



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Sahrawis campaign for independence in the second intifada, Western Sahara, 2005-2008

Time period notes: It is unclear when exactly the second intifada ended (especially since the Western Sahara has never had a lull in Sahrawi resistance); however, there seemed to be waning frequency and intensity of the campaign by 2008.

May

2005

to:

2008

Country: Western Sahara

Country: Morocco

Goals:

To gain independence for Western Sahara.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 107. Sympathy strike
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)
- 162. Sit-in

Methods in 4th segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 5th segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 159. The fast (fast of moral pressure, hunger strike, satyagrahic fast)

Methods in 6th segment:

- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 027. New signs and names

Notes on Methods:

Protests sustained throughout the second intifada, with actions everyday in 2007, making it impossible to list them all. Detained Sahrawis also employed hunger strikes throughout the three years. The Sahrawis also employed very creative actions, including attaching RASD flags on feral cats and letting them run loose and changing street names into French in historically Spanish-governed (the preferred colonial power) towns.

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Sahrawi people

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Aminatou Haidar, Ali Salem Tamek

Partners:

Sahrawi Diaspora, especially those in Spain, Polisario Front

External allies:

Not known

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

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:

Joining order not known

Segment Length: *Approximately 6 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Moroccan government

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

None known

Campaigner violence:

Some protesters allegedly threw stones at Moroccan security forces at the very first protest in May 2005. Similarly, at the student solidarity demonstrations for that May protest, some students also reportedly threw stones.

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:

Despite sustained protests, the Sahrawis were not successful in gaining independence for Western Sahara.

The Kingdom of Morocco invaded Western Sahara in 1975. Morocco has retained control of the majority of the territory, with the nationalist Sahrawi (the ethnic group of the Sahara, mostly those from Western Sahara) Polisario Front, controlling only 20-25% of the land. The Polisario Front has declared the entire Western Sahara territory to be the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD), which has been recognized by close to 80 other countries and granted membership to the African Union.

In 1991, the Polisario Front and Moroccan government agreed to a ceasefire and referendum supervised by the United Nations, which then began the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara. Debate over voter eligibility initially plagued progress on the referendum.

Sahrawi students and political activists began their first protests of human rights abuses from the Moroccan government and lack of progress in the referendum issue in the first Sahrawi intifada of 1999-2004. (See "Sahrawis campaign for human rights and

independence in the first intifada, Western Sahara, 1999-2004.”)

In 2003, the United Nations created the Baker Plan, an initiative to grant self-determination to Western Sahara. Though accepted by Polisario, the Moroccan government rejected the proposal, sparking new protests in Western Sahara and southern Morocco in 2005.

The Sahrawis began the second intifada, or the “intifada al-istiqlal” (intifada of independence), in May 2005. Women and young people led thousands of Sahrawi protesters in demonstrations in the Hay Maatala quarter of al-‘Ayun. Demonstrators lined the streets demanding an end to the Moroccan occupation and the right for Western Sahara’s independence.

The Moroccan police severely cracked down on the protests; after only a few hours, many Sahrawi organizers had been kidnapped from the site. The Moroccan media, notably Channel 2 and the al-‘Ayun channel, was able to report on the protests because they mislabeled them as riots. Meanwhile, at Moroccan universities, Sahrawi students held solidarity demonstrations and hunger strikes.

Ahmed Mahmoud Haddi (“Al-Kainan”) was a political activist who strongly supported Polisario. He had been imprisoned by Moroccan security forces, but was supposed to be transferred from a facility in al-‘Ayun to one in southern Morocco, thus making it difficult for his family to visit him. On 21 and 22 May, Haddi’s family and other political activists held a protest outside of the al-‘Ayun jail, which grew in numbers until police forcefully broke up the crowd on the 24th. This intervention ignited larger protests later that day and on the 25th, with Sahrawis holding RASD flags and yelling for independence. Sahrawis also protested in the Ma’tallah neighborhood and neighborhoods near al-Zamlah square. Moroccan authorities invaded Sahrawi homes, arrested and jailed protesters, and used violence to dispel the crowds.

The next day, more Sahrawis engaged in protests occurring in Smara and Dkhla in Western Sahara and Tan Tan and Assa in southern Morocco. Students at Moroccan universities in Agadi, Marrakesh, Casablanca, Rabat, and Fez, students held solidarity protests, accusing the government of violent repression. Students throwing stones were beaten by the Moroccan police.

After days of these protests, over 100 activists were arrested. In response, Sahrawis held solidarity demonstrations in front of al-‘Ayun’s prison.

Arrests continued in the next few weeks as Moroccan authorities rounded up and imprisoned important leaders. Many jailed activists went on hunger strikes to draw attention to their unlawful arrests, maltreatment, and terrible prison conditions, such as in August 2005, when 37 Sahrawi protest prisoners waged a hunger strike. Jailings presented a new strategy for Sahrawi nonviolent resistance: in addition to hunger strikes, Sahrawis often refused to cooperate during court hearings as a method of protest against their imprisonment.

Sustained protests throughout 2005 also faced strong crackdowns by the Moroccan police. Women and the elderly were no exception to police violence, and two were killed in the second intifada. Sahrawis mostly chose to demonstrate when international figures were visiting the country in an attempt to gain awareness of the human rights situation that the global community had continually ignored.

Smaller demonstrations continued; most notably, students at a high school in al’Ayun unfolded a RASD flag in the courtyard in October. Also in October, on the 30th, Sahrawi protester Hamdi Lembarki was beaten to death by two Moroccan policemen during a protest in al-‘Ayun. He became the intifada’s martyr. Massive numbers of Sahrawis attended his funeral in January 2006. A RASD flag covered his coffin, a poignant symbol of the Sahrawi struggle.

Upon the release of Aminatou Haidar, the “Sahrawi Gandhi” who was imprisoned in the “black prison” on 17 June 2005 and blindfolded and tortured for seven months, Sahrawis celebrated publicly by displaying RASD flags and pictures of RASD founders, and wearing Palestinian-style headscarves. (Read more about Haidar’s protests in this database: “Aminatou Haidar hunger strikes in protest of detainment, Western Sahara, 2009”)

There were many other forms of protest throughout the second intifada. In historically Spanish colonial towns, protesters altered the French street names, a symbol of Morocco's preferred colonial power, to the original Spanish. In another protest, marchers let loose feral cats with RASD flags attached to their bodies, causing Moroccan riot police to race after them in order to remove the flags. Sahrawis also used leafleting, graffiti in public places and at homes of Moroccan government collaborators, and cultural celebrations with political overtones.

For Human Rights Day on 10 December 2006, Sahrawis planned a march, but after discovering that their planned course was obstructed by police, the protesters staged a sit-in in front of a hotel where United Nations personnel were staying. Protesters were beaten and many were arrested.

Sahrawi protesters organized through the Internet, relying heavily on chat rooms (which were nicknamed the 'Sahrawi CNN' due to their importance in disseminating news updates), such as the 'Western Sahara: Voice of Intifada' chat room. Mobile phones were also integral to organizing.

Over time during the second intifada protests became smaller in scale due to the repressive violence and frequency of "disappearances" and arrests. In 2007 Sahrawis were still able to hold at least one form of protest every day, somewhere in the Western Sahara. In 2008, however, the protests became more sporadic and, although the people did not give up, we date the conclusion of the intense campaign as 2008.

Sahrawis in the Saharawi diaspora outside of the region, mainly those in Spain, helped to fund much of the campaign. Activists in the Saharawi diaspora, as well as Polisario representatives in Washington, D.C., U.S.A. greatly influenced the awarding of the 2008 Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award to Aminatou Haidar.

As of this writing there is still no solution to the Western Sahara-Morocco conflict. The 1991 agreed-upon referendum has not occurred and the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara, though receiving a budget of \$60 million annually, has been extended 39 times. Sahrawis continue to protest Moroccan occupation.

In what has been called the beginning of the third Sahrawi intifada, on 9 October 2010 activists created Gdeim Izik camp in al-'Ayun as a form of protest against Moroccan occupation. The camp greatly resembled the initial sit-in and tent city of the first intifada in 1999 in al-'Ayun. After a few weeks of hundreds of protesters staying in the camp, the number grew to several thousand. (Noam Chomsky has suggested that this camp was actually the catalyst of the Arab Spring, not the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi).

What began as a nonviolent protest devolved to violence, however. One month later, on 8 November, Moroccan police brutally attacked the camp. Sahrawis and security forces clashed, using violence on both sides. The camp was taken down, but other Sahrawi nonviolent protests have continued. Protests beginning on 26 February 2011 and continuing until May may have reflected the Arab Spring movement (Arab Awakening (2011)), with Sahrawis demonstrating and conducting sit-ins across the territory.

Research Notes

Influences:

The independence intifada was inspired by the first intifada of 1999-2004 (see "Sahrawis campaign for human rights and independence in the first intifada, Western Sahara, 1999-2004")(1). It also influenced later protest actions in the Western Sahara and Morocco in 2010 and 2011, which have been called by some as the third intifada. (2)

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