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Morocco/Spain

The isle of discord

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On July 11, 2002 a small band of Moroccan troops occupied a rocky, uninhabited island in the Straits of Gibraltar, sparking a conflict with Spain. The island is known as Perejil (Parsley) by the Spanish and LeA⁷la by Moroccans.

After two weeks of standoff, the Bush administration, concerned at this conflict between its most faithful allies in the western Mediterranean, brought the game to an end with the withdrawal of the Spanish soldiers who had expelled the Moroccans from the island.

The little island has become the symbol of the remaining Spanish enclaves in North Africa, last relics of the empire (Morocco also claims sovereignty over other enclaves such as Ceuta, Melilla and so on). Its symbolic reoccupation by ten Moroccan police officers allowed the Aznar government to use methods that had been thought reserved for the Basque country. Morocco is already stigmatised and considered as the main source of illegal immigration and the drugs trade in the region, but remains a key pivot of US imperialism in the area, particularly after September 11. The occupation of the island might then seem mysterious, but several factors lie behind it. While tension with Spain is always a factor, there are also internal questions at play.

Firstly, the landing on the island coincided with the marriage, amid great pomp, of the 'sovereign'. Three days of feudal feasting with a progressive veneer - the first public marriage of a monarch from this dynasty - supposedly to symbolize the alliance of a 'popular monarchy with its monarchist people'. The occupation was intended to rally public opinion behind the palace.

The situation in the Western Sahara [\[1\]](#) was undoubtedly also a factor, with Morocco wishing to stress its inviolable character. Spain remains attached to the UN plan for the future of the region (involving a referendum on self-determination), but there is no majority support for this inside the EU and the UN plan has in any case been effectively buried by the US mission led by James Baker, envisaging autonomy for the area within the framework of the monarchy and postponing any referendum to the medium term.

However, the perspective of an end to the conflict carries certain dangers for the security apparatus, inasmuch as the conflict in the Sahara has served to justify the maintenance of a military force of 200,000 men. The army enjoys a position of strength within Moroccan society; it alone can contain popular uprisings or riots and the lack of legitimacy of the political establishment allows them to interfere increasingly in everyday life.

The government, then, is seeking an external outlet for its internal bankruptcy, combined with a forced legitimisation of the role of the military. Not a week goes by without the discovery (or rediscovery) of enemies: Polisario Front, Algeria, Spain... not to mention South Africa and the African Union whose very essence seems to threaten 'national integrity'! (according to the newspaper Maroc Hebdo). Throw in a more immediate problem: on the eve of elections, did the ruling USFP hope that, through warlike rhetoric, it could counter the growing influence of the Islamicists who multiply their shows of strength at each demonstration of support for Palestine?

[\[1\]](#) Former Spanish colony invaded by Morocco. The Polisario Front is fighting for its independence.