Moroccans march into Western Sahara in the Green March, 1975

October 16, 1975

to: November 9, 1975

Country: Morocco
Country: Western Sahara

Goals:
To bring the Western Sahara region into Morocco.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention  ›  King Hassan II declared his intention to hold the Green March

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 038. Marches  ›  from all over Morocco to the city of Tarfaya

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 038. Marches  ›  from all over Morocco to the city of Tarfaya

Methods in 4th segment:

- 038. Marches  ›  from all over Morocco to the city of Tarfaya

Methods in 5th segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 025. Displays of portraits  ›  of King Hassan II
- 170. Nonviolent invasion  ›  of the Western Sahara

Methods in 6th segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 025. Displays of portraits  ›  of King Hassan II
- 038. Marches  ›  back into Morocco
- 170. Nonviolent invasion
Classifications

Classification:
Change
Cluster:
National/Ethnic Identity
Group characterization:
- Moroccan volunteers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
King Hassan II
Partners:
Not Known
External allies:
Not Known
Involvement of social elites:
King Hassan II of Morocco led the campaign

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
Groups in 2nd Segment:
Groups in 3rd Segment:
Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
Groups in 6th Segment:
Additional notes on joining/exiting order:
As far as is known, all participants joined after King Hassan II's original announcement of the march.
Segment Length: Four days

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Spanish Troops in the Western Sahara
Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not Known
Campaigner violence:
Not Known, King Hassan stationed troops on the borders of Western Sahara to protect against any intervention, but no violence was used.
Repressive Violence:
Not Known
Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
4 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
Although the March itself did not immediately bring about Moroccan control of the Western Sahara, it did lead to negotiations and eventual Moroccan control. The infrastructure for the mobilization of this sort very much stayed in place, and the growth of the campaign was incredible, with high sustained numbers throughout the action.

Ever since gaining its independence from Spain in 1956, Morocco firmly held that the Spanish Sahara (now known as the Western Sahara) should be included within its borders. Morocco based this assertion on the fact that some of the nomadic populations in the region had apparently once owed allegiance to the Moroccan sultan, yet the strength of its commitment to securing control over Spanish Sahara may have increased after it became known in the early 1970s that the region contained substantial phosphate mines. Morocco was already the world’s largest phosphate exporter, and was keen to gain control of the newly found reserves. Mauritania also wished to control the region, with similar justifications for its desire.

Spain had been under pressure from the United Nations to relinquish control of Spanish Sahara since 1965. This was compounded by two years of guerrilla warfare by POLISARIO (the Sahrawi liberation movement) and a drawn-out UN led process of decolonization, and by 1975 Spain was willing to step back from its role in Spanish Sahara and to accept the UN’s renaming of the region as the Western Sahara.

On October 16, 1975, the International Court of Justice in the Hague released an advisory ruling which stated that the people of the Spanish Sahara should have the right to exercise self-rule, despite Morocco and Mauritania’s opposition. In response to the announcement, that night King Hassan II of Morocco announced to the entire nation over radio that he would organize and lead a “Green March” in order to “reclaim” the Western Sahara. The announcement of the Green March triggered a massive mobilization of 350,000 Moroccans: King Hassan outlined in his initial address that 306,500 of the volunteers were to be members of the general public roughly representing each of Morocco’s districts (although rural Morocco was over-represented), and the remaining 43,500 were to be government officials, yet all were to take part on a voluntary basis.

Quietly, King Hassan deployed troops along the northwest region of Western Sahara on October 31 in order to fend off any external interference from other African countries, while much more publicly in the south volunteers continued to gather in the city of Tarfaya for the Green March. On November 6, King Hassan gave the signal for the march to begin, and the Moroccans who had congregated in southern Morocco entered Western Sahara.

The Moroccans carried pictures of their king and of the Qur’an with them, as well as flags representing Morocco, Jordan, the United States, and Saudi Arabia. The march itself was called the Green March because of the religious importance of the color green, which symbolizes Islam. The Spanish troops still positioned in the area were given orders not to attack, in order to avoid a massacre.

The march continued for four days until November 9, by which point the marchers had pushed ten kilometers into Western Sahara. Once there, King Hassan called the volunteers back and they returned to Morocco, completely unharmed. On the 14th of that month, Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania arrived at a tripartite agreement during the Madrid Accords, where the three countries were given joint control over the region until 1976 when Spain would pull out entirely.

Over the next decades the region experienced substantial political (and military) turmoil since the native Sahrawi people still
believe in their right to self-determination. Nearly half of the Sahrawi have left the region entirely and are now housed in four refugee camps in Algeria. The Western Sahara remains a disputed territory, and the Green March has become a powerful symbol for Moroccans who believe that the region belongs to Morocco.

Research Notes

Sources:


Additional Notes:
This case illustrates that strategic nonviolence can be affective even in situations that ordinarily are considered to be primarily violent, such as international conquest. Although there was a military component to Morocco's invasion of the Western Sahara, it was the nonviolent Green March that placed Spain in the greatest dilemma.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
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