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# The Politics of Western Sahara

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## Introduction

The politics of Western Sahara represent one of the world's most enduring and complex territorial disputes—a saga marked by colonization, war, protracted negotiation, and the continuing struggle for self-determination. Once a remote Spanish possession in northwest Africa, Western Sahara's fate became a subject of fierce contestation at the end of colonial rule in the mid-1970s. The abrupt withdrawal of Spain from the territory set off a new chapter in North African geopolitics, giving rise to conflicting claims by Morocco and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, which advocates the independence of the territory on behalf of the indigenous Sahrawi people.

Within this unique political setting, two rival administrations have emerged: Morocco, exercising control over the western and more populous part of Western Sahara, and the Polisario Front, governing a smaller portion in the east while maintaining a government-in-exile known as the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR). The former has endeavored to assimilate the territory into its national structure, offering limited political participation under Moroccan sovereignty. The latter operates in the harsh conditions of refugee camps in neighboring Algeria, organizing its own political institutions and continuing to press for independence.

The international community has played a recurring, yet often inconclusive, role in Western Sahara's political saga. The United Nations, still regarding the territory as a "non-self-governing" entity, has sponsored a peacekeeping mission and repeatedly called for a referendum on self-determination—a promise that remains unfulfilled decades later. Various diplomatic efforts have stalled over questions of voter eligibility, the status of Moroccan settlers, and the basic terms of Western Sahara's political future. Meanwhile, other global and regional actors, such as Algeria, Mauritania, and the African Union, have contributed to the complexity of the conflict and its resonance beyond Africa's northwest.

The consequences of this impasse are not solely geopolitical—they are deeply human. Both in the Moroccan-administered areas and among refugees in Algerian camps, fundamental freedoms are circumscribed by the prevailing political realities. The question of Sahrawi self-rule is inseparable from issues of human rights, social justice, and the day-to-day lives of people separated by walls, fences, and ideology. Reports of restrictions on civil liberties, suppression of dissent, and the enduring hardships faced by tens of thousands of displaced Sahrawis highlight the urgency and sensitivity of the conflict.

This book seeks to provide a comprehensive and accessible guide to the politics and

political system of Western Sahara. It traces the evolution of the conflict from colonial rule to the present impasse, examines the organization and function of rival administrations, and surveys the roles of key local, regional, and international actors. In doing so, it aims to cut through misinformation and competing narratives, seeking clarity where politics is often muddied by history, emotion, and strategic interest.

Ultimately, “The Politics of Western Sahara: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Western Sahara” is not merely an account of political institutions or international diplomacy. It is a guide to understanding the roots of a conflict that has left generations of Sahrawis in limbo and continues to test the principles of sovereignty and self-determination in the modern era. With the future still uncertain and the stakes for peace as high as ever, examining Western Sahara’s political reality remains not only an academic endeavor, but a moral imperative.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: Historical Background: From Spanish Colonization to the Present**

Before it became the subject of international squabbles and competing claims, Western Sahara was a vast, sparsely populated territory in northwest Africa, inhabited by nomadic tribes, primarily the Sahrawi people. These tribes had their own systems of governance, often centered around councils that would manage affairs and organize resistance against external forces. For centuries, the region served as a link in the trans-Saharan trade routes, connecting sub-Saharan Africa with the North African coast. While various European powers showed interest in the area from the 1500s onwards, it was Spain that eventually established a lasting colonial presence, beginning in 1884 with a claim over the coastal zone.

Spain's hold on the territory wasn't initially firm. Resistance from the Sahrawi people and the competing colonial ambitions of France, which was expanding its influence in neighboring Mauritania and Morocco, limited Spanish penetration inland for many years. It wasn't until 1934 that Spain fully occupied the interior, consolidating its control over the regions of Saguia el-Hamra in the north and Río de Oro in the south, eventually formally uniting them in 1958 to form the Spanish province of Spanish Sahara. Spain's colonial rule was marked by a degree of isolation for the territory, and its own internal struggles, including a civil war and alignment with the Axis powers in World War II, further limited its focus on this distant outpost.

However, the global tide of decolonization in the mid-20th century didn't spare Spanish Sahara. As neighboring countries like Morocco and Mauritania gained independence, they began to voice their own historical claims to the territory. Morocco, in particular, asserted a centuries-old claim dating back to pre-colonial times. The United Nations, established in the wake of World War II, also began to take an interest in the remaining non-self-governing territories, including Spanish Sahara. In 1965, the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the decolonization of the territory. A year later, the UN explicitly requested that Spain hold a referendum on self-determination for the people of Western Sahara.

Spain, perhaps sensing the shifting international landscape and facing growing pressure, including from a nascent Sahrawi independence movement, eventually indicated in 1974 its willingness to hold a referendum. This proposed referendum would allow the indigenous population to choose between independence or remaining part of Spain. However, this plan was met with opposition from both Morocco and Mauritania, who favored integration with their own countries.

Amidst this growing pressure and internal political changes in Spain following the decline of Francisco Franco, the situation in Western Sahara reached a critical juncture in 1975. Morocco, aiming to press its claim, organized the "Green March," a mass demonstration of some 350,000 unarmed Moroccan civilians, escorted by troops, who crossed into Western Sahara. This dramatic move was a clear assertion of Moroccan intent and put Spain in a difficult position.

In November 1975, Spain, under pressure from Morocco and Mauritania, signed the Madrid Accords. This agreement, which the United Nations did not recognize as a valid transfer of sovereignty, transferred administrative control of Western Sahara to a temporary tripartite administration involving Spain, Morocco, and Mauritania. Crucially, the accords made no provision for the self-determination of the Sahrawi people through a referendum, effectively bypassing the UN's call for such a vote.

Following the Madrid Accords and Spain's withdrawal in early 1976, Morocco and Mauritania moved to solidify their control, with Morocco taking the northern two-thirds of the territory and Mauritania the southern third. This act was seen by many as a violation of international law and the right to self-determination. The Sahrawi independence movement, which had been organizing since 1973 as the Polisario Front, responded by declaring the establishment of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) in February 1976 and launching an armed struggle against both Morocco and Mauritania.

The ensuing conflict, known as the Western Sahara War, pitted the Polisario Front, supported by Algeria, against the forces of Morocco and Mauritania. The Polisario Front, operating from bases in Algeria, conducted guerrilla raids against the occupying forces. Mauritania, facing significant military and economic pressure from the Polisario Front, eventually withdrew from its portion of Western Sahara in 1979, signing a peace treaty with the Polisario Front. Morocco, however, promptly annexed the territory vacated by Mauritania, consolidating its control over the majority of Western Sahara.

The war continued between the Polisario Front and Morocco throughout the 1980s, with Morocco constructing a heavily fortified sand berm, or wall, across the territory to defend the areas it controlled. This berm effectively divided Western Sahara into two zones: the larger western part controlled by Morocco and a smaller, less populated eastern part controlled by the Polisario Front. The conflict reached a stalemate, leading to a UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991.

The ceasefire agreement included a plan for a referendum on self-determination for the Sahrawi people, to be organized and supervised by a United Nations mission, MINURSO. This referendum was intended to allow the Sahrawis to choose between independence and integration with Morocco. However, disagreements between Morocco and the Polisario Front over voter eligibility have repeatedly delayed the

promised vote, leaving the political status of Western Sahara unresolved and the territory divided. The historical legacy of colonization and the unresolved decolonization process continue to shape the complex political landscape of Western Sahara today.

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