



Freedom in the World 2014 - Western Sahara

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2014 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7.0

Civil Liberties (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7

Political Rights (1 = best, 7 = worst): 7

OVERVIEW

Twenty-two years after a UN-brokered cease-fire between [Morocco](#) and the pro-independence Polisario Front – a nationalist liberation movement comprised of members of the Sahrawi ethnic group – a promised referendum on independence for Western Sahara has yet to be held. The year 2013 marked [Morocco](#)'s second of its two-year position on the UN Security Council, allowing authorities in the Moroccan capital of Rabat to deepen control over Western Sahara. [Morocco](#) considers it to be its "Southern Province," but the Polisario has declared a Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). Longstanding support for [Morocco](#) from France and the United States – based on geopolitical calculations – continues to give Rabat the upper hand. The support of French president François Holland is especially crucial, particularly in the context of France's January 2013 intervention in nearby Mali. The Sahara and the Sahel have been framed as zones of insecurity and a theater in the global war on terror; Rabat points to evidence that Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is reaching into Western Sahara and calls for support from its western allies in fighting extremism.

The power of [Morocco](#)'s status on the Security Council was particularly evident in April, when the United States sought to expand the mandate of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) to include a human rights monitoring effort. The move was angrily blocked by Rabat as an "attack on the national sovereignty of [Morocco](#)." France backed [Morocco](#)'s position,

and the mission was ultimately renewed without the human rights clause. In response to the U.S. initiative, [Morocco](#) in April 2013 canceled its annual participation in "African Lion," a joint military exercise with the U.S. African Command (AFRICOM) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). Relations were eventually smoothed over, and the exercises were planned for 2014.

In 2009, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon named Christopher Ross to be the UN Special Envoy for Western Sahara. In 2012, Rabat had called for his dismissal because it perceived Ross to be biased, but the secretary general rejected the calls. In 2013, Ross continued his shuttle diplomacy, traveling to the region in October.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: -2 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

There are no free elections within Western Sahara. As the occupying power, [Morocco](#), which controls about 85 percent of the territory, holds authority over municipal elections and excludes candidates who support independence, and works to retain the territory as a vital component of the kingdom. Some members of the Moroccan Parliament represent districts in Western Sahara.

The Polisario government-in-exile in Tindouf, Algeria, is formed from a General Popular Congress, which is made up of delegates from refugee camps in Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara and in Algeria.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

Within the territory – and in [Morocco](#) – the Moroccan monarchy continues to react toward Sahrawi activism with harsh repression and an unwillingness to compromise. The Polisario remains fragmented between hardline elements demanding full independence, with other wings more willing to accept a degree of autonomy from Rabat.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

Corruption among Moroccan authorities in Western Sahara and within the Polisario as well is rampant and goes uninvestigated. Although the territory possesses extensive natural resources, including phosphate, iron ore deposits, hydrocarbon reserves, and fisheries, the local population remains largely impoverished.

Discretionary Political Rights Question B: -2 / 0

[Morocco](#) has tried to bolster its claim to Western Sahara over the years by working to alter its demographics. Moroccan authorities offer financial incentives for Moroccans to move to Western Sahara, and for Sahrawis to move to [Morocco](#).

Civil Liberties: 7 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 3 / 16

Freedom of expression within Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara is sharply curtailed. Moroccan authorities detain or expel Sahrawi, Moroccan, and foreign reporters who seek to cover sensitive issues relating to Western Sahara from both [Morocco](#) and from Western Sahara; additionally, Moroccan law bars the media and individuals from challenging [Morocco](#)'s sovereignty over Western Sahara, leading to self-censorship. Freedom of expression within the Polisario is also constrained, and there have been reports of restrictions by Polisario (and Algerian) authorities in refugee camps in Tindouf. Access to the internet and independent satellite broadcasts are largely unavailable in the territory 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.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 0 / 12

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.

After the UN vote in late April to extend MINURSO's mandate, protests among Sahrawis angry about the lack of a human rights mandate within the mission took place across the territory. In Laayoune, it was reported that six detainees arrested at a pro-independence rally in May, including a minor, were tortured in detention in order to extract confessions. One, 17-year-old El Hussein Bah, was rearrested after he reported to Amnesty International that he had been tortured. In September, demonstrations took place to protest the killing of Rashid al-Mamoun Shin, a young protester who was shot by Moroccan police at a Sahrawi rally held earlier that month in Assa, [Morocco](#). Demonstrations over his death also took place in September outside the Moroccan embassy in Paris.

The third anniversary of the November 2010 Gdeim Izik clashes – in which Moroccan forces had violently dispersed the Gdeim Izik protest camp's Sahrawi residents – saw Moroccan forces clash with Sahrawi demonstrators. In February 2013, a Moroccan military court sentenced two dozen people detained during the 2010 clashes and accused of killing members of the Moroccan security forces. Eight of the detainees were jailed for life, 4 received 30-year sentences, 8 received 25-year sentences, and 2 received 20-year sentences. The 2 remaining detainees were given two-year sentences and released for time served, while another person was convicted in absentia and sentenced to life.

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

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

The government of [Morocco](#) asserts judicial and penal administration within the Western Sahara. In the Western Sahara territory that [Morocco](#) does not fully control – principally the eastern part of the

territory – and the refugee camps in Algeria, the Polisario is ostensibly the governing power. The Polisario's General Popular Congress is responsible for administration of the refugee camps.

Activists and dissidents have in the past disappeared after being detained by Moroccan authorities, although there were no reported cases in 2013. Torture has been reported in Moroccan-run detention facilities. In April, Amnesty International called for the Moroccan authorities to examine claims by Sahrawi activist Mohamed Dihani that he had been tortured while in detention. Dihani in 2011 had received a 10-year sentence in connection with terrorism charges but was appealing the case; Amnesty also called on Moroccan authorities to exclude from court proceedings any previous confessions from Dihani extracted through torture.

In September, a team of forensic experts from the University of the Basque Country in Spain said its members, while working in Western Sahara, had identified the remains of eight Sahrawi people and had confirmed that the people died after being shot by Moroccan forces in 1976, corroborating scenes the deceased's relatives claimed to have witnessed. None of the eight people had been mentioned in the 2004 Equity and Reconciliation (IER) Commission – the body that investigated human rights abuses under former Moroccan King Hassan II. [Morocco's](#) Advisory Council on Human Rights mentioned four of the deceased in a later report, but that investigation found that the four had been arrested and died later while in detention. The forensic team said remains belonging to possibly hundreds of other Sahrawi victims were likely still unexamined in shallow graves in the territory.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

[Morocco](#) and the Polisario Front both restrict free movement in potential conflict areas. 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. For its part, [Morocco](#) signs contracts as well and grants access to Western Sahara's abundant territorial waters to foreign fishing fleets.

The National Union of Sahrawi Women was created in 1974 and is especially present in Tindouf. It also has representation and influence in Western Sahara, although its scope is difficult to gauge. According to journalistic accounts, women in Sahrawi society are understood to enjoy relatively strong civil liberties. They are certainly prominent in activist circles. Some attribute this to the liberal interpretation of Islam in Sahrawi society, as well as the nomadic roots of the culture. Others ascribe it to the ordeal of living in refugee camps or under occupation. LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals) face high levels of discrimination, similar to the situation in [Morocco](#).

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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