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## Upsurge in repression challenges nonviolent resistance in Western Sahara

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On November 8, Moroccan occupation forces [attacked](#) a tent city of as many as 12,000 Western Saharans just outside of Al Aioun, in the culminating act of a months-long protest of discrimination against the indigenous Sahrawi population and worsening economic conditions. Not only was the scale of the crackdown unprecedented, so was the popular reaction: In a dramatic departure from the almost exclusively nonviolent protests of recent years, the local population turned on their occupiers, engaging in widespread rioting and arson. As of this writing, the details of these events are unclear, but they underscore the urgent need for global civil society to support those who have been struggling nonviolently for their right of self-determination and to challenge western governments which back the regime responsible for the repression.

[Western Sahara](#) is a sparsely-populated nation located on the Atlantic coast of northwestern Africa. Traditionally inhabited by nomadic Arab tribes, collectively known as [Sahrawis](#) and famous for their long history of resistance to outside domination, the land was occupied by Spain from the late 1800s through the mid-1970s. The nationalist [Polisario Front](#) launched an armed independence struggle against Spain in 1973, and Madrid eventually promised the people of what was then still known as the [Spanish Sahara](#) a referendum on the fate of the territory by the end of 1975. Irredentist claims by Morocco and Mauritania were brought before the International Court of Justice, which [ruled in favour](#) of the Sahrawis' right to self-determination. A special [Visiting Mission](#) from the United Nations engaged in an investigation that same year and reported that the vast majority of Sahrawis supported independence under the leadership of the Polisario, not integration with Morocco or Mauritania. Under pressure from the United States, which did not want to see the leftist Polisario come to power, Spain [renege](#)d on its promise for a referendum and instead agreed to partition the territory between the pro-Western countries of Morocco and Mauritania.

As Moroccan forces moved into Western Sahara, most of the population fled to [refugee camps](#) in neighboring Algeria. Morocco and Mauritania rejected a series of unanimous UN Security Council resolutions calling for the withdrawal of foreign forces and recognition of the Sahrawis' right of self-determination. The United States and France, meanwhile, despite voting in favor of these resolutions, blocked the UN from enforcing them. Meanwhile, the Polisario – which had been driven from the more heavily populated northern and western parts of the country – declared independence as the [Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic](#). Thanks in part to the Algerians providing significant amounts of military equipment and economic support, Polisario guerrillas fought well against both occupying armies. Mauritania was defeated by 1979, agreeing to turn their third of Western Sahara over to the [Polisario](#). However, the Moroccans then annexed that remaining southern part of the country as well.

The [Polisario](#) then focused their armed struggle against Morocco and, by 1982, had liberated nearly 85% of their country. Over the next four years, however, the tide of the war was reversed in Morocco's favor thanks to dramatic increases in American and French support for the Moroccan war effort, with U.S. forces providing

important [training](#) for the Moroccan army in counter-insurgency tactics and helping with the construction of a wall which kept the Polisario out of most of their country. Meanwhile, the Moroccan government, through generous housing subsidies and other benefits, successfully encouraged thousands of [Moroccan settlers](#) to immigrate to Western Sahara. By the early 1990s, these Moroccan settlers outnumbered the remaining Sahrawis indigenous to the territory by a ratio of more than 2:1.

A cease fire in 1991 was part of an agreement that would have allowed for the return of Sahrawi refugees to Western Sahara followed by a UN-supervised referendum on the fate of the territory. Neither the repatriation nor the referendum took place, however, due to Moroccan insistence on stacking the voter rolls with Moroccan settlers and other Moroccan citizens that it claimed had tribal links to Western Sahara. To break the stalemate, the UN Security Council passed a [resolution](#) in 2004 which would allow Moroccan settlers to also vote in the referendum following five years of autonomy. Morocco, however, rejected this proposal too, with the apparent reassurance that the French and Americans would yet again threaten to veto any resolution imposing sanctions or other pressures on them to compromise.

### **Unarmed popular resistance**

As happened during the 1980s in both South Africa and the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, the locus of the Western Sahara freedom struggle shifted from the military and diplomatic initiatives of an exiled armed movement to a largely unarmed popular resistance from within, as young activists in the occupied territory and even in Sahrawi-populated parts of southern Morocco confronted Moroccan troops in street demonstrations and other forms of nonviolent action, despite the risk of shootings, mass arrests, and torture. Sahrawis from different sectors of society have engaged in protests, strikes, cultural celebrations, and other forms of civil resistance focused on such issues as educational policy, human rights, the release of political prisoners, and the right to self-determination. They also raised the cost of occupation for the Moroccan government and increased the visibility of the Sahrawi cause. Indeed, perhaps most significantly, civil resistance helped to build support for the Sahrawi movement among international NGO's, solidarity groups and even sympathetic Moroccans.

Internet communication became a key element in the Saharawi movement, with public chat rooms evolving as vital centres for sending messages, as breaking news regarding the burgeoning resistance campaign reached those in the Saharawi diaspora and among international activists. Despite attempts by the Moroccans to disrupt these contacts, the diaspora has continued to provide financial and other support to the resistance. Though there have been complaints from inside the territory that support for their movement by the older generation of Polisario leaders was inadequate, the Polisario appears to have recognized that by having signed a cease-fire and then having had Morocco reject the diplomatic solution expected in return, it has essentially played all its cards. So there was a growing recognition that the only real hope for independence has to come from within the occupied territory in combination with solidarity efforts from global civil society. There have been some [small victories](#), such as the successful campaign which led to Sahrawi nonviolent resistance leader Aminatou Haidar [securing](#) the 2008 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, as well as forcing Moroccan authorities to reverse their expulsion order in December 2009, which resulted in her near-fatal 30-day [hunger strike](#).

Aminatou Haidar, Sahrawi activist who won the Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Prize After Moroccan authorities' use of force to break up the large and prolonged demonstrations in 2005 -2006, the resistance subsequently opted mainly for smaller protests, some of which were planned and some of which were spontaneous. A typical protest would begin on a street corner or a plaza where a Sahrawi flag would be unfurled, women would start ululating, and people would begin chanting pro-independence slogans. Within a few minutes, soldiers and police would arrive, and the crowd would quickly scatter. Other tactics have included leafleting, graffiti (including tagging the homes of collaborators), and cultural celebrations with political overtones. Such

nonviolent actions, while broadly supported by the people, appear to have been less a part of coordinated resistance than a result of action by individuals. Still, the Moroccan government's regular use of violent repression to subdue the Sahrawi-led nonviolent protests suggests that civil resistance is seen as a threat to Moroccan control. One of the obstacles to the internal resistance is that Moroccan settlers outnumber the indigenous population by a ratio of more than 2:1 and by more in the major cities, making certain tactics used effectively in similar struggles more problematic. For example, although a general strike could be effective, the large number of Moroccan settlers, combined with the minority of indigenous Sahrawis who oppose independence, could likely fill the void resulting from the absence of much of the Sahrawi workforce. Although that might be alleviated by growing pro-independence sentiments among ethnic Sahrawi settlers from the southern part of Morocco, it still presents challenges that have not been faced by largely nonviolent struggles in other occupied lands - among them East Timor, Kosovo, and the Palestinian territories.

### **A shift in Morocco's strategy**

Despite this, civil resistance also appears to have forced a shift in Morocco's strategy to maintain control of the mineral-rich territory. Although the Moroccan autonomy plan for the territory put forward in 2006 does not meaningfully address Morocco's legal responsibility to recognize the Sahrawi's right of self-determination (see my Open Democracy article *More Harm Than Good*), it nevertheless constitutes a reversal of Morocco's historical insistence that Western Sahara is as much a part of Morocco as other provinces by acknowledging that it is indeed a distinct entity. Protests in Western Sahara in recent years have begun to raise some awareness within Morocco, especially among intellectuals, human rights activists, pro-democracy groups, and some moderate Islamists - long suspicious of the government line in a number of areas - that not all Sahrawis see themselves as Moroccans and that there exists a genuine indigenous opposition to Moroccan rule.

In the occupied territory, Moroccan colonists and collaborators are given preference for housing and employment and the indigenous people receive virtually no benefits from their country's rich fisheries and phosphate deposits. In response, a new tactic emerged late this summer, as Sahrawi activists erected the tent city about 15 kilometers outside of El Aioun, the former colonial capital and largest city in the occupied territory. Since any protests calling for self-determination, independence, or enforcement of UN Security Council resolutions are brutally suppressed, the demonstrators pointedly avoided such provocative calls, instead simply demanding economic justice. Even this was too much for the Moroccan monarchy, however, which was determined to crush this nonviolent act of mass defiance. The Moroccans tightened the siege in early October, attacking vehicles bringing food, water and medical supplies to the camp, resulting in scores of injuries and the death of a 14-year old boy. Finally, on November 8, the Moroccans attacked the camp, driving protesters out with tear gas and hoses, beating those who did not flee fast enough, setting off rioting and triggering the burning and pillaging of Sahrawis homes and shops, with occupation forces shooting or arresting suspected activists, hundreds of whom disappeared after the outbreak of violence.

Morocco has been able to persist in flouting its international legal obligations toward Western Sahara largely because France and the United States have continued to arm Moroccan occupation forces and blocked the enforcement of resolutions in the UN Security Council demanding that Morocco allow for self-determination or even simply the stationing of unarmed human rights monitors in the occupied country. So now, at least as important as nonviolent resistance by Sahrawis is the potential of nonviolent action by the citizens of France, the United States, and other countries that enable Morocco to maintain its occupation. Such campaigns played a major role in forcing Australia, Great Britain, and the United States to end their support for Indonesia's occupation of East Timor.

Despite 35 years of exile, war, repression and international neglect, Sahrawi nationalism is at least as strong within the younger generation as their elders, as is their will to resist. How soon they will succeed in their struggle for self-determination, however, may well rest on such acts of international solidarity by global civil society.