

The African Union Liaison Office in Western Sahara

The AU established its Liaison Office in Western Sahara in August 1994, to assist in the registration process leading up to the referendum.¹ Today the office, which is based in Laayoune and currently led by Ethiopian Senior Representative Yilma Tadesse, holds weekly meetings with leading members of MINURSO, consults with Morocco and POLISARIO, and provides humanitarian assistance for Sahrawi refugees in the camps in the Tindouf region of Algeria. The AU has long defended the notion for Sahrawi independence and fully recognizes the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic – a stance that somewhat limits its role as a mediator in the conflict.

The Organization of African Unity formally admitted the Western Saharan government on 22 February 1982, quickly prompting Rabat's departure. Today, Morocco remains the only African state outside of the AU, which succeeded the OAU in 2002. The principle of decolonization remains a foundation of the African Union, and some of its larger members have been strong proponents of a referendum to eliminate Africa's "Last Colony," as Western Sahara is often referred to. Yet, the organization has deferred to the Secretary-General's Personal Envoy Christopher Ross, and expressed its unconditional support for the UN process. A November 2010 progress report by the Chairman of the Peace and Security Commission reiterated this position, and called for the "intensification of efforts towards the holding of a referendum to enable the people of the Territory to choose between the option of independence and that of integration into the Kingdom of Morocco."²

While this statement still exhibits a position of solidarity with the Sahrawi people, the AU is also exploring ways to strengthen its relationship with Morocco. Consultations between the AU and Personal Envoy Ross in September 2010, detailed the establishment of a panel of eminent experts to find ways of increasing Morocco's involvement in the work of the AU.³ This initiative along with growing trade partnerships with many Western African countries perhaps signals an evolving relationship between Morocco and the continent's premier institution. A stronger relationship between the two actors may also positively affect the stalled negotiations on the future of Western Sahara.

- 1 United Nations, Report of the Security General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara, S/1994/1257 (5 November 1994).
- 2 African Union, Progress Report of the Chairperson of the Commission on the Implementation of the Tripoli Declaration on the Elimination of Conflicts in Africa and the Promotion of Sustainable Peace and on the Tripoli Plan of Action PSC/AHG/2(CCL) (30 November 2010).
- 3 United Nations, Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation Concerning Western Sahara, S/2011/249 (1 April 2011).