

[A Tale of Two Human Rights Awardees](#)

The annual Robert F. Kennedy Award ceremony took place at the White House this year for the first time in its 28-year history. Also for the first time, the president of the United States was there to honor the awardees.

This year's winner was the group Women of Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), represented by Magodona Mahlangu and Jenni Williams. Since its founding six years ago, WOZA has campaigned against domestic violence and rape, for rebuilding their country's crumbling health and education systems, and for ending government repression. Despite their commitment to nonviolence, WOZA activists have been routinely threatened, abducted, and beaten, and over 3,000 of its members have been detained or imprisoned. This show of support from President Obama is particularly important in light of the trial of the two WOZA activists, scheduled to begin next week, for "conduct likely to cause a breach of [the] peace," which could result in a five-year prison sentence if convicted.

Such public support from the White House is in stark contrast with its silence on the fate of last year's winner, Aminatou Haidar, who is widely known as the Saharan Gandhi. Earlier in November, when she was returning from the United States after receiving the Civil Courage Award from the Train Foundation, Moroccan occupation authorities arrested and expelled Haidar from her homeland of Western Sahara.

Belated Response

Haidar is Western Sahara's leading human rights campaigner. She has led the nonviolent struggle to free her people from an illegal 34-year Moroccan occupation, and was nominated on several occasions for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Like many Western Saharans who travel abroad, she declared Western Sahara as her country of origin on the immigration entry form when she landed at the airport in El Aioun, in the occupied territory. This time, however, Moroccan authorities confiscated her Moroccan passport, held her overnight for interrogation, and — claiming she had renounced her Moroccan citizenship — expelled her to Spain's Canary Islands. It is a direct violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention for an occupying power to expel anyone from their country of origin.

For nearly two weeks, the State Department was silent on Haidar's fate. It spoke out only this past Thursday, as Haidar's physical well-being came into question when she entered the eighth day of a hunger strike. Spokesman Ian Kelly expressed U.S. concerns about her health situation, but simply called for "a speedy determination of her legal status." Rather than calling on Moroccan authorities to live up to their international legal obligations, Kelly instead appeared to endorse Morocco's right to "determine" that she is *persona non grata* and has no right to return.

The RFK Center for Justice and Human Rights, which grants the annual award, has sent its director and senior advocacy director to the Canary Islands to be with Haidar, now entering the third week of her fast in the Lanzarote Airport. They also called upon UN Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay to immediately investigate the circumstances of Haidar's forced exile and to establish a formal mechanism for protecting the human rights of the people of Western Sahara. However, despite the RFK Center's efforts and those of Kerry Kennedy, Senator Patrick Leahy (D-VT), and others, the Obama administration has refused to demand Haidar's return.

It was Leahy who, standing in for his ailing colleague Edward Kennedy at last year's ceremony, praised Haidar's struggle for human rights against Moroccan repression and promised that, with the incoming Obama administration, "help was on the way." Unfortunately, Obama ended up appointing Hillary Clinton, a longtime supporter of the Moroccan occupation, to oversee his foreign policy.

Currying Favor with Morocco

Indeed, Secretary of State Clinton may bear partial responsibility for Haidar's situation. The activist's arrest and expulsion is part of a broader Moroccan crackdown that appears to have received Clinton's endorsement during a visit to Morocco early last month. Rather than joining Amnesty International and other human rights groups in condemning the increase in the already-severe repression in the occupied Western Sahara, Clinton instead chose to offer unconditional praise for the Moroccan government's human rights record. Just days before her arrival, Moroccan authorities arrested seven other nonviolent activists from Western Sahara — Ahmed Alansari, Brahim Dahane, Yahdih Ettarouzi, Saleh Labihi, Dakja Lashgar, Rachid Sghir, and Ali Salem Tamek — on trumped-up charges of high treason. Amnesty International has declared the seven activists (who are currently awaiting trial) prisoners of conscience, and called for their unconditional release. But Clinton decided to ignore the plight of these and other political prisoners held in Moroccan jails.

Under such circumstances, it appears that the Moroccan authorities decided they need not fear a negative reaction from Washington for engaging in further repression, especially since the United States has given the country billions of dollars in military assistance since its conquest of Western Sahara in 1975. International law requires that the people of non-self-governing territories such as Western Sahara deserve the right of self-determination, confirmed in the case of Western Sahara by a landmark opinion of the International Court of Justice. However, Clinton — in an interview during her recent visit — appears to have endorsed Morocco's plans for annexing the territory under a dubious "autonomy" plan. Though a series of unanimous UN Security Council resolutions supported by previous U.S. administrations have called for a UN-supervised referendum on the fate of the territory, Clinton has simply called for "mediation" between the Moroccan kingdom and the exiled nationalist Polisario Front, a process that would not offer the people of the territory a say in their future.

I have worked with both Jenni Williams and Aminatou Haidar. They are both deserving of the RFK Prize, and they both deserve the support of the U.S. government as well. A test of a government's sense of justice is whether it sees human rights as a universal principle or simply as a political tool to advance its foreign policy agenda. The Obama administration appears to have opted for the latter. It is easy to support human rights activists like the women of WOZA, since they are battling against a regime opposed by the United States. When it comes to human rights activists who challenge a U.S. ally, however, the Obama administration appears no different than previous administrations in tolerating their oppression.