

**Prospects for
peace in the
Maghreb region:
A decade since the
Arab Spring**



HUMAN RIGHTS AND PROSPECTS FOR PEACE

WHAT COMES AFTER THE ARAB SPRING?

EMMAUS
STOCKHOLM

HUMAN RIGHTS & DEMOCRACY -HOW ARE THEY CONNECTED?

Although political outcomes of the Arab Spring differ between countries in North Africa and the Middle East, the protests have shown the power of mass mobilization. Authoritarian regimes understood that people were ready to fight for democracy and human rights.

As a decade has passed since the Arab Spring, Tunisian society has undergone significant democratic change. In the post-revolution years, the country has held democratic elections and has adopted a new constitution which guarantees freedom of speech. Nevertheless, in Tunisia and other neighboring countries, people still face socioeconomic issues, including unemployment and corruption. In recent years, this has led to new protest movements. Human rights violations are also being witnessed across the Maghreb region. Independent journalists, human rights activists and civil society are sometimes targeted by regimes. In other words, being critical against authorities and fighting for human rights can still come at a high cost.

The pandemic has added another layer of repression as measures against Covid-19 have sometimes been used to justify restrictions on people's movements. As a decade has passed since the Arab Spring first started, to what extent are human rights respected in the Maghreb region today, and what main factors are relevant to explain the prospects for peace?

Human rights are part of International Law and regulate the legal relationship between states and individuals.¹ In particular, human rights set boundaries to states' exercise of power over individuals. States have legal obligations to individuals, which are articulated for instance in human rights conventions. The relationship between democracy and human rights might seem rather complex, and the two concepts are sometimes described as "interdependent".²

Not only are human rights essential to a functioning democracy, but democracy as a political system is also important for the effective promotion and protection of human rights.³ As emphasized by several United Nations Bodies and human rights organizations, democracy remains the political system that is most effective in promoting and protecting human rights.

FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND ASSEMBLY TUNISIA

The revolution in Tunisia in 2011 ousted dictator Ben Ali and started a democratic transition in the country. Since then, there have generally been improvements for citizens' enjoyment of political rights and civil liberties.⁴ Additionally, freedom of the press has been described as one of the most important achievements of the Arab Spring uprisings and subsequent revolution in Tunisia.⁵ Press freedom is guaranteed under the new constitution, which was passed in 2014.⁶ In the World Press Freedom Index that is conducted by Reporters Without Borders, Tunisia is ranked 73 out of 180 countries in 2021 (with 1 being the best ranking, and 180 the worst) which is a better ranking than any other Maghreb country.⁷

Nevertheless, concerns about democracy and freedom of expression have been raised since the Tunisian President Kais Saïed suspended parliament in July and extended extraordinary powers indefinitely in August.⁸ Following these political events, several members of parliament were investigated and detained, according to Human Rights Watch. The local office of the news channel Al-Jazeera in Tunis was also closed by authorities without an official explanation.⁹

"Activists have been arrested after criticizing local authorities, the police and public officials on social media."

Moreover, activists have been arrested after criticizing local authorities, the police and public officials on social media. Amnesty International has reported that some social media users were investigated and prosecuted after they openly criticized how the Tunisian government handled the pandemic. Police unions also threatened to press charges against people who criticized the police.¹⁰ Authorities have used various charges, such as "insulting a public official", to restrict people from publicly expressing their opinion on authorities. Last year, the police force used excessive violence to end a peaceful protest which blocked all roads to an oil pump, according to Amnesty International. Protesters and civilians in the area reported of injuries as a result of disproportionate violence used to dismantle the demonstration, and several protesters were arrested on arbitrary grounds.

ALGERIA

Arbitrary detentions of journalists and political dissidents have continued during the last decade in Algeria, according to Amnesty International. Journalists and protesters associated with the oppositional Hirak movement have been arrested. For example, journalist Khaled Drareni was sentenced to prison in 2020 for “calling for an illegal gathering” and “undermining national unity” after filming the police when they attacked protesters of the Hirak movement.¹¹ Several UN experts, among them the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, condemned the verdict and called for Drareni’s release. He was later released on parole, but accusations against him remain.¹² According to Amnesty International, the Covid-19 pandemic was in some instances used as an excuse when police arrested demonstrators in Algeria.¹³

A decade after the Arab Spring, self-censorship in the media is still frequent in Algeria, in part because most newspapers are dependent on state agencies for advertising and printing.¹⁴ For example, newspapers generally avoided to report about former President Bouteflika’s declining health before he died in September. Several news websites, such as Tout sur l’Algérie and Algérie Part, have been blocked by authorities in recent years. Reporters Without Borders ranks Algeria as 146 out of 180 countries regarding its current level of press freedom (2021).¹⁵ In other words, except for Libya, Algeria is the worst ranked Maghreb country in this year’s World Press Freedom Index.

MOROCCO

Freedom of expression is limited in Morocco as journalists, activists, and political dissidents face repression on what appears to be political grounds.¹⁶ The authorities monitor and punish journalists who are publicly critical of the country’s monarchy, Islam, or the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara.¹⁷ Since 2016, it is illegal by the Moroccan Press Code to challenge Morocco’s “territorial integrity” which has sometimes been interpreted as an obstacle to freedom of expression concerning the occupation of Western Sahara.¹⁸ The journalist Soumia Dghoughi was fired in 2017 after using the term “Western Sahara” in her

reporting.¹⁹ In the Moroccan media, Western Sahara is usually referred to as the “Southern provinces” or the “Moroccan Sahara” even though the International Court of Justice concluded in 1975 that Western Sahara is not part of Morocco.

In recent years, there have been several cases where critics, such as activists and journalists, have been arrested and prosecuted for what human rights organizations describe as politically motivated charges.²⁰ For example, the journalist and human rights activist Omar Radi was sentenced to prison for espionage, tax evasions, “harming the internal and external security of Morocco”, among other allegations. These allegations against Radi have been described by human rights organizations as politically motivated. Moreover, about ten people were prosecuted between September 2019 and January 2020 after they criticized Moroccan authorities, for instance on social media. Such allegations, when politically motivated, are harmful not only to the individuals concerned, but can also work as a strategic tool for authorities to suppress the expression of people’s opinions. In other words, it can undermine implementation of political rights and civil liberties. In the long term, it can also contribute to increased mistrust against authorities.

WESTERN SAHARA

As the occupying power, it is the responsibility of the Moroccan government to protect human rights in the occupied Western Sahara.²¹ However, the human rights of citizens, journalists and self-determination activists are systemically violated by Moroccan authorities in the occupied territories.²² Earlier this year, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights Defenders, Mary Lawlor, publicly criticized Moroccan authorities for “the systematic and relentless targeting of human rights defenders in retaliation for exercising their rights to freedom of association and expression to promote human rights in Western Sahara”.²³ Moreover, Lawlor stated that: “Not only do human rights defenders working on issues related to human rights in Morocco and Western Sahara continue to be wrongfully criminalized for their legitimate activities, they receive disproportionately long prison sentences and whilst imprisoned, they are subjected to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and torture”.

Freedom of expression is severely limited in Western Sahara, and together with Morocco, Western Sahara is ranked 136 out of 180 countries in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index. Self-censorship is also a common issue in the media in Western Sahara.²⁴ Furthermore, the organization Freedom House considers Western Sahara as one of the least free countries in the world. At the same time, international media’s ignorance on the occupation and human rights situation in Western Sahara is a concerning issue. Something that contributes to the lack of international media attention is the fact that foreign journalists and human rights activists are often denied entry into the occupied Western Sahara, or deported from the country.²⁵ These problems are common especially for foreign journalists who have contacts with Sahrawi organizations.²⁶ Many foreign journalists were deported from Western Sahara after reporting on the large-scale Gdeim Izik demonstrations in 2010.²⁷ Moroccan authorities sometimes take away international journalists’ press cards instead of deporting them, which also makes it difficult to work in the occupied territories.

When access to Western Sahara remains limited for journalists and activists, not as much information about the human rights situation in the occupied territories gets out, which also means that the international community may not become as interested in solving the conflict.

Freedom of expression is limited not only for local and foreign journalists in Western Sahara, but the space for activism towards self-determination is limited in civil society as well. For example, organizations that advocate for a free Western Sahara are frequently denied registry in the occupied territories.²⁸ In turn, such organizations typically cannot open a bank account, rent an office space, or receive financial aid on a legal basis. Moreover, the possibilities for Sahrawi civil society organizations to legally organize demonstrations against the Moroccan occupation are severely limited. Sometimes in the past when such demonstrations still have taken place, activists have been met with excessive force by authorities. For example, excessive force was used to contain the 2010 Gdeim Izik protests.²⁹ In recent years, journalists have been prosecuted and sentenced to prison after reporting on demonstrations.³⁰ Furthermore, activists who participate in protests seeking independence may be punished by their employers by not receiving their salaries or by being relocated to other cities.³¹ Some organizations also report that they have been put under surveillance by Moroccan authorities.³² Members of media groups such as Équipe Média and Smara News state that they have been imprisoned and tortured by Moroccan authorities for their reporting on human rights abuses in Western Sahara.³³



INTERNATIONAL LAW

The Maghreb states have ratified several UN Conventions that regulate different responsibilities regarding human rights. One of these instruments, which is also legally binding for State Parties after ratification, is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR). Today, most countries in the world have signed or ratified the Convention.³⁴ Tunisia ratified the ICCPR in 1969, followed by Morocco in 1979 and Algeria in 1989. After the ratification is completed, the states have a legal obligation to follow the Convention.³⁵ Freedom of expression is regulated through the ICCPR, for instance article 19:2 states that: "Everyone shall have the right to freedom of expression; this right shall include freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of his choice". Similar requirements on freedom of expression are also found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), which the UN General Assembly adopted in 1948.

Different actors in Morocco and Western Sahara, such as activists and journalists, are not free to express critique regarding Morocco's occupation of

Western Sahara without facing risks of severe repression from authorities. Examples of such consequences include arbitrary arrests, torture, disappearances, and politically motivated sentences.

"In Algeria and Tunisia, authorities have prosecuted people in order to restrict freedom of speech"

In Algeria and Tunisia, authorities have sometimes prosecuted people in order to restrict freedom of speech, according to Amnesty International. In Algeria, journalists and protesters associated with the oppositional Hirak movement have been charged and prosecuted on arbitrary grounds.³⁶ UN human rights experts have expressed concerns over the development in Algeria as journalists, activists and civil society organizations are being increasingly harassed for doing their job. In Tunisia, some social media activists have been arrested for expressing their views on authorities online.³⁷ These actions may threaten the considerable progress made on freedom of speech in Tunisia since the Arab Spring.

FREEDOM OF RELIGION

The degree to which freedom of religion is respected varies today in the Maghreb region, even though the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion is regulated for instance through ICCPR (Article 18). The post-revolution constitution from 2014 in Tunisia guarantees freedom of religion, but Islam remains the official state religion.³⁸ Today, officially 99 percent of the Tunisian population are Sunni Muslims. There are also some religious minorities in the country, mainly Christians, Jews, and Shia Muslims. There are no official statistics available on how many people are atheists. According to the constitution, the country's president must be Muslim.

Islam is also the official state religion in Algeria, where more than 90 percent of the population are Sunni Muslims.³⁹ Freedom of religion is restricted by law and the authorities must act in accordance with Islam.⁴⁰

In similarity to Tunisia and Algeria, most people in Morocco and Western Sahara are Muslims. In Morocco and the occupied Western Sahara, it is illegal to publicly "insult" Islam.

LGBTQI+ RIGHTS

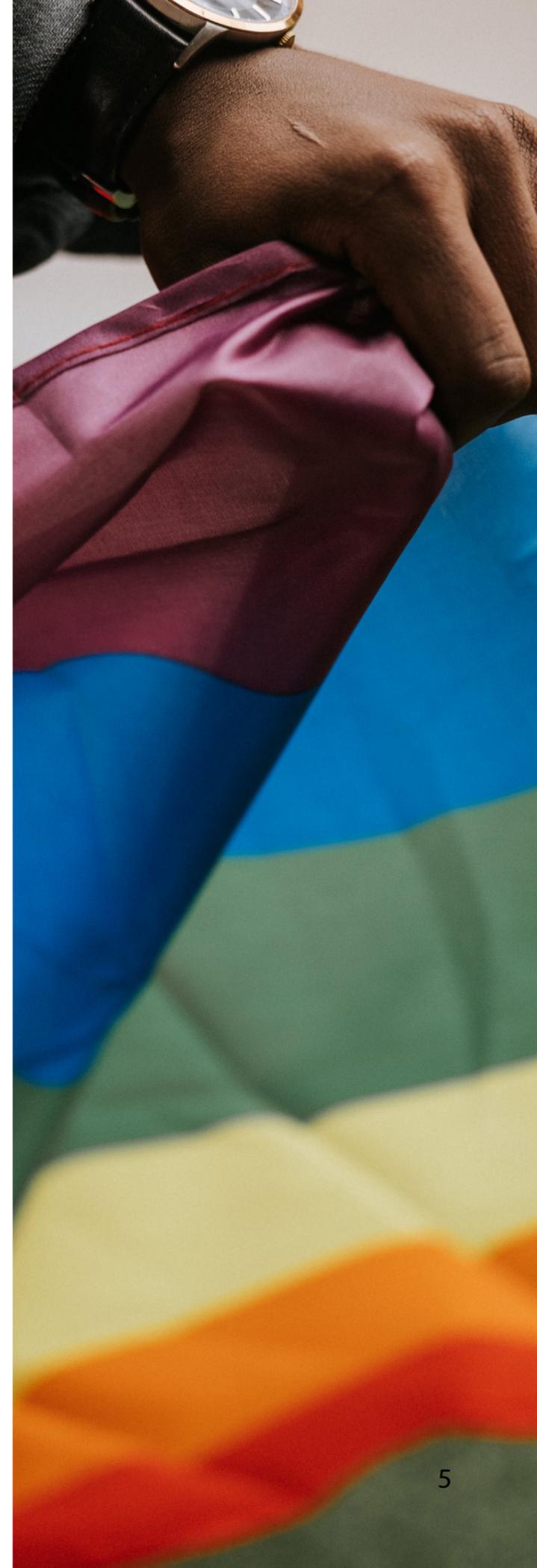
Same-sex sexual relations are criminalized throughout the Maghreb region.⁴¹ In Algeria, same-sex conduct is punishable by up to two years in prison. In Tunisia, "sodomy" is often used as a ground for arresting and prosecuting LGBTQI+ people and it can give a prison sentence of up to three years. Likewise, the Moroccan authorities often refer to homosexuality as "sexual deviancy", which is criminalized under the Penal Code.

Similar terms such as acts "offensive to public morals" and "indecent" are used to prosecute members of the LGBTQI+ community in Tunisia.⁴² LGBTQI+ people's human rights are not only restricted by law, but they are also subjected to harassment and discrimination based on their sexual orientation or gender identity throughout the region.⁴³

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Negative prejudices against the LGBTQI+ community, such as homophobia, are prevalent in society. The social stigma around homosexuality was reflected in an online campaign launched by a group of individuals in Morocco last year, where the group outed people on same-sex dating apps to the public.⁴⁴ The Moroccan state did not officially condemn the campaign.

Moreover, Amnesty International has reported on cases in Morocco where the police have failed to intervene in hate-crimes against LGBTQI+ people that included violence and transphobic and homophobic insults.



COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The pandemic has added another layer of repression as measures against Covid-19 sometimes have been used to justify restrictions on people's movement in several countries in the Maghreb region.⁴⁵ While important in combating the spread of the disease, certain pandemic measures can thus become a threat to fundamental rights and freedoms. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has expressed concern that governments could abuse pandemic restrictions to gain more control over their citizens. Such measures could also possibly amount to violations of human rights. In particular, Guterres claimed in 2020 that the Covid-19 pandemic is a "human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis".⁴⁶ Moreover, there is a risk that pandemic restrictions can normalize governments' "security measures" in the long run, even in post-pandemic contexts, thus threatening democratic values and respect for human rights.⁴⁷ Obviously, this is a potential problem not only in the Maghreb countries, but in many regions around the world.

Amnesty International has highlighted the case of Ibrahim Amrikli, a journalist and human rights activist who was detained in El Aaiún, Western Sahara, in May 2020. Amrikli was later charged with "breaking orders related to the health emergency status" and "offending public officials" under Article 263 of Morocco's Penal Code.⁴⁸

Amrikli has witnessed about being harassed and beaten during an interrogation about his connections to the Nushatta Foundation, which is a human rights organization based in the occupied parts of Western Sahara. Amrikli claims that he also was forced to sign a "confession" during his detention. Because of the official reference to "breaking orders related to the health emergency status", pandemic-related restrictions thus appear to have been used as an excuse in this case for detaining a journalist and human rights activist who operates in Western Sahara.



SITUATION IN WESTERN SAHARA: TORTURE, ARBITRARY ARREST & UNJUST SENTENCES

Being a journalist or activist in Western Sahara who reports on human rights abuses or criticizes the Moroccan occupation is still very dangerous. As many human rights organizations have described, critics often become targets of harassment, arbitrary arrests, unfair sentences, physical abuse, and torture.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, there are still journalists and activists who continue to advocate for Western Sahara's right to self-determination and who report on various human rights abuses.

Aminatou Haidar is a prominent human rights and non-violence activist from Western Sahara who continues to spread awareness about human rights abuses and the Moroccan occupation.⁵⁰ In 2009, she carried out a 32-day hunger strike at Lanzarote Airport after she was expelled from Western Sahara by Moroccan authorities.⁵¹ Over the years, she has been praised for her non-violent methods in criticizing the occupation and human rights situation in Western Sahara. Notably, Haidar was awarded the Right Livelihood Award in 2019 for her "steadfast nonviolent action, despite imprisonment and torture, in pursuit of justice and self-determination for the people of Western Sahara". In other words, Haidar still advocates for non-violent methods in the struggle for Sahrawis' human rights, although she herself is a victim of human rights abuses such as enforced disappearance and torture due to her self-determination activities.

According to the UN's Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, the principle that anyone who is charged with a criminal offense is presumed innocent until proven guilty has not always been respected by Moroccan authorities, especially not in cases where the accused person has been active in self-determination activism regarding Western Sahara.⁵² As stated by the Working Group, this principle was not fulfilled by Morocco in some cases between 2017-2019. The principle of being presumed innocent until proven guilty is regulated in the ICCPR (Article 14:2), to which Morocco is a State Party.

During the start of the Arab Spring, at the 2010 Gdeim Izik protests, Sahrawis expressed criticism about issues such as low living standards, unemploy-

ment, and Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara. Two civilians and eleven security force agents were killed during the dismantling of the protest camp.⁵³ Some protesters were accused of the deaths of the security force agents. In total, about 200 people were arrested after participating in the Gdeim Izik protests. Out of the 200 arrested activists, 25 people (some of which are journalists) were detained in the Salé prison in Morocco, where some of them allegedly became victims of torture. Indeed, several UN Bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international observers have reported that confessions of Gdeim Izik protesters were made under torture during police interrogations.⁵⁴

According to Reporters Without Borders, four journalists who were detained after the Gdeim Izik protests, were put in solitary confinement for six months. They were also beaten, doused with water, and photographed naked in the prison courtyard during Winter.⁵⁵ Allegations of torture against the Gdeim Izik prisoners were never sufficiently investigated by Moroccan authorities,⁵⁶ although torture is illegal in Public International Law as well as in the Moroccan constitution.⁵⁷ Many activists who participated in the Gdeim Izik protests were ultimately sentenced to from 20 years to life in prison.⁵⁸ Several well-known NGOs, such as Human Rights Watch and Reporters Without Borders, describe the Gdeim Izik trials as unfair as the verdicts were based on confessions that were allegedly obtained by means of torture.

Using torture to make someone "confess" a crime is illegal by the UN Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT).⁵⁹ Morocco ratified CAT in 1993 and since then the government is legally obliged to follow the Convention.⁶⁰

In accordance with their obligations to the ICCPR, the Moroccan government must also guarantee that "No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. (...)" (Article 7, ICCPR), and that "Everyone has the right to liberty and security of person. No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest or detention (...)" (Article

9:1, ICCPR). Torture against, for instance, the Gdeim Izik prisoners is therefore illegal not only by the Moroccan constitution, but Morocco also violates some of its legal obligations regarding UN Conventions IC-CPR and CAT.⁶¹

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

The United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) was created by the UN Security Council in 1991, after the Polisario Front and Morocco signed a cease-fire agreement.⁶² Since then, MINURSO's mandate mainly consists of two missions; to monitor the cease-fire, and to organize a referendum in Western Sahara in which the population would get to vote for independence or integration with Morocco. Today, 30 years have passed since MINURSO was first established and yet, no referendum has taken place. MINURSO's mandate has been renewed many times since 1991. At the same time, actors such as NGOs and international observers have increasingly demanded that MINURSO's mandate should be extended to also include human rights monitoring in Western Sahara.⁶³ In fact, MINURSO is unique since it is the only UN mission today that does not have authority to monitor and report on human rights abuses.⁶⁴ As a result, there is a substantial risk that human rights abuses will continue in Western Sahara without scrutiny nor interference from the international community.

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The Security Council has commented on the need for more human rights monitoring by stating in October 2021 that "lack of access by OHCHR to Western Sahara continued to result in substantial gaps in human rights monitoring in the Territory".⁶⁵ The human rights defender and non-violence activist Aminatou Haidar, who was awarded the Right Livelihood Award (known as the Alternative Nobel Prize) in 2019,

has also expressed concern that repression against Sahrawis has increased in Western Sahara since the cease-fire between Morocco and the Polisario Front ended in November 2020.⁶⁶ Consequently, she has encouraged the Human Rights Council to consider the appointment of a "Special Rapporteur on the situation of Western Sahara". Such a rapporteur could monitor and investigate allegations of human rights abuses in Western Sahara. In other words, an extended mandate for MINURSO, along with the creation of a Special Rapporteur, could possibly contribute to more international attention regarding the human rights situation in Western Sahara.

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In 2020, the U.S. government, under the presidency of Donald Trump, decided to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in exchange for that Morocco normalized its relations with Israel.⁶⁷ The U.S. government went through with this political recognition even though the United Nations considers Western Sahara as a "non-self-governing territory" that should be decolonized. The U.S. government's political decision is also incompatible with the 1975 ruling of the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which concluded that the Moroccan government has no sovereign right over Western Sahara.

Over the years, the European Union (EU) has signed several trade agreements with Morocco, some of which are illegal by Public International Law as they include natural resources from the occupied parts of Western Sahara, which the Moroccan government has no legal right to. The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has concluded several times (most recently in a ruling from September 2021) that the EU's trade agreements with Morocco that include Western Sahara's resources must be declared invalid since they lack consent from the Sahrawi people. To support implementation of human rights in Western Sahara, and to respect Public International Law, it is therefore necessary that powerful actors such as the European Union do not engage in trade agreements with Morocco that include resources from Western Sahara, if there is no consent by the Sahrawi people.



CONCLUSION: A DECADE LATER -PROSPECTS FOR PEACE?

HUMAN RIGHTS SITUATION

The 2010-2011 uprisings gave people hope for improvements of human rights in the Maghreb region. Tunisia's democratic transition led to improvements in citizens' political rights and civil liberties. Today, freedom of expression and gender equality is also guaranteed in the constitution. Likewise, Morocco and Algeria introduced improvements on women's rights, among other areas, in the constitutional reforms following the uprisings. However, a decade since the Arab Spring, there are still limitations regarding implementation of human rights in many countries of the Maghreb region. In Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Western Sahara, ruling authorities must step up and take immediate action to promote and protect human rights.

In the Western Saharan case, this includes that Morocco must stop its illegal occupation in order for the Sahrawi people to enjoy self-determination in Western Sahara, in line with Public International Law. It is also necessary that more governments implement freedom of speech, which is still severely restricted in most countries of the region. Freedom of religion, gender equality, and rights of LGBTQI+ people must also be enhanced across the region. It is impossible to implement efficient democratic institutions if core principles of gender equality, freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, transparency and accountability are neglected.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Arab Spring in Tunisia led to the overthrowing of dictator Ben Ali and to constitutional changes, which in turn resulted in democratic transition and freedom of speech. Nevertheless, the country still

struggles with widespread unemployment and persistent corruption. In Algeria, Bouteflika's government made political and economic concessions to deal with the protests in 2011.

However, new protests of the Hirak movement that emerged in 2019 ultimately made Bouteflika resign. Today, people continue to protest for political change in the country. In similarity to Algeria, the Moroccan government made reforms to curb the 2011 protests. A new constitution was introduced in 2011 that transferred some political power from the King to the Parliament. Nevertheless, the King still has significant political influence in the country. In Western Sahara, large-scale protests emerged in Gdeim Izik in October 2010 where people protested against economic and political injustices. During the protests, people also demanded an end to the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara. More than a decade later, independence activists continue to spread awareness about the situation in the occupied territories of Western Sahara, making them possible targets of repression by Moroccan authorities.

NEW PROTESTS AND THE ROLE OF YOUTH

Across many Maghreb countries, protests for political, social, and economic change continue. People still protest to achieve changes such as economic reforms, democratization, inclusion, and transparency. As marginalization, especially among the youth, has remained a significant problem in the region, it is important that young people are increasingly included in decision-making processes. In accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2250, youth should be seen as assets regarding the promotion and maintenance of peace and security. Moreover, there is an immediate need for youth to be more included in the labor market in the Maghreb region.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC - BEYOND THE HEALTH CRISIS

The Covid-19 pandemic has had deep effects in the Maghreb region. Not only has the pandemic put more pressure on health care systems and become a burden economically, but sometimes it has also been used to justify limitations in political rights and civil liberties in the region. Moreover, the pandemic has had harmful effects on the prevalence of gender-based violence. Women have increasingly become victims of domestic abuse as people have been restricted to their homes during lockdowns. Regarding political relations between states in the region, the closing of national borders during the pandemic may have negative impacts for regional integration.

PROSPECTS FOR PEACE?

Increased regional cooperation and integration in the Maghreb region is important not only for the region's economic development, but it could also potentially improve diplomatic relations and therefore play an important role in peacebuilding efforts. Since 1975, Morocco has illegally occupied large territories of Western Sahara. As a result of the occupation, many Sahrawis who lived in the area fled to Algeria, where several refugee camps were established. Morocco and the Polisario Front, which represents the Sahrawi people, were fighting a war from 1975 until 1991, when the parties finally agreed on a cease-fire. According to the cease-fire agreement, a UN mission called MINURSO was going to organize a referendum in which the population would choose between independence and integration with Morocco. Yet, such a referendum has never taken place which has created a lot of frustration, especially among young Sahrawis. In conflict with the 1991 cease-fire agreement, Moroccan forces entered a buffer zone last year, after which a low-intensity war between Morocco and the Polisario Front resumed in November 2020.

Beyond the ongoing conflict between Morocco and the Polisario Front, the relations between Algeria

and Morocco have been complex for decades. The Algerian government is critical of Morocco's occupation of Western Sahara. Moreover, diplomatic relations between the two countries have deteriorated further in the last year. The complicated relations between Algeria and Morocco, on the one hand, and between Morocco and Western Sahara, on the other, may impede future regional cooperation and integration. Therefore, it is crucial that different parties take part in political dialogue. On a positive note, a new UN Personal Envoy for Western Sahara was appointed earlier this year (after the previous Personal Envoy resigned in May 2019) which is a development that could lead to enhanced political dialogue about Western Sahara.

As a decade has passed since the start of the Arab Spring, several root causes to the protests, such as widespread unemployment and corruption, are still present in the Maghreb region. Marginalization, for instance among youth, is still common. Accordingly, feelings of frustration against the authorities have continued. Discontent against ruling authorities may increase the risk that more people turn to populist or violent extremist ideas to bring about political change. In turn, this could potentially become a challenge for democratic transition and have consequences for peace prospects in the region. However, because of popular discontent and frustration, many people in the region continue to fight for their political rights and civil liberties. The new wave of protests that has erupted recently demonstrates that there is still hope among the people to achieve social, economic, and political change.

This is the fifth, and last part in a series of articles about prospects for peace, a decade after the Arab Spring in the Maghreb region.

The article series mainly focuses on four countries in the Maghreb region: Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, and Western Sahara.

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CONTACT:

Emmaus Stockholm

Vretensborgsvägen 6, 126 30 Hägersten

Telephone: 08 - 744 22 22

info@emmausstockholm.se

emmausstockholm.se

TEXT: Agnes Hornsved, Alicia Lindeborg,
Agnes Holm

PHOTO: Juan Obregón, Anete Lusina and
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