in Western Sahara. The move taken by Mauritania gave a glimpse of hope to the struggle of Western Sahara people as the only remaining occupying force in the region was Morocco and therefore its advances could not be that strong compared to the