



## FREEDOM IN THE WORLD 2018

# Western Sahara\*

NOT FREE

# 4

/100

<u>Political Rights</u>	<b>-3</b> /40
<u>Civil Liberties</u>	<b>7</b> /60

## LAST YEAR'S SCORE &amp; STATUS

**4 /100**    **Not Free**

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. See the methodology.

*\* Indicates a territory as opposed to an independent country.*



# Overview

Morocco has claimed authority over Western Sahara since 1975, but the United Nations does not recognize Morocco's control, calling Western Sahara a “non-self-governing territory.” While the United Nations brokered a cease-fire in 1991, a long-promised referendum on the territory's status has yet to be held. Elections are severely restricted, as are civil liberties, particularly as they relate to independence activism or topics that are also sensitive in Morocco.

## Key Developments in 2017

- A standoff between the Polisario Front and Moroccan forces that began in 2016 ended in February as the latter withdrew from the UN buffer zone between the areas controlled by each side. The crisis began when the Polisario Front accused Morocco of breaking the terms of the cease-fire by attempting to build a road in the buffer zone.
- In July, a Rabat court of appeals sentenced 23 Sahrawis to prison terms ranging from two years to life over the killing of 11 Moroccan security personnel in 2010. The court allowed evidence that included confessions allegedly obtained through torture.

## Political Rights

### A. Electoral Process

**A1** 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections?	0 / 4
---	-------

Morocco controls more than two-thirds of Western Sahara and allows no pro-independence candidates to run for office. The remaining portion of the country is controlled by the Polisario Front, which is based in Algeria and leads a nationalist movement comprised of members of the Sahrawi ethnic group. The constitution of the government-in-exile states that the leader of the Polisario Front is the territory's president, but it does not hold elections within the territory.

**A2** 0-4 pts

<b>Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections?</b>	<b>0 / 4</b>
---	--------------

In the Moroccan-controlled portion of the territory, voters elect 13 representatives to the Moroccan parliament. The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, the breakaway government, has a 51-member legislature called the Sahrawi National Council (SNC), which is indirectly elected by the General Popular Congress of the Polisario Front. Most voting occurs in refugee camps in Algeria. The Polisario Front organizes the elections and does not allow any political parties to compete.

**A3** 0-4 pts

<b>Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies?</b>	<b>0 / 4</b>
--	--------------

The electoral framework is not fair, given the constraints on representation in the territory and the prohibition of any candidate who challenges Moroccan control of the territory to run for parliament.

## B. Political Pluralism and Participation

**B1** 0-4 pts

--	--

**Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings?**

**0/4**

The Polisario Front, which controls the government-in-exile, does not allow other political parties to compete. In the Moroccan-controlled areas, the Polisario Front is banned, and pro-independence parties are not allowed to form.

**B2** 0-4 pts

**Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections?**

**0/4**

Since political parties that advocate for Sahrawi independence cannot function in Moroccan-controlled areas, the most salient opposition elements cannot gain power through elections. No credible opposition exists in the territory controlled by the Polisario Front due to the ban on other political parties.

**B3** 0-4 pts

**Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means?**

**0/4**

People's political choices are dominated by Morocco and a government-in-exile; under the territory's current UN status as a "non-self-governing territory," Sahrawis are unable to elect an independent government.

**B4** 0-4 pts

**Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities?**

**0/4**

Due to Western Sahara's lack of sovereignty, no segment of the population has full political rights or electoral opportunities. However, women play a significant role in the Polisario Front. Many women are leaders in the independence movement and organize the refugee camps in Algeria.

## C. Functioning of Government

**C1** 0-4 pts

<b>Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
--	------------

Western Sahara, which has not yet achieved self-determination, has no freely elected leaders. However, the 13 members of parliament in the Moroccan-controlled portions of the territory participate in the legislative process in Rabat, and the Polisario Front governs portions of the territory in its control.

**C2** 0-4 pts

<b>Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
---	------------

Corruption among both Moroccan authorities and the Polisario Front is widespread and investigations are rare. Corruption occurs primarily to facilitate the exploitation of natural resources—phosphates, hydrocarbons, and fisheries—by Moroccan and international interests. Military officers frequently use government contacts to attain fishing licenses and win contracts for quarries.

**C3** 0-4 pts

<b>Does the government operate with openness and transparency?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
--	------------

Moroccan laws on access to information apply to Western Sahara. Information about Western Sahara is nearly nonexistent, which severely limits transparency. The Moroccan government publishes budget and financial information online, and public officials—including parliament members, judges, and civil servants—are required to declare their assets. However, transparency nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) assert that many officials do not provide this information, and the law provides no sanctions for noncompliance.

### Add Q

ADDITIONAL DISCRETIONARY POLITICAL RIGHTS QUESTION	-3
--	----

**ADD Q: Is the government or occupying power deliberately changing the ethnic composition of a country or territory so as to destroy a culture or tip the political balance in favor of another group? -3 / 0**

Before and since the establishment of the UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) in 1991, Rabat has endeavored to tip the population's balance in Morocco's favor. Morocco also works to challenge the conduct of a referendum that would determine the territory's final status. By some counts, Moroccans now outnumber Sahrawis in Western Sahara. Morocco constructed a sand berm to divide territory under its control from the smaller territory to the east that is under Sahrawi control.

## Civil Liberties

### D. Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1. Are there free and independent media? 0 / 4

Some pro-Sahrawi media outlets do operate, such as the all-volunteer Equipe Media group, but they face regular harassment by Moroccan authorities, who ensure that reporting does not dispute Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara. Exiled groups provide coverage from the outside; reporting by foreign journalists is sharply constrained. Internet access is limited throughout the territory.

**D2** 0-4 pts

<b>Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
---	------------

Moroccan authorities generally do not interfere with religious practices, though as in Morocco proper, mosques are monitored by authorities. Moroccan law prohibits any efforts to convert a Muslim to another faith. It is illegal to publicly criticize Islam.

**D3** 0-4 pts

<b>Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
---	------------

Educators must practice self-censorship around the status of Western Sahara, as Moroccan law criminalizes debate that calls this into question. Other sensitive topics include the monarchy and Islam. The University of Tifariti was established in 2013 as the first university in the area claimed by the Polisario.

**D4** 0-4 pts

<b>Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution?</b>	<b>1/4</b>
---	------------

As in Morocco proper, there is concern about state surveillance of online activity and personal communications, and people do not feel free to speak privately about the

status of Western Sahara and other sensitive topics. Freedom of expression is constrained in Polisario-controlled areas as well.

## E. Associational and Organizational Rights

**E1** 0-4 pts

Is there freedom of assembly?	0/4
-------------------------------	-----

Demonstrations and protests are broken up regularly, particularly on sensitive issues such as self-determination and Sahrawi prisoners held by Morocco, and protesters are frequently arrested and beaten. In April 2017, police violently dispersed a pro-independence protest in El-Aaiún, assaulting dozens of peaceful protesters.

**E2** 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work?	0/4
---	-----

NGOs that advocate for independence or question Islam as the state religion are denied official registration by the Moroccan government. Organizations that meet the government’s criteria are frequently denied registration as well. Foreign NGO representatives who traveled to Moroccan-controlled areas of Western Sahara to observe the human rights situation were expelled on several occasions in 2017.

**E3** 0-4 pts

Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations?	0/4
--	-----

Moroccan unions have a presence in Western Sahara, but they are largely inactive. Government restrictions limit the right to strike. Most people in unions work for the Moroccan government. The Polisario Front has a trade union called the Sahwari Trade Union, which is also inactive.

## F. Rule of Law

**F1** 0-4 pts

Is there an independent judiciary?	0/4
------------------------------------	-----

Courts in Western Sahara are controlled by Morocco and their rulings reflect Rabat's interests. Executive interference and corruption significantly impede judicial independence.

**F2** 0-4 pts

Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters?	0/4
---	-----

Due process rights are not respected. In July 2017, a Rabat court of appeals sentenced 23 Sahrawis to prison sentences ranging from two years to life for the 2010 deaths of 11 Moroccan security personnel during an uprising at the Gdeim Izik protest camp. Evidence at the trial included confessions allegedly obtained by torture. The court did not investigate these allegations.

Pro-independence advocates and other civil society leaders are often arbitrarily arrested, particularly in the aftermath of demonstrations. International human rights groups view many Sahrawis in Moroccan prisons, including human rights activists and pro-independence advocates, as political prisoners.

**F3** 0-4 pts

Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom	
---	--

from war and insurgencies?

0/4

Tensions remain between the Moroccan military and the Polisario Front, with periodic mobilization of forces. A military standoff began in 2016 when the Polisario Front accused Morocco of breaking the terms of the cease-fire by attempting to build a road in the UN buffer zone. The standoff ended in February 2017 when Morocco withdrew its troops.

Torture and degrading treatment by Moroccan authorities continues to be a problem, especially against pro-independence advocates.

**F4** 0-4 pts

Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population?

0/4

Sahrawis experience discrimination in access to education and employment. According to Sahrawi activists, Moroccan settlers are favored by employers in the phosphate mining industry, which is one of the predominant sources of jobs.

Although women play leadership roles at the Sahrawi camps in Algeria, cultural norms often dictate that women stay at home and manage the household. Moroccan law prohibits same-sex sexual acts.

## G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

**G1** 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education?

1/4

Morocco and the Polisario Front both restrict free movement in Western Sahara. The sand berm, constructed by Morocco in the 1980s, is 1,700 miles long. The wall is surrounded on both sides by land mines, and constitutes what may be the longest continuous land mine field in the world.

**G2** 0-4 pts

<b>Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors?</b>	<b>1/4</b>
--	------------

The territory's occupied status leaves property rights insecure. No credible free market exists within the territory. 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.

**G3** 0-4 pts

<b>Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance?</b>	<b>2/4</b>
--	------------

In the Polisario-controlled territory and in Tindouf, women have a relatively higher social status than in Morocco. However, social freedoms are curtailed. Moroccan law criminalizes both adultery and premarital sex. Spousal rape is not considered a crime.

**G4** 0-4 pts

<b>Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation?</b>	<b>0/4</b>
---	------------

Economic opportunity is inhibited by the territory's undetermined status. The economic activity generated by companies that exploit the country's natural resources generally does not benefit the Sahrawi population. Sex trafficking, often affecting young girls, takes place in coastal fishing villages.



### On Western Sahara

See all data, scores & information on this country or territory.

See More >

### Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

**4/100** Not Free

### Other Years

## Be the first to know what's happening.

Email

Join the Freedom House monthly newsletter

Subscribe

#### ADDRESS

1850 M St. NW Floor 11  
Washington, DC 20036  
(202) 296-5101

#### GENERAL INQUIRIES

[info@freedomhouse.org](mailto:info@freedomhouse.org)

#### PRESS & MEDIA

[press@freedomhouse.org](mailto:press@freedomhouse.org)

@2020 FreedomHouse