

Sahrawi Conflict and African Decolonization, 1975-2015

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Abstract. This study investigates Sahrawi conflict and African decolonization between 1975 and 2015. Using Economic Internationalism theory, documentary and survey methods, and relying essentially on content analysis, the study examined Morocco's underlying motivation for invading and occupying Western Sahara in 1975, and why resolution of the conflict and decolonization of the territory has been elusive since 1975. The study contends that Morocco's economic and political interests in Western Sahara led to the invasion and occupation of the territory in 1975; increased exploitation of Western Sahara's resources by Morocco and foreign multinational corporations impeded resolution of Sahrawi conflict and decolonization of the territory since 1975. The study finds that divergent aims and interests of the conflicting parties and their supporters in the Sahrawi conflict led to partisanship and polarization of member states within the Security Council, and inability of the United Nations in implementing its resolutions for the decolonization of Western Sahara. Accordingly, the study recommends, among others, that United Nations should remain unified, consistent and resolute in the implementation of its resolutions for quick settlement of the conflict and decolonization of the territory.

Keywords: Sahrawi Conflict, Decolonization, Natural Resources, Invasion, Partisanship

Introduction

The conflict over Western Sahara (Sahrawi conflict) was a liberation war between Morocco and Polisario (representatives of the Sahrawi people) for the decolonization and independence of Western Sahara, which was invaded and occupied by Morocco in 1975. Western Sahara, then Spanish Sahara, was a colonial territory under Spanish regime from 1884 to 1976. A coastal territory located in North Africa, and inhabited by the Sahrawi people, Western Sahara occupies a surface area of 266,000 square kilometers with a long coast of more than 1000 kilometers. Western Sahara remained the last African decolonization case on the agenda of United Nations and the last relic of African colonial history. The conflict was as a result of Morocco's claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara, and rejection of plans by Spain to decolonize the territory in accordance with the United Nations resolutions 1514(XV), 1960; 2072(XX), 1965; and 2229(XXI), 1966.

After the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted the Declaration Granting Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, Spain planned to hold a referendum on self-determination for the people of Western Sahara in early 1975. In a move to frustrate the planned referendum, Morocco and Mauritania opted for arbitration by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) for an advisory opinion on their respective claims over the territory. The ICJ in 1975, held that any legal ties that Morocco or Mauritania had to tribes in Western Sahara did not establish territorial Sovereignty over the land. The ICJ held that any ties the two countries had with Western Sahara would not affect the decolonization of Western Sahara (Miller, 2012, p. 2; ICJ Report, 1975).

Despite the ICJ's opinion, on 6 November 1975, "Morocco launched the Green March in which 350,000 unarmed civilians crossed over from Morocco into the territory to press Morocco's claim to it" (Theofilopoulou, 2006, p. 3). And on 14 November 1975, Spain, Morocco and Mauritania signed the Madrid Accords in which Spain ceded administrative

control of the territory to Morocco (northern two-thirds) and Mauritania (Southern third). The Madrid Accords ignored the various UN resolutions upholding the right to self-determination for the Sahrawi people, and ignored the wishes of the Sahrawi people, which had been demonstrated by the UN visiting Mission to Western Sahara (Lamdieu, 2012, p. 8). Shortly after Morocco and Mauritania's occupation of Western Sahara, Polisario engaged in guerilla warfare against the two countries. The hostilities forced tens of thousands of refugees into Tindouf, Algeria. On 15 August 1978, a cease-fire between Mauritania and Polisario led to Mauritania's withdrawal of claims on Western Sahara, and the recognition of the right of Western Sahara to self-determination.

Several attempts by the United Nations and African Union at resolving the Sahrawi conflict have been unsuccessful. For example, over 100 United Nations resolutions were adopted calling for Morocco's decolonization of Western Sahara since 1975. Also, the United Nations and African Union brokered cease-fire between the parties, and created United Nations Mission for the referendum in Western Sahara through Security Council resolution 690 with the mandate to monitor the cease-fire, organize and ensure a free and fair referendum, and proclaim the result. The cease-fire led to cessation of armed conflict but with threat of renewed attack. Since 1991 the conflict between Polisario and Morocco took on new dimensions within a regional and international context, arising from increased involvement by foreign interests in violations of international laws.

Studies on Western Sahara conflict have attracted the attentions of many writers: Shelley (2006); Leite (2006); Clarke (2010); and Franck (1976) focused on the role of natural resources in decolonization. On the other hand, Cherkaoui (2007); Ouali (2008); Miller (2012); and Lamadieu (2012) dwelt on issues of decolonization as impediment to the resolution of Western Sahara conflict. All these writers failed to establish the link between Morocco's claims over Western Sahara and the invasion and occupation of the territory in 1975; Increased exploitation of Western Sahara's resources by Morocco and foreign companies and impediments to the decolonization of the territory since 1975.

Theoretical Framework of Analysis

The study adopted the Economic Internationalism theory as our framework of analysis in the study of Sahrawi conflict and African decolonization between 1975 and 2015. The major proponent of Economic Internationalism theory was David Ricardo. He developed the theory during the Napoleonic wars 1803-1815. The theory assumes that the global economy is a community of nations and that nations interact through trade and through war (Rankin, 1999, p. 15). The world economy according to Rankin (1999, p. 6) is an anarchic community of nations where there is neither a government nor sovereign authority to enforce laws and order, there is no sanction on whoever defects from the common good, only diplomatic protest.

Studies show that states interact through trade or war for the achievement of increased economic prosperity, national wealth, and power. These achievements were often attained through unfettered access to resource exploitation, foreign investment, and territorial conquest. According to Burchill and Linklater (1996, p. 35), "most wars were fought by states to achieve their mercantilist goals. Wars were engineered by a 'warrior class' bent on extending their power and wealth through territorial conquest." Studies indicate that powerful states have either by themselves or in collaboration with other states invaded other territories to secure economic advantages through resource exploitation and foreign investments. Iraq's invasion and annexation of Kuwait in 1991, Morocco invasion and occupation of Western Sahara since 1975 succinctly illustrates this.

The proponents of international trade relations between states have hailed trade as a more effective and peaceful means of achieving national wealth because it creates relations of mutual dependence by removing barriers to commerce. Kant quoted by Burchill and Linklater (1996, p. 35) stated that:

Unhindered commerce between the peoples of the world would unite them in a common peaceful enterprise. Trade ... would increase the wealth and power of the peace-loving productive sections of the population at the expense of the war-oriented aristocracy.

On the other hand, the antagonists of international trade have always considered it as a means used by rich and powerful states to secure economic advantages through investment and resource exploitation in foreign territories. They often achieve this through Multinational Corporations (MNC) sponsored by their home states. Burchill and Linklater (1996, p. 54) noted that “the critique of free trade imperialism tended to see free trade as an imperial weapon used by dominant players to open their societies to resource exploitation, foreign investment, and repatriation of profit.” The dominant players always determine the terms of trade which were always on unequal terms and disadvantageous to their partners. Conflict does arise in the course of interactions between states. Research findings indicate that resolution of conflicts and trade disputes by the international community were most times influenced by key influential members of the international community in furtherance of their economic and strategic interests. For instance, major powers in the United Nations (UN) or World Trade Organization (WTO) usually influence outcomes of decisions in the settlement of conflicts or trade disputes between states.

Based on the analysis of Economic Internationalism theory, the following prepositions could be synthesized: (i) Interactions between states through trade or war was for the achievement of economic and strategic interests of powerful states. (ii) Resolution of conflicts or trade disputes between states by international organizations such as UN or WTO were often influenced by key members of the organization in furtherance of their economic and strategic interest, and that of their allies.

The relevance of Economic Internationalism theory as a framework of analysis to this study was evident. It elucidates the rationale behind Morocco’s invasion and occupation of Western Sahara since 1975, reasons for the Western countries support to Morocco’s claim of sovereignty over the occupied territory; and obstacles to resolution of the Western Sahara conflict and decolonization of the territory since 1975. The support of Western countries Morocco’s claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara was in pursuance of their economic and strategic interests, which includes resource exploitation, foreign investment, repatriation of profits and the United States consideration of Morocco as an important ally in the fight against terrorism, and the implementation of its policies in the Middle East and Africa (Zunes & Mundy, 2010, p. 70).

More importantly, the framework enlightens our understanding on the inability of the United Nations in implementing its resolutions on Western Sahara since 1975, and the politics behind the differential outcome of decision from the resolution of disputes between member states. Some member states of the United Nations enjoy the support of the major powers in their actions and activities even when they were illegal. For example, the United States and the France supported Morocco’s invasion and occupation of Western Sahara, and illegal exploitation of their resources. Also, Iraq invasion and annexation of Kuwait in 1991, and the quick response of the United Nations led by United States and its allies were quite illustrative.

The framework equally explicates the rationale for the seeming impotence of some UN member States in the support for Western Sahara’s independence. This was against the backdrop that any state who shows solidarity with the Sahrawi people in pursuance of their

independence was viewed by the United States and France as going against their interests and that of their ally, Morocco. On the basis of the prepositions arising from our analysis of Economic Internationalism theory, we hypothesized that;

- ❖ Morocco's economic and political interests in Western Sahara led to the invasion and occupation of the territory in 1975.
- ❖ Increased exploitation of Western Sahara's resources by Morocco and foreign Multinational Corporations impeded resolution of Western Sahara conflict, and decolonization of the territory since 1975.

Methodology

For data collection, we relied essentially on survey and documentary methods for the collection of primary and secondary data. Documentary method entails a detailed and systematic analysis of the contents of a particular body of materials for the purpose of identifying patterns, trends, themes or biases. Documentary method used for collection of secondary data was considered appropriate because it was not only an indispensable source of data for empirical analysis of political phenomenon but it also provides information for establishing trends of political events. Sources of secondary data include books, official documents, journal articles, conference papers, among others.

Survey method was used for the collection of primary data. Survey method according to Obasi (1999, p. 13), is "a process of eliciting data from a target population through either a questionnaire or interview instruments, and subjecting such data to statistical analysis for the purpose of drawing conclusions." We adopted unstructured key informant interview for needed information from the Embassy of Morocco, Abuja, Nigeria. A key informant interview involves interviewing a knowledgeable individual who would likely be better informed to provide needed information, ideas, and in sights on a particular subject.

A key informant in the Embassy of Morocco was believed to be knowledgeable on the Sahrawi conflict, and issues of decolonization of Western Sahara to provide the needed information on the subject. Key informant interview was adopted because it provides data and insight that may not be easily obtained by other methods; it also provides the researcher flexibility to explore new ideas and issues that were not earlier envisaged in the planning of the study. For data analysis, we relied on content analysis. Content analysis is "a method of analyzing the content of written documents, transcript of films, videos, and speeches, and other types of written communication" (McNabb, 2009, p. 470). Content analysis was adopted because it enables a political inquirer to scrutinize the contents of documents in order to understand the underlying structure, ideas, and concepts and to quantify the message it relates.

• Morocco's Claims over Western Sahara and the Invasion and Occupation of the Territory in 1975

Morocco's claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara, and the invasion and occupation of the territory in 1975 rested on the following arguments: Western Sahara excised by Spain and France during colonization must be reclaimed and reintegrated within the kingdom of Morocco; the existence of historical ties and allegiances between the kingdom of Morocco and the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara prior to Morocco's colonization (Lamadieu, 2012; Cherkaoui, 2007, p. 60). The above claims informed King Mohammed V description of Sahrawi nationalists as "Moroccan secessionist who must be returned to the Sahara in accordance with respect to our historic rights and the will of its inhabitants" (Zoubir, 1996, p. 176; Lamadieu, 2002, p. 5). Morocco's claims over Western Sahara was corroborated by Cherkaoui (2007, p. 60) and Ayu, a key informant and Executive Officer in the Embassy of Morocco, Abuja during an interview with the author of this paper on 27 November 2017. Mr.

Ayu stated that Morocco was an established state before colonization, and that its invasion of Western Sahara in 1975 was to reclaim its lost territory excised by Spain and France during colonization. Ayu posit that there was in existence historical ties and allegiances between the kingdom of Morocco and the territory of Western Sahara before Morocco's colonization by the European powers. Cherkaoui (2007, p. 60) also stated that "before colonization the Moroccan tribes whether from the Sahara or not were autonomous republics that the King joined together in the federal state with the cement of allegiance".

Ayu and Cherkaoui's views were, however, at variance with the ruling of the International Court of Justice in 1975, and the findings and recommendations of UN visiting mission to Western Sahara, Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania and Madrid between 8 May and 9 June 1975. The UN mission found that those residing within the territory were "manifestly in favour of independence. For Sahrawi refugees, opinion regarding independence or integration were mixed often reflecting policies of Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria" (Franck, 1976, p. 798). The mission recommended self-determination of the people of Western through a referendum to be conducted by the United Nations and supported by Morocco and neighbouring countries toward achieving the objective in an atmosphere of peace and mutual security (Lamadieu, 2012, p. 7).

Morocco's rejection of United Nations resolution for its withdrawal from the occupied territory, and the recommendations of the UN visiting mission in 1975 prompted Morocco's resort to arbitration by the international court of Justice (ICJ) to decide the pre-colonial legal status of the territory. The ICJ "found no evidence of any legal tie of territorial sovereignty between Western Sahara and Morocco but indication of a legal tie of allegiance between the (Moroccan) Sultan and some of the tribes of the territory". Again, Morocco rejected the International Court of Justice advisory opinion on the territory, and instead embarked on a number of activities to actualize and consolidate its claims over Western Sahara. These activities include: The Green March on 6 November 1975 in which 350,000 unarmed civilians crossed over from Morocco into the territory to press Morocco's claim to it (Theofilopoulou, 2006, p. 3); Signing of the Madrid Accords on 14 November 1975 by Spain, Mauritania and Morocco, which transferred administrative control of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania.

Morocco's rejection of United Nations resolution for the decolonization of Western Sahara, and the International Court of Justice ruling of 1975, which reaffirmed UN resolution 1514 (xv), 1960 on decolonization of Western Sahara raises the following questions (i) Why was Morocco insistence on its claims of sovereignty over Western in the light of UN and International Court of Justice resolutions? (ii) Why has Western Sahara conflict and decolonization of the territory defied United Nations resolution since 1975?

- **Economic Interest in Western Sahara's Natural Resources**

Research findings show that Morocco's claims over Western Sahara goes beyond reclaiming its lost territory during colonization to Spain and France, and claims of historical ties and allegiance between the kingdom of Morocco's and Western Sahara. This paper posit that Morocco's interest in Western Sahara's natural resources, specifically phosphate reserves, fisheries and prospect of oil discoveries were the major motivation for Morocco's invasion and occupation of the territory since 1975. According to Shelley (2006, pp. 17, 19);

Three key economic resources of Western Sahara that are important to the Moroccan economy and which influenced Morocco's desire to remain in control of the territory are: Phosphate reserves, fish stocks, and hope of finding oil.... In recent years fishing has become significant for both the colonization project and for the Moroccan economy as hope of oil discoveries have intensified.

Clarke (2010, p. 258) corroborated Shelley's view that "it is not hard to ascertain that Morocco's interest in the Southern provinces is based partly on hydrocarbons, among unrelated matters, sovereignty bring one." Analysis of Shelly and Clarke's view shows that Morocco's claims over Western Sahara, and the Western countries support to Morocco's claims was a smoke screen over their economic interest in Western Sahara's rich natural resources, notably phosphate reserves, fisheries, oil etc. The importation of Moroccan citizens into Western Sahara to settle, and subsidizing them by the Moroccan government was to insure demographic dominance and control of the territory. The infrastructural development of the territory was also for political purpose - to dampen the enthusiasm of residents in Western Sahara, and to discourage them from supporting Western Sahara's independence in any future referendum on the territory.

- **Increased Exploitation of Western Sahara's Resources by Morocco and Foreign Companies, and Impediments to the Decolonization of the Territory since 1975**

Morocco's interest in Western Sahara's natural resources was evident in the increased exploitation of the territory's resources in connivance with foreign Multinational Corporations (MNC). They carried out exploitation of the natural resources in Western Sahara against the interests and wishes of the Sahrawi people, and in violation of United Nations resolutions and international laws. For example, General Assembly resolutions 1803(XVII) of 14 December 1962; 3201 (S-VI) of 1st May 1974. Exploitation of oil, gas, and solid minerals increased significantly in Western Sahara as a result of the increase in number of both local and foreign companies engaged by the Moroccan Government to carry on exploration and exploitation activities. Foreign companies increased from 4 (Philips, Gulf oil, Caltex and American Hispan oil) in the 1960s to about 40 by 2013 (National Office for Hydrocarbons and Mines, 2014, p. 42; Clarke, 2010, p. 256). Some of the Multinational Corporations doing business in Morocco include: Lafarge Group, France; Potash Corporation, Canada; Repsel Exploration Atlas S.A, Spain; Total S.A, France; Anardarko Petroleum Corp. USA, amongst others.

Fisheries exploitation from the Saharan waters increased significantly on account of the EU-Morocco Fisheries Partnership Agreements since 1988. In December 2013, through the EU-Morocco Fisheries Partnership Agreement, "120 vessels from European Union countries were licensed to fish in Western Sahara extensive territorial waters." Compiled from EU - Morocco Fisheries Partnership Agreements, 1988-2011. During the same period (1988-2011), fisheries from the Saharan waters contributed over one trillion Euros to the Moroccan economy. The Sahrawi people were excluded from the increased exploitation of resources in Western Sahara by Morocco and foreign companies. According to Lamadieu (2012), "Fishing activities in the port towns of Laayoune, Dakhla and Boujdour in Western Sahara were dominated by the government and Moroccan nationals imported into Western Sahara." Shelley (2006, p. 19) confirmed when she stated that "Sahrawi's were edged out of employment at Bou Craa in favour of Moroccan." According Shelley (2006, p. 14) "Moroccan landings (from Saharan waters) increased from 200,000 tons a year in the 1960s to over 1 million tons in 2001. The industry employs directly and indirectly some 400,000 Moroccans and export are worth around \$1 billion a year." The exploitation of Western Sahara's natural resources was expected to increase in the years ahead with the "United States planned investment of \$2.45 billion in Morocco's national phosphate industry (OCP) from 2017 to 2030.

The continuous and increased exploitation of natural resources in Western Sahara by Morocco and foreign Multinational Corporations (MNC) have been in violation of international laws and United Nations resolutions. Morocco and the MNC's acts of impunity have seriously undermined efforts by the United Nations in the decolonization of Western

Sahara. The United States, France and the European Union continued exploitation of resources in Western Sahara, and their support to Morocco's claims over the territory was in furtherance of their economic and strategic interests. For strategic reasons, Morocco was considered by the U.S as "an important ally in the global fight against terrorism, and in the implementation of US Policies in the Middle East and African" (Zunes & Mundy, 2010, p. 70). Economically, Morocco provided the United States, France and other western countries unfettered access to the exploitation of phosphate rocks and other valuable resources in Western Sahara. Morocco's continued occupation of Western Sahara means United States, France and the European Union's continued investment and exploitation of resources in Western Sahara.

Data from European Commission (2014, p. 9); United Nations (2014, p. 7) showed that in 2013, the European Union was Morocco's highest trading partner (54%) followed by the United States (6.4%). Also, Morocco's export to the European Union during the same period was (61%). The huge investment in foreign territories and the repatriation of profit from such investment always encourage the invasion and annexation of poor and weak territories by powerful States and their allies. Morocco found allies in the West, especially France and United States who supported their illegal claims and exploitation of resources in Western Sahara. The involvement of key United Nations member states in supporting Morocco's action in Western Sahara makes the United Nations resolution of the conflict and decolonization of the territory difficult. The United Nations would not want to act against the interests of its key members, who were major financiers of its activities such as the United States. The possibility of halting illegal exploitation of Western Sahara's resources by the United Nations as it did in Namibia and other territories is bleak because it panders to the whims and caprices of these major powers who exerts considerable influence on the Security Council.

Summary

The Western Sahara conflict was a dispute between Morocco and Polisario (representative of the Sahrawi people) over claims of right to Western Sahara territory. Morocco claimed sovereignty over the territory on the ground that Western Sahara was part of Moroccan kingdom excised by Spain and France during colonization. Morocco also claimed historical ties and allegiance between the kingdom of Morocco and Western Sahara. Consequently, Morocco insisted that Western Sahara must be reclaimed and integrated within the kingdom of Morocco. On the other hand, Polisario maintained that the Sahrawi people of Western Sahara were not Moroccans, and would not be subject to Moroccan rule and authority. They insisted on the right to self-determination of the people of Western Sahara as provided in the Charter of the United Nations, and its various resolutions.

The irreconcilable positions of Polisario and Morocco on the status of Western Sahara was resolved by the International Court Justice (ICJ) in 1975 when the Court said there was no legal basis to justify the Moroccan claim of sovereignty over Western Sahara. The ICJ reaffirmed decolonization of Western Sahara in accordance with United Nations resolution 1574 (xv) of 1960. The United Nations has from the outset of its involvement in Western Sahara issues on 16 December 1965, consistently stated in unambiguous terms that Western Sahara conflict could be resolved only through an act of self-determination in accordance with United Nations General Assembly resolutions 2072(xx), 1965; 2229(xxi), 1966; 34/27, 1979; and Security Council resolutions 380, 1975; 1429, 2002 among others. Morocco has in flagrant disregard to United Nations resolutions and ICJ rulings in 1975 continued its invasion and occupation of Western Sahara since 1975.

Several efforts by the United Nations at resolving the Sahrawi conflict since 1975 has been unsuccessful. The UN's effort has been hindered by the major powers that supported to

Morocco's claims over the occupied territory. The objective of the United Nations for the creation of United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) through Security Council resolution 690 of 1991 has not been fully achieved.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Morocco's annexation of Western Sahara and the involvement of foreign interests in the Western Sahara conflict were in pursuance of their economic and strategic interests. Morocco's claims over Western Sahara were a smokescreen over its real intention- the expropriation of Western Sahara resources in collusion with foreign Multinational Corporations (MNC). This paper concludes that Morocco and foreign interests in Western Sahara's natural resources, and its increased exploitation at the exclusion and benefit of the Sahrawi people exacerbated the conflict, and impeded the decolonization of Western Sahara since 1975. Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were suggested:

- The United Nations should remain unified, consistent and resolute in its decisions and actions in resolving the conflict and ensure the decolonization of Western Sahara.
- The United Nations should apply sanctions against Morocco for ignoring the implementation of its resolutions on the decolonization of Western Sahara.
- The United Nations and African Union should bring to Justice any leader or member state who perpetuates impunity, genocide, or crimes against humanity through established Judicial institutions like the International Criminal Court (ICC), Extraordinary African Chamber (EAC) etc.

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