

The New, old leadership of Polisario

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On 31st May 2016 the Secretary General of the *Frente Popular de Liberación de Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro*, commonly known as the Polisario Front, died from lung cancer in the United States. Mohamed Abdelaziz was in office for more than 40 years. Born in Marrakech in 1947 and member of the Reguibat tribe, he was among the founders of the Front at the Zourate Congress held in 1973 and a member of the western Saharawi Polisario politic bureau since that year. In 1976, following the killing of el-Ouali Moustapha Sayed, Abdelaziz was elected Secretary General of the Polisario. His 40 years in office made Abdulaziz an iconic figure of the movement, a reference for the Saharawi people and a long time representative of their cause.

Following his death, the Polisario decreed 40 days of national mourning, paving the way for the succession process. According to the Fundamental Law of the Front, the President of the Saharawi National Council (SNC) Khatri Addouh temporary replaced Abdulaziz. During this period, potential candidates for the top job were identified in Mohamed Sidati, Polisario Minister for Europe, former Foreign Minister Mohamed Salem Ould Salek and Abdelkader Taleb Omar, current prime minister. However, on 9th July Brahim Ghali was elected

new Secretary General during the two days' extraordinary congress held in Dhakla. Head of Polisario's political secretariat, Ghali received 93.17% of the votes, showing the world the unity of the Front, with militants denying any internal clash or division over the succession. At the same time, the overwhelming majority of votes for Ghali cast a shadow over the internal democratic procedures of the movement, validating rumours about the suppression of dissent and opposition by Polisario.

Ghali is the expression of the first generation of Sahrawi militants, generally considered a continuity figure

Ghali became the new Secretary General of the Front as well as the new President of the République Arabe Saharoui Démocratique (RASD) the Saharawi's in-exile government in Tindouf, Algeria. Former Defence Minister, Polisario's representative in Madrid and RASD's ambassador to Algiers, Ghali is the expression of the first generation of Saharawi militants (he was born in 1949 in

Smara) and is generally considered a continuity figure. Given his previous diplomatic experience, Ghali can well implement Abdelaziz's political strategy, based since 1991 on the internationalisation of the Saharawi question and on the recourse to diplomacy. On the other hand, Morocco considers Ghali as a hard-line Saharawi politician, a strict associate of Algeria's regime given his previous diplomatic experience in the neighbouring country. Moreover, Ghali was also accused of genocide and human rights violations by both Moroccan soldiers detained in Tindouf's prisons and by the Saharawis association for human rights. The appeals, filed to Spanish judiciary, forced him to leave his office as Polisario's representative in Madrid in 2008.

The generational gap inside the Polisario Front between the old guard and the younger generation raises concerns

During his office, Ghali will certainly face two main challenges, one internal and the other external. Inside the movement the increasing generational gap between the first generation of militants and younger people raises concerns. The nomination of the 32 years-old Minister of Sport and Tourism Ahmed Lehbib Abdi seems far from addressing the crucial issue of the unavoidable turnover at the top of the Saharawi's elite. The younger generation expects more in this field and demography will certainly put pressure on the Polisario's ruling class in the near future. In 1974 Spanish authorities estimated a Western Sahara population of 74,000. As of 2014, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimated 400,000 people. Even considering more conservative figures, the demographic boom cannot be underestimated and the election of Ghali did not address the demand for change expressed by the younger generation. Most Saharawis

did not experience the liberation war and are increasingly pessimistic about their future. Furthermore, Polisario's internal procedures alienated them from politics, convincing them of a necessary return to the armed struggle. Furthermore, the dire living conditions of the camps and the high rate unemployment represent two factors of which the terrorist organisation could take advantage in case of infiltration attempts. Brahim Ghali will need to address the generational issue, inaugurating a new policy of dialogue and inclusiveness with the young people.

As regards the external challenge, the succession process took place in a very delicate moment. In March the visit in the region of United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon created deep resentment in the Morocco. Tensions increased following the use of term 'occupation' by UN highest representative. The Kingdom took an intransigent position, demanding the withdrawal of the civilian component of the Mission des Nations Unies pour l'organisation d'un referendum au Sahara Occidental (MINURSO), the UN mission in Western Sahara.

Further developments occurred following Brahim Ghali's election. On 18th July, Morocco asked to re-join the African Union (AU) after a 32-years empty seat policy due to the Western Sahara issue. The Kingdom took advantage of its African policy, which in recent years saw Morocco increasingly present in the continent, both on the economic level and on religious basis. Morocco also asked to suspend RASD's membership and reached to Algeria in order to establish a security partnership to fight terrorism. Morocco's diplomatic offensive in the region is intended to break its previous isolation, which gave no results on Western Sahara. The new course of Morocco's foreign policy and Algeria's subsequent reaction can have long standing consequences on Polisario's struggle for independence. Moreover, it also confirms that the keys to resolve the Western Sahara issue lie on the road between Rabat and Algiers.

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