

Western Sahara, the last African nation

The republic that does not exist

First Spanish colonialism and then Moroccan one: Saharawis struggle for more than a century for the independence. Exiled in the refugee camps of southern Algeria, they risk everything in the referendum on December 7. In the sea of Sahara sand the only true democracy of the Islamic world could be born.

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"The referendum? Merely a bridge to independence". Sukheina is surer and more drastic than the top of Polisario Front, the political and military organization that has fought for self-determination of Saharawi people since 1973. She is little older than twenty years and together with her sister Suilma came from Madrid to be identified as voters. They have Spanish citizenship and residency, they do not speak hasanya, Arabic dialect of this place of Sahara, but they feel proudly Saharawi and want to contribute to birth of a nation that has suffered too much for its land, a piece of desert almost as big as Italy, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, between Mauritania and Morocco. There are dozens of women at the center Minurso (UN mission which has to manage the referendum) of Dakhla. The wind weeping sand and puffing clothes and headscarf is full with tension: the authority from Morocco who should assist the identification do not come: Sukheina, Suilma and many other people have made the trip for nothing, through all Algeria up to this far corner of the barren land that houses the Saharawi refugee camps.

Dakhla is the most remote of the four settlements managed by Polisario in Algerian territory (the others are El Aaiun, Smara and Ausert). Each one is named after cities of Western Sahara abandoned in 1976, with Moroccan army, which chased the masses of refugees, barely impeded by the troops of Polisario, fewer in number and less equipped.

David against Goliath. Only the desert seems to make possible so uneven challenges. Saharawis know it perfectly, and Polisario raiders moved fast, elusive, with a "hit and run" guerrilla, which in the long run wore out the army of King Hassan II, 150 thousand people spread over a huge front (2,500 kilometers), protected by a line of sand walls and minefields built in the eighties.

They are the increasingly tired and hallucinating sentinels, always waiting for an invisible enemy, forced to struggle with isolation, sleep, paranoia. The cases of insubordination and episodes of madness are numerous, even now that the war is gone. The absurdity of the situation is exacerbated by Moroccan authorities that do not accept the existence of prisoners of war fallen into the hands of Polisario: they are ghosts now integrated into the strange life of refugee camps (often the only ones able to perform technical tasks).

The idea of "Great Morocco", the law of the strongest clashes with the desire for freedom of the "desert men" (this is the simple meaning of the word "Saharawi").

The attempt of Moroccan sultans of subjecting the Sahara nomads was born long time ago, at least from the conquest of Timbuktu in the sixteenth century. The area inhabited by tribes of nomadic Berber and Yemeni origin, since the thirteenth century, was pointed by Alawite dynasty, which ruled over Morocco as *bled-as-siba*, "the land of dissidence": apart from temporary periods of submission or non-regular payments of taxes, Saharawi were never subjects of Moroccan monarchy. The desert did not admit borders, freedom of "blue men" (a name that indicates both Saharawi, with a black turban that faded leaving an indigo halo on the skin, and Tuareg) bordered on anarchy, on the potential war of everyone against everyone. To resolve issues of concern, however, was the "Council of Forty," which brought together the leaders of all the tribes on an egalitarian base: the founding core of democracy in the desert. Saharawi nation began to exist, based on a common language, on a highly Arabized culture, Sunni Muslims. The notion of territory completely lacked, "gift" of Spanish colonialism, which faced with French expansion in the Sahara. The Berlin Conference of 1885 recognized Spanish sovereignty on the area that was then known as Rio de Oro: actually Iberians had settled only on the Atlantic coast south of Canary Islands.

But the French, at the beginning of the twentieth century, were advancing from the north (Morocco), East (Algeria) and South (Mauritania): concerned about the potential conflict, France and Spain came to the exact definition of Spanish territory (1912).

The process of decolonization of the fifties was not to alter the structure of new African states: this apparently absurd principle, (Europeans certainly did not keep in mind the various ethnic realities in designing "their" Africa) was actually the best criterion for ensure a minimum of peace and stability to African continent and it was fixed once and for all in 1963 in Addis Ababa, when the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was founded. Two years later, the UN voted a resolution about Western Sahara that requested Spain to respect the self determination of Saharawi people (who had participated in the anti-colonial struggle of Morocco and Mauritania). Franco regime's response was to emphasize the administrative and social integration, trying to increase the level of autonomy with the result of encouraging the emergence of a true independence movement: on May 20, 1973 the first action of the newborn Polisario Front is recorded, an attack on a Spanish outpost. Franco's Colonialism had no chance of survival, this awareness leads Madrid to organize the 1974 census as the basis for a future referendum about independence.

The situation falls precisely with the long agony of the "Caudillo" in the fall of 1975.

While they are preparing the delicate succession of Franco, Spain is facing not only the first struggles for independence and international pressures, but also the expansionist intentions of Morocco and Mauritania.

Solution as Pontius Pilate, endorsed by the young Juan Carlos: a nice division between the two litigants, as provided in the agreement signed on November 14, 1975. Spaniards leave, Moroccan and Mauritanian troops arrive. Fleeing Saharawi are bombed mercilessly by aviation of Hassan II (equipped, as now, by France and the United States). Algeria is opening its doors to refugees. On 27 February, 1976 in a part of Sahara controlled by Polisario, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) is proclaimed. The republic that does not exist, the state of refugees and guerrillas. In the original constitution Islam is "state religion", Arabic official language and the principles are socialist (even though the ideological element has never been a priority).

The first state to recognize SADR is "red" Madagascar of Didier Ratsiraka. Followed by the revolutionary Yemen, Vietnam, Mengistu's Ethiopia, Sandinista Nicaragua. In the eighties agreement grows among Latin America and the Caribbean countries, among the non-aligned ones (India, Yugoslavia), Muslim ones (Syria, Libya, Iran) and even Papua New Guinea. The largest recognition, however, is with the admission to the OAU as a 51th member in 1982. Morocco of Hassan II leaves the organization as a protest.

Europe is completely absent, in the years of Polisario guerrillas, which accepts the armed confrontation without ever being tempted by terrorism. Mauritania, too weak to sustain a war of attrition, withdraws from the conflict.

Morocco is the best ally in the area and can carry on undisturbed the forced colonization of cities, that change face: tens of thousands of Moroccans in Western Sahara are transferred, considerable infrastructure are built, exploitation of the precious deposit of phosphate Bou Craa (one of the largest in the world) works, arrangements for the management of commercial fish stocks (the coast of Western Sahara is one of fullest of fish of the Atlantic coast) are made.

In other words, Hassan II "normalize" the situation with business. Only the maintenance of the army, the funding of the war of position slows Moroccan budgets. But the war moves from the desert to the rooms of the UN: in 1991 they come to the cease - fire, and for the first time officially they come to a referendum. The game becomes purely political - diplomatic. The first round is won by Hassan II, who manages to dissolve like a mirage the popular consultation scheduled for 1992. The king of Morocco knows that time is working for him and against the aspirations of Polisario. Meanwhile he manages to gain six years, although eventually, through the mediation of former U.S. secretary of state James Baker they come to the D-Day: December 7, 1998.

"A mere conduit for independence". In the collective imagination of Sahrawi this is the referendum. The happy ending of a story that has already caused too much sufferings. The issue is actually much

more complex, and the leaders of Polisario, a skilled and knowledgeable elite, know it. The official line says that any decision in a referendum that is "free, fair and transparent" will be accepted: if Saharawi vote for integration, the Front will be dissolved, ceasing its activity. The General Secretary of Polisario (and president of the SADR), Mohamed Abdelaziz has adopted a moderate policy for years in international relations, but on the ground the attitude of his people is rightly hard, uncompromising. The officials of Minurso know it perfectly, every time they go to the delicate task of identification. On the composition of electoral lists the first attempt for a referendum was wrecked: Morocco tended to broaden the base of the suffrage, including many settlers, Polisario, on the contrary, is essentially based on Spanish census of 1974, "counting" 73,497 Sahrawi (Europeans were 20 thousand). After a long diplomatic haggling, Morocco largely succumbed to the pressures of Baker, near to the demands of Polisario, as regards the criteria for identification. Those enrolled in Spanish census, their immediate relatives of first degree (parents and children), those born in Western Sahara before 1974, people who can prove they were resident in the territory for at least six years before 1974 may participate in the fateful referendum. It may seem like a bureaucratic problem, but this is where they play the real game, in the centers of identification there is a harsh political and human debate, sometimes within the same family. While it is clear the reiterated attempt of Morocco to blow up lists, it is also true that Saharawi representatives are very hard with those who are suspected of collaborating or simply integration. This obviously is only for those who remained in the occupied Sahara, accepting the humiliation in exchange for well-being (according to an "ideological" vision: there are also those who could not run away). We've already seen fathers who swore they had never seen their children, grandparents who showed strangers to grandchildren. The real Saharawi can not choose integration, this is the truth unspoken by Polisario (and the vast majority of Saharawi, apparently), which has a thousand reasons to support it. But the right and the good do not always coincide, in politics: and here the project bordering on utopia of those who would return to govern a land no longer known, and the eternal Realpolitik that always tends to make win the stronger and to keep the acquired order. It is amazing how all the expectations, away from the official speeches, are converging on two contradictory hypotheses: Saharawi will win referendum, but Morocco does not ever grant independence to Western Sahara. On the one hand micro-solidarity and the good feelings of thousands of volunteers, observers, journalists, political parties of the international left, friends of Saharawi; on the other the business world, globalization, a Western ally Morocco that aims to become the regional power (with a good chance of success), without much regard for democracy and human rights (the regime of King Hassan is always in "pole position" on the blacklists of Amnesty International). On the one hand, a people living thanks to the assistance, in the harsh conditions of camps, and having developed an almost surreal community model of democracy (literacy, good basic schooling, women with an unthinkable role in other Islamic countries, total acceptance of foreigners), a sort of island of "poor but happy" (increasingly in crisis, indeed) in the middle of desert; on the other, people who manage fisheries, tourism, business, anchored to a paternalistic (not to say authoritarian) model of society with stifling social control typical of all Arab states, including the autonomous territories. The big challenge is already underway. In this remote corner of the world, in a desert so empty to stay hallucinated, in the deafening silence of nature mistress, a tiny seed may be thrown, but with enormous potential consequences for Arabs, for Islam, for the West. On December 7, 1998 the mustard seed could win

Cesare Sangalli

The Sheltering Desert of Emhamed Khadad, Polisario Front

Last but not least

"Our success will strengthen democracy in this part of the world". According to the person in charge

of relations with the UN, Saharawi have learned the "lesson of Algeria". If all the leaders of Polisario Front are like him, Saharawi can face the future with high hopes. Emhamed Khadad, 45, is in charge of relations with the Minurso. It seems younger than his age, but he certainly does not lack the charismatic force, which communicates both in look and in voice. It is clear that the atmosphere helps him: sit on the carpet in a tent in the desert to observe the tea liturgy, you lose the sense of the role, of officialdom, of the respective memberships. Human, too human. In these situations the struggle of Saharawi is fought with weapons of kindness and hospitality. Khadad is not among those who were bracing kalashnikovs: student in Algiers, he had his first contact with Polisario in 1973, when he was in college, and two years later he began his political activity.

How was Saharawi independence movement born?

As an obvious consequence of the process of decolonization, which, as later, it had to involve Western Sahara. You should keep in mind, however, that first Spaniards arrived in 1884 and the conquest of the Sahara (then called Rio de Oro, author's note) was not completed until 1934. Fifty years of resistance. And it is also important to remember the contribution of Saharawi struggle for independence of Morocco and Mauritania: the anti-colonial feeling is well established.

The warrior tradition of the nomadic population was important ...

Undoubtedly. The desert people have never wanted masters. But the historical process of decolonization is more important: the Western Sahara has yet to complete this course established in 1965 by the UN. Unfortunately it was not possible to obtain independence within the rules of international law, because of Moroccan invasion. No one, in 1975, expected such a response from us. Only the military failure, despite the overwhelming numerical superiority, led Morocco to accept a political solution.

Was Polisario's a military victory?

We did not win the war: we only took up the challenge on the battlefield to prove that the solution could not be military. Now finally there is room for a political peaceful solution. We agree to submit ourselves to the will of the people, and in this way there will be neither winners nor losers.

Many national liberation movements became only parties, after independence. You know Algeria and the history of FLN. Is it the same for Polisario?

After all the suffering that was inflicted on our people, a dictatorship is unimaginable. Peace is first of all inner peace and harmony. Polisario Front claims to have no historical legitimacy for power. Our goal was and remains to achieve self-determination for Western Sahara. Once compliance with this principle, the field is open to all solutions, to all parties. We want a pluralist democracy, market economy, close cooperation with European countries.

Could SADR become a model for other Arab countries?

I believe that our success will strengthen democracy in this part of the world. We do not want to fail where others have failed, we can build on the lessons of history. I'm not saying that everyone is ready, I'm not saying that everyone has the same feelings and the same maturity, but democracy is also accepting problems, contradictions, conflict.

What are the biggest problems you face?

Deleting the wounds of a so long war, rebuilding the country, getting a stable economy. For the political situation there is a period of transition and the establishment of a new constitution.

In the project of constitution, Islam remains the state religion. Do you not run the risk of falling into fundamentalism?

We are a Muslim society, but I do not see the risk of fundamentalism. The role played by the Saharawi women is the best example of our approach. Eighty percent of teaching is done by

women. At the time of Spaniards there were ninety per cent of illiterate women: today, all girls study in mixed classes. But in all fields women participation is significant and certain achievements will never be challenged.

How can people, grown up in refugee camps, in a community style, adapt to a market economy?

The initial impact will be traumatic, we can not hide it. We grew up in assistance and there is not the slightest idea of organized labor. People do not understand the value of things and money, there is no concept of retribution: here everybody receives according to needs, depending on the size of family and not according to their work. This assisted mentality will weigh surely, we will make a big effort to accept the reality of things. But I think that our tradition of solidarity, generosity and tolerance will not fail.

What does it mean leave the desert and go back in town?

Even this prospect is unknown. Our centers are named after Western Sahara cities, we tried to develop a sense of belonging to the land of origin, even in the youngest people. Of course, if you think for example that children born in the camp of Dakhla have never seen the sea, as the real Dakhla is a beautiful town on a peninsula, with its temperate climate and with little wind ...

If you win the referendum, what kind of politics will you adopt for residents of Moroccan nationality?

We will definitely need them in our state. They can safely be citizens of Western Sahara. We are not a lot, I am convinced that there will be work for everyone.