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Freedom in the World 2011 - Western Sahara

Capital: N/A

Population: 511,000

Political Rights Score: 7 *

Civil Liberties Score: 6 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front made little progress in mediated negotiations on Western Sahara's status in 2010, and violent clashes between Sahrawi protesters and Moroccan security forces led to a number of deaths in November. Sahrawi activists continued to face harassment and detention during the year.

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 claimed the resource-rich region for themselves, agreeing to a partition in which Morocco received the northern two-thirds. However, the Polisario Front 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 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. Morocco 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.

In 2004, the Polisario Front accepted a UN Security Council plan that called for up to five years of autonomy followed by a referendum on the territory's status. However, Morocco rejected the plan, as it could lead to independence, and in 2007 offered its own autonomy plan.

Because the Polisario Front remained committed to an eventual referendum on independence, the two sides failed to make meaningful progress in four rounds of formal talks and three informal meetings that started in 2007 and continued in 2010. Talks in November 2010 were overshadowed by a confrontation on November 8 in the Gadaym Izik protest camp outside Western Sahara's main city of Laayoune, in which Moroccan forces used helicopters, tear gas, and water cannons to disperse residents who had mobilized within the camp. According to Human Rights Watch, 11 officers and 2 civilians were killed, although it emphasized that these were Moroccan estimates and that independent verification was made impossible by the Moroccan authorities. The Polisario claimed that 11 civilians died, 700 were wounded, and many were arrested. Each side accused the other of attempting to disrupt the ongoing negotiations.

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 reports of corruption are widespread. The territory possesses

extensive natural resources, including phosphate, iron-ore deposits, hydrocarbon reserves, and fisheries. Nevertheless, the local population remains largely impoverished.

According to the Moroccan constitution, the press is free, but this is not the case in practice. There is little independent Sahrawi media activity. 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. As in previous years, activists supporting independence and their suspected foreign sympathizers were subject to harassment. In April 2010, activists faced harassment at the Laayoune airport upon their return from the Polisario-controlled refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. Sahrawis are technically subject to Moroccan labor laws, but there is little organized labor activity in the territory.

International human rights groups have criticized Morocco's record in Western Sahara for decades. In the aftermath of the November 2010 clashes outside Laayoune, Amnesty International renewed its call for independent monitoring of human rights violations. Three Sahrawi activists who had been arrested in Morocco in October 2009 – Brahim Dahane, Ali Salem Tamek, and Ahmed Naciri – remained in detention throughout 2010, and their pending trial was postponed in November after disruptions in the courtroom, largely by pro-Moroccan spectators. The Polisario Front has also been accused of disregarding human rights. In September 2010, the Polisario Front arrested a Sahrawi dissenter, Mostapha Selma Sidi Mouloud, as he returned to the Tindouf camps after publicly endorsing Morocco's autonomy plan in Western Sahara.

Morocco and the Polisario Front 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.

** Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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