

Sahrawi arab democratic republic battery performance

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The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR), or Western Sahara, appears to be gradually but steadily losing ground in its long battle for independence from Morocco.

In 1991, Rabat accepted a United Nations (UN) peace plan that included a referendum among the people of Western Sahara to decide if they wanted to remain part of Morocco or secede.

But in 2007, Morocco began pushing instead for Western Sahara to be granted limited autonomy - while remaining under its sovereign authority. This was an alternative to the full independence claimed by SADR's Polisario Front and recognised by the African Union, many African countries, and others beyond the continent.

But the SADR's support is slipping in Africa. Around 22 states now recognise it, and several more have withdrawn recognition in recent years or frozen it, pending resolution of the dispute. Morocco meanwhile, also lists 22 African countries that have opened consulates in what it calls its "Southern Provinces", implying recognition of its claim. So quite a few nations are sitting on the fence.

The first major power to move in this direction was the United States (US) in 2020. Donald Trump, then president, officially recognised Morocco's claim in exchange for Rabat signing onto the Abraham Accords. The US had brokered the accords to help normalise relations between Israel and several Arab states. That provoked Polisario into resuming its armed struggle.

Spain backed Morocco's claim in 2022. But the potential game changer, which other nations might follow, was the recent letter from French President Emmanuel Macron to Moroccan King Mohammed VI. In it, Macron backed Rabat's autonomy plan as the "only basis" for resolving the conflict. "France intends to act consistently with this position at both national and international level," Foreign Policy magazine reported.

Algeria recalled its ambassador from Paris in protest and also began refusing to accept its citizens deported from France. Algeria and South Africa have been the SADR's staunchest supporters. The issue has poisoned their relations with Morocco for many years, even though Pretoria took a pragmatic decision after Morocco was readmitted to the AU in 2017 to restore diplomatic ties to full ambassadorial level.

Nonetheless, even some South African government officials are losing heart. They perceive an erosion of support for the SADR and a steady growth in support for Morocco's claim to sovereignty. One official told ISS Today that the Polisario Front had not mobilised anything like the grassroots international support that the African National Congress (ANC) had done against the apartheid government.

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This grassroots support, including mass protests in London, had been strong enough to force even conservative anti-ANC Western leaders like US president Ronald Reagan and British prime minister Margaret Thatcher to back down. The official also felt Polisario had not mustered the same global sympathy as the Palestinians in Gaza.

Rabat has also been strategic in keeping the issue at the UN, where the SADR is not a member - and away from the AU, where countries like South Africa and Algeria have influence and where the SADR is a member.

Liesl Louw-Vaudran, AU Senior Adviser at the International Crisis Group, says, "It has been noteworthy how Morocco has kept the Western Sahara issue completely off the AU agenda." She says it is never discussed in the AU Assembly, Peace and Security Council (of which Morocco is a member) or the AU's political affairs department. "It's as if it does not exist."

But Mohamed Beisat, the SADR's ambassador to South Africa, dismisses all speculation that his country's independence cause is losing ground, calling it "Moroccan propaganda."

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