

'The will of the people is the best law.'

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By:

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(Member of a group from Mexico City and Spain who visited the Saharawi refugee
camps situated near Tindouf, Algeria,
in February of 2007. This piece was originally written in Spanish; it has been
translated and edited by myself.)**

It's what it says on a tiny strip of paper found inside a Chinese cookie. It has a happy face at the beginning and one at the end. It's a 'fortune cookie', though the phrase I read is more of an affirmation. Sometimes these cookies are somewhat paradoxical, and it happened that I came upon it just as I had finished eating lunch and reading some press releases having to do with the series of negotiations regarding Western Sahara being held in Manhasset, New York, between the POLISARIO front and Morocco.

If my fortune were true, according to my cookie, these negotiations should not be taking place. The phrase says *'the will of the people'*, not *'the will of a government'*. The mere fact that the representatives of the Saharawi people are 'negotiating' the future of their own country is an insult all in itself. They are obligated to sit with those who stole their country, forced them to run under attacks, and who separated them from their families.

I've heard another fortune cookie-style phrase somewhere that says that Lady Justice is blind. Just for a moment, let's give back her sight and take away her hearing. Since she can now see, let's show her the story of the Saharawi people such as it happened – no sound, of course. Let's imagine it's something like one of those silent films. During the 1950's and 60's, countries were reaching independence from colonialism all throughout the African continent. Some fight for independence; others are granted their sovereignty without dispute. It's the end of colonialism for no country, no matter how powerful, can justify it's presence in Africa.

Western Sahara too awakens from a long slumber; it matures from a prolonged childhood under the ruling of powerful Spain, and begins to peacefully let their wishes for independence be known. Little by little Spain makes plans to leave, promising

sovereignty to the Saharawi people. Now, you must remember that Lady Justice cannot hear--she can only see all this. Suddenly, in 1975, Spain is seen finally leaving Western Sahara, closing the front door behind her and without making good on that promise of independence to the Saharawi people. They see her take off in awe, without realizing that, behind them, Spain had left the back door wide open. Morocco and Mauritania come in through that door, taking advantage of the moment of surprise. They arrive with their tanks, their weapons, their bombs, and they begin to attack indiscriminately.

Our Lady Justice cannot hear those bombings, but she is able to see the mutilated bodies that fall to the ground. She can see women, children, and elders running scared all about the place, not knowing where to go, not having a safe place to hide. She sees men turn around valiantly, confronting that horrible and unwelcome surprise. Their children, brothers, sisters, parents, cousins, aunts, uncles, neighbors, and friends die. And those who do not perish, run. And those who do not run, it's because a bomb has taken their legs. It is the Green March initiated by Morocco on November 6, 1975.

Just a few weeks before, on October 16, 1975 to be exact, the International Tribunal of Justice had just ruled in favor of the right to self-determination of the Saharawi people, following Spain's departure. Lady Justice sees this, and it seems to her only logical and expected, just as it has been happening all throughout the African continent. The powerful nations leave their colonies behind, allowing them to become independent nations. What a surprise to her when she sees that this was not the case in Western Sahara. Spain was leaving in a hurry from there, without looking back. Maybe at that moment Lady Justice sees happiness in the faces of the Saharawi people; hope in their eyes; dreams of freedom; a bright future for their children. But then she sees something else as well, something that the Saharawi never expected. It was that green cloud which lurked nearby and which finally erupted that cold November day. Would Lady Justice have warned the Saharawi of what was to come over them if she could? It's only a film; it would be just like when we try to warn the victim in a plot that the killer is just behind her with a knife and, as soon as she turns around, he will strike her with no mercy. We can only sit at the edge of our seats and scream helplessly at the screen.

The movie continues and the scenes of the Green March, of the Moroccan occupation continue, with Mauritania following on the sidelines. The Saharawi begin to flee, mainly

the women, children and elders. Those who cannot run look for a hiding place, though some find death instead of refuge. The men and the strong organize as best they can to assemble a defense plan. To the eyes of Lady Justice, it seems as though Morocco and Mauritania mean to obliterate every Saharawi in sight. This, in Lady Justice's vocabulary, is called genocide. She does not need to hear a reason or listen to any explanation to comprehend what she sees perfectly with her eyes: the clear intention on behalf of two countries to destroy the Saharawi people. They did not arrive in Western Sahara with threats--but with bombs. They did not announce their arrival from afar--they let themselves in through the back door and immediately began to drop bombs on men, women, children and elders.

After a few years, things remain unchanged. Morocco settles forcefully on the Western Sahara territories, with the obvious intention of keeping them and sharing only with Mauritania. Perhaps they thought they could quickly annihilate the Saharawi people. Lady Justice asks herself, as do the Saharawi, how such horrors could happen, how was it that Spain was capable of leaving the back door wide open like that. Western Sahara was not empty, there were people living there, Bedouins who had for centuries traveled and lived throughout its lands. Of course it was not an abandoned house. It was a home with splendid treasures, illegally sold to the best bidders, divided between them. Except this home already had rightful owners, and now they were being murdered and forced to flee.

'Soon the world will find out,' might have thought Lady Justice and the Saharawi. Neighboring countries and continents would soon come to put an end to such horror; they would not allow the genocide of innocent people to continue. *'Do for your neighbor as you would like him to do for you.'* Until this happens, the Saharawi men organize their resistance forces and begin a fight against their oppressors. With time, Mauritania can no longer justify its military and political presence in Western Sahara and it takes off. Lady Justice thinks she sees the beginning of the end to this which should have never happened, which had no reason to be. Surely Morocco would also soon leave; it would give back to its rightful owners that house it illegally occupied, and would allow them to live in peace. Both Morocco and Mauritania would then have to answer to the rest of the world for their atrocities committed against the Saharawi people, and Spain

would too be expected to explain why it left in such fashion. The world would get involved via the United Nations.

Morocco, however, does not leave; it remains there firm on its intention of appropriating a house that does not belong to them. Nobody asks for any explanations. Instead, the United Nations explains to them why they cannot and should not do what they just did. Meanwhile, the Saharawi front, the POLISARIO, is able to free a few territories and come to a cease-fire agreement under the principle of not wanting to continue the violence, expecting Morocco will finally understand their mistake and finally leave...

More years go by, more than two decades—three since their arrival—and Morocco remains illegally occupying a country which never belonged to them. The United Nations continue with their efforts to explain, with rulings in favor of the self-determination of the Saharawi people. Rulings that Morocco completely ignores each and every single time with arrogance and insolence. In fact, they have built a wall so that the Saharawi who fled cannot return and those who remained in the occupied territories cannot leave. The ones who stayed behind are systematically and persistently tortured, forced to renounce their rights and to become what they are not, what they never were, and what they will never become: Moroccans.

Lady Justice sees with disbelief how all this takes place without anybody saying and much less doing anything about it. Spain never returned to fix the wrongs it left behind. The big and powerful nations allow Morocco to get away with not returning a country which they took by force. She does not understand why nobody does anything until she sees how Morocco, under the table, comes to an agreement with these big and powerful countries to exploit the natural riches of Western Sahara. Lady Justice does not need to listen in on the agreements; just the mere fact of seeing how these countries shake hands with an obviously treacherous country inside a land which does not belong to one nor the other, this is proof enough to understand what it is they are after. *'Tell me with whom you walk and I'll tell you who you are.'*

We have reached the end of the film, where the Saharawi representatives are asked to have patience, to be courteous, to sit down and have an open dialog about the fate of Western Sahara. It is not Western *Morocco*, it is still called Western *Sahara*. The word *'just'* comes from *'justice'*; as *'Saharawi'* comes from *'Sahara'*. *Western Sahara*.

'*Moroccan*' does not come from '*Sahara*', it comes from '*Morocco*'--completely different countries, completely different people. But Lady Justice is unable to hear any of these words as she is still deaf. She does observe, however, how the Saharawi sit down, valiant, with pride, amongst those who tried to destroy them, who forced them to flee, who mutilated and murdered their families, who took their lands, their country, who took away the most precious possession of a human being: freedom.

Lady Justice does not understand what is going on, she does not know that the Saharawi have been asked to '*negotiate*' the future of Western Sahara. '*The will of the people is the best law,*' said that little strip of paper inside my fortune cookie. Could it really be that, after more than three decades, the will of the Saharawi people will be honored by the entire world and Morocco will finally be forced to leave from where it should have never arrived in the first place? After all, it *is* a *law*, one that has been ruled upon by the United Nations and supported by many countries, though *openly* and *repeatedly* ignored by Morocco. And, after all, law *is* based on *Justice*...

Let us now restore hearing to poor Lady Justice, who has understood perfectly without having to hear, that it is precisely she who has been repeatedly been violated by Morocco, and that neither Spain nor any other country has done anything about it and that, on the contrary, those nations who have the power and the means to prevent this abuse from continuing, prefer to look elsewhere and instead search for ways to take advantage of the situation. They do nothing, not even move a single finger. It does not matter to anyone how loudly Lady Justice voices her concerns via decrees from the United Nations, via the desperate voices of the Saharawi people, via activists around the world. It might just turn out that Lady Justice is not only blind, deaf, but mute as well because nobody hears her, nobody sees her, nobody gives her any attention, nobody believes in her. She now knows what it feels to be Saharawi. To be promised freedom...only to be attacked. To try to run...only to be mutilated. To try to hide...only to be murdered. To try to defend yourself...only to be silenced. To try to survive...only to be forgotten in the worst possible place on earth, literally. It sounds like the worst horror film you've ever watched; or perhaps it's the worst nightmare you've ever had.

After the silent movie, you too can try to picture, even for half-a-second, what it must have been like to have this happen in Western Sahara. Now imagine, for the other half of that second that it happened in your *own* country instead.

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