

# Western Sahara

## Forgotten occupation

For over 35 years the people of Western Sahara have suffered a brutal occupation.

**Shawn Hattingh** gives the background to this invasion and how the Sahrawi Polisario guerrillas and, more recently, ordinary people have, and are, struggling against the Moroccans and their US and European backers and corporations.

The site of occupying tanks rumbling down the street, soldiers beating unarmed civilians and activists being dragged from their houses, on their way to torture chambers, have turned into regular features of life in Western Sahara.

Likewise, checkpoints and a series of militarised walls that imprison the population have become aspects of the landscape. Unfortunately, most people in the world don't know about this and are unaware that Morocco has held onto the last colony in Africa for 35 years through military might. Indeed the occupation of Western Sahara, unlike Iraq or Palestine, has been largely forgotten even amongst many activists.

### ORIGINS OF STRUGGLE

The story of Western Saharan's misery began in the late 19th century. It was in this period that Spain grabbed the area as part of the imperial scramble for Africa. For over 70 years, it held on to Western Sahara through brutal force.

By the 1960s, however, the grip that Spain had over this region began to weaken. Mass protests against the occupation started and in 1971 a

guerrilla movement, Polisario, was launched with the intent of militarily ending Spanish colonialism.

By 1975, the Spanish had come to realise that they could not hold onto the territory indefinitely. That year, Spain issued the promise of a referendum in Western Sahara around the issue of independence. Immediately, however, both Morocco and Mauritania laid claim to Western Sahara.

The matter was taken to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which ruled that the people of Western Sahara had the right to self-determination along with rejecting Morocco and Mauritania's claims. The ICJ declared that a United Nations (UN) sponsored referendum on independence should be held immediately.

Behind the scenes, however, the United States and France were backing Morocco's claims to Western Sahara. The main reason behind this was that the two imperial powers viewed Morocco as an ally in the Cold War. They felt that if Morocco controlled Western Sahara, French and US corporations stood a good chance of acquiring the territory's oil, fisheries and phosphate mines.

Both the US and France in turn

placed pressure on the ailing fascist Spanish state to accept Morocco's claims. In the end, the Franco regime in Spain agreed to Morocco seizing Western Sahara in exchange for a 35% share of the phosphate mines in the country.

With US and French backing, two weeks after the ICJ ruling the Moroccan state marched hundreds of thousands of settlers and troops across the border into Western Sahara in the name of 'liberating' the country. While Moroccan troops were invading from the north, Mauritania launched its own assault and the two states divided Western Sahara between them. The Moroccan elite's desire to invade Western Sahara stemmed, like the US and France, from the desire to claim a share of the territory's phosphate mines.

In addition, Morocco's invasion was a ploy by King Hassan II of Morocco to galvanise his own regime. Hassan's regime had faced a number of coup d'états and uprisings by workers and the poor in the years preceding the invasion. Through invading Western Sahara, the king's regime was trying to blunt growing class antagonism domestically.

At the same time the king aimed to

placate Morocco's nationalist parties and generals through creating a common cause - a nationalist war in Western Sahara. As such, Hassan claimed the invasion was about incorporating Western Sahara back into a 'Greater Morocco'.

### WARFARE AND NO REFERENDUM

What the Moroccan and Mauritanian states had not anticipated, however, was the level of resistance that the people of Western Sahara or Sahrawis, would show.

Polisario immediately resisted the invading forces through guerrilla warfare. The general population also tried to resist, but were overwhelmed and over 150 000 Sahrawi people, half of the population, were forced to flee into refugee camps in Algeria.

By 1979, Polisario had gained control over large sections of Western Sahara and in that year they drove the Mauritanian military out. Fearing that Morocco too would be driven out, the US poured arms and money into the Moroccan military. Along with this they funded the construction of fortified walls, stretching over 1 600 miles, and the laying of landmines to divide up the territory into military zones.

The effect was that Polisario found it hard to carry out military operations and both sides reached a stalemate.

It was in this environment that the Organisation of African Unity put forward a peace plan in 1990, which was also agreed to in the UN. The plan called for a referendum on independence, and it was partially on this basis that Polisario agreed to a ceasefire.

Initially, Morocco also agreed but soon began stalling. Backed by US and France in the UN Security Council, Morocco shelved the referendum and to this day it has not been held. With this, Morocco's official position shifted and it now states that Western Sahara should be incorporated into Morocco as an 'autonomous' province.

### PROTECTING CAPITAL'S INTERESTS

Throughout Morocco's 35-year occupation of Western Sahara, it has relied mostly on force to hold onto the territory.

Since 1975, more than a thousand activists in Western Sahara have 'disappeared' and been killed in torture chambers in Morocco. Added to this, over 10 000 people were killed in fighting prior to the 1990 ceasefire. Moroccan troops have also used mass rape and beatings as a means of intimidating activists and their families.

Even today, the Moroccan state continues to kidnap activists. Since the US 'war on terror' these kidnappings and torture have been conducted under the guise of fighting terrorism.

It is also this brutal force that has protected the investments of corporations in Western Sahara. With the



help of the Moroccan military, US corporations such as Kerr-McGee, have been exploiting oil resources in the territory.

Likewise, fishing fleets of European corporations have been allowed to plunder Western Sahara's coastal resources. A subsidiary of the South African registered company Oceania Ltd, has also been involved in this plunder. With the recently signed EU-Morocco Fisheries Agreement this situation looks as though it will become further entrenched as the agreement gives a green light to corporations to do whatever they want off the coast.

Unfortunately, for the people of Western Sahara it is not only the Moroccan state that has close ties with exploitative multinational corporations, but also Polisario.

In recent years, Polisario has amended its constitution to make explicit that it is committed to 'free' market capitalism. Along with this, the leadership of Polisario have begun negotiations with multinational oil companies around mining rights in Western Sahara. At one point they invited multinational oil companies to bid for access to Western Sahara's oil at an auction in London.

It, therefore, seems that the same problems that have occurred in other liberation struggles fought on the basis of nationalism are arising within the struggle of Western Sahara. This is that the elite within the movement has very different objectives to the base. Indeed, there seems to be a real danger that the elite within Polisario have no real interest in breaking with the imperialist system, but rather wish to be accommodated within it as local partners. This is why they embrace the 'free' market and oil multinationals.



*Demonstration in Madrid in 2006 in support of Western Sahara's self-determination.*

This means that liberation for the workers, the poor and women in Western Sahara will probably not be achieved through Polisario. If it comes to power it would in all likelihood use the state to keep workers, the poor and women subservient to the interests of capitalism, a local and international elite, and multinational corporations.

### WESTERN SAHARAN INTIFADAS

In the last decade and a half, the dominance that Polisario had within the liberation struggle has started to weaken slightly. The main form of resistance has changed from guerrilla warfare to mass protests and intifada (uprising), which has often been outside of the direct control of Polisario even if it remains highly influential. As part of this, the locus of struggle has shifted to the people living under occupation rather than an armed vanguard undertaking raids.

In September 1999, this new form of struggle burst into the open when Sahrawi students organised sit-ins to demand scholarship and transportation subsidies from the Moroccan state. The students were soon joined by workers from the phosphate mines who went on strike and joined the sit-ins. Activists from the Moroccan Union of Unemployed University Graduates also joined the action.

After 12 days the Moroccan security forces moved in to break up the sit-ins using batons and tear gas. In response people organised a mass action to call for the end of the occupation. What was interesting was that impoverished Moroccan settlers, who live in shantytowns in Western Sahara, joined the march and demanded not only an end to the occupation, but also an end to economic exploitation. In reaction, the Moroccan state rounded up thousands of activists. Many were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for being 'spies'.

In May 2005 a second intifada erupted.

It began when a group of human rights activists protesting outside of a prison were brutally repressed. People in response poured onto the streets carrying illegal Western Saharan flags and demanded an end to the occupation. Some set tyres on fire and began to engage the Moroccan security forces in running street battles.

Within a day the protests had spread right across Western Sahara and riots even began to take place in the southern cities of Morocco itself. Even in the capital city of Morocco, Rabat, students at one of the universities pelted the police with stones when they tried to break up a demonstration in support of the uprising.

Again the Moroccan state tried to

put down the uprising by targeting key activists through arrests. Even this failed to quell the intifada, and it became clear that the action was taking place autonomously through people embarking on self-organisation and direct action.

Ever since 2005, nightly clashes between activists and the Moroccan military have become common. It is perhaps this struggle, based on self-organisation, direct action and linking up with the poor and workers of Morocco that offers the most hope for the liberation of the Sahrawi people.

### CONCLUSION

For 35 years, Western Sahara has been subjected to a brutal occupation, which has been largely forgotten around the world. Under this occupation the resources of the country have been pillaged by multinational corporations.

The people of Western Sahara face immense challenges. They face an occupying force, an international elite backed up by an imperial system, and they face a local elite in the movements that are seeking state power in order to be accommodated within the international capitalist system. As such, the people of Western Sahara cannot rely on the 'elite' within the movement for liberation. Rather, if true freedom is going to be achieved, it will have to come through self-liberation via collective action and self-organisation.

Hopefully, this long road to self-liberation has begun, and the intifadas will flourish into a new free society marked by not only an end to the occupation, but also to all forms of exploitation, domination and oppression. LB

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