

Observadores emergentes



57. MAURITANIA		٥٧- موريتانيا
58. BURKINA FASO		٥٨- بوركينا فاسو
59. PERU		٥٩- البيرو
60. NIGERIA		٦٠- نيجيريا
61. YUGOSLAVIA		٦١- يوغسلافيا
62. COLOMBIA		٦٢- كولومبيا
63. LIBERIA		٦٣- ليبيريا
50. NAURU		٥٠- ناورو
51. ISLAS SOLIMAN		٥١- جزر سليمان
52. MAURICIO		٥٢- موريشيوس
53. VENEZUELA		٥٣- فنزويلا
54. SURINAME		٥٤- سورينام
55. BOLIVIA		٥٥- بوليفيا
56. ECUADOR		٥٦- ايكوادور
43. CHAD		٤٣- تشاد
44. MALI		٤٤- مالي
45. COSTA RICA		٤٥- كوستاريكا
46. VANUATU		٤٦- فانواتو
PAPUA 47. NUEVA GUINEA		٤٧- بابواغينيا الجديدة
48. TUVALU		٤٨- توفالو
49. KIRIBATI		٤٩- كيريباتي

South Africa's position on the Western Sahara and the right of self-determination: An Afro-decolonial Analysis

Siphamandla Zondi*

pp. 117-129

In the light of the developments to which I have referred, we have begun discussions with the Polisario Front to agree on the modalities of the opening of the Embassy of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic in our country (Mbeki, 2004).

Introduction

In respect of the conflict between the Saharawi and Morocco over their right to self-determination, both the ANC policy outlook and the formal government foreign policy required the new South Africa to side with the struggle of the Saharawi people to attain their right to self-determination, even if this undermined Morocco's claim to national sovereignty extending into Saharawi territory. So, this article suggests that to understand the South African position on the Saharawi question, we must understand the fact that while both the principle of preserving national sovereignty, especially of African countries, and the support for the right to self-determination for peoples that demands it feature prominently among the guiding principles of the ANC government, it is the latter that undergirds the policy on the Saharawi question. In power, the ANC pursued the policy of solidarity with the Saharawi, disagreed with Morocco's claim to sovereignty over the Western Sahara, and supported pressure on Morocco to respond positively to UN mediation for a peaceful resolution of the conflict over the status of the Western Sahara. Yet, it encouraged Morocco and Polisario to reach a negotiated settlement under the auspices of the UN. In 1995, the Mandela-led government took a decision to support the calls for a referendum among the Saharawi people in the occupied territories on the status of Western Sahara. This, it was thought, would bring about a way out of the dispute on the basis of the expressed will of the people on the ground. South Africa decided not to recognize the sovereignty of the Saharawi territory in order to give the UN a chance to bring about a negotiated solution. But in spite of a number of UN initiatives, no progress has been registered. It is in this context that Mandela's successor, Thabo Mbeki, wrote the letter announcing the decision to recognize the Saharawi Republic as an independent state. This article will employ a decolonial Afrocentric lens of analysis to explain this policy position, its evolution and the underlying principles that underpin, as well as how this influenced the aggressive growth of Moroccan influence in Africa.

* University of Pretoria.

A Lens Matters

No serious piece of analysis is achieved without a clear and rigorous paradigm of thought, a theoretical lens sort. The idea of thinking from a point zero perspective (Castro-Gomez, 2005) means being a free-floating signifier (Mafeje, 2011: 41). Thinkers once took a view that the knowing subject is objective, transparent, disincorporated from the known and untouched by the geopolitical configuration of the world in which people and regions are racially ranked. This point of view enabled the knowing subject to map the world for others according to what is good for them (Mignolo, 2009). This made possible the de-centering of the thinker from Africa from places, traditions, cultures, and experiences they speak from. This de-centering is in fact dislocation where thinkers of the South are fooled into thinking from locations other than where they are from. Without being uprooted from their physical locations, their locus of enunciation is established elsewhere, in the centres of global discourses, making possible mimicry and puppetry in our discourses about ourselves. Thus, it generated silences, erasure and distortions of our stories, a sort of dismemberment where we torn between our true ontology and what we say and think (our epistemology). It has trapped thinkers from the South in globally engineered extroverted discourses, the discourses by which the data from the South are exported in order to validate narratives, theories, methodologies and illusions manufactured in imperial centres, which we import (Hountondji, 1997). The hubris of zero point has thus produced and reproduced epistemic injustices.

This makes necessary a shift in the locus of enunciation. This is something akin to what Ngugi wa Thiong'o terms re-memberment, which in this is re-memberment of who we are with where we are and with where we speak and think from (wa Thiong'o, 2009: 1-31). Re-memberment is to negate the prior epistemic negation, which is the dismemberment that causes forgetfulness and disillusionment among the oppressed. This is what Mignolo terms epistemic disobedience (Mignolo, 2009: 2). Re-memberment is to undertake epistemic liberation in order to lead to freedom, diversity and justice.

In this case, we employ an Afro-decolonial on the basis of shared analytical principles. Between Afrocentric analysis and decoloniality is premised on recognizing fixing fundamental problems at three levels simultaneously: the level of being, the level of power and the level of ways of knowing. It helps us recognize that all in modernity is underpinned by a new model of power, being and knowledge that takes the form of lines of inclusion and exclusion as well as the logic of hierarchies that normalize injustice, inequality, domination of some by others, racism, patriarchy, sexism, imperialism and neocolonialism today. It promotes solutions along the lines of undoing this logic in order to end the outcomes listed. It enables thinkers to argue along the lines of liberation, freedom, justice, rebellion, emancipation and ending all forms of domination. This is not an emotional argument driven by blind faith, but it is a reasoned outcome of understanding how the logic of coloniality haunts phenomena the global South has to contended as well as those that relate to relations between the South and the North. It remains the organizing logic of the modern world and the world system. So, decoloniality enables us to understand systemic issues that lie below the surface in relation to the issue at hand, including how this may not be understood merely within the boundaries of the territories that are our focus but epitomize something global and international. It also helps us understand the contestations over the Western Sahara, which is a tiny impoverished and semi-arid territory involving Morocco, an old established stable and powerful state seeking to assert its sovereign power over Western Saharawi, against the will of the Saharawi represented by the Polisario organization.

Afrocentricity compliments this observation of how things operate that give rise to the contestation over Western Sahara's status by emphasizing an epistemological perspective that foregrounds the African experience of African phenomena, the view from within rather than from without (Asante, 1989). This means while understanding the entanglement of issues that explain the Western Sahara issue and South Africa's position on it, from national to global levels, we need to be sensitive to African agency in our analysis. It also calls for re-centering Africa, its history, its cultural heritage, its aspirations, its thinking, paradigms and philosophies in interpreting African phenomena. Recognizing the centrality of African experience in the story of Western Sahara and South Africa's position enables us as analysts to get closer to understanding the issue in a manner that is closest to its gist and to arrive at positions of thought closest to the experiences of those who are affected by the phenomenon understand. This is important because it is very easy to force onto the Western Sahara issue narratives manufactured far from the issue, narratives meant to conceal rather than reveal, to confuse rather than to clarify the Saharawi question and South African foreign policy towards it. The Afrocentric dimension of our lens also enjoins us to think about the whole subject on the basis of the question: what is the interest of the Saharawi people as key African/black people in the story? Both decoloniality and Afrocentricity require the exposition of the dismemberment, the decentering, the epistemic injustice and an understanding of the political, economic and social/cultural injustices that the Saharawi question and South Africa position on it foreground. Both recognize the intersection between various levels of problems that make up the Saharawi problem. They both seek to unmask the rhetoric used in the Saharawi problem and the negative operations of power, privilege and position that thrive on inequality and subjection. Both place historical analysis at the center of rethinking because the present and tomorrow cannot be fully grasped without understanding the historical evolution of phenomena we contend with today. Both have a revolutionary flavour in that they militate against injustice and its manifestations today in order to bring about new possibilities. They are both about freedom and liberation. Therefore, then together they offer a useful perspective for thinking through struggles of the oppressed, the pursuit of equality and freedom; contestations over sovereignty and power and position. These are central considerations to the issue of Western Sahara and an Afro-decolonial lens of analysis has a potential to explain the problem and responses to it including post-apartheid South Africa's policy position on it.

South Africa's Position on Western Sahara

The challenge that confronted the post-apartheid South African state at birth in 1994 was what position to take regarding the sovereignty of the area called Western Sahara located in North-Western Africa because while the Saharawi had organized themselves through the Polisario Front to fight to be granted the right to self-determination, Morocco which rules the territory called Western Sahara claimed its sovereignty over the area. The Polisario Front led an insurgency against the Spanish colonial empire in 1973-75 demanding independence from colonial rule. The Spanish were forced to depart the area in 1975 only for Mauritania and Morocco, also newly independent states, to annex it in 1976 just as the Polisario Front declared an independent state of Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). In response, the United Nations General Assembly voted to grant the Saharawi people their right to self-determination, the right to rely decide their statehood. But the conflict between the Saharawi, Morocco and Mauritania continued. Mauritania withdraw from territory in 1979, leaving the Saharawi people to continue

their struggle against Morocco further. Interventions by France, United States and the UN in the 1980s and 1990s only succeeded to keep the stalemate in place with frequent outbreak of incessant conflict. Polisario Front governs 20 % of the territory as the SADR, while Morocco retains control over 80 % of it as what it calls southern provinces. The Organization of African Unity and its successor, the African Union (AU), have repeatedly taken the position in favour of the right of self-determination for the Saharawi people. They officially declare the Western Sahara to be among the last cases of decolonization before the United Nations. SADR was admitted as a member of the OAU in 1982 and continued when the AU replaced the Organization of African Unity (AU) in 2003. As a result, Morocco left the OAU until its surprise return in 2017. The AU has repeatedly expressed support for an UN-led mediation process to facilitate the granting of the right to self-determination for the non-self-governing territory as it calls it. The AU argues for an UN-supervised referendum to allow the Saharawi people to exercise their right to choose how they should be governed. It has also shone spotlight on human rights violations in the occupied territories to Morocco's chagrin (AU, 2012).

Since the South African position has been in conformity with the OAU and later AU positions, it is crucial to briefly outline these continental positions. The OAU and the AU referred frequently to *African Charter of Human and People's Rights*, especially its preamble referring to the commitment to end colonialism, neocolonialism and all forms of domination and Article 20(1), which states, "All peoples shall have the right to existence. They shall have the unquestionable and inalienable right to self-determination". In this regard, the Charter grants all African people the right to "freely determine their political status" and "pursue their economic and social development according to the policy they have freely chosen" (ACHPR, undated).

The OAU decisions on this can be traced back to the Ordinary Session of the Council of Ministers held in 1966 in Addis Ababa that resolved to call on Spain to grant full independence to all its colonies, namely; Spanish Sahara, Equatorial Guinea and Fernando Po (OAU, 1966). Again, three years later, the Council adopted a resolution where it affirmed the legitimacy of the struggles for self-determination in several countries including territories under Spain. It invited solidarity and support to ensure these struggles succeeded (OAU, 1969). In another resolution in 1970, it called on Spain to abide by a UN resolution requiring that the dominated people be given a chance to express their right to self-determination. From this point on, both the UN and the OAU emphasized the right to self-determination in resolving the Saharawi question. The OAU support for the Polisario Front grew every time Spain sought to obfuscate issues. When Spain finally conceded and agreed to convene a referendum on the self-determination in Western Sahara, Morocco objected on the basis that the referendum included the option of independence. This has been the contestation between the Saharawi people, the UN and the OAU/AU on their side, on the one hand, and Morocco claiming the territory as its province, on the other. Since 1975, the OAU rejected Morocco's claim and insisted on a self-determination referendum. This has been the AU position also since taking over from the OAU in 2002.

The African National Congress (ANC) was elected to lead South Africa's post-apartheid government and remembered its long-established policy positions on Western Sahara during the 1960s and 1970s that would later translate into government policy. This position developed alongside the evolution of its international strategy to form alliances with various like-minded forces around the world in order to isolate apartheid South Africa and mobilize concrete support for its struggles against apartheid. International solidarity became key among the four pillars of the new phase of the struggle after 1961 following the banning of the liberation movements and arrests of Mandela and other

leaders. These four pillars were internal mobilization, underground struggle, armed struggle and international solidarity. The latter required the ANC to find friends all over the world either on the basis that they share the ANC's outlook, commit to support its efforts to isolate apartheid South Africa or because the potential friends are engaged in similar struggles elsewhere and the ANC can offer solidarity. The Polisario Front-led struggles of the Saharawi people came into the picture on that basis. Links with the Algerian liberation movement in power, which was also the main source of support for the Polisario Front, saw the ANC solidarity network extended to Polisario Front. The Saharawi struggle got a mention in ANC campaigns, speeches and discussions as a sister struggle worthy of energetic support.

In a speech to the Afro-Arab Solidarity Conference in 1981, the ANC President, Oliver Tambo (1981), revealed that the ANC shared with Polisario and others the enemy in the form of imperial designs over Africa including those epitomized by the subversion of newly independent African states. Though Morocco was seen as a major stumbling block to the Saharawi's right of self-determination, the ANC was critical of the involvement of Western powers in enabling Morocco's defiance of advice and demands of the international community. For this reason, he saw beyond Morocco's chauvinism and detected imperial designs that sought to undermine the forward march of the forces of liberation. In this sense, what the Saharawi people were contending with were simply manifestations of the same mega enemy that the liberation movements were fighting against in various parts of the world. The conference was described as an opportunity "for the progressive forces of the Afro-Arab world to launch a united counter-offensive to beat back the offensive that world imperialism, and especially the United States, has launched to turn our countries and peoples into vassals" (*Ibid*). These imperialist forces felt entitled to turn various territories and countries into assets in their global geopolitical games. Therefore, the liberation struggle is a universal struggle against a universal problem. It was thus a struggle for "the renewal of the world order in favour of independence, democracy, social progress and peace" (*Ibid*). The ANC therefore approached international solidarity on the understanding that this universal problem resolved a devilfish with many limbs that affect various preys at the same time in a manner that seems distinct for each of its victim. This is the essence of the idea of coloniality as a logic that brutalizes, diminishes, violates, impoverishes, hurts and confuses various parts of the world even simultaneously. It seems to be different things in different parts of the world because of how each tormenting limb of coloniality appears in each nation, but it is different tentacles of the same beatifically looking enemy.

Solidarity is therefore a response on the global scale that is conditioned by the universal nature of the problem experienced in different ways and forms in different countries. The understanding that the problems of Saharawi were not just as they appear (the chauvinism of Morocco) but were of a deeper nature similar to the South African apartheid manifestation of the same. Archie Mafeje's idea of negation of prior negation like Ngugi wa Thiong'o's idea of re-memberment as a historically-determined response to dismemberment explain this vividly. The solidarity that brought the ANC and the Polisario Front together was about what Tambo called the pursuit of a "common future".

Immediately, after 1994, it was clear that the ANC had a specific expectation that its government's foreign policy on Western Sahara was part of its broader solidarity programmes. It stated that on Western Sahara, South Africa "will support OAU resolutions which call for the recognition of that territory's independence" (ANC, 1995: 3). It prefaces this policy statement with two statements of principles that must be born in mind when analyzing the South African policy towards Western Sahara. The first is the principle of

solidarity, that South Africa needed to not forget that the people of this territory joined together with those of Algeria to stand with South African liberation movements in South Africa, including by providing practical material support to the anti-apartheid struggle all over Africa. This established the point that this experience of solidarity driven by revolutionary pan-African consciousness against colonial domination needed to be reciprocated or could not, at least, be discounted when making decisions about the Saharawi question. This is underpinned by “our anti-imperialist, anti-colonial and anti-neocolonial commitments in international relations” (ANC, 1997: 2), declared the governing party in relation to solidarity as a key factor in the foreign policy outlook of its government. In this regard, the new state’s willingness to build relations with non-state actors in the form of liberation movements like Polisario in pursuit of the ends mentioned above. Three years earlier, the ANC’s commitment that in future foreign policy, “The right of all the people of Africa to independence and self-government shall be recognized and shall be the basis of close cooperation” (ANC, 1994: 3), was also reflected in the actual state conduct in foreign affairs in relation to the Saharawi question, the Palestine issue and the Niger Delta crisis in Nigeria. This showed how ANC thinking shaped the state’s foreign policy conduct. It went on to acknowledge that, “We are conscious, however, that new demands on the ideal of democracy have recently emerged. In part, they arise from an apparent rediscovery of self-determination which, in some cases, undercuts the sovereignty of established nation-states” (ANC, 1994: 3). In 1990, addressing the United Nations in his capacity as a leader of the ANC, Nelson Mandela outlined the future foreign policy positions of free South Africa widely expected to be led by the ANC. On the Saharawi question he said,

We also take this opportunity to extend warm greetings to all others who fight for their liberation and their human rights, including the peoples of Palestine and Western Sahara. We commend their struggles to you, convinced that we are all moved by the fact that freedom is indivisible, convinced that the denial of the rights of one diminishes the freedom of others (UN, 1990).

Thus, before it assumed the reigns as the first government of the post-apartheid period, the ANC had made the right self-determination a crucial foreign policy principle, even if this had a possibility of challenging the sovereignty of established nation states. South Africa’s foreign policy discussion document of 1995 established similar parameters for the new foreign policy. It suggested that, “if consistently adhered to”, principles “will render our foreign policy predictable and in line with our perception of the kind of nation we seek to be, and the kind of world we wish to live in” (SA Government, 1995: 4-5). It went on to say, the principles adopted would also “serve as a yardstick by which the quality of our practical foreign policy decisions may be measured” (*ibid*). Key among those principles is the use of foreign policy and diplomacy for the promotion of human rights, stating that foreign policy “should be a means to an end, namely to promote the well-being of the country and its citizens” (*ibid*). It presented a view of human rights based on the dictum, what is good for South African citizens should be fought for other citizens too. In this is included such rights as the right to self-determination. The document suggested a commitment to advance and promote the rights of nations to self-determination by ending all forms of colonial and neocolonial domination. Solidarity with those fighting for this right would therefore become a cornerstone of post-apartheid foreign policy outlook after 1994. The international efforts to bring about a lasting and negotiated solution to the Saharawi question on the basis set by UN resolution gained momentum when the UN appointed a former Secretary of State of the US with influence in Washington, Mr. James Baker, as an envoy to facilitate a negotiation solution in 2000 (UN Security Council, 2001). Spain also

began to take keen interest in playing a prominent and constructive role in the process a former colonial power. This led to a proposal of a solution that did not involve full integration into Morocco or full independence, but a third way in the form of a 5-year period of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty followed by a referendum. The UN, US, EU, Spain and the AU supported this; the Polisario Front accepted it, but Morocco rejected it saying its sovereignty was not negotiable. After four intense years without any positive outcomes, Baker resigned in 2004. This was the period when the US under George W. Bush took strong interest in energy resources in the region and drew a little closer to France, Morocco's major backer (Zoubir, 2014: 249-51). South Africa strongly supported the Baker Plan though the plan did not provide an unfettered route to the achievement of the right of self-determination for the Saharawi people and South Africa's wish to recognize the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic. It seems that in South African policy circles, this principle could be deferred or be temporarily sacrificed because a peaceful, negotiated solution in this conflict was considered more important than insisting on this principle as a precondition. So, South Africa vocally expressed its support of the Baker Plan and the UN Security Council Resolution 1495 on it. It expressed hope that the international community will put pressure on Morocco to accept a negotiated solution.

In a debate on the Western Sahara of the Fourth Committee of the UN General Assembly two years later in October 2006, South Africa expressed frustration at the fact that the issue remained unresolved because Morocco, a fellow African country, had not moved an inch to make this possible. "Anything short of the exercise of the right of self-determination will not be acceptable," said a South African diplomat. It pleaded with the two parties to redouble efforts to find a way out of this impasse (UN General Assembly, 2006). In an extensive briefing to the parliamentary committee on foreign affairs in March 2015 on the situation since South Africa took a formal position on Western Sahara, the head of the Department of Foreign Affairs then, Dr. A. Ntsaluba, told the committee, the path to a negotiated solution was fraught with difficulties, littered with all manner of thorns and stumbling blocks (Ntsaluba, 2005). He expressed frustration about the stalemate that had frozen progress after the Baker Plan as not unconditionally accepted by Morocco. He told parliamentarians South Africa was on the verge of formally recognizing Western Sahara, a decision the country had put in abeyance for almost a decade in order to give a negotiated process a chance. South Africa was clearly angered by Morocco's geopolitical games including its formal request in mid-2004 that South Africa "contribute to the search for a solution within the context of the UN processes led by the UN secretary" (*ibid*). When South Africa convened an exploratory discussion between Morocco and representatives of the Saharawi people in September of the same year, having secured the support of the UN Secretary General, Morocco declined the invitation and questioned South Africa's ability to mediate. This led to a letter by the then President of South Africa, Thabo Mbeki, to key countries involved in finding solution to this question informing them of his government's intention to give full recognition to SADR. We will return to this shortly.

As Dr. Ntsaluba reported, South Africa had remained consistently committed to four principles about the Western Sahara situation: the OAU/AU Policy stance regarding complete decolonization; the UN resolutions that consistently call for the decolonization of the Western Sahara through a self-determination referendum of the people of that territory; the decisions of the International Court of Justice regarding the interpretation of the Charter of the UN in regard to self-determination of non-self-governing states; and the solutions proposed by the UN General Secretary endorsed by the OAU in 1991 and 1994 summits. Besides, the UN, South Africa also formally recognized the US and Spain as interlocutors in the search for a durable solution (*ibid*).

This frustration on the part of South Africa over the stalemate on the Western Sahara question reached a sort of a climax in 2004 with the collapse of the Baker Plan and the failure of its own mediation Initiative to even take off the ground. It is evident in Mbeki's speech to the Pan African Parliament in September of that year where he said the following:

It is a matter of great shame and regret to all of us that nevertheless the issue of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara remains unresolved. This presents to all of us with the challenge to ensure that we do everything possible to ensure that these sister people also enjoy this fundamental and inalienable right, whose defence by the entirety of our continent brought us our own freedom (Mbeki, 2004b).

A day earlier, his foreign minister, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, had told parliament, "In implementation of the principles and objectives enshrined in the African Union and UN Charters, the Republic of South Africa and the Sahrawi decided to establish diplomatic relations at ambassadorial level as of Wednesday" (Mbeki, 2004c). Both Mbeki and the Foreign Affairs Minister continued to call for a negotiated solution, suggesting that the full recognition decision in 2004 was not an abandonment of the foreign policy position since 1994, but an amplification of it. It did not think that Morocco's disappointment with this will diminish the weight of their voice calling for a lasted negotiated solution. Therefore, the decision to recognize SADR even before there was negotiated solution was seen by South Africa as an implementation of a part of its position that was always in place but had been deferred to give negotiations a chance. For this reason, the South African government hoped to campaign for the negotiated solution through bilateral engagements, multilateral discussions, lobbying China and Russia as two permanent members of the UNSC that were most likely to understand the plight of the oppressed, partnerships with civil society including the Friends of Western Sahara in Britain, engagement with IBSA partner countries, and building international consensus on the recognition of the Polisario Front (Executive Background).

Let us return to the letter by Mbeki that we alluded to the beginning of this article in order to establish the point immediately above. Penned on 1 August 2004 for the attention of the King of Morocco, the Mbeki letter announced a policy change on the Saharawi question (Mbeki, 2004a). Mbeki began the letter by reminding the king that the first post-apartheid president, Nelson Mandela, announced in 1993 that the new government would recognize and start formal diplomatic relations with the SADR, consistent with the decisions of the OAU that the country joined in 1994. Mandela was persuaded by the king and the UN General Secretary not to carry out this decision in order to give the UN-facilitation of a peaceful solution a chance. He communicated how difficult it had been to defer a principle South Africa held so dear for a decade against pressure from the Polisario Front and from some African states.

Mbeki indicated that in this decade of painstaking wait for a negotiated solution, South Africa repeatedly persuaded the Polisario Front to give negotiations a change and contribute to a peaceful solution of the issue in line with UN resolutions. On the advice to defer recognition, Mbeki said,

We indicated to the Front our belief that our respect of this advice was the best contribution we could make to the successful implementation of the peace plan and other proposals that would lead to the holding of a referendum that would give the people of Western Sahara the possibility to exercise their right to self-determination (ibid).

It is clear from the tone of the letter that this stalemate hurt South Africa's compromise and made this compromise position untenable to maintain. It felt vindicated for shelving its decision to grant diplomatic recognition in order to give negotiations between Polisario and Morocco a chance. According to the letter, the strike that broke the proverbial camel's back was the conclusion by then UN secretary-general, Kofi Anan, that Morocco's final response to the UN efforts was to reject off-hand the very basis of interventions by insisting that it would negotiate only on the basis that the solution will be autonomy within Moroccan sovereignty. But Mbeki noted that Morocco had gone further and announced formally that the final nature of "the autonomy solution is not negotiable", thus rendering negotiations a futile exercise. There was clear a deep clash between the principle of justice as in the rights to the Saharawi to be heard on the issue of self-determination and another principle, Morocco's insistence on its national sovereignty as extended over the territory of the Saharawi considered in Rabat as the southern provinces. This clash had not been resolved by the many UN initiatives, neither by the flexible position promoted by South Africa, nor by many compromises that the Polisario had made since 2001 on behalf of the Saharawi people. It seemed central to the logjam over the Saharawi people and was a clash that Morocco used skillfully to keep hopes for a peaceful end to conflict alive without moving an inch in the direction of such peace. Mbeki said that the UN Security Council Resolution no 1541 in response to Morocco's statement, which insisted on a solution a solution that provided for self-determination of the people of Western Sahara, was the solution South Africa also insisted. The resolution reaffirmed the Council's commitment to the "Peace Plan for Self-Determination of the People of Western Sahara" and the mandate of the Secretary-General (UNSG) and the UNSG's Personal Envoy in the pursuit of this plan, and called upon the parties cooperate with the UNSG and the Envoy, while it also extended the mandate of the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) by a further six months (United Nations Security Council, 2004). In spite of overwhelming evidence about the lack of genuine political will on the part of Morocco to allow a win-win solution to the problem, the Security Council continued to hope that such a solution could be read as quickly as in the next six months after the resolution. It even made provision for a possible reduction in the size of the MINURSO at the end of its extended mandate. Accordingly", Mbeki said, "when we delayed recognition of SADR this was on the basis that both Morocco and the Polisario Front were working with the UN SG and the Security Council to agree on the modalities of a process that would allow the people of Western Sahara to exercise their right of self-determination, in a manner consistent with the principles and purposes of the Charter of the United Nations and the relevant documents of the OAU and AU" (Mbeki, 2004a). After reminding the King of Morocco's sterling role in support of the struggle for the right of self-determination in South Africa, Mbeki concluded that the kingdom clearly did not have intentions to extend the same principle position in relation to the right of the Saharawi people under any circumstances. It suggested that Morocco had abandoned a principle that had connected the kingdom to the new South Africa in the first place, a basis on which South Africa had hoped to help bring finality to the stalemate. Though the kingdom had willingly participated in the decade-long negotiation period culminating in the peace plan, Mbeki observed that it turned out the very issue being discussed was in fact not negotiable. Therefore, Morocco's statement had revealed what was already obvious in its conduct, the fact that it was negotiating in bad faith because it had an outcome in mind, but one that made negotiations a futile exercise. The sense of betrayal and of being deceived is clear from this observation. Morocco had deceived everyone including the UN and this undermined the international system itself.

“The avoidable cul-de-sac caused by the position advanced by the Government of Morocco”, Mbeki concluded, “has created the situation that any further delay on our part to recognize SADR will inevitably translate into an abandonment of our support for the right of the people of Western Sahara to self-determination” (*Ibid*). South Africa felt that maintaining the compromise in the hope of a positive outcome from negotiations had suddenly become not just unwise option, but one that could be construed as supporting Morocco’s deceitful position. Therefore, South Africa decided to establish full diplomatic relations with the SADR while continuing to support the UN efforts to find a lasting peaceful resolution of this matter.

Morocco responded by withdrawing its ambassador from South Africa, accusing Tshwane of having a biased stance on the Western Sahara issue. It called South Africa’s decision “partial, surprising and inopportune”, saying it “undermines the efforts of the United Nations to find a just, realistic solution that is acceptable to all parties to this conflict” (Morocco Recalls). Morocco indicated that by pursuing the right of self-determination, South Africa was out of touch with the realities on the ground in the disputed territory and, that in fact, it undermined the will of the very populations concerned, which said were not in favour of a Polisario agenda. The relations between South Africa and Morocco thus froze to basic diplomatic interface and became hostile in international platforms like the UN.

Mbeki was succeeded by Jacob Zuma in 2009, after a one-year interregnum in which Kgalema Motlanthe was a caretaker president. Between 2009 and 2017, the Morocco position on the questions discussed above shifted a small and subtle ways. It started to shift towards friendly overtures to South Africa in order to end hostility. It started to court Zuma. By 2012, South Africa and Morocco were the African representatives in the UN Security Council and shouldered the responsibility to coordinate on mostly African issues before the Council. The election of Morocco into the Council in September 2011 followed the bruises South Africa had suffered over its vote in support of what became a destabilizing regime change agenda in Libya. This dovetailed with Morocco’s spirited courting of African countries to enable Morocco to get elected alongside Togo ahead of Mauritania that the AU had decided to support. Morocco had thus split an AU consensus and demonstrated that it had made inroads in the AU that it remained not member of due to disputes over the Saharawi question. So, as a partner with South Africa in the Council in 2012, Morocco was a growing power in African multilateral politics as a result of conscious strategy to end its isolation by hook or crook. According to Nomfundo Ngwenya, a foreign policy expert, this required South Africa to seek a pragmatic relationship with Morocco while watching its growing significance in African politics (Ngwenya, 2012). By 2016, having supported the African agenda at the Council, Morocco had built up its case for its re-admission into the AU without changing its position on Western Sahara, which was the reason it departed in the first place.

Things changed remarkably in 2017 when after a year of spirited lobbying and campaign, Morocco was overwhelmingly voted back into the membership of the AU after 34-year absence from the formal African multilateral platform (Rawhani, 2018). This campaign happened in the course of 2016 when the South African Africa policy seemed to be in disarray with the energies of the Jacob Zuma government absorbed by huge domestic problems including political scandals and its focus on nurturing relations with China and BRICS. There was a lack of an alternative group of African countries to insist on Morocco addressing the reasons for conflict that led to its withdrawal from the OAU in 1984. Morocco was wise to identify key anchor states whose support would enable it to win the votes at the AU. It had actually experiment on this when it won the votes of many African

countries in the race for the seat in the Security Council in September 2011. So, it was not a short-term strategy at work, but part of an elaborate long-term strategy that can be traced back to 2007/2008, when the Mbeki term ended and the era of a strong team of leaders driving the AU agenda ended.

Morocco had unveiled a regionalization agenda with Western Sahara as a key spring board to Morocco's expansion in Africa in 2008-2010. In this period, there was a marked growth in the kingdom's bilateral engagements with African countries, intensified as European markets dried up due to the global financial crisis after 2009 (Ben-Meir, 2010; Messari, 2018). South Africa had assumed that the traditional OAU/AU position on the right to self-determination was still so entrenched that it would prevent Morocco from shirking its responsibility to account for the Western Sahara issue before it could be accepted back. Outwitted and out-boxed, South Africa had not way to explain the return of Morocco when it happened (Allison, 2017).

This has shifted the relations from Western Sahara to power relations between two major powers in Africa, both with ambitions to be leading African powers. There are discussions in progress to resume full ambassadorial bilateral relations between South Africa and Morocco. The thawing of relations in spite of stalemate in Western Sahara is a key indication of this shift to geopolitical chess-games between an adventurous and expansionist Morocco and a rather lethargic South Africa. Morocco is back in the AU using its power to project itself as a champion of African development, signing many bilateral economic cooperation agreements and promising millions in Moroccan investment in Africa. South Africa takes solace in the fact that SADR remains also a member of the AU because Morocco has not pushed to have it expelled in fear of being as divisive. South Africa seems happy with the fact that it is what is called a draw in football language, but this is a draw with Morocco on a stronger footing, and certainly on the prowl for more gains in African geopolitics. The SADR is worried that this re-admission of Morocco reduces the pressure on Morocco, disincentivizes it to reach a settlement and makes the Saharawi struggle even more difficult and complicated.

Conclusion

The decision to fully recognize the SADR in 2004 marked the end of a decade of hope in the UN-driven facilitation process in the hope that this would result in a negotiated granting of the right of self-determination for the people of Western Sahara. It also marked a beginning of a decade that would culminate in Morocco's a surprise return to the AU without abiding by the AU position on Western Sahara. Both decades represent power politics in the form of Morocco's dancing around the AU, UN and South Africa in delay tactics and deceit. It was also power games in the form of solidarity alliances that South Africa was a part of that kept the hopes of the people of Western Sahara high. The second decade also showcased Morocco's smart power politics by which it lobbied strategically to win the support for its own decision to return to the AU and its visible efforts to build itself up as a major regional power in Africa. South Africa's position evolved over time with a deferment of the decision to recognize SADR in the first decade and a decision to give SADR full recognition to the chagrin of Morocco in the second decade. The future of Western Sahara and the UN process to find a lasting negotiated solution is uncertain and so are outcomes of the South African position on this issue. What is certain is that Morocco is increasingly setting the pace and drawing the parameters of the next phase in the evolution of this problem. South Africa is certainly exhausted, inward-looking and directionless in relation to the future of the Saharawi question.

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