

Polisario and Western Sahara

By Brigitte Robineault

For the past thirteen years, North Africa has known a protracted guerrilla war between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Polisario Front, a national liberation movement representing the people of Western Sahara (the Sahraouis). This war — the product of conflicting nationalist claims, colonial influence and rich mineral reserves — has played a pivotal role in the sensitive North African political arena and has had some wide-reaching repercussions. Our main concern here will be to examine the context in which Sahraoui nationalism arose as well as the origins, nature and *raison d'être* of the nationalist movement.

Road to nationalism

The Western Sahara is an arid tract of desert covering 266,000 square kilometers of Northwest Africa. It shares boundaries with Morocco to the north, Mauritania to the south and east and Algeria to the east, and has a western coastline stretching 1,062 kilometers. The area is divided into two regions: the Saguia el-Hamra in the north and the Rio de Oro in the south. According to a Spanish census taken in 1974, the Sahraoui population numbered 73,497 and consisted mainly of Moorish nomads with a distinct language and culture, who prized mobility and autonomy, and had a thorough disregard for artificial or imposed boundaries, and who generally remained free of any subservience. Their loyalties were to their tribe, faction and family and they have never experienced political unity as the West understands it.

Over the last thirty years drought, colonization, population movements, the discovery of high-grade phosphate deposits (estimated at 1.7 billion metric tons in 1976) and modernization forced the Sahraouis to abandon their nomadic life and migrate towards the cities.

Spanish colonialism

Colonization was the most important agent of change in Sahraoui society. Although the Spanish had established themselves on Western Saharan soil as early as 1405, not until 1884 was the territory actively colonized, and only in 1958 was full military and administrative control gained. The discovery of large phosphate deposits in 1962 led to large-scale Spanish investment in economic and social development programs for the region. The "Spanish" Sahara became a province of Spain and in 1967 the *Yemaa'* (or tribal assembly) was created to grant Sahraouis representation in the Spanish Cortes, in a bid to assimilate the population.

Education, urbanization and the discovery of phosphate wealth all led to social, political and economic changes in the region in a short 20-year span. The Sahraouis who moved to the cities were given menial jobs within the phosphate industry and were the victims of segregation and repression, which contributed to a nascent community feeling based on their unequal status and homogenization. Becoming aware of the economic viability of an independent Sahraoui state, by the early seventies the Sahraouis began to challenge the unrepresentativeness of the Spanish laws and political institutions. Sahraoui society responded to these changes and challenges in two ways: by adaptation, and by fleeing the region to settle in scattered refugee camps. Although the first stirrings of nationalist feeling would take place in Western Sahara itself, it was among the refugee population that the expression of national identity would become strongest.

The first resolution on Western Sahara adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1964 called for self-determination and heralded the start of a 10-year decolonization process. By 1966 Spain was showing signs of wanting to withdraw from the territory, as Spain was by then one of the last colonial powers still remaining in Africa. It was not until 1974 that Spain finally agreed to hold a referendum for the territory as a result of pressure exerted by an anti-colonial Moroccan/Algerian/Mauritanian front. Spain's hand was forced by two major events in 1975: Franco's death and the "Green March," that extraordinary show of Moroccan nationalist fervor in which 350,000 men, women and children marched into the desert. It was an attempt to assert sovereignty over Western Sahara by a bizarre, "Islamic" (hence "Green") mobilization of Moroccan civilians. Final Spanish withdrawal came with the signature of the Madrid Accords later in 1975, which granted Morocco and Mauritania administrative control over the now partitioned territory.

Western Sahara had known until then a number of nationalist movements, all short-lived and ineffective save for the "Frente Popular para la liberación del Saguia el Hamra y Río de Oro," or Polisario Front, as it is commonly known. This movement led the struggle — with Algeria's backing since 1973 — first underground against the Spanish, then against the Morocco/Mauritanian coalition and now against the Moroccan Forces Armées Royales.

Claims over the territory

The conflicting claims over the territory are perhaps the thorniest issue in this situation. Morocco has contended that the Polisario constitutes a secessionist movement and that it is not the sole representative of the Sahraoui people. Morocco has propounded the argument of a "Greater Morocco" based on geo-

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