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MOROCCO: Could this be the end for Polisario Chief Brahim Ghalil?

International sympathy with the breakaway group is losing traction as the Polisario Front continues to block UN-led efforts to resolve the conflict.

By Madeleine Handaji

Morocco World News (30.07.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2PAEUIZ> – The Spanish Criminal Court of the National Assembly has ruled in favor of pursuing a criminal case against the Polisario Front leadership. The case, and rumors of Algiers losing patience

with the current head of the breakaway group, could spell the end for Polisario chief Brahim Ghali.

Ghali is facing an in-depth investigation into allegations of human rights breaches, including false imprisonment and torture, that the Spanish court has authorized until August 2021. Spanish prosecutors, having won the right to investigate further in the criminal court, are now beginning to compile evidence against Ghali and a number of other key Polisario figures.

Brahim Ghali is not alone in facing criminal charges but, as the pseudo-president of the self-proclaimed Sahrawi Democratic Republic (SADR) and Polisario leader, many of the more serious charges are hanging over his head. The 29 Polisario leaders facing investigation and prosecution include Bachir Mustapha Sayed, Jandoud Mohamed, and Sid Ahmed Batal.

In 2019, Mustapha Sayed admitted to committing human rights breaches in a social media voice recording. The Polisario member said “serious crimes and overruns were committed against Moroccan Sahrawis and other former leaders of the Polisario, and that the officials involved in these abuses today regret their misdeeds, ask to open a new page and forget the past.”

While Spanish prosecutors have already compiled significant evidence against Ghali and his fellow Polisario leaders and will continue to consolidate the block of proof against the group, the challenge will be in following through on the prosecution while Ghali and company remain under the

protection of Algeria.

Recent rumors in Algiers, however, suggest that Ghali's time in the spotlight may be coming to an end and the Algerian powers that be are hoping to replace him with a younger, more malleable candidate in the near future, meaning that Ghali may end up as the Polisario's sacrificial lamb as they "open a new page."

Is it all over for Brahim Ghali?

Brahim Ghali became the leader of the Polisario Front on July 9, 2016 after a snap election sparked by the death of the former incumbent Mohamed Abdelaziz, who held the position for 40 years. For Ghali, however, it appears the Polisario leadership seat, and the special relationship with Algeria that comes with it, may come to an end after a mere four years.

And, as the demons close in on Ghali, the younger, more dynamic Abdelkader Taleb Oumar is jostling for the top position, seemingly with the full weight of the Algiers behind him. Currently serving as the Polisario Front's representative in Algiers, Taleb Oumar challenged Ghali for the top spot in 2019 only to be slapped down by the current "president" for his lack of military experience.

Experts and observers have speculated that Algeria, as it undergoes its own mid-Hirak facelift under the presidency of Abdelmajid Tebboune, wants a fresher, more modern face at the

head of the Polisario Front to put the rumors of aid embezzlement and human rights violations to bed once and for all.

Taleb Oumar's reputation as having a more liberal worldview, as well as his vocal support for the UN-led peace process in Western Sahara, known as MINURSO, consolidate his position as an attractive candidate who would lend gravitas to the Algerian president's efforts to promote the "new Algeria."

Brahim Ghali, born in 1949, has been at the forefront of the Polisario Front's claims of independence since the group was born in 1973, consolidating his position as leader of the movement through his experience with the Polisario's military wing. However, his military experience and alleged involvement in torture, illegal detention, and genocide that raised him to power, may be the source of his demise.

Both the European Union and the United Nations have been monitoring the situation in the Tindouf Camps, makeshift communities in Algeria that house 90,000 people under the control of the Polisario Front. Concern is rising over aid embezzlement, inhumane conditions, and crackdowns on opposing voices.

A group of 925 Sahrawi human rights NGOs recently released a statement to condemn the situation in Tindouf. The population living in the Tindouf camps "are left at the mercy of a non-governmental entity that exercises its control over these people with impunity, through armed militias," the NGOs said.

Meanwhile, the Taxpayers' Association of Europe, a federation of 29 national taxpayers' associations, last month urged the European Commission to respond to Algeria and the Polisario's ongoing embezzlement of humanitarian aid destined for the Tindouf camps.

"We urge the Commission to ensure that the Algerian or Sahrawi individuals incriminated by the OLAF report no longer have access to aid funded by [EU] taxpayers," head of the association's Brussels office Walter Grupp told the EU.

Desperate tactics

As scrutiny over human rights breaches in Tindouf and the Polisario Front's reticence to engage in the UN-led peace negotiations increases, Brahim Ghali has grown more desperate. Recent statements from the Polisario Front and Ghali himself expose panic, as Ghali loses his grip.

In mid-July, Ghali released a bizarre tirade, calling on Spain to take responsibility for its former colony. The statement said Polisario "holds Spain responsible for the suffering and tragedies caused to the Saharawi people" and claimed that Spain remains the "administrative power" in Western Sahara and therefore responsible for the "decolonization" of the region.

In the same erratic statement, the Polisario Front leader lashed out at France for supporting Morocco and accused the UN of not taking its role in the peacekeeping process seriously enough. The statement accused the Security Council of

neglecting their duties in Western Sahara and called on the UN to “play their role effectively in this conflict in order to maintain international peace and security.”

Not for the first time, Ghali threatened to withdraw from the UN-led process unless his demands were met.

The statement included renewed calls for a referendum, an idea that the international community gave up on decades ago due to the impossibility of monitoring voter registration and the lack of clarity on who would be eligible to vote, suggesting that Ghali really is grasping at straws.

Ghali’s critics are circling as Spain’s criminal case against the Polisario Front’s leadership looms in the background: The cracks are beginning to show. It remains to be seen whether Ghali’s hand on the reins of power will survive the latest blow or whether Taleb Oumar will, indeed, rest his legs in Ghali’s still-warm chair, however, it is clear that the winds of change are blowing for the Polisario Front.

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