Sahrawis campaign for human rights and independence in the first intifada, Western Sahara, 1999-2004

September 1999 to: 2004

Country: Western Sahara
Country: Morocco

Goals: Sahrawis demanded that the Moroccon government address their human rights violations against Sahrawi activists and recognize Western Sahara’s right to self determination.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 173. Nonviolent occupation

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:
Classifications

Classification: Change
Cluster: Democracy
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Sahrawi people

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Aminatou Haidar, Ali Salem Tamek, The Truth and Justice Forum, the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders

Partners:
Polisario Front

External allies:
United Nations

Involvement of social elites:
United Nations

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Students
- activists
- members of the National Association of Unemployed University Graduates in Morocco
- phosphate mine workers
- political prisoners

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- The Truth and Justice Forum
- the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders

Segment Length: 8.5 months
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:
Moroccan government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
None known

Campaigner violence:
None known

Repressive Violence:
Moroccan police used violence to break up protests, and “disappeared,” arrested, imprisoned, and tortured political activists.

Success Outcome

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

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
2 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:
The first Sahrawi intifada was not successful in attaining its goals.

In 1975, the Kingdom of Morocco invaded the Western Sahara territory, which had previously been a Spanish colony. Morocco, led by King Hassan II, attacked just as the territory was expected to gain independence from Spain for the first time. Morocco’s actions disobeyed a United Nations Security Council resolution stating that the people of Western Sahara had the right to self determination. The nationalist Sahrawi (the ethnic group of the Sahara, mostly from Western Sahara) Polisario Front, which had been fighting the Spanish, then turned its attention towards Morocco and began a violent campaign for independence. A year later in February, Polisario proclaimed the region to be the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic, which was granted membership to the African Union and recognized by close to 80 other countries. Morocco nonetheless took control of most of the region.

Starting in 1981 and finishing in 1987, King Hassan II constructed a wall, 2-3 meters tall, 1.5 meters wide, encompassing four-fifths of the Western Saharan territory. Many Sahrawi refugees fled to Polisario-run refugee camps in the south-western corner of neighboring Algeria. Others were caught in the occupied Western Saharan territory, separated from their Sahrawi relatives, some of whom were living in southern Morocco, or others who had escaped to the refugee camps. Polisario retained control of a sliver of territory, which they call the Liberated Zone.

Costly violence occurred between the Moroccan army and the Polisario Front until the two parties agreed to a ceasefire in 1991. The agreement said that the status of the region would be determined by an internationally-supervised referendum. The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara was established to oversee the initiative. Morocco, however, blocked any progression in the matter. In order to maintain hold of the Western Saharan territory, the Moroccan government moved 20,000 Moroccan settlers into the region. Since then, protests for independence have come from the major Western Saharan cities as well as southern Moroccan cities.

The first Sahrawi intifada began in late 1999 and was characterized by large-scale protests. King Hassan II, who had pledged promises of democracy and reform, had died on July 23rd, creating new political space. In early September 1999, Sahrawi students held a sit-in at al-Zamlah Square in al-ʿAyun, the capital of the territory, demanding scholarships and transportation subsidies to Moroccan universities located in northern Morocco. Dozens of students sat in a constant vigil underneath tents in the
square, which directly faced Najir Hotel, where United Nations personnel always stayed during their visits. The square was also symbolic because of its past history: in 1970, the Spanish army had killed a group of Sahrawis protesting for independence in the square.

The students were joined by Sahrawi political prisoners arguing for compensation and an end to the common “disappearances” of other political activists. Soon, these two groups were joined by Sahrawi phosphate mine workers and Sahrawi members of the National Association of Unemployed University Graduates in Morocco.

The demonstrators occupied al-Zamlah Square for 12 days before Moroccan officials responded, sending police to break up the protest. Police beat protesters and arrested many; some Sahrawis were reportedly driven out into the desert and left there. The Sahrawi population organized a protest five days later in which they demanded independence and a referendum. In response, Moroccan officials authorized local thugs to ransack Sahrawi homes and businesses. State security forces arrested 150 demonstrators during the protest, and rounded up many more in the early months of 2000. Though security forces released the prisoners fairly quickly, Sahrawi activists accused the police of torture and other maltreatment during detainment. Throughout the first intifada, Sahrawi protests attracted other Moroccan settlers, some of Sahrawi descent who had been relocated and living in southern Morocco for a long time, to their protests. Witnessing the violence and injustices, many of Morocco’s own Sahrawis became disillusioned with Moroccan government policy.

In November 1999, Sahrawi political activists who had been jailed and “disappeared” formed the Truth and Justice Forum which sought government redress of human rights violations and injustices. A branch of this group was formed in al-‘Ayun, Western Sahara by Sahrawi activists on August 26th, 2000. The Moroccan government had little tolerance for the Sahara Branch, stating that it was a pro-independence campaigner, and, in November 2002, Moroccan courts created legislation to outlaw the organization. In January 2004, Sahrawi political activist groups united under the Collective of Sahrawi Human Rights Defenders. The collective demanded the formation of an international commission of inquiry to investigate human rights injustices in the Western Sahara. Aminatou Haidar, the president of the collective and also the “Sahrawi Gandhi” who won the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award in 2008, and Ali Salem Tamek, vice president of the collective, were both, (and still are) organizers of the Sahrawi fight. Also in January, King Mohammed (Hassan II’s son) released and pardoned twelve Sahrawi activists, some of whom had been involved in the Sahara Branch of the Truth and Justice Forum.

Protests persisted throughout the years 2000 to 2004, but small peace developments were made during the time period (such as the Baker Plan of 2003, which was the United Nation’s proposal to grant self-determination to the territory), influencing activist mindsets and the protest environment. By 2005, however, discussions for a peace negotiation had reached a standstill. Out of this, a new wave of Sahrawi nonviolent protest erupted, in what is known as the second intifada. This nonviolent fight campaigned more openly on the issue of independence than had the first intifada, which focused mostly on human rights; however, the first intifada was pivotal in showing Sahrawis that they could dissent, protest, and state their demands.

Research Notes

Influences:

The first Sahrawi intifada inspired a more powerful uprising in 2005, also known as the independence intifada (see database case: "Sahrawis campaign for independence in the second intifada, Western Sahara, 2005-2008").

Sources:


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