

Gdeim Izik. A change in the struggle strategies of the Sahrawi population

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Abstract

This communication will contribute to clarify factors involved the first and the less known of the Arab revolutions. We will also show the differences between this revolt and other events taking place in neighbour countries some months later: above all, the capability of the Sahrawi people for combining social and economic demands, the struggle for identity recognition and classical claims of independence. Finally, these elements will allow us to try to predict the effects that the new scenario emerged from Gdeim Izik will have in the short/medium term in Western Sahara. In this sense, we foresee an increased political commitment of Sahrawi people in the occupied territories; the transition from peaceful actions towards more radical and violent reactions; and a direct and daily confrontation with Moroccan settlers, affecting relationships between both populations and stopping any possibility of coexistence.

Key Works

Western Sahara, Gdeim Izik, peaceful camp, revolts, Sahrawi, Moroccan.

Abbreviations

ASVDH: Association sahraouie des victimes des violations graves des Droits de l'Homme

AMDH: Association marocaine des Droits de l'Homme

CODESA: Collectif de défenseurs Sahraouis des Droits de l'Homme

CORCAS: Conseil royal consultatif des affaires sahariennes

FRENTE POLISARIO: Frente de liberación nacional de Saguia El Hamra y Rio de Oro

MINURSO: United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara

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Introduction

In autumn 2010, as a prelude to the popular protests in the Maghreb and Machrek, the Sahrawi population living inside the occupied territories performed a totally unexpected action: more than 20.000 people set the peaceful camp Gdeim Izik to denounce their political, economic and social situation. Several weeks after its establishment, the camp was violently dismantled by Moroccan security forces. This intervention triggered bloody riots in some cities of Western Sahara, causing 13 dead among Moroccan policemen and Sahrawi citizens, and hundreds of wounded and arrested.

Gdeim Izik is considered by some authors¹ as the first revolution of the ‘Arab spring’. According to Professor López García (2011), Gdeim Izik must be linked to a ‘new Arab time’, because as in the following protests it was the youth who forced an authoritarian power to negotiate using innovative ways of call and organisation. This author considers as well that the camp as protest strategy was exported from Gdeim Izik to the Kasbah of Tunis and Tahir Square at El Cairo. The so-called ‘Dignity’ camp introduced important changes, above all, a radicalization of political positions and an increase of violence among Sahrawi and Moroccan population. One year after the appearance of the camp, the dynamics of this action and its consequences can be better understood by carrying out an exhaustive analysis of the situation in Western Sahara, before, during and after Gdeim Izik. Besides, we can observe that the spirit emerged in Gdeim Izik remains, and that it fed the riots happened in other Arab countries. Despite the initial failure of their revolt, Sahrawi people did not lost hope regarding their cause because they verified the possibility to break the dynamics of impunity characteristic of some Arab regimes.

Taking into account these facts and their immediate consequences, this communication² seeks to answer the following questions: How was the political socialization of the actors involved in the 2010 revolt? What have been the major changes in struggle objectives and methods

compared to previous years? Can we talk about the emergence of new political and social Sahrawi organizations? (Role played by Human Right activists/Polisario's position within the resistance in the occupied territories). What role played the traditional mass media and the new information technologies in the development of this protest?

1. Chronology

Gdeim Izik resulted from several unfruitful attempts of setting protest camps in the outskirts of a number of cities of Western Sahara (El Aaiún, Smara, Dajla, Bojador and the port of Al Marsa). With this new struggle strategy the Sahrawi people tried to denounce the harsh social and economic situation in the occupied territories, specially their marginalisation regarding access to jobs and housing, the corruption of local authorities (be Moroccan or Sahrawi), the welfare State policies guided by clientelism rather than by socio-economic criteria, and the traditional denounce of the plundering of natural resources of Western Sahara, to which the original population of the region do not have access.

The idea of building a new camp in the Gdeim Izik area, about 15 km away from El Aaiún, was conceived at the beginning of October 2010. As in previous attempts, the spark was ignited by the questionable management of development funds and social subsidies by the Moroccan authorities. The first demonstrators gathered on October 10, most of them women and unemployed young men. On this occasion the Moroccan security forces did not ban the rally, encouraging more people to join the protest³. Such massive attendance made the management of the camp a complex task. Although each family cared for their own supplies, after a few days the formation of so-called popular committees was necessary: internal security, cleaning, camp planning, basic services and negotiation⁴. The camp was divided in six quarters, each one under responsibility of a zone chief. As time went on, the Moroccan security forces established a blockade around the camp by digging trenches and sand dikes. The access gates were reduced to a single entrance at the road connecting El Aaiún and

Smara, where three police check points made even more difficult gaining access to the protest place.

The calm was hardly maintained until October 24, when a car ignored one of the check points and was shut by troopers, killing one of the passengers, a 14 year old who was buried three days later without the authorisation of his parents and without the presence of any relatives. This event changed dramatically the situation at Gdeim Izik. Outside the camp the informative blockade was tightened. The Moroccan authorities blocked the access of foreign journalists to El Aaiún, and some of them were even expelled from the country⁵. This happened also to some international observers and MEPs such as the Spaniard Willy Meyer and the French Jean-Paul Lecoq. On the other hand, the atmosphere inside the camp became tense. In view of the likely imminent dismantling of the camp, pro-independence speeches were more and more frequent among the displaced population.

Despite the evident tension and perhaps with the objective of gaining some time and project a lenient image, the Moroccan authorities agreed to negotiate with a committee of representatives of the camp (composed by nine members, men and women). The contacts were held initially with Mohamed Jelmous, who had been to that date the *Wali* (governor) of El Aaiún, and later with a commission of the Home Ministry integrated by three *Walís* of the central administration. Finally, the last phase of the negotiations was led by the Home Minister in person, Taïeb Cherkaoui. On November 4 a basic agreement was reached, by which the Moroccan State pledged to address progressively the housing and employment demands of the protesters. The creation of a joint commission was planned, with the task of channelling the claims and building a census of impoverished people. In principle, such measures should have been in force from November 8, but none of the commitments were fulfilled, since the camp was dismantled that very same day⁶.

The operation took place early in the morning and without a chance for the displaced population to organise the evacuation. Chaos developed among those trying to run away from water cannons and tear gas, and those trying to organise resistance against the State security forces. According to Moroccan authorities, the intervention could not be delayed, because the camp was under control of criminals and traffickers who held part of the population against their will⁷. However, Sahrawi and Moroccan Human Rights organisations question this version⁸. According to them, it is difficult to understand how four *Walis* from the Home Office and the Minister himself had been negotiating with the spokespersons of the camp if they considered that it was hijacked by dangerous individuals. Another fact disproving the official discourse is the report published by Amnesty International about Gdeim Izik, where it is highlighted that the number of participants in the protest was oscillating along the week, implying that Sahrawi people could travel between the camp and El Aaiún without overwhelming problems, despite the check points⁹.

The breaking of the security forces into the camp generated an extremely violent response among many of the displaced young people¹⁰. Violence spread shortly later to El Aaiún, where the lack of information and rumours induced people to believe that a massacre had happened during the eviction. The confuse information and the lack of police brought chaos to the city centre, where barricades were erected, and public buildings, shops, bank offices and cars of Moroccan citizens were plundered and burned¹¹. During the riots a Sahrawi young man with Spanish nationality died after being run over by a police car, which amplified the strikes against shops and public and private properties. The arrival of the bulk of the Moroccan security forces back from Gdeim Izik stopped the violence unleashed by the Sahrawi population at El Aaiún, but during the evening Moroccan civilians under police protection launched into plundering and destruction of shops and houses belonging to the Sahrawi population. The brutal onslaught on the camp and the subsequent repression of the

riots at El Aaiún by the security forces led several Sahrawi members of CORCAS –consultative organism on issues related to the Sahara created by Mohamed VI–, to complain against the management of the crisis by the Moroccan government.

The human cost of the operation of dismantling the camp and the subsequent riots at El Aaiún is clearly excessive. At the end of the day the number of injured, mostly Sahrawis, was of several hundred, while the number of casualties rose to 13 –11 members of the Moroccan security forces and two Sahrawis. On the other hand, the search of the instigators of the revolt engulfed El Aaiún in a non-declared emergency state. Assaults on houses without court order, beatings and mistreatments in police stations, extra-judicial arrests, etc. lasted for weeks after November 8. Although most arrested people were released a few hours later, around 130 persons were transferred to the Black Prison at El Aaiún¹² and another group of 24 persons to the military prison of Sale (Morocco). All people belonging to the first group were released on parole within the first six months of their imprisonment. However, more than one year after the revolt, all members of the second group are still in prison waiting for military trial, accused of formation and integration of criminal band, possession of weapons, take of hostages and attack on the State security.

2. Consequences of the 2010 revolt

Gdeim Izik can be considered as a rupture with the previous situation, especially concerning the organisation of the Sahrawi population and the emergence of new forms of struggle, but also regarding the opening of a breach in the community coexistence of Sahrawis and *Dakhilis*¹³, on which the Moroccan authorities had prided themselves in the past.

On the other hand, Gdeim Izik also shows continuity in the way the Moroccan State addresses the Sahara conflict. Despite the serious social problems which explain the unrest of the population and led to the camp protest, the approach of Rabat has been putting security on top

of any other measures which could have helped to escape from the usual deadlock of this conflict.

A few weeks after the dismantling of the camp Khalil Dkhilm, of Sahrawi origin, was appointed new *Wali* at El Aaiún. However, this measure was not accompanied by deeper reforms which could have solved the problems at the heart of the unrest, e.g. facilitating access to housing and employment to Sahrawis, and implementing measures of social pacification such as creating joint spaces to promote mutual respect and knowledge between populations.

Therefore, the importance of Gdeim Izik does not lie in how the camp protest developed, but in the changes that this action triggered *a posteriori* in the Sahrawi population and in general in the Western Sahara. Here, it is necessary to distinguish between four different effects:

1. The renewal of the collective awareness of struggle, and the use of new strategies complementing the traditional political claims.
2. The inrush in the public scene of a generation of young people suffering alarmingly high unemployment rates and lacking a promising outlook, that without being politically organised tend to come together and carry increasingly radical actions.
3. Break of the fragile coexistence between *Dakhilis* and Sahrawis, as demonstrated by the successive clashes between the two communities from November 2010 on.
4. Gdeim Izik impacts similarly the Sahrawi refugee camps at Tinduf, exasperating those (specially young people) who, for years, had been demanding to resume the armed struggle, but also conveying to the Sahrawi leadership democratic claims, which are also observed in other Arab revolutionary contexts.

3. Revitalisation of the struggle in Western Sahara

The development and the strength of the camp surprised everyone, including Sahrawis participating in the protests. Despite the lack of infrastructures and resources, as well as the

chaotic situation characterising the first days, the displaced population managed to organise a large scale event and coordinate in record time with the objective of solving the most elemental organization problems. Gdeim Izik represents, in this sense, an instrument which allowed them to gauge their strength and, simultaneously, revitalise the foundations of the citizen mobilisation, which had been restricted to a few groups still active since the 2005 'Intifada' and whose new referents were the Human Rights activists.

From 1975, when Spain abandoned Western Sahara leaving the territory to Morocco and Mauritania, many Sahrawis who stayed in the occupied territories acted as combatants or supported the Polisario Front in its struggle against Morocco. The construction during the 80's of the defensive wall separating the Western Sahara between the occupied zone and the so-called 'liberated territories' controlled by the Polisario Front isolated the Sahrawi cities and population from any contact with the guerrilla, and therefore the leading role of the resistance was centralised on the other side of the wall, Ruíz Miguel (1995). The 1991 peace agreement opened a new phase characterised by a tense calm in the refugee camps. All the attention still converged on Tinduf, although the Sahrawis in the occupied territories were the ones who, with a minimal organisation, continued with their particular resistance. During the last ten years, recurrent unrests both in the cities of Sahara and Morocco have been staged by the Sahrawi population, students and Human Rights activists. Together with these frequent protests, three critical moments separated by 5-6 years can be distinguished, when the conflict was reanimated and mutations in the struggle strategies took place.

The first and less well-known event took place in September 1999, and was named by the Polisario Front as the first Sahrawi 'Intifada'. The protest rallies at El Aaiún were harshly crushed by the security forces under command of Briss Basri, Home Minister and strongman of the late Hasan II. The claims of the population focussed mainly on economic issues. In fact, at that point, problems such as unemployment, lack of housing and concentration of

wealth in a few hands sparked off the social conflict, Sobero (2010). However, the political question was also at the core of the protests. The crisis exploded just a few weeks after the crowning of Mohamed VI, and can be considered as a warning to the new king that the situation in the Sahara was still as explosive as during the harsh years of repression experienced under his father Hassan II.

In May 2005 a new series of protests started in Western Sahara, which continued until the end of the year. The so-called second Sahrawi 'Intifada' had a clearly political nature (the claim of the self-determination right and independence for Western Sahara) and a larger international impact. The crushing of a demonstration against the transfer to the Agadir prison of a Sahrawi prisoner accused of drug dealing and abusing the Crown triggered a wave of demonstrations proclaiming independence slogans, which were in turn severely repressed at El Aaiún, Smara and Dajla. The unrests extended to several Moroccan cities such as Agadir, Casablanca, Rabat or Fez, where the police clashed violently with Sahrawi students¹⁴.

Finally, 40 demonstrators, and among them some well-known Human Rights and activists like Ali Salem Tamek, Brahim Noumria and Aminetou Haidar, were violently arrested and tried under the accusation of breaching peace, illegal association, unrest instigation and damage of public property. They were sentenced to 6 months in prison, although the intense campaign of political pressure from abroad forced their release in early 2006¹⁵. During this period, the imprisoned activists and several Human Rights organisations denounced the practice of torture in police stations and prisons, arbitrary transfers of prisoners, inhuman arrest conditions and systematic mistreatment¹⁶.

After the 2005 events, Western Sahara disappeared again from the headlines of the international media. However, the decrease of the intensity of the protests does not mean its end, mainly because the serious political, social and economic problems persist, and the only measures undertaken by the Moroccan administration consist on reinforcing security and

repression machinery. The Western Sahara did not come back to the international headlines until 2009, when the Human Rights activist Aminetou Haidar began a hunger strike at the Lanzarote airport¹⁷, showing again that despite of the external invisibility, the conflict continues and is far from being solved. The visibilisation of the conflict at international level broke with four years of oblivion, causing a reactivation of the struggle in Western Sahara. In fact, during 2010 and thanks to the momentum generated by the Haidar case, the protests resumed with renewed intensity. Such is the case for example of the trial against seven Human Rights activists –the so-called ‘group of the seven’- arrested on October 8, 2009, at the airport of Casablanca after visiting the Tinduf refugee camps, accused of “attempting on the integrity and sovereignty of Morocco”. The trial was delayed throughout 2010 as a result of numerous clashes between Sahrawis and *Dakhilis* during the hearings, Gomez Martín (2011: 159).

The hunger strike of Haidar caused an acceleration of events. The intense social unrest originated by socio-economical discrimination and the deadlocked political conflict, besides classical demonstrations and rallies, gave rise to new forms of protest such as the one at Gdeim Izik. Be failed or successful attempts, the construction of camp-cities in the outskirts of the large urban centres of the Western Sahara managed to effectively attract the attention of the world, question Rabat’s ‘development’ policies and shed light on the deep corruption of the local Sahrawi and Moroccan elites, for decades one of the major curses of the Sahara, (Berona Castallenda (2011: 6). Gdeim Izik succeeded in encouraging new forms of struggle with a socio-economic *leitmotiv*. However, these questions did not only impact the occupied territories¹⁸. These are intrinsic problems of the Moroccan State, as shown by the claims of the young men and women taking part a few months after the Gdeim Izik events in the demonstrations that shook the Moroccan society within the context of the so-called ‘Arab revolutions’.

Finally, the Western Sahara 2010 revolt also brought new behaviour dynamics and relational attitudes, which to date had not been taken into account. The unrests were more and more frequent and are accompanied by intense violence. Now it is not just about Sahrawi demonstrations harshly crushed by Moroccan security forces, but also direct clashes between different communities coexisting in the territory, caused by the development of an unprecedented tense atmosphere between Sahrawis and *Dakhilis*.

4. Role of the Sahrawi youth in the new wave of protests

One of the most relevant characteristics of the democratic revolutions across the Magreb and Machrek from the beginning of 2011 is the massive participation of young people, acting as the driving engine of the protests and spreading the unrest among other sectors of the population. The major role played by the middle and low class youth is not random. As pointed out by Khader (2011), together with the demographic factors (important decrease of the birth rate from the 80's and an extremely young population¹⁹), there has been an increase in the educational levels, leading to the formation of a large working force with an important consume potential, which could contribute to the economic development of these countries. However, this reality is in open conflict with the productive structure of decadent and corrupted regimes governed for decades by oligarchs who amassed huge fortunes and kept their power through the use of force with the approval of the West. Thus, the current situation in the Arab countries cannot be disconnected from the context of global economic crisis, nor from the social contradictions generated by the neo-liberal system, which in the case of the Arab countries has allowed, among other consequences, the plundering of natural resources and the deepening of serious social fractures between the working and middle classes and the elites controlling power, Massiah (2011). The crisis of the familiar economies, which hardly supported the labour market in these countries, the huge weight of the informal sector, the incapacity of adapting the employment offer to the increasing educational level of the

working force, the barriers set by Europe to migration, etc., constrain the landscape of a young population who has identified the destruction of the old regimes as the only way of transforming their own future.

In Western Sahara, the 2011 protests were organised by unemployed youths, in contrast to the 2005 unrests, when the Human Rights activists played a leading role. The lack of information about the Sahrawi youth does not impede to establish common characteristics with the youths of neighbour countries. Up to a point, and taking into account the specificities of each country, it can be stated that the Sahrawi youth suffer from the same problems than the youths of other countries of the region: a not very promising outlook, high unemployment rates, poverty, political repression, etc. All these issues add to the Sahrawi national issue and the ethnic discrimination, which has been continuously increasing during the last decade.

On the other hand, and similarly to neighbour countries, this generation grew in a cultural context marked by strong changes, by which the traditional representatives (political parties, unions, etc) have lost their appeal and capability for mass mobilisation Massiah (2011). However, despite the pretended spontaneity of the protests highlighted by the media, a careful analysis of the events shows more complex scenarios in which the masses playing the leading role have been supported by -or sought support from- traditional sectors of the dissidence such as opposition parties or trade unions.

The marginal presence of the Polisario Front in the occupied territories and the ban of political parties with discourses opposed to the interests of the Moroccan state regarding the territorial dispute, forced the Sahrawi youth seeking to participate in the decision making processes to join local regime-friendly or simply tolerated parties, or Human Rights associations, which are also banned but have some operational capability and external support, Veguilla (2009: 106-107). The current important social support for Human Rights associations and the transformation of its most charismatic members into icons of the

resistance against occupation, has finally given them a political specific weight, thus opening the political representation to other actors and displacing the Polisario Front from the hegemonic role that it had played between the mid 70's and the end of the 90's.

Repression has played a key role in the reorganisation of the Sahrawi political space during the last decade, training its participants in distinguishing clearly the frontier between what is considered as a forbidden and a tolerated protest, that is, susceptible of not causing a repressive response from the Moroccan authorities. This is where the contribution of the Sahrawi youth to the reconfiguration of the resistance political field has been most significant: the replacement (only apparent) of ethnic and political references by others linked to the territory and the right to economic and social development of the region, Veguilla (2009: 97-98). Thus, during the last few years a number of associations have been created by Sahrawi youths with the objective of defending specific interests or denouncing particular situations of injustice²⁰.

Gdeim Izik was also one of such apparently non-political mobilisations considered by the social actors as legitimate, although carrying an underlying political component evident both to the participants and to the Moroccan authorities, thus causing that many actions ended up in riots and repression. As pointed out by the Organisation marocaine des Droits Humains: 'It is not possible to speak about social claims of citizens ignoring their political claims. Indeed, the social issue in the background is political, because is a direct consequence of the damage caused in the region by social discrimination and plundering of natural resources'²¹.

Finally, another important element characterising the development of the protests during the last decade in Western Sahara, with a direct link to the participation of young people, is the use of the new information and communication technologies: Internet, blogs, social networks, etc. Such technologies allow the participation of the citizenry in the construction of news in real time and the exchange of information through personal testimonies, videos, pictures, etc.,

facilitating the rapid diffusion of events without intermediaries which could adulterate the news.

The use of this type of instruments in the Sahara makes possible –specially from the 2005 ‘2nd Intifada’ on–, a better coordination of the actions, reinforcing the discussion and exchange of ideas between non-conformist youths or establishing links with the exterior to by-pass the informative blockade set by Morocco. Although the use of Internet, social networks, YouTube, etc. is still limited due to the lack of resources, these tools were key during the weeks of protests of Gdeim Izik in organising the camp and also in providing the only alternative information channel to the official Moroccan media.

5. The rupture of the coexistence myth: ethnic tensions and racism

The unrests at El Aaiún the same day the camp was dismantled had a profound impact on the relationship between the populations settling the Western Sahara. Actually, the clashes between communities on November 8, 2010, were the result of a situation that had been developing for a long time, and question the artificial nature of a coexistence which the Moroccan authorities have been trying to mythicise over and over again.

The breach in the population goes beyond the Western Sahara independence issue and its total annexation by Morocco. From the occupation of the territory in 1975, the Moroccan State implemented a series of economic and social policies which on the long term have generated a number of perverse effects. In this sense, with the objective of ‘moroccanise’ the territory, Rabat promoted the transfer of population from Morocco by means of incentives and generous welfare policies. On the other hand, measures were adopted to offer important positions in the Moroccan public administration to those Sahrawi ex-combatants abandoning the Polisario Front discipline from the 90’s on. Finally, a third group, the so-called inhabitants of Al Wahda (‘Union’) complete the populations subsidised and supported by the Moroccan State in the occupied territories. This group is composed by several tens of thousands of

members of Sahrawi tribes living outside the territory under dispute, which from 1991 on have been encouraged to settle in provisional camps in the periphery of El Aaiún, Smara, Bojador and Dajla, with the objective of being integrated in the identification lists of MINURSO, Bennani, (2011). Since the referendum never took place, such camps have turned into permanent dormitory towns perpetually subsidised by the Moroccan State.

Such biased welfare policies finally convinced the native Sahrawis that the access to decent housing, state subsidies or basic services completely depends on the ethnic origin or opinion about the Sahara conflict. Therefore, the usual political tension and the permanent feeling of injustice regarding the distribution of resources have been joined in the last year by ethnic and tribal tensions promoting dangerous racist attitudes between communities. A proof of this are the clashes at Dajla between young *Dakhilis* and Sahrawis during the celebration of the 'Mer et désert' festival in February 2011, or the riots after an amateur football game in the same city in September 2011, where 7 people were killed.

As stated by the Moroccan journalist Driss Bennani (2011), "the total absence of mutual understanding –which was never promoted by the Moroccan authorities–, increases the impression that violence, more and more raw and intense, can reappear with the most insignificant incident". The violence between communities results, therefore, from the total lack of understanding between populations, but mainly from prejudices promoted during three decades, and from the policies implemented in the Western Sahara by the Moroccan authorities: exploitation of natural resources without profit for the native population, introduction of new populations encouraged by generous subsidies, segregation of populations, transformation of the Sahrawi population in a marginalised ethnic minority, use of subsidy policies as a coercion to force Sahrawis to assume the Moroccan presence, state subsidies not driven by socio-economic criteria, etc. In summary, the rise of the ethnic factor

as a new variable in the conflict is an additional danger which could contribute to destabilize the region permanently.

6. Effects of Gdeim Izik in the refugee camps

Gdeim Izik created a double tension among Sahrawi refugees in Tinduf (Algeria). First, the protests and the violent dismantling of the camp in Western Sahara reinforced the pressure of Sahrawi refugees on the Polisario Front. The Sahrawi population demanded stronger action and giving up the unsuccessful diplomacy protocol. From the beginning of the 2000 decade, an increasing number of Sahrawi refugees have joined their voices to those of the people who as early as in the 90's already questioned the peace process opened in 1991, openly criticising the deadlocking of the conflict generated by the fruitless negotiations between the Polisario Front and Morocco. Similar to what happened in Western Sahara, in the last ten years several events sparked off the indignation among the population of the refugee camps, leading to more and more critical stances against the action of the Sahrawi authorities. These events can be considered as moments of rupture or loss of hope.

The first of these events took place in 2001, when the organisers of the Paris-Dakar rally decided to pass through the liberated territories without consulting the Polisario Front. The Sahrawi authorities reacted promptly spurred on by the critical views within their population, threatening with taking arms again and mobilising people with an unmatched intensity in a decade. Later, the Sahrawi government thwarted its own call, coinciding with the collapse of the 1st Baker plan. Thus, the freezing of the belligerent actions and the new failure of the diplomacy caused a deep frustration and unrest among the population.

The second event happened in 2003. The Polisario Front accepted, with the frontal opposition from a sector of the refugees, the conditions imposed by the 2nd Baker plan²². However, it was this time the Moroccan government who incomprehensibly rejected the settlement. The

diplomatic way lost its appeal for the Sahrawi population, and the discourse favouring taking back arms was embraced by a majority.

The third event was the so-called second Sahrawi 'Intifada', beginning in spring 2005 and shaking the Sahrawi society as a whole. The repression in the occupied territories gave rise to additional tensions in the refugee camps, where the young population demands the Polisario Front a convincing response. The mobilisation of troops and reservists in the liberated territories was quick, but the Polisario Front was in a difficult situation. On one side, it was not convenient calling to arms, considering their scarce military resources and international support; but on the other hand they feared losing support among their own refugee population, exasperated of living at the Hamada and ready to go to war if that could break the deadlock. From 2005, a new development took place with the coming into being of loosely organised groups of young people, both within the migratory context and in the refugee camps. Such groups tried to offer support to the demonstrators in Western Sahara, and made use of blogs and social networks to convey their ideas about the need of rising in arms again, Gómez Martín and Omet (2009: 210).

Between 2005 and 2011 the tension in the camps escalated considerably. The lack of future perspectives pushed many youths to join the Polisario army, while others drifted between idleness and participation in smuggling networks, Caratini (2007). Considering this distressing scene, it is understandable that every time that unrest emerged in the cities of Sahara the young people reacted by putting pressure into their own government to finally break with the pacifist stances it has defended from the beginning of the 90's. In this sense, the resumption of negotiations with the Moroccan representatives at Manhasset (New York), just after the dismantling of Gdeim Izik, meant a big blow for many, a non understandable action lacking any logic and reinforcing the total divorce between part of the Sahrawi population and the foreign policy of their government²³.

However, the discontent of the Sahrawi population with the political direction of the Polisario Front was not new. The critical voices rose for the first time during the previous decade, in a context of a series of desertions of former cadres of the Polisario and external and internal discrediting campaigns orchestrated from Morocco. Thus, the suspicion of betrayal impregnates any criticism exerted against the actions of the government or the direction of the Polisario. Gdeim Izik and the revolutionary context in the Magreb and Machrek encouraged some shy criticism within the camps. With the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt and the start of the protests in Morocco by the 'February 20th' movement, on March 5, 2011, a demonstration was organized at Rabuni, political and administrative centre of the refugee camps. The call was made by the self-denominated 'Revolutionary Youths' group, who did not claim for the resignation of the prime minister Mohamed Abdelaziz, but asked for a stronger support of the Polisario Front to the Sahrawis living in the occupied territories and reforms in the government. Among these demanded reforms were changes in the administration of the State and the Judiciary, putting an end to the corruption in the government institutions, fighting misuse of public funds, participation of the youth in the political activity and a reform of the electoral law allowing voters to have a stronger influence in the election of the MPs and the president of the Republic²⁴.

Although the Sahrawi authorities did not forbid the demonstration, the official propaganda against it and the suspicion of manipulation by Morocco to create internal disputes, discouraged the participation of young people in the event²⁵. Simultaneously, the demonstration call was endorsed by the Jat Achahid movement, formed by a group of dissident Sahrawis based outside the camps. Their support increased the suspicions, and even more when they sent a letter to the Algerian government asking for authorisation to access the camps accompanied by independent journalists and members of Human Rights groups to prevent a potential repression by the Sahrawi authorities – a repression that, however, never

happened²⁶. In view of so much pressure, it could be expected that those seconding the call carried with them all sorts of nationalist paraphernalia and pro-Polisario symbols. Such behaviour looks like a clear attempt to reject any attempt by Morocco of manipulating the rally, but at the same time, was a way to rebut the official accusations of being pro-Morocco or trying to support the Moroccan discourse about the existence of internal dissent among the Sahrawi refugees.

This serves as an example of the difficulties of organising a protest movement inside the refugee camps. In this sense, the democratic character and the importance given by this society and its government to freedom of speech have been damaged by the presence of the bitter enemy, Morocco, whose omnipresence has finally favoured the perpetuation of the old elites in power. Despite the failure of the demonstration on March 5, the history leading to this event should not be missed, nor its future consequences underestimated. This is indeed a proof of the tensions and internal debates within the Sahrawi society both in the refugee camps and the occupied territories, as well as within the migration (mainly in Spain). The voices claiming louder the need of adapting to new times and giving a democratic impulse to the Sahrawi State clash with the evident existence of destabilising groups, but mainly with the fear of a critical interpretation of the official discourse favouring Rabat's interest, or simply of a breakdown of the status quo maintained during more than 35 years in the power circles of the Sahrawi movement.

Conclusion

After a detailed analysis of the events and the aftermath of Gdeim Izik in the occupied territories and in the Sahrawi society as a whole, it can be observed that this way of protest, although innovative, is the logical product of a process of political and social transformation which was on its way from the beginning of the 2000 decade. In other words: instead of a rupture with the previous situation, it would be more appropriate to speak about an evolution

to a new scenario culminating in the 'Dignity' camp and marking the approach for the next years in Western Sahara.

The camp introduced three major innovative elements. Regarding the participant subjects, it confirmed the irruption of new actors, led by the unemployed youths and the Human Rights activists, who enriched the Sahrawi nonconformity. Regarding the struggle instruments, the *jaima* (tent) emerges as the principal element of the peaceful protests²⁷. The *jaima* turns this way into the symbol of the Sahrawi culture, an element anchored to the land, its most visible and exportable identity sign. Innovation also shows up in the methodology of the protests: camps are placed in spaces close enough to cities to facilitate the supply of essentials, but, on the other hand, free and outside the urban orbit and the control of the local and even the state authorities, Berona Castañeda (2011: 6). Such strategy allows large people gatherings, creates actions with significant internal and external impact and, most importantly, implies at a symbolic level the use of a fundamental space, which defines the Sahrawi identity and culture: the desert.

The marginalization in wealth distribution, the corruption of a local elite emerged from non transparent elections and controlling all the sources of funding, which impedes a real participation of the Sahrawi society in the decision making processes and the distribution of resources, are key elements to understand Gdeim Izik. But another key factor is the displacement of the nonconformist actions from the political to the socio-economic sphere wherever they are more tolerated and even legitimate. This does not mean that the political issue is no longer present, but that it appears surrounded by new discourses and new forms of social nonconformity, which make the conflict even more complex if possible.

Although it can be stated that Gdeim Izik generated a multitude of changes in the Sahrawi society, at the same time the basic problem persists. A proof of this is that the Moroccan regime has made the same mistake of imposing stability in the region by only reinforcing the

security and repression machinery. But the deadlock of the conflict also shows in the lack of convergence between the Moroccan and Sahrawi nonconformity, which would have had important consequences. What would have happened if the Sahrawi youth would have joined the 2011 Moroccan protests led by the 'February 20' movement? This movement, together with the experience at Gdeim Izik, could have made the common interests of the Sahrawi and Moroccan youths converge, facilitating an approach of the two populations. However, this did not happen, and it is not even considered as a possibility. Neither the Sahrawi population felt concerned by the youths demonstrating in Morocco, nor any of the reforms claimed by the 'February 20' movement mentioned the solution of the Sahrawi conflict –since as a matter of fact the Moroccan youth considers Sahara a part of Morocco. Nevertheless, the total lack of connection between both movements is remarkable, since together with the autocracy, corruption, social inequality and lack of freedom denounced by the Moroccan youth, the heaviest burden compromising the future of Morocco both at economic and political level still is the undefined delay of the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict.

Notes

¹ One of the first authors pointing out this fact was the north-American political scientist Noam Chomsky: http://www.democracynow.org/2011/2/17/the_genies_are_out_of_the

² Regarding methodology, this empirical research has used a qualitative approach: interviews (Sahrawi people present in "Gdeim Izik", Human Right Sahrawi activists, international observers and political representatives of the Polisario Front), analysis of reports developed by Human Right Sahrawi and Moroccan associations, newspapers and social networks and videos.

³ The attendance estimates oscillate between 20.000 and 25.000 demonstrators and between 6.500 and 8.000.tents.

⁴ Sahara Thawra report: Gdeim Izik, November 8, 2011, p.5.

⁵ The Spanish journalists were the worst hit by this decision. Rabat accused them of conducting a campaign to damage the international image of Morocco.

⁶ ASVDH- report: « sur le campement de Gdeim Izik et les événements qui ont suivi son démantèlement ».

LAAYOUNE / Sahara Occidental, 4 Janvier 2011, p.10.

⁷ Among these groups also violent young men belonging to Frente Polisario were included.

⁸ E.g. CODESA, ASVDH and AMDH.

⁹ A.I. report: “Morocco/Western Sahara Rights trampled amidst protests, violence and repression”, p. 4.

¹⁰ Several police officers are killed in the camp and during the following riots; among them at least one had his throat cut.

¹¹ Among the buildings worst damaged in the riots are the Court of appeal, the Energy and Metals Office, three schools, a clinic and the Investments Centre.

¹² The figures of arrested people are not accurate either. According to workers of the Moroccan Foreign Affairs Ministry, the number of arrested is 77. However, the Ministry of Justice reports 138. The director of the Penitentiary Administration speaks about 117 arrested, while the Crown General Attorney at El Aaiún reports 115. A.I. report: ‘ Morocco/Western Sahara Rights trampled amidst protests, violence and repression ’.

¹³ Any non-Sahrawi person settled in the region.

¹⁴ In October 2005 a student was killed in clashes with the police. The Moroccan authorities reported the killing as an accident, whereas the Sahrawi Human Right groups denounced police brutality during the arrest as the cause of death.

¹⁵ More information about the 2005 protests can be found at www.arso.org/intifada2005.htm.

¹⁶ AMDH- Rapport relatif aux événements qu’a connus la ville de Laâyoune à la fin du mois de mai. 15.10.2005. Can be accessed at: www.arso.org/AMDH2005.htm.

¹⁷ After having his passport seized and being expelled from the airport of El Aaiún, Haidar was forced to enter Spain through the airport of Lanzarote. Her decision of carrying out a hunger strike, which will last for six months, causes a major diplomatic crisis between Morocco and Spain, which reanimated with full intensity the sleeping Sahrawi conflict.

¹⁸ The difference between the Sahrawi revolt and the one happening months later in Morocco lies precisely in the complexity added by the unresolved national question to the Sahrawi claims of social and economic reforms.

¹⁹ 45% of the population of the Arab countries is under 20 years old, in contrast to 25% in the European Union.

²⁰ Such is the case of the foundation in April 2005 in Dajla of the association called ‘La liste pour l’égalité’,

created by unemployed Sahrawi youths in order to denounce the reduction of the fishing licenses and the lack of access to them by the local population. Despite the evident identitary component of this protest, the Moroccan authorities and press interpreted it as a sectorial conflict far from any political or territorial claim (Veguilla, 2009).

²¹ AMDH report : 2005, « Rapport relatif aux événements qu'a connus la ville de Laâyoune à la fin du mois de mai », p.8.

²² After the blockade of the process of identification of the Sahrawi population, which should have led to the celebration of a self-determination referendum, United Nations tries twice through its former special envoy to the Sahara, James Baker, the approval of two frame agreements for the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict: the 1st and 2nd Baker plans (2001 and 2003). Both plans propose a two step process: in first place, a 5 year transitory period in which the territory could enjoy a provisional autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty, and a second phase when a referendum could be celebrated about the self-determination of the Sahrawi people.

²³ The spokesperson of the Polisario front in Spain, Bucharaya Beyoun, confirmed in an interview in Madrid on September 21, 2011, the difficulties of the Sahrawi authorities to convey the reasons for such stance to the population. The Polisario Front considered that not attending to a negotiation round programmed much in advance would benefit Morocco in a moment when its international allies were criticising its approach to the Sahara issue and its questionable Human Rights record. Accordingly, the Polisario Front understood the meeting at Manhasset as a political manoeuvre with two objectives: certifying the compromise of Sahrawis with the negotiation process and second, forcing Morocco to explain to the international community what happened at Gdeim Izik. In his own words: "In politics you have to know how to work. I think that what the Polisario Front did was well studied, well measured and was right for the future. That is, not breaking with the negotiation process as Morocco wanted us to do, and force them to face in the United Nations the consequences of what happened at Gdeim Izik".

²⁴ www.afrol.com/es/articulos/37531.

²⁵ The most optimistic attendance estimations are of 150-200 people.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Already in the 1999 crisis a camp had been built at the Echdeira Square of El Aaiún.

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