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June  
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African Dynamics in a Multipolar World

ISCTE - Lisbon University Institute

## **ECAS 2013**

5<sup>th</sup> European Conference on African Studies

*African Dynamics in a Multipolar World*

©2014 Centro de Estudos Internacionais do Instituto Universitário de Lisboa (ISCTE-IUL)

ISBN: 978-989-732-364-5

## **LINGUISTIC POLICY IN THE CAMPS OF SAHRAWI REFUGEES**

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## **Abstract**

*In this paper, we refer to the situation of the Spanish Language among the Sahrawi people, a heritage of their Colonial past. We're interested in examining the policies that have been implemented by the Polisario Front since the 70's, geared towards the return of their territory, which has been occupied by Morocco since 1975, and towards the recognition of their national state, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic. Central to the creation of the Sahrawi national state is the recognition of a cultural tradition clearly different to that of surrounding countries. We concentrate on the function the Sahrawi people attribute to the Spanish language, as part of that cultural tradition, in the configuration of a national state with full international recognition, independent of Morocco and its Francophone heritage.*

**Key Words:** Linguistic policies, Sahrawi National State, spanish language, spanish colonial past

## **1. The Diaspora: Sahrawi people in Exile in the Refugee Camps and in the Occupied Territories. The Construction of a Sahrawi Nationalism.**

Since 1975, the Sahrawi population has been fragmented and dispersed along various countries, with a State in exile and their original territory, the Western Sahara, occupied. In spite of this geographic dispersion, the Sahrawi people have developed a deeply felt nationalism born during the process of decolonization, that continues to this day in its aspiration to consolidate an unfinished national project (Cadena & Rosas 2010).

Before the Spanish withdrawal from the Western Sahara in the beginning of 1976, Sahrawi society was dominated by the traditional social structures of family and tribe, though they were rapidly changing due to the process of sedentarization and acculturation stemming from the colony (Barreñada 2013). Although the nomadic society had their own mechanisms of social, political, and economic organization, we cannot speak of a “national identity” among the Sahrawi people during the colonial period. The liberation movement emerged with the independence of Morocco in 1956, when the seed of political independence took root in the conscience of the Sahrawi people (Mera Miyares, n.d.).

Before the Moroccan occupation in 1975, the mobilization of civil society through the construction of a native organizational network in the Sahara was practically nonexistent. As a result of the occupation, the 80's and 90's saw the consolidation of an independent civil association movement that was key to the development of Sahrawi nationalism (Barreñada, 2013, p.672). The arrival of Mohamed VI to the throne in 1999 started a new political era, with a further development of the independent civil associations.

The Sahrawi civil association movement today is fundamentally nationalist. It has come to be in an extremely negative context due to:

- The persecution and political repression
- The demographic decrease of the native Sahrawi population in the occupied territories, now a minority
- The “Moroccization” of the Sahrawi population, at the expense of their particular cultural identity
- The profound modification of the socioeconomic reality brought about by public investments and the exploitation of natural resources for more than three decades.

Sahrawi associations, considered illegal, created new spaces for protest and opposition able to participate in the organization of the occupied territories and in the political changes that have been seen in the last decades. The truth is that these civil organizations have become key players—denouncing the failure to address socioeconomic needs, discrimination and repression, expressing the discomfort and dissatisfaction, making frustration visible, particularly among the young, and acting as spokespersons for social justice demands. The push for economic, social, civil, and political rights is connected to the national issue, as the right to self determination is the goal to which the rest of the demands are subject to.

These local movements have been heard by the international community. In the last few years, the question of human rights in the occupied territories has gained preeminence. All main international organizations devoted to human rights have paid attention to the occupied areas in the Western Sahara, denouncing cases of human right violations by authorities (Barreñada 2013). In the same fashion, the international stage has shown a proliferation of non-governmental organizations devoted to the defense of human rights and concentrated in supporting the Sahrawi cause; these organizations throw light on the conflict in the hope of contributing to a solution.

However, such efforts have obtained very limited success, since the Moroccan annexation policy has found powerful allies in the international community, as made evident by the decisions of the Security Council of the United Nations (Cadena & Rosas 2010).

As far as the government in exile of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, it is an interim government, without territory or the full recognition of the international community. Its political objective to create a modern and sovereign national state, with full recognition of the international community and the return of the occupied territories, rests in a nationalist discourse (Cadena & Rosas 2010).

Nowadays, there is a coincidence of the nationalist and self-determining aspirations of the Sahrawi people from the refugee camps and from the occupied territories. This is so to the point that Moroccan authorities consider Sahrawi associations and activists to be a continuation of the Polisario Front (Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al Hamra and Rio de Oro), nevertheless recognized by the United Nations as a legitimate representative of the Western Sahara people. The associations have adopted a discourse increasingly in favor of self-determination, with symbols pro-independence which deny the legitimacy of the occupation (Barreñada 2013).

The Moroccan government, who has previously denied the Sahrawi identity and fomented tribalism through policies of co-opting and clientelism, has finally, reluctantly recognize the existence of a Sahrawi identity, ethnic and cultural, but characterizing it as a component of being Moroccan, like the Berber. Some steps have been taken to normalize the hassaniya<sup>1</sup> dialect (Barreñada 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Hassaniya is the dialectal Arabic spoken by the Sahrawi population, very close to the Classic Arabic.

The process of construction of a national state is based on the existence of a set of features that clearly differentiate a nation from its neighbors. Among the features that define what is called “the rhetoric of the nation” (Calhoun, in Cadena 2011) we find the following: (1) possession of territorial or population borders; (2) the notion that the nation is one integral and indivisible unit; (3) aspiration to sovereignty, to be an autonomous and supposedly self-sufficient state; (4) legitimacy, or the idea that a government becomes one only when it rests on the will of the people; (5) participation of the people in collective issues, etc. (Calhoun, *apud* Cadena 2011). Included among these features is the possession of a cultural tradition, which involves language, beliefs and other common values that contribute to construct a specific identity.

## **2. Construction of the Sahrawi People Identity. The Role of Spanish Language in the Construction of a Hispanic-Arabic identity, differentiated from the Arabic identities linked to the Francophone World.**

Beyond the ethnic and tribal elements, modern Sahrawi identity has developed around nationalist values. It is a recent reality, started in the 60’s and 70’s, first brought about by the Spanish Colonial experience, and later by the Moroccan political activism of opposition, which reached its full status with the anticolonial and pro-independence movement, crucially helped by the war, exile, and the state experience of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic.

The Sahrawi cultural identity is defined by its national component, by its territory of origin, by its affiliations and cultural markers (language, practices), and also by one’s positioning in reference to the conflict, which forged a collective identity to construct the Sahrawi people out of diverse backgrounds. Today, to be Sahrawi is synonymous to being Sahrawi nationalist.

In this context one of the aspects that distinguishes Sahrawi people from their neighboring countries is their Spanish-speaking heritage. The Spanish language is a symbol of their past, of a Spanish colonial heritage that distances them from the surrounding Francophone countries, identified with a colonial past alien to them.

It happens that the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic is the only Arabic speaking African country that speaks Spanish, which explains how Spanish speaking has become a distinguishing cultural element. For the Sahrawi people living in the Tindouf camps since 1975, the Spanish language functions as a cultural and historic barrier against the annexation ambition of Morocco, and supports the Sahrawi people in its contention that they have a Colonial tradition distinct from the Moroccan or Mauritanian, justifying its status as an independent nation.

In contrast to the movement of Pan-Arabism that developed in the Arab countries as a consequence of decolonization, the Sahrawi people did not see the Spanish language as an imposition from the Old Metropolis, but rather they saw Spanish language maintenance as a reinforcement of the idiosyncrasy of the Sahrawi people.

More than an imposition, Spanish is perceived as a distinguishing legacy, and also as a tool to get close to other peoples, particularly to Spain and Latin America. It was forged as a language of resistance that helped them to survive the regional pressure of the Francophone world and helped them build their own space, different from that of the neighboring states (Awah & Moya 2009). Although they were abandoned from Spain, the Sahrawi people built a bridge across that legacy to Latin America and to civil population of Spain. Spanish in the Sahara is a language of resistance in the face of globalization and the Francophone imposition in the region. Through the Spanish language, the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic wants to become a bridge



among the relations in the Arabic, African, and Latin American worlds, stressing its character as an Arabic, African, and Spanish speaking nation.

### **3. Linguistic Policy: The Situation of Spanish in Tindouf and the Western Sahara**

For the Sahrawi people, Spanish has been a language of prestige both during the Colony and since the beginning of the decolonization process. Its implementation in the Sahara started in the 40's, during the Spanish colony, with a school curriculum very similar to the one implemented in Spain, monolingual in Spanish; this state of affairs lasted until the beginning of the 70's when the study of Arabic was introduced in the education program of the Colony.

According to data from the Spanish Census of 1970, in a population of 76,425, 16,648 were speakers of Spanish (21.8%). Between 1945 and 1975, the Spanish language experienced a boom without precedent in Western Sahara among the young Sahrawi population (Awah & Moya 2009).

#### *3.1. Spanish in the Refugee Camps of Tindouf*

From the beginning of the creation of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic in 1976, the Polisario Front launched a linguistic policy that assigned a key role to the Spanish language in State administration, as well as education and the health system.

The 1999 political Constitution of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic states in its 5<sup>th</sup> article that “Arabic is the official language of the Republic”; Spanish is considered the second official language and after the creation in 1976 of the Ministry of Education, Health, and Social Affairs, a program was set forth the mandatory teaching of Spanish. Since 1978, the teaching of Spanish has been mandatory for students from 4<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Between 1994 and 1999, the

Ministry of Education carried out a reform that provided for the training of Spanish language teachers, the development of a Spanish curriculum, and the experimentation and generalization of a Spanish program that would be a first step towards a future bilingual Secondary education (Romero 2007).

In spite of the great economic difficulties encountered in the development of this bilingual school program, the lack of human resources and of adequately trained personnel, the shortage of school materials and infrastructure, the government of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic has been able to reach its objective to see Spanish language become:

1. The language of administration
2. The language of the health system
3. The language of school, along with Arabic
4. The language of international cooperation

Thousands of Sahrawi people are bilingual. Different patterns of language use coexist according to age, personal history and work situation. All the population who attended school in the camps have learned Spanish to some extent, and a large segment of the population, who did not receive formal training, has a high degree of proficiency in Spanish; the great majority understand it in certain contexts. The linguistic situation of the Sahrawi Refugee Camp has been characterized as “social bilingualism”, since Arabic and Spanish are used in different spheres and for different functions (Romero 2007).

### *3.2. The Situation of Spanish in Western Sahara*

The situation of the Spanish language in the three occupied provinces in Western Sahara is very different from the one described for the refugees in Tindouf, since this population is ruled by Moroccan laws and is subject to its linguistic policy, which does not provide for the teaching of Spanish. On the contrary, the policy carried out by the Moroccan government in Western Sahara is geared towards suppressing Sahrawi signs of identity, such as the use of Spanish, which was completely eliminated since the Green March.

The lack of social and economic rights suffered by the Sahrawi population in the occupied territories has been repeatedly denounced by a variety of groups. As far as cultural rights, the Moroccan policy sought to eliminate the Sahrawi cultural patrimony and to culturally “Moroccanize” the population.

The passage of time has borne some fruit to this policy, as the population under 35 years of age who did not have any contact with the Spanish language has no command of the language. This situation worries the government of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, since for them, the Sahrawi population of the occupied territories is also their people and they do not want to see the onset of segregation brought about by this linguistic situation. According to the current linguistic division, the population in the Tindouf camps speak Arabic and Spanish, while in Western Sahara Arabic is spoken, and only those who studied can speak French as well. This linguistic segregation will be an added challenge for the future reunification of the population, since it will force the Sahrawi people to choose between French or Spanish as a foreign language, and the language for international communication and science.

#### **4. Absence of Relationship with the Spanish Government/ Solid Relations with the Spanish Civil Population**

While it is true that the government of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic has chosen Spanish as its language of prestige after Arabic, this circumstance has not contributed to attract the attention of the Spanish government of its cause. As a matter of fact, Spain has not yet accepted responsibility as the administrative power of a non-autonomous territory that is part of an unfinished process of decolonization (Cadena & Rosas 2010). In the more than 35 years that have passed since the Green March, there has not been any official policy from the Spanish government or, consequently, any support to the Spanish language in the refugee camps. Spain is not included in the group of countries that have recognized the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic, nor does it maintain an official policy of support of the Sahrawi population.

The repeated requests for help to the Spanish government from the Polisario Front have not found any echo. In linguistic matters, the government requested from the Tindouf camps the help of the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (SAIC) and the Cervantes Institute, repeatedly requesting that this organism comply with its cultural and humanitarian mission by opening in Tindouf (Algeria) the headquarters for its Algerian delegation. Since both organizations are state institutions under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these initiatives were automatically rejected.

The absence of Spanish institutions in the Saharan conflict is in strong contrast with the initiatives of the civil population, organized through associations and humanitarian groups of diverse origin. It is this collective who is lending support to the teaching and use of the Spanish language, along with the valuable cooperation from Cuba, a country that since 1977 has provided collaboration in the areas of education and health, receiving thousands of Sahrawi secondary

school and university students. Recently, cooperation with Cuba has been stopped as a result of the profound crisis experienced by the country (Romero 2007).

In the absence of collaboration with Spanish governmental institutions, the Sahrawi people have developed an intense cooperation with the Spanish civil population. Official institutions, political parties, unions, non governmental organizations, professional organizations and associations of friends of the Sahrawi people have carried out projects in cooperation with the Ministries of Health, Education, Justice, Information, Construction, Equipment, Transportation, Culture, and Sports (Romero 2007).

In the area of education, dozens of small civil initiatives have allowed thousands of Sahrawi students to study in Spain, at all levels of the educational system. This relationship has been supported by the program “Vacation in peace”, which sponsors summer vacations in Spain with Spanish families for thousands of Sahrawi children. This experience takes place over several consecutive years, creating strong ties between the Sahrawi children and their Spanish host families and, by extension, with the Spanish language and culture.

The support to the Spanish language received by the Sahrawi population of Saharan Arab Democratic Republic through the programs with Cuba and Spain has extended the use of the Spanish language in the Health field. All Health administration is in Spanish: clinical histories, medical records, and even medical prescriptions; the admittance of patients, consultations, medical interventions and the sanitary information sent to Algeria, they are all in Spanish. At the Ahmed Abdelfatah School of Nursing, which houses the most ambitious educational bilingual program in force in the refugee camps, Spanish is a mandatory subject for all three years.

## **5. The Future of Spanish in the Sahrawi people**

The lack of clear and sustained institutional support has always been an important obstacle for the Hispanophone project of Saharan Arab Democratic Republic government. In Western Sahara as well as in Tindouf, there is a considerable portion of the population, younger than thirty years old, that has not lived an important part of the Sahrawi history and that does not know the physical and symbolic referents of its territory. All this explains the change experienced by the younger generations in their linguistic attitudes towards Spanish, and who choose French as more useful to communicate with the neighboring countries. In spite of the linguistic policies developed by the government of the Polisario Front, the linguistic reality of Magrib pushes against the Hispanophone project of Saharan Arab Democratic Republic.

Since some of the students and other members of the Sahrawi population consider it more useful to choose French, this language is already being offered at school as an alternative in Secondary school, in order to give this opportunity to those students who go to study to Algiers (main receptor of Sahrawi students) or to other Francophone countries: the debate among the civil population is open.

In spite of the great difficulties implicated in the implemented linguistic policies, the government of the Saharan Arab Democratic Republic shows a real preference for Spanish. The situation nowadays poses numerous uncertainties about the future of Spanish among the Sahrawi population, but the Polisario Front holds firm to its Hispanophone policies. The political and social fatigue in an exile that is already almost forty years old can be seen in all realms of life, and especially in the educational system, which without the necessary support, has grown weak.

The futures of the Spanish language among the Sahrawi people has always and continues to depend on the relationships of cooperation that the civil Spanish population maintains with the refugee camps, in the absence of support from the Spanish government.

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