INTRODUCTION

Jacob Mundy zooms our analytical lens into the phenomenon of Saharawi human rights activism defying Morocco’s repression. He charts this history through the war years (1975-1991), after the ceasefire (1991 onwards) and up to the December 2010 dawn raid by Moroccan security forces upon the Saharawi Gdeim Izik camp in the occupied territory and illuminates how Morocco’s excessive violent approach has only served to fuel the determination of each generation to continue the indigenous struggle for their fundamental human rights under international law.

Below is a selected extract, however the full article provides greater illumination on the intriguing emergence of Saharawi human rights advocates and the youth movement’s innovation of peaceful intifadas, as well as a superb analysis of the Moroccan monarchy and its ‘King of the Poor’. Full article [The dynamics of repression and resistance: Sahrawi Nationalist Activism in the Moroccan occupied Western Sahara](PDF) [2]

In 2001, renowned Moroccan author Tahar Ben Djelloun published This Blinding Absence of Light. The story — written in the first person — is based upon the experiences of a former Moroccan political prisoner, a survivor of Morocco’s most infamous ‘secret’ detention centre, Tazmamart. Located in the eastern High Atlas Mountains on the edge of the Sahara, the prison was not only boiling in summer but freezing in winter. Under international pressure, King Hassan II, who ruled from 1961 until his death in 1999, reportedly destroyed the prison in the early 1990s and released or relocated many of its inmates. Up to that point, Tazmamart had been the home of the regime’s worst political enemies, especially the participants of failed military coups in the early 1970s like the narrator of Ben Djellou’s retelling. Yet according to This Blinding Absence of Light (Ben Djelloun 2006: 31), there was one class of prisoner that was considered even more treacherous than the putschists — Western Saharan nationalists:

‘Baba, the Saharawi who joined our group one evening, froze to death. There were two of them, tall and skinny. The other one’s name was Jama’a. He never spoke. They had arrived exhausted, probably after being tortured. They could hardly walk. A guard threw them each into a cell. ‘You sons of bitches!’ he shouted. ‘I’ve brought you company — some bigger sons of bitches, since they’re even worse traitors than you are. They say the [Western”> Sahara doesn’t belong to Morocco!’”

Whether or not this aspect of the story is fiction [1], King Hassan II likewise seemed to betray a similar attitude. In his memoir, the late sultan stated firmly that, ‘I have always said that, in this country, the rights of man stopped at the question of the [Western”> Sahara. Anyone who said that the Sahara was not Moroccan could not benefit from the rights of man’ (Hassan II 1993: 293).

While Moroccan elite attitudes towards Western Sahara’s nationalists tend to be hostile (to say the least), the Moroccan government has nonetheless sunk billions of dollars into the territory since 1976 — to militarily control it, to build up its infrastructure, to cultivate Loyalist Sahrawis and to subsidise the large number of Moroccan settlers of non-native origin (Damis 2000: 25; Von Hippel 1996). From 1976 to 1991, a large portion of these outlays — then heavily subsidised by France, the United States and Saudi Arabia — went towards the war against the Algerian-backed independence movement, Frente POLISARIO (Frente Popular para la Liberación de Saguia el-Hamra y Río de Oro;
The dynamics of repression and resistance
Published on Pambazuka News (https://www.pambazuka.org)

here: Polisario). With the completion of a series of defensive barriers in 1987 (termed the Berm or Moroccan Wall of Shame), which succeeded in limiting Polisario attacks, Morocco has maintained control of roughly eighty percent of the territory.

A 1991 UN-sponsored ceasefire and two decades of subsequent diplomatic wrangling have further allowed Morocco to fortify its position in Western Sahara. Morocco’s unimpeded ability to create ‘facts on the ground’ benefits in large part from Security Council’s demonstrated unwillingness — owing to French and US support for Morocco — to confront Rabat’s occupation and colonization of Western Sahara as a clear violation of the UN Charter’s prohibition against aggression, not to mention Geneva IV’s famous Article 49 dealing with settlers. Under these conditions, one would think that the Moroccan government has been well placed to win over the hearts and minds of the native Sahrawi population over the past three and a half decades (see Thobhani 2002).[2]

During the reign of Hassan II, it was nearly impossible to gauge Morocco’s success in ridding Western Sahara of indigenous nationalist sentiment. Shortly before Morocco’s invasion, a 1975 mission of the UN General Assembly claimed that the majority of Western Saharanas favored independence under Polisario. Following Spain’s definitive abandonment of the territory in February 1976, the Moroccan government generally adhered to this story: Polisario was an Algerian created mercenary army with no real constituency. And while Polisario continued to claim that the majority of native Western Saharans desired independence, this was impossible to prove. During the first half of the Morocco-Polisario dispute, Rabat’s portions of Western Sahara were strictly controlled military zones. Even following the arrival of UN peacekeepers in 1991, Western Sahara remained largely off limits to independent foreign observers. Only in the past ten years, with the relative freedom’s introduced by King Mohammed VI and, more importantly, the diffusion of new media technologies (e.g., cyber cafes, the internet, digital cameras) has the outside world been able to get a better picture of Saharawi sentiments in the occupied Sahara. These advents have allowed the rapid circulation of texts, images and video from the Moroccan zone, shedding much light on a previously opaque occupation.

For the Moroccan government, much of the new information coming out of Western Sahara did not support its claims of overwhelming native support for annexation. The first major sign that Morocco had failed to win over many Saharawis came in September 1999, when a large numbers of Saharawis took to the streets of Al-‘Ayun — the territorial capital (Shelley 2004). These demonstrations began as platforms to air social and economic grievances, but soon became political with calls for self-determination being launched. In the following years, there was a series of smaller demonstrations. Then, in May 2005, Al-‘Ayun saw some of the largest and most explicitly pro-independence demonstrations in the history of the Moroccan occupation. The famous Intifada May 2005 [3]. In the year following the ‘intifadah may’ (May uprising), the situation on the ground mutated into an almost nightly cat-and-mouse game between Sahrawi youth (sometimes brandishing the Polisario flag) and Moroccan security forces, punctuated by smaller, sporadic and sometimes spontaneous acts of defiance.
Five years later, Western Sahara witnessed, yet again, massive demonstrations for independence in late 2010. This time Sahrawi youth activists established a tent city on the outskirts of Al-‘Ayun to symbolize their socio-economic marginalization under Moroccan occupation. The camps were also a show of solidarity with the 100,000 Sahrawi refugees who have lived in exile in refugee camps in Algeria since 1976. The ‘Gdeim Izik camp - many videos selections on youtube

Interestingly, the Saharawi students and unemployed youth who participate in these decentralised and mostly uncoordinated or ‘rhizomic’ acts of resistance have grown up during the latter half of the Moroccan administration period and, unlike their parents, have no first-hand knowledge of Spanish rule or Polisario. Indeed, there is even an emerging third generation of Saharawi activists who have come of age alongside the UN presence in Western Sahara, activists who have known nothing but Moroccan occupation and visible international acquiescence to it. Though the older or first generation of Saharawi human rights — read: nationalist — activists, the ones who witnessed the Moroccan annexation firsthand and suffered the most from it, form a kind of elite, the youth increasingly constitute the most dynamic aspect of Saharawi resistance. Their open embrace of Western Saharan nationalism, without having been directly indoctrinated by Polisario, should be very disconcerting for Morocco. Morocco’s steadfast reticence to allow a referendum on independence implicitly recognizes and fuels international speculation that many Saharawis — perhaps a majority — harbour nationalist sentiments or are at least receptive to pro-independence ideas.

The failure of Morocco to coerce or convince many Western Saharans to abandon their pro-independence feelings has many roots. In addition to the overriding political complaint (for example the denial of self-determination and national rights), Western Saharan nationalists commonly point towards socio-cultural grievances (marginalisation of Saharawi culture or the ‘Moroccanization’ of Western Sahara) as well as economic factors (unemployment or discriminatory employment practices towards Saharawis, etc). This article, however, is concerned primarily with the apparently disastrous effects of Morocco’s security policy against Saharawi civilian activists in the occupied Western Sahara.

The main claim here is that Morocco’s heavy reliance upon the tools of coercion in the occupied Western Sahara have furthered, rather than dampened, Saharawi nationalist ideals and practices. The reason for this is the formation of an activist Saharawi class whose nationalist careers are rooted in personal histories of suffering at the hand of Moroccan security policy.

The events of May 2005, and the more recent violence of November 2010, are indicative of the new permanent state of Saharawi nationalist insubordination inside the Moroccan occupied Western Sahara. Where one would never see Saharawis brandishing the flag of Polisario in the streets of Western Sahara or on Moroccan campuses before 2005, it has now become a quotidian symbol of Saharawi resistance. Meanwhile, Morocco’s well documented, consistent and continuing reflexive resort to coercion in the face of Saharawi resistance — beatings, detention, torture — has helped create, reinforce and sustain a whole new generation of nationalist activists who know nothing of Polisario firsthand yet embrace its project of independence.

Indeed, it is easy enough to see the relationship between Morocco’s overly coercive security policy in the occupied Western Sahara and the resistance it has engendered. All the major dissident Sahrawi civil society groups are human rights organization led by past victims of repression, especially the
former disappeared. In addition to sustaining and invigorating the very resistance it seeks to abolish, Morocco’s excessively coercive approach towards addressing the problem of Western Saharan nationalism has had another important effect. These cycles of repression and resistance have only helped further convince the Sahrawi refugees in Algeria that they are better off in the camps waiting for independence. Thus it goes without saying that both these trends do not augur well for a consensual resolution of the conflict. They instead point towards something bleaker.

NOTES
[1]. Contrary to Ben Jelloun’s second-hand account, some Sahrawi rights activists dispute the claim that there were any Western Saharans held in Tazmamart. Other Sahrawi activists, however, have heard rumors that there was a special section of Tazmamart reserved for Western Saharan nationalists.
[2]. In Arabic, Sahrawi sing.; Sahrawa plural. The terms Sahrawi and Western Saharan are often used interchangeably though there are ethnic Sahrawi populations native to southern Morocco, western Algeria and Mauritania. In this paper, the term Western Saharan will refer to a Sahrawi native to Western Sahara, whereas a Sahrawi will mean either an ethnic Sahrawi (generally) or a Western Saharan.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT
This paper was originally presented at the 2008 annual meeting of the International Studies Association in San Francisco. I would like to thank the organizer of the panel, Yahia Zoubir, comments from David Sorenson and co-panelists Karima Benabdallah-Gambier and Stephen Zunes. I would also like to thank a very special Sahrawi, Mohammed Brahim (pseudonym), for his comments on an earlier draft, as well as other Sahrawi informants who wish to remain anonymous.

BROUGHT TO YOU BY PAMBAZUKA NEWS

* Jacob Mundy is assistant professor of Peace and Conflict Studies, Colgate University.
* Please send comments to editor[at]pambazuka[dot]org [6] or comment online at Pambazuka News [7].

Categories: Features [8]
Issue Number: 551 [9]
Article Image Caption | Source: © Robert Griffin

(function(d, s, id) { var js, fjs = d.getElementsByTagName(s)[0]; if (d.getElementsByTagName('script')[0]) return; js = d.createElement(s); js.id = id; js.src = '//connect.facebook.net/en_US/sdk.js#xfbml=1&appId=1465091963738031&version=v2.0'; fjs.parentNode.insertBefore(js, fjs); }(document, 'script', 'facebook-jssdk'));

Article-Summary:
Morocco’s repression of Sahrawi resistance through beatings, detention, torture and disappearance has helped create and sustain a new generation of nationalist activists demanding independence, writes Jacob Mundy. All the major dissident Sahrawi civil society groups are led by past victims of repression.

Category: Governance [10]

Source URL: https://www.pambazuka.org/node/74871

Links:
[1] https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/7585
[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_3Um41o2s_g
The dynamics of repression and resistance

Published on Pambazuka News (https://www.pambazuka.org)

[8] https://www.pambazuka.org/taxonomy/term/3272