

Morocco's New Tango with the African Union #28thAUSummit

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Ahead of the African Union Summit which takes place from 22-31 January 2017 in Addis Ababa, Yohannes Woldemariam analyses Morocco's campaign for readmission to the continental body.

Why is King Mohammed VI of Morocco suddenly keen to join the African Union (AU), after his late father King Hassan II abandoned the continental Organization of African Unity the (OAU), in 1984?

Morocco is currently courting a number of African countries relentlessly, including Madagascar, Tanzania, Rwanda, and others. Morocco has signed 19 economic agreements with Rwanda and 22 with Tanzania—two countries that traditionally backed the Western Sahara's quest for decolonisation. Nigeria and Morocco have also signed a total of 21 bilateral agreements, a joint venture to construct a gas pipeline that will connect the two nations as well as some other African countries to Europe.

Clearly, the economic agreements with these countries imply ulterior motives for increasing Morocco's leverage in its campaign to return to the AU and deal a blow to Western Sahara's aspirations for self-determination. Morocco is [waging a similar campaign](#) internationally and in the halls of the US congress by hiring expensive lobbyists and public relations firms.



King Mohammed VI of Morocco (pictured here with President Kagame of Rwanda) is keen for his country to rejoin the African Union
Photo Credit: Ministry of Natural Resources, Rwanda via Flickr (<http://bit.ly/2jZ7H88>) CC BY-ND 2.0

For Morocco, joining the AU is part of the tactic of trying to use the organisation for its objective of neutralising Western Sahara, from the inside, which has become a terribly divisive wedge issue within the AU.

Outside Africa, Morocco has powerful support for its position from influential Gulf States such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia, which are not members of the AU, but which can still use their political influence and the power of the purse to coerce and lobby cash-strapped African countries and the United Nations. In a clear show of muscle, [Morocco, Saudi Arabia and UAE walked out from a meeting of the Arab and African foreign ministers meeting](#), which was held in the capital of Equatorial Guinea, Malabo, in preparation for the fourth Arab-African summit, because of opposition to the presence of a delegation from the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic ([SADR](#)). Among African countries, [Senegal strongly backs Morocco's position](#), undoubtedly

due to great pressure from France and Moroccan economic investments in Senegal. Morocco is also the largest investor in Ivory Coast and therefore can count on strong Ivorian support. Morocco has stronger support in Francophone Africa.

Kenya, which once supported SADR reversed course in 2007 but now Foreign Minister [Amina Mohamed](#), candidate to head the African Union Commission, is calling for holding, as quickly as possible, “the referendum on Western Sahara people’s self-determination.” Zambia has similarly vacillated after early support for the cause of Western Sahara. According to [WikiLeaks](#), at least until 2009 Ethiopia’s position was to recognise the SADR, declared by the Polisario (Western Sahara’s guerrilla army) in 1976 as its representative body. It still remains to be seen, how countries will line up when it really matters.

The case of Western Sahara bears striking resemblance to Eritrea’s struggle for independence from Ethiopia and the independence struggles of Namibia, Belize and East Timor. According to the Wikileaks report, both Belize and East Timor are listed among countries who recognise SADR.

Africa committed itself to maintain colonial borders, drawn arbitrarily in the 19th and 20th centuries, after the collapse of European colonialism. This commitment was not made because those borders made any sense: borders were rarely congruent with ethnic geographical homelands or previous historical delineations. One can debate the pros and cons of this but Africa made the decision in Cairo in 1964, to keep these borders in order to avoid disruptive and endless conflict of trying to rearrange colonial boundaries, to fit language groups or ethnicities. For better or worse, that is what was decided with the Cairo resolution (AHG/Res. 16(I)). Nevertheless, Morocco is choosing to violate that resolution by gobbling up Western Sahara.

But why does Morocco need the AU, the much [troubled continental body](#)? The explanation lies in Morocco’s illegal [Occupation of the Western Sahara](#) and its need to legitimise it by enlisting as many African countries as possible, to accept Western Sahara’s fate as *fait accompli*. Morocco has been colonising the territory since 1974. Recently, UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon characterised Morocco as an occupying force, which obviously did not sit well with Morocco.

An impasse of a no-war, no-peace status exists since 1991, after a ceasefire brokered by the United Nations. Morocco has proposed “internal autonomy” but the Saharawis insist on a United Nations supervised referendum vote, with independence on the table. The International Court of Justice (ICJ) after consideration of materials and information provided by both sides concluded there is no evidence:

establish[ING] any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity... the Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory.

In a rare show of some backbone, the OAU welcomed Western Sahara’s membership, which incensed Morocco and caused its [withdrawal from the organisation in 1984](#)—making it the only country to do so in its history. This was a strategic mistake by Morocco, which it seems to have finally realised.

Illegal Mining of Western Sahara’s Potash Resource

Morocco is exploiting and using Western Sahara’s potash resource to bribe and lobby countries like Ethiopia, casting doubt on the sincerity of its offer for “internal autonomy” to the territory.

According to the [financialpost.com](#):

Two Canadian fertilizer firms have become the dominant buyers of phosphate rock from the disputed territory of Western Sahara after other companies stopped the practice... Western

Sahara Resource Watch (WSRW) found that Potash Corp. of Saskatchewan Inc. and Agrium Inc. shipped a combined 916,000 tonnes of phosphate from the territory last year. That accounted for 64.5 per cent of all purchases from Western Sahara in 2015. Potash Corp. shipped 474,000 tonnes and Agrium shipped 442,000...

The *Financial Times* reported that the OCP (Morocco's state-owned phosphate company) sealed a deal to build \$3.7bn fertiliser plant in Ethiopia. This is hailed as the largest investment of Morocco outside the country and as an example of South–South cooperation. The clue for this motive is to be found in “Ethiopia’s support for Morocco’s return to the African institutional family ...articulated in a joint statement issued following King Mohammed VI’s ... visit to Ethiopia, the first since his accession to the Throne.”

Moroccan robbery of Western Sahara’s resources is widespread. Hillary Clinton was complicit with relaxing US foreign aid restrictions on Morocco during her tenure as Secretary of State, allowing US funds to be used in the territory of Western Sahara where OCP operates phosphate-mining operations. Collaterally, Hillary’s favour to Morocco resulted in US\$12-million for the Clinton-Foundation, courtesy of King Mohammed VI.

Morocco’s commitment to South- South Cooperation is questionable at best. Morocco is framing its charm offensive in Africa in terms of South– South cooperation. But what really is Morocco’s commitment to South-South cooperation? Like Ethiopia, Morocco’s commitment, first of all, is commitment to an extreme form of neoliberalism and to an environmental narrative that blames pastoralists and their overgrazing practices as an excuse for invading and appropriating land for commercial agriculture and other land grabs. In Morocco, state services such as health care and education have faced drastic reduction. The promotion of exports and the lowering of tariffs is the reality. For the majority of their populations, rampant degradation and poverty are the reality in both countries.

A central tenet of South-South cooperation is poverty reduction, but neoliberalist market fundamentalism is incompatible with reducing inequality and protecting the environment. The beneficiaries from these policies are the elite and international capitalists; the results are a far cry from South-to-South cooperation that would alleviate poverty. Even the 22nd Conference of the Parties (COP22) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) was used by Morocco to insert itself in the 16 November 2016 meeting of the Africa Action Summit in Marrakesh. King Mohammed VI was the new face in the meeting, clearly pushing his campaign to get rid of SADR from the AU.

The struggle to deal seriously with climate change should not be circumvented by the unjust political agendas of opportunistic leaders. As Hamza Hamouchene of *War on Want*, articulates: there cannot be authentic environmental justice in Morocco when its government ignores the political rights of the Saharawi people.

Similarly, In 2009, in his capacity as a designated negotiator, the late Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi betrayed the G77’s and Africa’s collective stance in Copenhagen by making a back-door deal with France retreating from the agreed upon 1.5 degrees Celsius target to 2 degrees and thereby dealing a serious blow to the bargaining capacity of the global South. As Kate Sheppard of *Mother Jones magazine* wrote:

The major powers welcomed Ethiopia’s defection from the 1.5-degree target. British Prime Minister Gordon Brown...endorsed the side deal with France....Obama placed a call to Zenawi [in which he] expressed his appreciation for the leadership [of] the Prime Minister... [In negotiating] with African countries on climate change.

The truth was that Meles used Copenhagen to further his own immediate agenda at the expense of Africa and King Mohammed VI was using COP22 to support Morocco’s agenda of denying the rights of the Saharawi people. Ethiopia is now seen as key for Morocco’s goals, as a founding member of the OAU hosting the headquarters of the AU’s Chinese-funded 200-million-dollar building in Addis Ababa, showcasing Chinese soft power. The world must not forget that Ethiopia still sits on its own violation by occupying parts of Eritrean territory

in [contravention of an ICJ verdict](#).

Moroccan and Ethiopian version of South-to-South cooperation is simply a repackaged version of neoliberalism based on extractive activities and destroying the lives of the most vulnerable.

The honorable thing for African Countries and the AU to do, as they recently have done in standing up to [Yahya Jammeh of the Gambia](#), is to rebuff Morocco's arm twisting and vigorously support the self-determination of the Saharawi people.

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The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the Africa at LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.