



Western Sahara — Va-PoReg Country Report

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12/26/1884 Start Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Spain]: During the Berlin Conference held between 1884 and 1885, European nations were defining regulations for creating zones of control in Africa. During this time, Spain declared a 'protectorate over the African coast' from Cape Blanc to Cape Bojador on 12/26/1884. Spain then initiated the establishment of trading posts and a military force in the region. By July 1885, King Alfonso XII of Spain appointed Emilio Bonelli as the commissioner of the Río de Oro, granting him both civil and military authority over the area. In 1924, the territory known as Spanish Sahara came into existence by merging the Spanish regions of Río de Oro and Saguia el-Hamra.¹ Following its independence in 1956, Morocco asserted its ownership of Spanish Sahara as a part of its historical pre-colonial land. In 1957, during the Ifni War, the Moroccan Army of Liberation nearly occupied the Ifni territory to the north of Spanish Sahara. Spanish forces stationed in the nearby Canary Islands thwarted the attacks, with French assistance helping Spain regain control. Through the 1960s, Morocco persisted in claiming Spanish Sahara and convinced the United Nations to include it on the list of territories needing decolonization. Spain relinquished control of Ifni to Morocco in 1969 but retained Spanish Sahara. In 1973, the Polisario Front emerged, advocating Sahrawi nationalism. The Front rapidly built a guerrilla army, resulting in Spain losing effective control over much of the region by early 1975.² On 02/26/1976, Spain officially informed the United Nations (UN) of its withdrawal from Western Sahara, leaving the area without any governing authority. Neither Morocco nor Mauritania received international recognition for their claims, leading to conflict with the pro-independence Polisario Front.³ LIED and V-Dem do not provide any data for Western Sahara.

02/27/1976 End Direct Rule Colonial Regime [of Spain, Right-Wing (Corporatist) Autocracy]/Start One-Party Autocracy: On this date, the Polisario Front declared the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in Bir Lehlou, Western Sahara.⁴ In 1979, Mauritania established peace with the Polisario Front and relinquished its territorial demands. Subsequently, Morocco took control of Mauritania's portion and asserted authority over the entire region. A vote was planned for 1992 to decide if the territory would stay under Moroccan rule or achieve independence, but this was delayed multiple times. When Muhammad VI assumed the Moroccan throne in 1999 after his father Hassan II, the referendum plans came to a halt. Morocco signaled a change in its stance, indicating that it was no longer willing to consider the possibility of a referendum.⁵ The SADR's administration refers to the areas it governs as the Liberated Territories or the Free Zone. Meanwhile, Morocco holds authority over and manages the remaining contested land, which it designates as its Southern Provinces.⁶ As outlined in its constitution, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) functions as a one-party autocracy, a status that persists as long as it lacks authority over its territory.⁷ Starting from August 1982, the highest position within the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) has been the President, held by the secretary-general of the Polisario Front. The President appoints the Prime Minister. The SADR's governmental framework included a Council of Ministers, headed by the prime minister, a judiciary with judges chosen by the president, and the Sahrawi National Council (SNC), a parliamentary body.⁸ On 03/08-03/09/2020, the Sahrawi Republic conducted legislative elections to select 52 out of the 53 representatives of the Sahrawi National Council, the singular chamber of the SADR's parliament. Over 100,000 Sahrawis were registered for voting, and a total of 145 candidates competed in the elections.⁹ As of September 2022, a total of 85 nations have extended recognition to the Sahrawi Arab Democratic

Republic.¹⁰ The one-party regime is justified by the SADR as a necessary measure due to the ongoing conflict and lack of full control over its claimed territory. The situation is complicated by the fact that Morocco controls the majority of Western Sahara and considers it part of its own territory, referring to it as its Southern Provinces. Per FH's evaluation for 1989 and 1990, the territory scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. According to FH's classification for the rest of the assessed regime period, a score between 11 and 14 makes the territory not free per FH, which we also place in the not free category. LIED and V-Dem's PCLI do not provide any data for this time.

One-Party Autocracy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Notes

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Sahara

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spanish_Sahara

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahrawi_Arab_Democratic_Republic

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahrawi_Arab_Democratic_Republic

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Sahrawi-Arab-Democratic-Republic>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahrawi_Arab_Democratic_Republic

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Politics_of_the_Sahrawi_Arab_Democratic_Republic

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahrawi_Arab_Democratic_Republic#Government_structure

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020_Sahrawi_legislative_election

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sahrawi_Arab_Democratic_Republic#International_recognition_and_membership