



# Current Colonization in Africa : Is Western Sahara Really a Colony?

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## Introduction

In January 2023, the African Nations Championship, commonly known as “CHAN” took place. This event is exclusively open to soccer players who play within Africa’s borders, with the main goal of spotlighting African players who may not receive much global recognition (McAllister). That year, the championship was held in Algeria at the newly built Mandela Stadium. For the occasion, Mandela’s grandson, Zwelivelile Mandela, was invited to open the championship with a speech (CAF). He spoke of the importance of freedom in Africa’s history and highlighted the continent’s common fight against foreign dominance, which he marks as a value that African nations should aim to protect at home and overseas. He continued by stating that the struggle was not over and pointed to Western Sahara as “the last colony of Africa” (Berban Sport). This sparked controversy, as Morocco, the accused colonizer, took offense. The Moroccan Football Federation lodged a complaint against the speaker for “political speech” (McDonald). This interaction begged the question: Is Western Sahara truly a Moroccan colonial project? This text will address this interrogation, arguing that Morocco engages in colonialism in Western Sahara through control of

the political system by using settlers, the economy by exploiting Sahrawi natural resources, and social control through oppression. First, this article will discuss the aggregation of historical events that culminated in the current situation in Western Sahara by providing each party’s perspective on the matter. The second part will analyze how the actions taken in Western Sahara can indeed be defined as colonization.

## Section I: Historical Account of the Conflict

In the pre-colonial era, Western Sahara was inhabited by many tribes that could be qualified as pastoral nomads (Hodges 75). Pastoral nomadism refers to a mobile lifestyle adopted by individuals who move frequently to meet their animals’ needs and themselves (Britannica).

Politically, the Sahrawi tribes were independent and lacked a centralized government, as none of the tribes could overpower the other and gain full control of the territory (Hodges 77-78). Instead, governance rested upon “djemaa”— assemblies of men from elite tribal families who elected a chief, or “Sheikh”. These assemblies also created their legal framework which they would implement alongside the Sharia (Hodges 77).

Although the tribes did not answer to outside higher hierarchical power, they maintained political ties with external powers, including the Moroccan monarchy. Certain tribes had political affiliations with the Moroccan King through alliances based on personal loyalty rather than territorial control (Weiner 21). These relationships bound individuals to individuals – there was no mention of territory (Weinstein 111). These political interactions are key to understanding Morocco's modern claim over Western Sahara because they were how rulers displayed their authority within the Islamic tradition (Weiner 21). As argued by Joffé, a modern way of understanding political legitimacy is based on the assumption that it is not an inherent quality of the state, but rather a contract between individuals and the state, in which each has its area of power. According to this Western perspective, states have to prove their legitimacy to their population (Joffé 379). However, one must consider how Eurocentric this understanding is.

Culturally and ethnically, the Sahrawi people had many similarities with the Mauritians, such as their shared use of a dialect of the Arabic language called Hassaniya (Weinstein 113). In contrast, Moroccans spoke a language called "Derija" which was

also part of the Arabic family but included words of locally spoken languages, notably, Tamazigh (Porter and Malka). These linguistic distinctions further highlight the differences between Sahrawis and Moroccans, complicating Morocco's claim that Western Sahara is a part of its national identity.

Colonization began for Western Saharans with the arrival of the Spaniards in 1884 (BBC). Following its independence, Morocco began to argue for the integration of Western Sahara into its territory. In 1973, the Polisario, a political group that fought for the independence of Western Sahara, was formed. Although the international court had decided that Western Sahara was to be an autonomous nation, the Moroccan government staged a protest in which settlers entered the Sahrawi territory (BBC). This ended with Spain leaving Western Sahara (BBC) because of Spain's tempestuous transition from a dictatorship to a monarchy. (Joffé 375). Spain managed to reach an agreement with Moroccan and Mauritanian officials in which the Spaniards agreed to give up Western Sahara (Weinstein 114). However, before leaving, the Spaniards had committed to holding a referendum on the topic of auto-determination for the Sahrawis (Weinstein 113), leav-

ing this task to the Moroccans, who, to this day, still have not done it. Finally, Western Sahara was forced to integrate into the Moroccan territory in 1975. In reaction to this, during the following years and until 1991, a war erupted between the Polisario and Morocco, the former still advocating for the freedom of the region. The war ended in a cease-fire, which lasted until 2000 (BBC). Although a more hidden political facet of the Morocco-Western Sahara relationship, the involvement of Algeria is crucial to the understanding of the power dynamics in the conflict. In reality, both Algeria and Morocco aspire to lead the North African bloc (Joffé 375), and Western Sahara serves as a point of conflict in their relationship (377). Although initially supporting Morocco's claims to the disputed region, Algeria seemed to have done so out of strategic intentions: they were in a territorial dispute with Morocco and, in hopes of appeasement, supported them in their quest in the desert (Weinstein 113). However, following the recognition of Algerian sovereignty over its entire territory, the country formally pledged support to its Sahrawi neighbours (114).

The incentives that lay behind the annexation of Western Sahara also have geographic considerations because the occupied country acts as a door for Morocco to the remainder of

the African continent. If the Polisario wins, Morocco expects to be blocked because of their mutual animosity (110). Sovereignty is at the heart of this issue (Joffé 376). Naturally, it cannot be solved by both parties partitioning the territory. It is a zero-sum game because both countries' goal is reunification, which loses all its meaning if the territory is cut in half (376). There is also a disconnect between their perspectives of sovereignty, which allows for contestation (376). Morocco looks at it from a top-down perspective, where legitimacy is exerted by the state itself, meanwhile, the Polisario believes it comes from the people, the Sahrawi nation (376). To summarize, Morocco's claims stem from the era of recreating their pre-colonial empire (Weinstein 112). However, at that time and place, the most decisive factors of sovereignty were individuals: the King exercised power over individuals, not the territory (Joffé 379). It has been verified by the international court that Morocco did indeed have political links with certain tribes, but it disagrees that the modern interpretation of this translates into the sovereignty being given to Morocco (Joffé 376).

## **Section 2: Analysis**

In political science, colonialism is first and foremost considered a power

dynamic which can translate into the political, social and territorial realms (Horvath 46). It is the relationship between two countries where one, the colonized, does not have full agency over its territory, due to the occupation of another, the colonizer. Colonialism started as a way for countries to enrich themselves by forcefully taking the resources of another country. It can be linked with the concept of mercantilism (National Geographic). This definition is incomplete, as it could define two different concepts: imperialism and colonialism. To this effect, Ronald F. Horvath has argued for a theoretical framework of colonialism that allows for a definition that draws a clear distinction between imperialism and colonialism. Indeed, the main difference between them is whether a considerable number of people from the metropole (settlers) have decided to live in the colony for good. In a colonialist project, settlers are prevalent; in an imperialist project, they are not (Horvath 47). He further divides each concept into categories which pertain to the nature of the interaction between the colonized and the colonizer. They include “extermination, assimilation, and a relative equilibrium” components (47). This article argues that Morocco engages in colonialism in Western Sahara through the use of politics through the instrumentali-

zation of settlers to gain legitimacy, of economics with the total control it has on the extraction and exportation of Sahrawi natural resources, and of social domination by oppressing the population into complying with the regime.

First, Morocco colonized Western Sahara by sending settlers to gain political control and legitimacy. The legitimation of a political system can be done in numerous ways. For example, democracy derives legitimacy from the popular vote (Merriam-Webster), and, in contrast, monarchy achieves legitimacy through spiritual authority, often viewing a ruler as chosen by God (Wills). In Western Sahara, legitimacy could be achieved through the results of the referendum, which will reveal the nation’s choice (Lovatt and Mundy). As mentioned previously, this is a bottom-up approach to legitimacy where the people are the sole guardians of legitimacy (Joffé 376). A solution to this is, from the Moroccan side, to have individuals favouring the Moroccan King voting in the referendum (Lovatt and Mundy). To this effect, a military invasion of Western Sahara took place in 1975 (Vasquez). It was called the Green March (Weiner 31) and counted 350,000 Moroccans (BBC). Studies of demographics reveal that regions that provided the most soldiers

to the cause were from places that endorsed the King the most (Weiner 27). By sending many settlers, Morocco sought to divert the result of a referendum to come (Smith 270). Indeed, some settlers could be “mistakenly” made to vote when they do not have the right to engage in this issue reserved to the Sahrawi (Smith 270). Of course, the settlers would act in the interest of Morocco. First, they are directly sent by the government as part of a reunification campaign, with the ultimate goal of making the region part of the Moroccan state (Vasquez). Second, they benefit from the occupation by being paid for activities rooted in the occupation (Smith 269). Furthermore, the occupation and march into the contested region led to the exodus of much of the population to avoid the expected brutality of the Moroccan government (Vasquez), which decreased the amount of Sahrawis present in the event of a referendum. Overall, by sending large numbers of Moroccan citizens into the Western Sahara region, the government aims to attain legitimacy of the region through the individuals (Vasquez). This will be done by creating uncertainty about the targeted demographic with the possible inclusion of the settlers in the referendum (Smith 270). Naturally, the settlers will vote to remain with the Moroccan state because of

their allegiance to the King and the personal benefits they enjoy from the occupation (Vasquez). This argument looked at Moroccan colonialism through a political lens. The following one will look at the phenomenon from an economist’s perspective.

Second, Morocco engages in colonialism in Western Sahara by extracting its natural resources and creating a monopoly on the Sahrawi economy. Naturally, the relationship between colonialism and economics is a very strong one (Dell 1). Mercantilism, as mentioned previously, was a compelling part of the interest of European countries in their colonies (National Geographic). Gottheil describes the economic component of colonialism as the domination of a metropole over a colony’s economy, which helps the metropole gain more power globally. Intrinsic to this, he argues, is the notion of privilege. Internationally, privilege manifests itself in the economic power a metropole derives from its colony. Since the colonizer can profit from its colony’s natural resources, it enriches itself, increasing its economic power on the world stage and impoverishing the colony (Gottheil 85). Moreover, inside the colony, economic privileges are used to maintain the colonial apparatus in place (87). In Western Sahara, the main prized resources are phosphates

and fish (Smith 263). Phosphates are used for fertilizer (Oulfakir). In his articles, Oulfakir points out the world's reliance on fertilizers because of their crucial role in the food industry. This is important to understand because it explains Morocco's incentive to keep the colonization going and the silence of the international community who are gaining from this colonization (Schalk). Estimates have shown that Morocco is one of the leaders in phosphate production. As pointed out by Weiner, Morocco had already achieved this recognition prior to the annexation; however, the exploitation of that resource by the Sahrawi would have made for some unwanted competition (Weiner 21). Therefore, in this regard, the occupation could serve two purposes: the elimination of a potential competitor and the expansion of the amount of available phosphate. Moreover, the companies involved in the extraction of sulphate are state-owned (Oulfakir), meaning that profits made from the economic activity of the occupation are directly given to the state. The Moroccan citizens settled in the occupied land are being rewarded through the jobs provided by these companies (Smith 269). This is in perfect contrast to the economic situation of the Sahrawi, who are not partaking in the job industry generated by the occupation, as many of them are refugees in Algeria because of the occupation (Western Sahara Resource Watch). Furthermore, they are blocked from coming back to their homes by the Berm Wall, and their properties have been given to the settlers during their absence (Betteridge-Moes). The Sahrawi people have spoken openly against the extraction of phosphate by Moroccan companies (Smith 263). Under an article of international law, a country is not allowed to extract natural resources without the population's consent. Of course, this is ignored by Moroccan authorities (Smith 273). To summarize, Morocco conducts colonialism through the extraction of resources. It exercises clear domination over Western Sahara's phosphate with the help of the settlers and state-owned companies. It blatantly ignores Sahrawi's call to end these economic activities. Lastly, it favours the welfare of its own citizens over that of the Indigenous population by providing the former with stable revenue, which is intrinsic to the economic perspective of colonialism.

Third, Morocco achieves colonialism in Western Sahara through the social control of the Sahrawi. Social control methods in colonies can be used to keep the indigenous population from protesting against the system and to facilitate the exploita-

tion of a territory, such as was the case in America (Waxman). In this regard, the situation in Western Sahara can be understood through the lens of Robert Blauner's thesis on internal colonialism. In his article, he studies the phenomenon which closely resembles traditional colonialism but focuses on the economic, social, and political framework it establishes instead of its procedural application (Blauner 943). The cases of Western Sahara and America can be compared because of certain key similarities. First, from a geographical standpoint, in both cases, individuals interact in the same space. In other words, the mainstream population of the colonized and the colonizers are not separated by different states, their interactions both occur in the same country (Blauner 395) (in Western Sahara's case because it was annexed) (BBC). Second, from a demographic perspective, settlers have the upper hand. In America, the white population constitutes the larger part of the population, compared to its black counterpart (USA Census Bureau). In Western Sahara, the settlers' population is twice that of the Sahrawi (Smith 280). Third, both colonized populations are being policed by their colonizers (Blauner 404). This leads to the abuse of the colonized people by law enforcement agents of the oppressive system (Blauner 404). This

is reflected in Western Sahara by the population's interaction with the military (Lourenço 10). In recountings, children and women recall violent incidents with the officers that were inherent to their condition as Sahrawis (Lourenço 7). Fourth, services provided to the colonized population are provided by individuals or systems that are part of the colonizing force (Blauner 397). In America, the author mentions that teachers in black ghettos are white and are not familiar with the locals (Blauner 397). In Western Sahara, an educational curriculum is a tool of Moroccan propaganda. Examples of this are the daily mandatory recitation of the Moroccan national anthem and the allusion to Western Sahara as an integral part of the pre-colonization Moroccan state (Lourenço 12), a narrative that supports the claims of the sovereignty of the Moroccan officials (Weinstein 112). These comparisons are important because they show the social domination that is exerted on colonized populations. However, there is one notable difference to note between Morocco and the United States, aside from the way the colonized population came into being subjugated to the colonizing power. This distinction pertains to the cultural integration of each group into the wider settler population. In America, slaves were forced to re-

nounce their cultural traditions and language to survive (Blauner 396). Pinkey argues that the assimilation of an enslaved person through assimilation was indispensable to the inner workings of slavery (38). However, the Moroccan state seemed to aim more for a multiculturalist approach to align with its legitimacy claims. Indeed, as a way to promote the idea that the Sahrawi people and the Moroccans are to be seen as one unit, they included Hassaniya, the language used by the Sahrawi, in the official Moroccan National languages in 2011 (Vasquez). Overall, Morocco is engaging in the social domination of the Sahrawi people, which is a form of colonization.

To conclude, based on a definition of colonialism that defines the phenomenon through the superiority or domination of one group (state or settlers) over another through politics, economics, and social interactions, Western Sahara does qualify as a colonial project. In the political sphere, one can observe the active use of settlers as a way to mitigate the political influence of the Sahrawi people. The main goal is to obtain political legitimacy through a favourable outcome in a referendum on Western Sahara's auto-determination (Lovatt and Mundy). Economically, the Moroccan government's monopoly on the

extraction of natural resources such as phosphate shows its domination over the Sahrawi economy (Smith 273). Socially, Sahrawis, much like Afro-Americans are forced to live in a society where their colonizer's interests and superiority are an integral part of their lives. This goes from formal interactions with military officers to children's classrooms where they are constantly reminded of their inferior status (Lourenço 12). The occupation and colonization of Western Sahara is not a hidden reality. The international community seems well aware of the situation but chooses to ignore it (Sansanwal and Kamath 112). One can suspect the considerable benefits that many countries reap from the occupation as a cause of this passivity (Smith 274). The most obvious of them is the trade of fertilizer made possible by the extracted phosphate (Oulfakir). One wonders, faced with the display of this deafening silence from the international community, if the legitimacy of supra-governmental organizations that claim to protect human rights globally has credibility.

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These photos were taken on medium format  
film on the Mamiya RB67 at the Montreal  
Museum of Fine Arts.  
Armen Erzingatjian

