



Freedom in the World 2013 - Western Sahara

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2013 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 7.0
Civil Liberties: 7
Political Rights: 7

Overview

UN envoy Christopher Ross continued efforts in 2012 to resolve the decades-long impasse over the status of Western Sahara, with no discernable progress. Two years after deadly clashes at the Gdeim Izik protest camp, two dozen people detained amid the incident remained incarcerated in a prison near Morocco's capital, with no trial scheduled.

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, agreeing to a partition in which Morocco received the northern two-thirds of Western Sahara, and Mauritania received the rest. However, the Polisario Front proclaimed an independent Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and continued its guerrilla campaign. Mauritania renounced its claim in 1979, and Morocco filled the vacuum by annexing the territory. During the 1980s, Moroccan forces built a 1,600-mile-long sand wall, or a "berm," that divides Moroccan-controlled territory in the west from a smaller region in the east controlled by the Polisario Front.

Moroccan and Polisario forces engaged in 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 the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). However, the vote never took place, with the two sides failing to agree on voter eligibility.

Morocco has tried to bolster its claim to Western Sahara over the years by offering financial incentives for Moroccans to move to Western Sahara, and for Sahrawis to move to Morocco. Morocco has also used coercive measures, engaging in forced resettlements of Sahrawis and long-

term detention and "disappearances" of pro-independence activists. Neighboring Algeria will not accept Moroccan control of the territory and hosts refugee camps in Tindouf, Algeria. According to the UNHCR, Tindouf is home to an estimated 90,000 Sahrawis, as well as the SADR government in exile.

In 2004, the Polisario Front accepted a UN Security Council plan calling for up to five years of autonomy, followed by a referendum on the territory's status. However, Morocco rejected the plan, fearing it could lead to Western Sahara's independence. In 2007, Morocco offered its own autonomy plan. The Polisario Front remains committed to an eventual referendum with self-determination and independence as options, with Morocco pushing for autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty.

The two sides have failed to make progress in a series of negotiations that started in 2007 and continued into 2012, with UN special envoy Christopher Ross brokering the talks. Algeria and Mauritania participate in the negotiations. Talks broke off abruptly after a November 8, 2010, confrontation in the Gdeim Izik protest camp outside Laayoune, in which Moroccan forces violently dispersed the camp's Sahrawi residents, who had been protesting the Moroccan occupation. Human Rights Watch reported that 11 police and two civilians were killed, with hundreds of civilians beaten and detained. Talks resumed in July 2011, but again sputtered.

In May 2012, Morocco criticized Ross for being biased following the release of a UN report suggesting that Morocco might have been spying on MINURSO. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon refused calls by the Moroccan authorities to replace Ross. In August, Ross announced that he was temporarily retiring efforts to hold joint negotiations between Morocco and the Polisario Front, and would instead meet separately with the parties involved in an attempt to lay groundwork for renewed face-to-face talks.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

As the occupying force in Western Sahara, Morocco holds authority over local elections and works to ensure that independence-minded leaders are excluded from both local political processes and the Moroccan legislature. The government in exile in Tindouf, Algeria, is formed from meetings held every four years of the General Popular Congress, which, in turn, is comprised of delegates from refugee camps.

Reports of corruption are widespread. Although the territory possesses extensive natural resources, including phosphate, iron ore deposits, hydrocarbon reserves, and fisheries, the local population remains largely impoverished.

The Moroccan constitution provides for freedom of the press, but this is severely limited in Western Sahara, and there is little independent Sahrawi media activity. Moroccan law bars the media and individuals from challenging Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, leading to self-censorship. Moroccan authorities expel or detain Sahrawi, Moroccan, and foreign reporters who attempt to conduct firsthand reporting on the issue. On the 2012 anniversary of the clashes at Gdeim Izik, Morocco expelled 15 Spanish and 4 Norwegian journalists from Western Sahara. According to Morocco's interior ministry, they were planning to meet with "separatist" elements in Laayoune; Spanish media outlets, however, reported that most of the expelled foreigners were activists, rather than journalists. The internet and independent satellite broadcasts are largely unavailable due to economic constraints.

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.

Freedom of assembly is severely restricted, and Sahrawis are not permitted to form independent nongovernmental organizations. As in previous years, activists supporting independence and their

suspected foreign sympathizers were subject to harassment. In November 2012, Sahwari human rights activist Aminatou Haidar was beaten by Moroccan police following a meeting with UN special envoy Christopher Ross.

Sahrawis are technically subject to Moroccan labor laws in Moroccan-controlled areas, but there is little organized labor activity in the territory.

Two years after the 2010 Gdeim Izik clashes, two dozen people detained amid the incident remain incarcerated in Salé prison near Rabat, Morocco's capital, with no trial scheduled.

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.

The SADR government routinely signs contracts with firms for the exploration of oil and gas, but these contracts cannot be formally implemented given the territory's status, and no credible free market exists.

The significant reform in 2004 of the Moroccan *Mudawwana* – a law governing issues including marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody – does not appear to have been applied to the Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara. Conditions are generally worse for women living in rural areas, where poverty and illiteracy rates are higher.

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