

Morocco

Western Sahara

Population: 380,000

Political Rights: 7

Civil Liberties: 6

Status: Not Free

Overview:

The Polisario Front made little progress during 2006 in its push to secure Western Sahara's independence from Morocco, which continued to offer only autonomy for the territory. However, the two sides maintained their long-standing ceasefire. UN-sponsored visits between Sahrawis living in camps in Algeria and family members in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara were restarted in November 2006 after a five-month suspension.

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 Polisario Front. Both Morocco and Mauritania claimed the phosphate-rich region and partitioned it after Spain's withdrawal, with Mauritania receiving the southern third. Rejecting the arrangement, the Polisario declared an independent state, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, and continued its guerrilla campaign. Mauritania renounced its claim to the region in 1979, and Moroccan troops filled the vacuum by annexing the entire territory.

Moroccan and Polisario forces engaged in a low-intensity conflict until the United Nations brokered a ceasefire in 1991. The agreement called for a referendum on independence, to be supervised by the UN Mission for a Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO). However, the vote has yet to take place, with the Polisario and Morocco disagreeing about who is eligible to participate.

Since the annexation, Morocco has moved to assert its control by encouraging Moroccans to move to the region, providing financial incentives and rewards for doing so. The Moroccan authorities have also encouraged Sahrawis to move to Morocco. While Morocco has attempted to improve relations by releasing Sahrawi prisoners in recent years, it still detains Sahrawi activists and demonstrators on a regular basis.

In 2004, the Polisario accepted the UN Security Council's so-called Baker plan, which called for up to five years of autonomy followed by a

referendum on the territory's status. However, Morocco rejected the plan. The Polisario in August 2005 agreed to release its remaining 400 Moroccan prisoners of war; Morocco continued to hold smaller numbers of Sahrawi prisoners.

In 2006, Morocco's King Mohamed VI said on several occasions that he was willing to grant autonomy to Western Sahara, but insisted that independence was out of the question. The king claimed that if Western Sahara were granted independence, it would cause regional instability and become a lawless haven for terrorists.

In positive news, the United Nations refugee agency in November resumed flights facilitating family visits between Sahrawis living in camps in Tindouf, Algeria, and relatives living in Western Sahara. The flights, carried out intermittently since 2004, had been suspended for the previous five months. In October, the UN Security Council extended MINURSO's mandate through April 2007, and reaffirmed its commitment to finding a "mutually acceptable" solution that "will provide for the self-determination" of the people of Western Sahara.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Moroccan authorities organize local elections and ensure that leaders of the Sahrawi independence movement are excluded from both local leadership and representation in the Moroccan parliament.

Morocco's constitution guarantees press freedom but, in practice, little exists in Western Sahara. Although there were fewer reported instances of government interference with press access to Western Sahara in 2006, Moroccan authorities continue to exercise control over who enters and reports on the region. The restrictions are particularly evident when there are local riots or demonstrations against Moroccan rule. Moroccan and international reporters are subject to expulsion or detention if the government objects to their work or they enter the region without permission. Western Sahara's population is extremely poor and has little access to independent media or the internet.

Sahrawis, like the vast majority of Moroccans, are Sunni Muslims, and Moroccan authorities generally respect their freedom of worship. There are no major universities or institutions of higher learning.

Moroccan officials restrict the ability of Sahrawis to form political organizations or assemble in public places. Demonstrations and riots are a regular occurrence in Western Sahara's towns and villages, and Moroccan authorities often arrest those involved. In October 2006, the Moroccan government disbanded the Groupements Urbains de la Surete (GUS), a security force formed in 2004 that was accused of human rights violations during riots and demonstrations in Laayoune in 2005. The force's 5,000 members would be reassigned to other security units. Sahrawis are subject to Moroccan laws,

including labor laws, but little organized labor activity takes place in the poverty-stricken region.

Particularly during the 1961–99 reign of Morocco’s King Hassan II, the current king’s father, Sahrawis who opposed the regime were summarily detained, killed, tortured, and “disappeared.” While thousands of Moroccan dissidents suffered under Hassan’s rule, Sahrawis who defied him faced even harsher scrutiny. While the political situation is different today, Sahrawis who oppose Morocco’s sovereignty are still detained, and torture has not ceased under King Muhammad.

International human rights groups have for decades criticized the behavior of Moroccan authorities in Western Sahara. A September 2006 report by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was highly critical of Morocco’s record in the territory. The report was intended to be distributed only to Algeria, Morocco, and the Polisario, but was leaked to the press in October. Morocco’s Equity and Reconciliation Commission, founded in 2004 to examine government abuses under Hassan, did not hold scheduled public hearings in Western Sahara. Few Sahrawis had the opportunity to testify publicly before the commission.

Both the Polisario and Moroccan authorities restrict freedom of movement in potential conflict areas.

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.