

Western Saharan activist admitted into Morocco

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The Western media and petty-bourgeois press have universally declared “victory” in the recent case of Western Sahara independence activist Aminatou Haidar, who undertook a hunger strike after being denied entry to her homeland by Moroccan authorities. However the nature of this “victory” calls for further analysis.

Haidar was refused entry on the grounds that she refused to describe herself as “Moroccan”. Her 35-day hunger strike took place at Lanzarote airport, in the Spanish Canary Islands. It was televised in Spain and drew wide public and celebrity support as Haidar’s health deteriorated. She was admitted to hospital shortly before being allowed to return home after behind the scenes negotiations involving Morocco, Spain, France and the United States.

Haidar had demanded a return to Western Sahara without having to acknowledge Moroccan sovereignty over the territory and proclaimed that her convictions were not for sale. “It is true that this hunger strike is about the individual right of one person to return to her home and her family,” she said. “But it also about the collective right denied to the Saharawi people to live freely in their native land.”

The stand-off had become embarrassing to Morocco, Spain and the US, and was threatening a diplomatic rift in European Union-Morocco relations. Spain and Morocco came close to an armed conflict over an uninhabited islet in 2002, and Madrid has increasingly favoured an independent Western Sahara.

Though Madrid and Rabat have improved their relations since 2002, the Haidar incident led to Morocco threatening indirectly to suspend cooperation regarding illegal immigration, and to stop cooperation on questions of “terrorism”, if Madrid continued to pressure it to allow her to return.

According to former British diplomat Carne Ross, the

incident was sparked by a visit by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Morocco. During her trip, Clinton praised Morocco's human rights record and its plans for the Western Sahara, which it has illegally occupied since 1976. Afterwards Rabat began a crack down against Saharawi activists.

Ross stated that, “I have no doubt that Hillary Clinton would not endorse this flagrant abuse of human rights, on the contrary. The trouble is that it is equally clear that Morocco has taken her words as an implicit permission to enact this repression...”

Morocco is of key importance to Washington as a major supporter of US interests in the Middle East. The US considers it essential to maintain Morocco as a pillar of support in the Arab world, in the face of growing hostility to American militarism. Rabat provides the US military with port facilities and landing and refuelling rights, including CIA rendition flights, and receives more US aid than any other Arab or African country, except Egypt.

The US was also somewhat embarrassed by media reports which unfavourably compared Haidar with President Barack Obama, both of whom were nominated for the recent Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Obama. Haidar, dubbed the “Saharan Gandhi”, has won the Robert Kennedy human rights award, and was en route home from New York, where she received the Train Foundation's Civil Courage Prize for 2009, when she was refused entry. It was during Haidar’s hunger-strike that war-monger Obama received the award in Oslo and justified aggressive war in his acceptance speech.

The Haidar incident was eventually resolved following pressure on Rabat and Madrid from Washington, and the intervention of Paris, which has historically supported Morocco’s position. Both France and Spain then immediately issued conciliatory statements recognising Morocco’s de facto control of Western Sahara until the conflict is resolved.

A statement from the Spanish prime minister's office stated that while awaiting a United Nations brokered agreement, Spain “confirms that Moroccan law applies in the Western Sahara territory.” It also promised Spain's backing for more cooperation between the European Union and Morocco. Within hours the European Parliament suddenly decided not to vote on the Haidar case. Parliamentarian Martin Schulz of Germany announced, “We can help Ms. Haidar more by being quiet rather than voting a resolution”.

Morocco had wanted a public apology and acknowledgement of its control over the territory but settled for the latter. Haidar eventually undertook entry requirements at the airport, including stating on a form that she was “arriving in Morocco”, before returning to Western Sahara, where she declared: “This is a triumph and a victory for international law, human rights, international justice and the Saharawi cause”.

Moroccan Foreign Minister Taib Fassi-Fihri described Haidar, who previously spent four years in a Moroccan detention camp, as “not a human rights activist, but a Polisario agent” whose “propaganda only aims at fuelling tension” in the mediation efforts.

The Polisario Front (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y de Río de Oro) is the military wing of the Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) and was founded to fight Spanish colonial rule in 1973. Spain relinquished control of the sparsely populated territory in 1976, whereupon it was promptly annexed by its neighbours Morocco and Mauritania, whose rulers share clan ties. Fighting then continued over the next 16 years between US-backed Morocco and Polisario, backed by Algeria and Libya (who were backed by the USSR). Mauritania withdrew from its third of Western Sahara in 1979.

In 1991 MINURSO—the UN mission to Western Sahara—was established in an attempt to resolve the dispute, and promised a referendum on the territory's future, i.e. whether it should remain a part of Morocco, become an autonomous province or be granted independence.

SADR and Polisario leaders accepted the UN referendum process as a face-saving measure, following the lead of other national independence movements, like the African National Congress and the Palestine Liberation Organisation, who were seeking a rapprochement with the imperialist powers.

Algeria has backed Polisario as a part of its own border disputes with Morocco and favours an independent

Western Sahara, which it might control and would give it direct access to the Atlantic. However, Algeria has made it clear that it would no longer support military action following the loss of Soviet backing and its reintegration into the Western camp. Libya withdrew its backing for Polisario following a deal signed between Morocco and Colonel Ghaddafi in the mid-1980s.

The UN never had any real intention of challenging Rabat's domination of the territory, which is controlled by tens of thousands of Moroccan troops behind a 1,500-mile defensive wall of sand and minefields.

The referendum issue, initially proposed by the Spanish in 1973, has been the subject of a long drawn out dispute over who should have voting rights, and is still no closer to being carried out. Morocco has ruled out eventual sovereignty for the territory and has stepped up its campaign in favour of autonomy rather than independence, but Polisario demands a referendum with independence as one option. An estimated 165,000 Saharawis have been living in four camps over the border in southern Algeria since 1979.

Whilst Haidar's stance was undoubtedly brave, it will at best only raise the profile of a dispute which has lain dormant for some years. An independent Western Sahara is not in the interest of any of the major players, as the territory is rich in minerals, particularly phosphates, has substantial fishing rights and contains potentially large oil reserves. The demand for national independence implies only the right of the Saharawi bourgeoisie to deal directly with the imperialists over these valuable resources.

Whether Haidar is a member of Polisario or not, her interests are with the Saharawi bourgeoisie, which wants control of its own territory and resources, and not with the Saharawi masses whose own interests lie in unity with the Moroccan, African and European masses in a unified struggle against the machinations of the imperialists and their cohorts in the national bourgeoisies of the region.



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