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Freedom in the World 2012 - Western Sahara

2012 Scores

Status: Not Free

Freedom Rating: 7.0

Civil Liberties: 7

Political Rights: 7

Overview

Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front failed to make progress in mediated talks on Western Sahara's status in 2011. Informal negotiations failed once again, with no future round scheduled. Meanwhile, Sahrawis continued to be denied basic political, civil, and economic rights.

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. 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 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 the 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, 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, which are 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 that called 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 independence, and in 2007 offered its own autonomy plan.

Because the Polisario Front remains committed to an eventual referendum with independence as an option, while Morocco continues to push for autonomy, the two sides have failed to make meaningful progress in a series of negotiations that started in 2007 and continued in 2011. A November 2010 meeting was overshadowed by a confrontation in the Gadaym Izik protest camp outside Western Sahara's main city, Laayoune, in which Moroccan forces violently dispersed residents who had mobilized within the camp. Around a dozen people were killed and scores were injured in the fighting, although the precise numbers are difficult to verify. The talks were reconvened on July 19-21, 2011, and brokered by the UN special envoy, Christopher Ross. These talks, which also included Algeria and Mauritania, failed as well.

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.

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. The authorities expel or detain Sahrawi, Moroccan, and foreign reporters who attempt to conduct first-hand reporting on the issue. 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.

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. 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 – were released from prisons in Salé and Casablanca in April 2011.

In October 2011, Moroccan police prohibited two Spanish members of the European Parliament, Willy Meyer and Já¹/₂se Pérez Ventura, from disembarking from an airplane at the Laayoune airport; they were seeking to observe the human rights situation in Western Sahara. Spain lodged a formal protest about the treatment of the men, who reportedly sustained injuries in an altercation on the airplane stairway.

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. A former police chief, Sidi Mouloud, was held by the Polisario for more than two months before being released in December 2010 to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees; he now lives in exile in Mauritania and has kept a low profile.

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, although these cannot be implemented given the territory's status, and no credible free market exists within the territory.

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

Ratings Change

Western Sahara's civil liberties rating declined from 6 to 7 due to the inability of civil society groups to form and operate, as well as serious restrictions on property rights and business activity.