

To prove their readiness for independence and statehood, the Saharawis have created an impressive government and state, both of which operate largely in exile from the refugee camps. The Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was declared on February 27th, 1976, when Spain abdicated its legal responsibilities and relinquished its control over the Western Sahara without organizing a referendum. In 1982, the Organization of African Unity (OAU) admitted the SADR as a member, acknowledging its status as the sovereign government of the Western Sahara. Over the years, more than 80 countries have recognized the SADR's sovereignty – including Mexico and South Africa – although some suspended that recognition



in the late 1990s and early 21st century.

Since the signing of the ceasefire in 1991, the Polisario has increasingly handed over the administration of the refugee camps and the independence movement to the SADR. It initially did so after MINURSO's deployment to the Western Sahara, expecting a referendum to be forthcoming and thus recognizing the need to have a fully-functioning government in place. As they continue their diplomatic efforts to gain international support, the Polisario points to the SADR to prove the Saharawis' ability for self-rule.

The SADR – enshrined in the Saharawi Constitution, which was most recently updated and ratified in 2007 – consists of three branches of government: an executive branch with a president and 18 government ministries, a legislative branch consisting of a parliament of 53 members, and a judicial branch that applies a mixture of western and Islamic law. While elections for the Parliament are universal for Saharawis over the age of 18, the Secretary General of the Polisario Front – currently Mohammed Abdelaziz – is automatically named the President of the SADR.

“We are not just building a democracy; we are building a state. We are educating a people who have never had this type of government before.”

-Malainin Lakhel, Secretary General of Saharawi Journalists and Writers Union

The Saharawis pride themselves on the level of democracy in the SADR. For them, operating under a democracy is based both in historical roots of Saharawi tribal councils and in strategic concerns in combating a monarchy. Greatly outnumbered by Moroccans, the Polisario recognizes the need for support from all Saharawis, so it enlists their participation through democratic involvement in the SADR. The Saharawi Parliament is home to fierce debate among members, many of whom are younger and newer political participants.



The 18 Saharawi executive ministries include: Professional Development and Employment, Economic Development, Equipment, Commerce, Cooperation, Environment, Transportation, Rehabilitation of the Liberated Zones, Interior, Justice and Religious Affairs, Public Health, Culture, Education and Teaching, Youth and Sport, Defense, Information, and Foreign Relations. Perhaps the most important SADR ministry today is the Ministry of Information, which runs a TV station and several radio stations in the camps. It also maintains a Web site that publishes information on the conflict for a worldwide community. Finally, it manages an extensive National Archive in the camps, where documents, photos, recordings, and videos taken since the founding of the Polisario are stored and digitized. The National Archives serves both to cement the idea of a true independent state and to educate the youth born in the refugee camps on the history of the Saharawis' struggle for statehood and freedom.

Despite the SADR's high levels of participation and organization, many question whether the Western Sahara would be a viable state. Arguments against the SADR's readiness include its unproven abilities at taxation and the large territory it would have to administer, relative to a small population and limited resources. Nonetheless, the Saharawis have proven their capacity to administer three branches of government, an army, and five refugee camps, and have been perfecting their parliamentary democracy over the past three and a half decades. The Saharawis insist that if given the chance, they would create the first fully-democratic country in North Africa.