



Freedom in the World 2015 - Western Sahara

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2015 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

The year 2014 saw a continued stalemate between Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front – a nationalist liberation movement comprised of members of the Sahrawi ethnic group. Long-standing support for Morocco from France and the United States – based on geopolitical calculations – continues to give Rabat the upper hand in the territory dispute.

In April 2014, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry visited Rabat (and Algiers) to discuss strategic cooperation between the United States, Morocco, and Algeria. Morocco has called for support from its Western allies to fight extremism, pointing to evidence that Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) is reaching into Western Sahara.

In October, a leak of classified Moroccan diplomatic cables revealed officials from the Moroccan government attempted to bribe foreign journalists and diplomats to support Morocco's position on Western Sahara. It also gave evidence of Moroccan dissatisfaction with Christopher Ross, who has been the UN Special Envoy for Western Sahara since 2009. Morocco called for his removal in 2012.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

Political Rights: -2 / 40

A. Electoral Process: 0 / 12

A promised referendum on independence for Western Sahara has yet to be held, despite a cease-fire between Morocco and the Polisario Front brokered by the United Nations 23 years ago. The United Nations considers Western Sahara to be a "Non-Self-Governing Territory." Morocco controls two-thirds of the territory of Western Sahara, including the entire Atlantic seaboard. The

region under its influence, which Morocco considers to be its Southern Provinces, is home to the majority of the territory's population. In the territory that Morocco does not fully control – principally the eastern portion and 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.

Morocco works to retain the territory as a vital component of the kingdom. There are no free elections within Western Sahara. Morocco holds authority over municipal elections and excludes candidates who support independence. Some members of the Moroccan Parliament represent districts in Western Sahara.

The Polisario Front, a rebel government recognized by the United Nations but outlawed within Western Sahara in Moroccan-controlled territories, operates a General Popular Congress made up of delegates from refugee camps in Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara and Algeria. The Polisario Front is based in Tindouf, Algeria.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 0 / 16

Morocco continues to repress Sahrawi activism to liberate the disputed Western Sahara territory. The Polisario Front is fragmented between hardline elements demanding full independence and more moderate factions willing to compromise with Morocco.

C. Functioning of Government: 0 / 12

Corruption among both Moroccan authorities and the Polisario is rampant and goes uninvestigated.

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 strictly curtailed. Moroccan authorities detain or expel Sahrawi, Moroccan, Spanish, and other foreign reporters who seek to cover sensitive issues relating to Western Sahara. Moroccan law bars the media and individuals from challenging Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, leading to self-censorship.

The October leak on Twitter of classified Moroccan diplomatic cables portrayed ostensible efforts by the Moroccan government to bribe foreign journalists and diplomats to support Morocco's position on Western Sahara. The origin and veracity of the documents was still in question at year's end, and the Moroccan government largely remained silent.

Freedom of expression within Polisario-controlled areas 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 Moroccans, and Moroccan authorities generally do not interfere with their freedom of worship.

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 in 2014.

In September, Hassana al-Wali, a member of the Sahrawi Association Against Torture as well as the pro-independence movement, died in custody. Moroccan authorities violently dispersed protests that erupted in Dakhla in response to his death, resulting in injuries and arrests.

Sahrawis are technically subject to Moroccan labor laws in Moroccan-controlled areas, and unions are present but not active.

F. Rule of Law: 0 / 16

The government of Morocco asserts judicial and penal administration within Western Sahara. Security forces in the territory have a history of human rights violations, including arbitrary arrest and detention as well as disappearances. Amnesty International has cited many cases in recent years of activists being tortured while in custody. In July 2014, an appeals court in El-Ayoun upheld the conviction of Sahrawi activist Abdeslam Loumadi, even after he protested that he had been tortured in custody.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 4 / 16

Morocco and the Polisario Front both restrict free movement in Western Sahara. In the 1980s, Morocco constructed a 1,700-mile wall to divide the northwest Moroccan-controlled region of Western Sahara from the southeast pro-independence Polisario Front-controlled Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR).

Western Sahara possesses extensive natural resources, including phosphate, iron ore deposits, hydrocarbon reserves, and fisheries. There is a history of exploitation of natural resources by foreign companies in Western Sahara, and the local population remains largely impoverished. In recent years, oil companies have made efforts to secure rights to oil exploration and drilling, with no discernible benefit for the Western Sahara population. In December 2013, the European Union signed a controversial Fisheries Agreement with Morocco that gives EU boats the right to fish in Western Sahara's extensive territorial waters in exchange for EU financial assistance in developing Morocco's fishery sector. 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. No credible free market exists.

The National Union of Sahrawi Women was created in 1974 and is especially present in the refugee camps in Tindouf. It also has representation and influence in Morocco-controlled territory, though its scope is difficult to gauge. According to journalistic accounts, women in Sahrawi society enjoy relatively strong civil liberties, and they are prominent in activist circles and in the pro-independence movement. Some observers 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.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

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