



Western Sahara: Morocco expelled 300 journalists, lawyers and activists in ten years

They arrived from 21 countries to observe trials, write news, film documentaries or collect data. The Moroccan authorities did not allow them to be present.

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professor universitário japonês Akihisa Matsuno DR

It's increasingly difficult to get truly independent information about what's going on in Morocco's Western Sahara - Occupied Sahara, to the independentists; the Southern Provinces, Rabat calls them. Foreign journalists have almost stopped trying to travel to the region, such is the speed with which they are usually expelled, and those who try to break the blockade from within face harassment and threats.

Almost ten years ago, Reporters Without Borders described the situation in the territories under occupation as a 'desert of news' and 'a desert for journalism', considering that trying to be a journalist in Western Sahara was an 'act of heroism' and denouncing the 'constant persecution and repression' of Saharawis who tried to 'do journalism outside official Moroccan rule' and who were 'often sentenced to long prison terms'. The situation has not improved.

Entering Western Sahara isn't just difficult for journalists: according to a survey carried out by a French association that will be presented at the 48th European Conference in Support of and Solidarity with the Saharawi People (EUCOCO), taking place on Friday and Saturday in Lisbon, since 2014 at least 300 people from 21 countries, including Portugal, have been expelled from the disputed territory.

In addition to these expulsions, 19 people in transit to the Sahara have been forced to leave Morocco and some people and organisations have simply been banned, including seven major non-governmental organisations from six countries (including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty

International) and the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights himself (or any staff from his office), 'to whom Morocco has [this year] denied access for the new consecutive year,' notes the dossier compiled by AFASPA (French Association of Friendship and Solidarity with the Peoples of Africa).

In the period analysed, researcher and Saharawi rights activist Isabel Lourenço was expelled from the territories occupied by Morocco since 1975 at least twice, once when she had an observer accreditation from a Spanish foundation to attend a trial, and once when she was preparing to visit political prisoners. The Portuguese is a researcher at the Centre for African Studies at the University of Porto and has been to the territory several times, while also taking part in the preparation of reports on the impact of the occupation on children or the situation of political prisoners.

Among journalists, mainly French and Spanish, several groups of young people and university students (dozens of them Norwegian, many Danish and Swedish, but also Americans and Canadians) and even MEPs have been expelled. And of course, many researchers like Isabel Lourenço, who in addition to her academic work has also taken up the cause of Sahrawi self-determination.

This is what happened in 2017 to Japanese university professor Akihisa Matsuno, whom PÚBLICO interviewed in Lisbon, where he is attending EUCOCO. After a few days in Morocco, Matsuno and his wife, fellow researcher Kiyoko Furusawa, travelled to Western Sahara and after just one day were forced to board a plane at the airport in El Aiún, the main city in the region, then in Casablanca, and again in Paris, at Charles de Gaulle airport, where they were constantly under surveillance until they were taken to the boarding gate of the flight that would take them to Tokyo, at which point they were given back the passports they had seized at El Aiún airport.