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Country:

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Year:

2016

Freedom Status:

Not Free

Political Rights:

7

Civil Liberties:

7

Aggregate Score:

4

Freedom Rating:

7.0

Overview:

The year 2015 saw a continued stalemate between Morocco and the pro-independence Polisario Front—a nationalist liberation movement comprised of members of the Sahrawi ethnic group. The Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO), the UN mission established in 1991 to implement a national referendum on independence for the territory, has never been able to fulfill its mandate. Long-standing support for Morocco from France and the United States continues to give Rabat the upper hand in the territory dispute.

The United Nations renewed MINURSO's mandate for another year in April 2015, but Sahrawis continue to doubt its effectiveness and lament its lack of a human rights monitoring mechanism. The UN envoy to Western Sahara, Christopher Ross, attempted to restart negotiations toward a political settlement in October 2015, but Polisario Front representatives indicated that they would continue to engage with the United Nations and Rabat only in a limited capacity. In November 2015, the Moroccan government reiterated its longstanding position that it will not accept full independence for Western Sahara under any circumstances.

In March 2015, Moroccan officials permitted the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Human Rights Abuses Committed by the Moroccan State to legally register its status as a

nongovernmental organization (NGO). However, Moroccan authorities still interfered with its activities following registration.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: -3 / 40 (-1) [Key]

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 more than two decades 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. In November 2015, the Moroccan government reiterated its longstanding position that it will not accept full independence for Western Sahara under any circumstances, proposing only limited local autonomy. 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 operates a General Popular Congress made up of delegates from refugee camps in Polisario-controlled areas of Western Sahara and Algeria. In December 2015, Mohammed Abdelaziz, a founding member of the front and its secretary-general since 1976, was reelected to another term by congressional delegates. 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 hard-line 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: -3 / 0 (-1)

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. By some counts, Moroccans now significantly outnumber Sahrawis in Western Sahara. Alterations to the physical landscape, including a sand berm running the length of the territory, serve as additional means of population control, preventing ethnic Sahrawis from accessing Moroccan-controlled areas.

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 regularly detain or expel local and foreign reporters who seek to cover sensitive issues. Moroccan law bars the media and individuals from challenging Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara, leading to self-censorship. Access to the internet and independent satellite broadcasts are largely unavailable in the territory due to economic constraints.

Some locally based pro-Sahrawi media outlets do operate, such as the all-volunteer Equipe Media group, though they face regular harassment by Moroccan authorities. In January 2015, Moroccan police surrounded a house where a group of journalists had gathered to film a project discussing Sahrawi resistance; two were assaulted when they left the residence, while the rest spent hours inside until the police departed. In March, the president of Equipe Media and one of its journalists were assaulted, harassed, and interrogated about the nature of their work by security officials at the Laâyoune airport before being allowed to depart for a conference in Spain.

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.

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

Freedoms of assembly and association are severely restricted. Although demonstrations and protests are common, they are often violently dispersed. In March 2015, Moroccan police attacked women who had gathered to demonstrate against the abuse of women by occupation forces, injuring more than a dozen.

In addition to Sahrawi activists, many of their foreign sympathizers present in Western Sahara are also targeted by the authorities. In February 2015, four activists from the

Canary Islands were expelled from the territory after they tried to hold training sessions with local activists. In March, two Norwegian activists were also expelled for allegedly working with local pro-independence groups.

In March 2015, Moroccan officials announced that for the first time, two Sahrawi nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) would be allowed to register, ending a longstanding prohibition against such groups. The most prominent, the Sahrawi Association of Victims of Human Rights Abuses Committed by the Moroccan State, was reportedly legally registered by August. However, authorities continued to curtail its operations, generally prohibiting any of its public activities.

Sahrawis are technically subject to Moroccan labor laws in Moroccan-controlled areas, and unions are present but not frequently active. In May 2015, local bus drivers went on strike to protest unfair treatment by the authorities and the proliferation of unlicensed taxis, many of which are allegedly controlled by elements within the security services as side businesses.

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, disappearances, and custodial torture. In one case that attracted international attention, 21-year-old Mohamed Lamine Haidala, an ethnic Sahrawi, was beaten and stabbed by five men in January 2015; his family claimed the assailants were Moroccan settlers. Haidala was repeatedly summoned to the police station for interrogations over much of the following week, interrupting necessary medical care. He died of his injuries in early February. Months later, authorities had yet to undertake an independent investigation into his death.

Moroccan law, administered in Moroccan-controlled parts of Western Sahara, prohibits same-sex sexual acts.

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, or berm, to divide the northwest Moroccan-controlled region of Western Sahara from the southeast pro-independence Polisario Front –controlled Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The wall is surrounded on both sides by land mines, and constitutes what may be the longest continuous land mine field in the world. In May 2015, three people were severely injured and one died when after their vehicle struck a mine.

Western Sahara possesses extensive natural resources, including phosphate, iron ore deposits, hydrocarbon reserves, and fisheries. The Moroccan government and foreign companies routinely exploit these resources while 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 2015, the European Court of Justice struck down a free trade agreement between the European Union (EU) and Morocco for improperly permitting European access to Western Sahara's resources. The EU has vowed to appeal. 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. Both Moroccan authorities and Sahrawi NGOs have made efforts to fight child labor in Western Sahara. However U.S. Labor Department has criticized Moroccan authorities for failing to publish more specific information about such efforts.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

Full Methodology

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