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The Other Occupation: Western Sahara and the Case of Aminatou Haidar

Aminatou Haidar, a nonviolent activist from Western Sahara and a key leader in her nation's struggle against the 34-year-old U.S.-backed Moroccan occupation of her country, has been forced into exile by Moroccan authorities. She was returning from the United States, where she had won the Civil Courage Award from the Train Foundation. Forcing residents of territories under belligerent occupation into exile is a direct violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, to which both the United States and Morocco are signatories.

Her arrest and expulsion is part of a broader Moroccan crackdown that appears to have received the endorsement of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton. Rather than joining Amnesty International and other human rights groups in condemning the increase in the already-severe repression in the occupied territory during her visit to Morocco early this month, she instead praised the government's human rights record. Just days before her arrival, seven other nonviolent activists from Western Sahara – Ahmed Alansari, Brahim Dahane, Yahdih Ettarouzi, Saleh Labihi, Dakja Lashgar, Rachid Sghir and Ali Salem Tamek – were arrested on trumped-up charges of high treason and are currently awaiting trial. Amnesty international has declared them prisoners of conscience and called for their unconditional release, but Clinton decided to ignore the plight of those and other political prisoners.

Almost exactly one year ago, Haidar was in Washington D.C. receiving the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights award. The late Senator Ted Kennedy, while too ill to take part in the ceremony personally, said of Aminatou Haidar, "All who care about democracy, human rights, and the rule of law for the people of the Western Sahara are inspired by her extraordinary courage, dedication and skilled work on their behalf."

Patrick Leahy, speaking in place of Kennedy, 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 Clinton, a longtime supporter of the Moroccan occupation, to oversee his foreign policy.

It is not surprising that Morocco sees Haidar as a threat and that Clinton has not demanded her right to return to her homeland. Not only is her nonviolent campaign an embarrassment to a traditional American ally, but having an Arab Muslim woman leading a mass movement for her people's freedom through nonviolent action challenges the widely held impression that those resisting U.S.-backed regimes in that part of the world are misogynist, violent extremists. Successive U.S. administrations have used this stereotype to justify military intervention and support for repressive governments and military occupations.

Moroccan Occupation

In 1975, the kingdom of Morocco conquered Western Sahara on the eve of its anticipated independence from Spain in defiance of a series of UN Security Council resolutions and a landmark 1975 decision by the International Court of Justice upholding the right of the country's inhabitants to self-determination. With threats of a French and American veto at the UN preventing decisive action by the international community to stop the Moroccan invasion, the nationalist Polisario Front launched an armed struggle against the occupiers. The Polisario established the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic in February 1976, which has subsequently been recognized by nearly 80 countries and is a full member state of the African Union. The majority of the indigenous population, known as Sahrawis, went into exile, primarily in Polisario-run refugee camps in Algeria.

By 1982, the Polisario had liberated 85 percent of the territory, but thanks to a dramatic increase in U.S. military aid and an influx of U.S. advisers during the Reagan administration, Morocco eventually was able to take control of most of the territory, including all of its major towns. It also built, thanks to U.S. assistance, a series of fortified sand berms in the desert that effectively prevented penetration by Polisario forces into Moroccan-controlled territory. In addition, in

violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention, Morocco moved tens of thousands of settlers into Western Sahara until they were more than twice the population of the remaining indigenous Sahrawis.

Yet the Polisario achieved a series of diplomatic victories that generated widespread international support for self-determination and a refusal to recognize the Moroccan takeover. In 1991, the Polisario agreed to a ceasefire in return for a Moroccan promise to allow for an internationally supervised referendum on the fate of the territory. Morocco, however, refused to allow the referendum to move forward.

French and American support for the Moroccan government blocked the UN Security Council from providing the necessary diplomatic pressure to force Morocco to allow the promised referendum to take place. The Polisario, meanwhile, recognized its inability to defeat the Moroccans by military means. As a result, the struggle for self-determination shifted to within the Moroccan-occupied territory, where the Sahrawi population has launched a nonviolent resistance campaign against the occupation.

Nonviolent Resistance

Western Sahara had seen scattered impromptu acts of open nonviolent resistance ever since the Moroccan conquest. In 1987, for instance, a visit to the occupied territory by a special UN committee to investigate the human right violations sparked protests in the Western Saharan capital of El Aaiún. The success of this major demonstration was all the more remarkable, given that most of the key organizers had been arrested the night before and the city was under a strict curfew. Among the more than 700 people arrested was Aminatou Haidar, then 21 years old.

For four years she was “disappeared,” held without charges or trial, and kept in secret detention centers. In these facilities, she and 17 other Sahrawi women underwent regular torture and abuse.

The current Sahrawi intifada began in May 2005. Thousands of Sahrawi demonstrators, led by women and youths, took to the streets of El Aaiún protesting the ongoing Moroccan occupation and calling for independence. The largely nonviolent protests and sit-ins were met with severe repression by Moroccan troops and Moroccan settlers. Within hours, leading Sahrawi activists were kidnapped, including Haidar, who was brutally beaten by Moroccan occupation forces. Sahrawi students at Moroccan universities then organized solidarity demonstrations, hunger strikes, and other forms of nonviolent protests. Throughout the remainder of 2005, the intifada continued with both spontaneous and planned protests, all of which were met with harsh repression by Moroccan authorities.

Haidar was released within seven months as a result of pressure from Amnesty International and the European parliament. Meanwhile, nonviolent protests have continued, despite ongoing repression by U.S.-supported Moroccan authorities. Despite the continued disappearances, killings, beatings and torture, Haidar has continued to advocate nonviolent action. In addition to organizing efforts at home, she traveled extensively to raise awareness internationally about the ongoing Moroccan occupation and advocate for the Sahrawi people’s right to self-determination. For this reason, she has been forced into exile from her homeland.

U.S. Increases Backing for Morocco

As the repression grew, so did U.S. support for Morocco. The Bush administration increased military and security assistance five-fold and also signed a free-trade agreement, remaining silent over the deteriorating human rights situation in the occupied Western Sahara while heaping praise on King Mohammed VI’s domestic political and economic reforms.

However, the occupation itself continues to prove problematic for Morocco. The nonviolent resistance to the occupation continues. Most of the international community, despite French and American efforts, has refused to recognize Morocco’s illegal annexation of the territory.

As a result, the Moroccan kingdom recently advocated an autonomy plan for the territory. The Sahrawis, with the support of most of the world’s nations, rejected the proposal since it is based on the assumption that Western Sahara is part of Morocco, a contention that the UN, the World Court, the African Union, and a broad consensus of international legal opinion have long rejected. To accept Morocco’s autonomy plan would mean that, for the first time since the founding of the UN and the ratification of the UN Charter more than 60 years ago, the international community would be endorsing

the expansion of a country's territory by military force and without consent of the subjected population, thereby establishing a very dangerous and destabilizing precedent.

In addition, Morocco's proposal contains no enforcement mechanisms, nor are there indications of any improvement of the current poor human rights situation. It's also unclear how much autonomy Morocco is offering, since it would retain control of Western Sahara's natural resources and law enforcement. In addition, the proposal appears to indicate that all powers not specifically vested in the autonomous region would remain with the kingdom.

Despite this, Secretary of State Clinton appeared to endorse Morocco's plans for annexation under the name of autonomy. In an interview during her recent visit she refused to call for a referendum on the fate of the territory in accordance with a series of UN Security Council resolutions. Instead, she backed Moroccan calls for "mediation," which would not offer the people of the territory a say in their future, as required by international law and reaffirmed in the case of Western Sahara by a landmark opinion of the International Court of Justice.

Meanwhile, key House Democrats have weighed in support of Morocco's right of conquest as well, with Rep. Gary Ackerman, D-NY, who chairs the Subcommittee on the Middle East, joining Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-MD signing a letter endorsing Morocco's autonomy plan. Prominent Republicans signing the letter included Minority Leader John Boehner, R-OH; House Republican Whip Roy Blunt, R-MO; and former House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-IL. Indeed, more than 80 of the signers are either committee chairmen or ranking members of key committees, subcommittees and elected leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives; yet another indication in this post-Cold War era of a growing bipartisan effort to undermine the longstanding principle of the right of self-determination.

It is particularly ironic that Morocco's autonomy plan has received such strong bipartisan support since the United States rejected a more generous autonomy plan for Kosovo and instead pushed for UN recognition of that nation's unilateral declaration of independence. This double standard is all the more glaring given that Kosovo is legally part of Serbia and Western Sahara is legally a country under foreign military occupation.

Next Steps

Given the reluctance of the Obama administration to publicly demand that the Moroccans end their forced exile of Aminatou Haidar and release political prisoners, their freedom may depend on the willingness of human rights activists to mobilize on their behalf. Indeed, this may be the only hope for Western Sahara as a whole.

Western Sahara remains an occupied territory only because Morocco has refused to abide by a series of UN Security Council resolutions calling on the kingdom to end its occupation and recognize the right of the people of that territory to self-determination. Morocco has been able to persist in its defiance of its international legal obligations because France and the United States, which wield veto power in the UN Security Council, have blocked the enforcement of these resolutions. In addition, France and the United States served as principal suppliers of the armaments and other security assistance to Moroccan occupation forces. As a result, nonviolent action by the citizens of France, the United States and other countries that enable Morocco to maintain its occupation would be as least as important as the Sahrawis' nonviolent resistance against Morocco's occupation policies. Such campaigns played a major role in forcing the United States, Australia and Great Britain to cease their support for Indonesia's occupation of East Timor. Solidarity networks in support of Western Sahara have emerged in dozens of countries around the world, most notably in Spain and Norway, but not yet in the United States, where it could matter most.

A successful nonviolent independence struggle by an Arab Muslim people under Haidar's leadership could set an important precedent. It would demonstrate how, against great odds, an outnumbered and outgunned population could win through the power of nonviolence in a part of the world where resistance to autocratic rule and foreign military occupation has often spawned acts of terrorism and other violence. Furthermore, the participatory democratic structure within the Sahrawi resistance movement and the prominence of women in key positions of leadership could serve as an important model in a region where authoritarian and patriarchal forms of governance have traditionally dominated.

The eventual outcome rests not just on the Sahrawis alone, but whether the international community, particularly those of us in the United States, decide whether such a struggle is worthy of our support.