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## Freedom in the World 2009 - Western Sahara [Morocco]

**Capital:** N/A  
**Population:** 500,000

Political Rights Score: 7  
Civil Liberties Score: 6  
Status: Not Free

### Overview

In 2008, the pro-independence Polisario Front and the Moroccan government continued to hold talks on Western Sahara's fate. In November, King Mohammed VI announced that Morocco would pursue a "decentralization" plan for the territory in a manner that would not adversely affect Morocco's territorial integrity. Meanwhile, the situation on the ground for Sahrawis remained largely unchanged from previous years.

Western Sahara was ruled by Spain for nearly a century until Spanish troops withdrew in 1976, following a bloody guerrilla conflict with the pro-independence Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario Front). Mauritania and Morocco both ignored Sahrawi aspirations and claimed the resource-rich region for themselves, agreeing to a partition in which Morocco received the northern two-thirds. However, the Polisario proclaimed an independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and continued its guerrilla campaign. Mauritania renounced its claim to the region in 1979, and Morocco filled the vacuum by annexing the entire territory.

Moroccan and Polisario forces engaged in a low-intensity armed conflict until the United Nations brokered a ceasefire in 1991. The agreement called for the residents of Western Sahara to vote in a referendum on independence the following year, to be supervised by the newly established UN Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). However, the vote never took place, with the two sides failing to agree on voter eligibility.

Morocco tried to bolster its annexation by offering financial incentives for Moroccans to move to Western Sahara and for Sahrawis to move to Morocco. The Moroccan monarch visited the territory repeatedly and made declarative speeches about its historical connection to his kingdom. Morocco has also used more coercive measures to assert its control, engaging in forced resettlements of Sahrawis and long-term detention and "disappearances" of pro-independence activists. The Moroccan government's conduct in recent years has been less oppressive, but its overall human rights record with regard

to the Western Sahara occupation remains poor.

In 2004, the Polisario accepted the UN Security Council's Baker II plan (named after former UN special envoy and U.S. secretary of state James Baker), which called for up to five years of autonomy followed by a referendum on the territory's status. Morocco, however, rejected the plan, and Baker himself has said that Rabat is not interested in implementing any plan that could eventually lead to independence.

In 2007, Morocco offered an autonomy plan as an alternative to the scuttled Baker proposal, apparently attempting to demonstrate its willingness to compromise. However, it continued to rule out independence, even as the Polisario remained committed to an eventual referendum on the question. Because of this impasse, the two sides failed to make meaningful progress in four rounds of talks that started in 2007 and stretched into 2008; additional negotiations were planned for 2009. In November 2008, King Mohammed VI announced that Morocco would pursue a "decentralization" plan for the territory in a manner that would not adversely affect Morocco's territorial integrity, effectively reiterating the kingdom's opposition to Sahrawi independence. A UN Security Council resolution adopted in April 2008 extended the MINURSO mandate until April 30, 2009, and reiterated the council's commitment to a mutually agreeable solution.

### **Political Rights and Civil Liberties**

As the occupying force in Western Sahara, Morocco controls local elections and works to ensure that independence-minded leaders are excluded from both the local political process and the Moroccan Parliament.

Western Sahara is not listed separately on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, but corruption is believed to be at least as much of a problem as it is in Morocco.

According to the Moroccan constitution, the press is free, but this is not the case in practice. There is little in the way of independent Sahrawi media. Moroccan authorities are sensitive to any reporting that is not in line with the state's official position on Western Sahara, and they continue to expel or detain Sahrawi, Moroccan, and foreign reporters who write critically on the issue. Online media and independent satellite broadcasts are largely unavailable to the impoverished population.

Nearly all Sahrawis are Sunni Muslims, as are most Moroccans, and Moroccan authorities generally do not interfere with their freedom of worship. There are no major universities or institutions of higher learning in Western Sahara.

Sahrawis are not permitted to form independent political or nongovernmental organizations, and their freedom of assembly is severely restricted. In 2008, Sahrawi activists continued to be harassed and at times detained and tortured by Moroccan authorities, in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. Among the year's cases was a violent attack on Dadach Sidi Mohamed, a prominent Sahrawi human rights defender. On June 17, he was severely beaten on the streets of Al-Aaiun by over a dozen men who were allegedly members of the Moroccan state security apparatus. The Coalition of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders (CODESA), which had operated outside the bounds of Moroccan law for six years, was again denied legal recognition by the state in 2008. In October, Moroccan authorities prevented activists from holding the organization's conference in Al-Aaiun. In November, members voted to create an executive office and an administrative committee for the organization. The executive office elected a prominent Sahrawi activist as its leader.

Moroccan authorities regularly use force when quelling demonstrations and riots in Sahrawi towns and villages. In October 2008, security forces surrounded the homes of the mothers of 15 men who had been "disappeared" in previous years, and prevented them from organizing a demonstration scheduled to coincide with a visit to Al-Aaiun by the Moroccan justice minister. They were similarly prevented from appearing at any of the events he attended. Also that month, pro-independence and human rights activists

faced renewed harassment, including the placement of a cordon around a neighborhood in Al-Aaiun that is home to many prominent activists. The town of Al-Samara witnessed similar events in October, when government forces violently dispersed a demonstration, resulting in injuries to civilians, including multiple women and children. During the demonstration and its aftermath, participating activists were beaten and detained, and many had their homes searched; at least one was dismissed from his government job without explanation.

Sahrawis are technically subject to Moroccan labor laws, but there is little organized labor activity in the resource-rich but poverty-stricken territory. A demonstration by unemployed Sahrawis in the town of Boujdour in October 2008 was broken up by Moroccan forces, leaving many protesters severely injured.

Particularly during the 1961-99 reign of Morocco's King Hassan II, Sahrawis who opposed the regime were summarily detained, killed, tortured, and "disappeared" by the thousands. While the situation has improved dramatically since the 1991 ceasefire and the coronation of King Mohammed VI in 1999, pro-independence Sahrawis are still detained, harassed, threatened, and in some cases tortured.

International human rights groups have criticized Morocco's human rights record in Western Sahara for decades. A highly critical September 2006 report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights – intended to be distributed only to Algeria, Morocco, and the Polisario – was leaked to the press that October. The human rights situation in the territory tends to worsen during periods of increased demonstrations against Moroccan rule, as was the case in 2005. For its part, the Polisario has also been accused of disregarding human rights.

Morocco and the Polisario both restrict free movement in potential conflict areas. Morocco has been accused of using force and financial incentives to alter the composition of Western Sahara's population.

Sahrawi women face much of the same cultural and legal discrimination as Moroccan women. Conditions are generally worse for women living in rural areas, where poverty and illiteracy rates are higher.

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