



## SALKA ABED SABEK SIDI

### *«I couldn't believe it. I thought that only older people die»*

This is the story of an activist who, at the age of 24, found herself battling against the Moroccan state to seek justice after her brother's murder. Throughout the years, Salka has blamed herself for not doing enough while simultaneously attempting to assure and reconcile with herself that she did what she could given her age. Salka is the oldest among her siblings, and when her brother was murdered, she took on the responsibility of dealing with the occupying authorities. She felt overwhelmed and isolated throughout this struggle in her fight against the Moroccan state.

Salka was born in 1984 in the town of Tan Tan. She obtained a degree in geography from the University of Marrakech in 2008 but has been unemployed since then. Like many activists in Western Sahara, she struggles to get any work position.

Even 16 years after the tragic murder, Salka's mother remains in a fragile state of mind, and not a day goes by without her mother confusing his name while calling one of her other brothers. There hasn't been a day without her mother bringing up his name.

The day her brother was murdered, Salka suddenly started receiving phone calls from people she hadn't been in touch with for a long time. They were all asking about him. Worried, Salka went to the shop to refill her phone balance. On her way back, she was surprised to see people in front of her house.

### **The incident**

It was the time of Eid. During this time, all Saharawi students travel back to the occupied territories to celebrate. The Moroccan state had arranged for Saharawi students to use Moroccan public buses for free with transportation cards. However, bus drivers would often favor those who paid over students with travel cards. Despite being there first, Saharawi students were not allocated any seats. In response to this discrimination, they started a peaceful protest to

demand that they get a chance to go home. They obstructed all the buses from leaving the bus station by forming a human chain by the station entrance.

One of the bus drivers refused and insisted on driving. The students peacefully and politely explained to him why they were protesting, emphasizing that it was not against him personally.

Nevertheless, blinded by anger, he started the bus engines and drove towards them. Seeing that he was carelessly and intentionally driving directly towards them, they moved from the station entrance towards the corners where the station guard was stationed. The driver swung towards them, crushing them against the wall. Two died, others were injured.

This was clearly an intentional killing. The driver could have driven off the station when they moved aside from the entrance. He wanted to crush them.

## **The witness**

When they were taken in the ambulances, they were treated inhumanely. Among the casualties of this crime was a Moroccan teacher who was working in Western Sahara. He was injured but conscious, but he deliberately pretended to look like he wasn't conscious to witness the incident. He told Salka how the police were searching their pockets, even those who were dead, explaining in detail how one of them took a tobacco box of Marlboro from one of the casualties' pockets. He said the officers were cursing and violently treating dead bodies. The Moroccan teacher told her that at that moment, he felt ashamed of being Moroccan as he witnessed their lack of humanity and sympathy.

The same teacher, who was of Amazigh origin, informed Salka that the driver was not acting alone. He had overheard the bus driver speaking on the phone with a police officer saying: "Grind the peace of shit!". They were conversing in Amazigh, and he understood.

Salka was advocating for justice for her brother and the other students who were coldly murdered. Since there were witnesses to the incident, she was convinced that it was evident the perpetrator would be punished.

Unfortunately, the teacher contacted her, crying, informing her that he was pressured, and threatened to change his testimony. He feared for his job as he was the sole provider for his father and siblings. He apologized, explaining that he would have to alter his testimony and withdraw the one he had already given. The teacher, a son of a simple farmer, had three younger siblings still studying, and he served as their provider. He expressed to her that if it were only him, he would have risked it all, but he couldn't jeopardize the bread and future of his younger siblings.

## **"Traffic accident"**

The family traveled to Agadir to see the corpse of her brother and investigate the truth behind the crime. However, the police record was completed, stating the cause of death as a traffic accident. All the necessary papers were prepared, and all they needed was for Salka's parents to sign them. The police officers attempted several times to take her father aside to convince and manipulate him to sign the papers. When the family requested the medical report, their request was denied.

Salka and her family also experienced discrimination during the legal process. If the victim had been a Moroccan, the case would immediately have been referred to the court of appeal, considering it as a felony murder. However, when the investigative judge inquired about the footage from the camera surveillance, the police refused to hand him the footage. The police claimed that the cameras were broken and that Saharawi students had destroyed them.

The case was ultimately categorized as manslaughter, and the bus driver spent 40 days under investigation. In the end, he was acquitted, and the case was closed.

## The funeral

The Moroccan authorities ordered the ambulance that brought the corpse from Agadir to take him directly to the cemetery. Salka ran barefoot after the ambulance, intending to prevent it from entering the cemetery and ensuring that burial prayers took place first. Despite her efforts, the Moroccan authorities proceeded with their plan. He was taken to a graveyard, and the police were everywhere. They were afraid that the burial would become symbolic and spark protests, so they aimed to speed up the process. When the family finally arrived, they discovered that the grave had already been covered.

## Fighting on two fronts

A 24-year-old had to contend with two battles, one with the legal system and the second with elders in her tribe. These elderly men wanted her to stop the investigation to stop demanding justice, and instead to adopt a pragmatic approach - using this opportunity as leverage to negotiate a job and better conditions for her family. They pressured her through emotional methods, at times guiltting her by suggesting her family could face imprisonment. On other occasions, they reminded her of the state's promised rewards, including a job position. They even informed her that some elected politicians would visit her. One even told her she should hang a picture of the Moroccan king on the wall during the politician's visit.

As a punishment for her tireless fight, their house became isolated. The Moroccan authorities spread fear among people who visited their home. "Anyone who showed sympathy or visited us was seen as being against the Moroccan state," she says. People referred to their house as the house of the separatists.

On the 10th of December 2008, Salka had planned to observe the International Day of Human Rights. It appeared that the police were already aware of her plan. The moment they opened the door to leave the house, the police were already there, stationed both at the front and back entrances. They forcefully entered the house and attacked the protesters, despite the fact that the majority were women and children.

Her brother, born in 1987 and killed in 2008, was her close friend. Their childhood memories were woven together. Her brother was a student activist. As Salka collected his suitcase, everything was meticulously organized. His clothes were folded neatly, and, among them, she found the Saharawi national flag. His friend later told Salka that her brother had sewn it himself.

## Education and human rights work

Salka was actively involved in the student movement.

Saharawi students face discrimination when it comes to housing, enrollment in studies, and are restricted in expressing their political opinions. For instance, Salka took part in the big demonstration of Saharawi students in 2007, when fellow activist Sultana Khaya lost her eye.

The younger brother continues the fight

The other younger brother, upon completing his English diploma, began visiting the graveyard of his eldest brother, holding the Saharawi flag as a form of protest to demand justice. He has become the target of harassment, with the police seizing any small reason to punish him, such as arresting him for not wearing a facial mask and not carrying his national ID during the pandemic.

The police beat him up until they broke his ribs. Instead of taking him to a hospital first, they brought him to a police station. Salka found herself again in a new battle for her young brother, who was arrested, beaten, and held in custody without their knowledge. The police had no intention of informing the family. Thanks to a nurse risking his job and

safety, Salka received a call informing her that her brother was at the police station. During her brother's interrogation, the police asked more questions about Salka than about him and inquired about her political opinions.

Having learned from the previous legal battle in the murder of her brother, the court ordered a medical report about the newly broken ribs. Salka ensured she was present while the doctor issued it. The moment the doctor finished the document, she snatched it and ran. It was almost comical how she ran with it, and the police chased after her, attempting to take it. Salka knew they intended to either destroy it or forge a new one. She ran with it because she wanted to take a picture to document it on her phone.

**Interviewed and written by Asria Mohamed**