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Freedom in the World 2010 - Mauritania

Capital: Nouakchott**Population:** 3,291,000

Political Rights Score: 6 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Not Free

Overview

General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who overthrew President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi in an August 2008 military coup, was declared the winner of a July 2009 presidential election. The results, while accepted by some foreign observers, were rejected by opposition parties.

Following independence from France in 1960, Mauritania was ruled by a series of civilian and military authoritarian regimes. In 1984, Colonel Maaouya Ould Sidi Ahmed Taya ousted President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah. Although Taya introduced a multiparty system in 1991, he repeatedly secured poll victories for himself and his Democratic and Social Republican Party (PRDS) through the misuse of state resources, suppression of the opposition, and manipulation of the media and electoral institutions.

Soldiers led by Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall finally overthrew Taya's government in August 2005, and the move was greeted with strong public support. Soon after taking power, the Military Council for Justice and Democracy (CMJD) pardoned and released hundreds of political prisoners, and dozens of political activists returned from exile. The CMJD set a timeline for holding elections and established an independent electoral commission to administer the process. Voters in June 2006 approved a constitutional amendment limiting presidents to two five-year terms. Legislative and municipal elections were held in November and December 2006, with independent candidates, mostly former PRDS members, securing a majority of the seats. Independents also won a majority of seats in January and February 2007 Senate elections. Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, running as an independent, won the presidency in March with 52 percent of the second-round vote. This series of elections were the first in Mauritania's history to be broadly viewed as generally free and fair.

Abdellahi drew criticism from military leaders and members of the National Party for Democracy and Development (PNDD), a pro-presidential party formed in early 2008, after he invited hard-line Islamists and former members of Taya's regime into the cabinet. The government resigned in June under the threat of a parliamentary no-confidence vote, and Abdellahi formed a new cabinet in July that included only PNDD members. This also failed to gain lawmakers' confidence, however, and 48 PNDD parliamentarians quit the party on August 4. On the morning of August 6, Abdellahi fired four leading generals. One of them, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, head of the Presidential Guard, then mounted a coup the same day. Security forces loyal to the coup leaders arrested the president, the prime minister, and several other officials.

Aziz and his allies announced that an 11-member junta, the High State Council (HSC), would run the country until new elections were held, but that other institutions such as the parliament could

continue to function normally. While the international community strongly condemned the coup and key donors suspended nonhumanitarian aid, the domestic reaction was mixed. A majority of lawmakers and mayors expressed support, but a coalition of four pro-Abdellahi parties formed the National Front for the Defense of Democracy, and some parties refused to participate in the junta-led government, which was formed on September 1.

In April 2009, Aziz announced that he would resign from the military in order to run for president. The junta sought to hold a presidential election by June 2009 but faced resistance from opposition parties, civil society, and the international community. Opposition parties eventually agreed to participate in a vote after six days of negotiations in Senegal. Under international pressure, the HSC handed power in June to a transitional government made up of both opposition and coup supporters that would supervise an election set for July 18. As part of the deal, Abdellahi, who had been released from house arrest in late 2008, voluntarily resigned as president, and his former prime minister, who still faced corruption charges, was released on bail.

Aziz won the election in the first round with 52.6 percent of the vote. Four opposition parties challenged the results, claiming that they were prefabricated. The opposition also said electoral lists had been tampered with and voters had used fake ballot papers and identity cards. The parties lodged a formal appeal with the constitutional court, and the head of the electoral commission, Sid'Ahmed Ould Deye, resigned, saying he had doubts about the election's conduct. However, the constitutional court rejected the appeal. Observers from the International Organization of La Francophonie, the Arab League, and the African Union were satisfied with the fairness of the elections, though these groups are typically among the least critical of electoral conduct, and more credible observer groups were not present to assess the election.

Mauritania was one of only three Arab League members to have diplomatic relations with Israel, but in March 2009 the government closed the Israeli embassy in response to Israel's offensive in the Gaza Strip.

Despite the initiation of oil production in 2006, Mauritania remains one of the world's poorest countries, with some three-quarters of the population dependent on subsistence agriculture and livestock production. Mauritania imports about 70 percent of its food, and rising global food prices sparked social unrest in late 2007 and early 2008 that helped to weaken Abdellahi's presidency. In December 2009, the U.S. government reinstated Mauritania's preferential trading status under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA). The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) also restarted their development programs, which had been suspended following the 2008 coup.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Mauritania is not an electoral democracy. The transitional elections of 2006 and 2007 were generally praised by independent observers, but constitutional government was suspended by the August 2008 military coup. Serious doubts have been raised about the legitimacy of the 2009 presidential election, which installed General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz as the civilian president almost exactly a year after he seized power.

Under the 1991 constitution, the president is responsible for appointing and dismissing the prime minister and cabinet, and a 2006 amendment imposed a limit of two five-year presidential terms. The bicameral legislature consists of the 95-seat National Assembly, elected to five-year terms by popular vote in single-member districts, and the 56-seat Senate, with 53 members elected by mayors and municipal councils and three members chosen by the rest of the chamber to represent Mauritians living abroad. All senators serve six-year terms, with a third coming up for election every two years.

Elections for 17 Senate seats were held in November 2009. The Union for the Republic (UPR), formed in March by Aziz supporters, won 14 of the contests. The opposition accused the party of putting pressure on local authorities. Mauritania's party system is poorly developed, and clan and ethnic loyalties strongly influence the country's politics.

Corruption is believed to be a serious problem, and political instability has helped to prevent fiscal transparency from taking root in recent years. In September 2009, the World Bank suspended funding for the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria after an audit uncovered embezzlement. The country coordinator and three other staff were arrested, but had not been tried by year's end. The Central Bank's former governor and his deputy were arrested in November for mismanaging and diverting nearly \$88 million in public funds. In December, two bank chairmen and a prominent businessman were arrested and charged with conspiracy for defrauding the Central Bank, though the opposition claimed they had been targeted for their support of an

opposition candidate. Mauritania was ranked 130 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Press freedom improved during Abdellahi's presidency, but journalists continued to practice self-censorship, and private newspapers faced the threat of closure for material seen as offensive to Islam or threatening to the state. The military imposed new media restrictions after the 2008 coup, beginning with the takeover of state broadcast media. In March 2009, an online journalist for the website Taqadoumy was detained for three days after criticizing the government. Journalists attempted to stage a sit-in at the United Nations offices in Nouakchott in solidarity, but police raided the offices with tear gas. In May the police assaulted a group of journalists and prevented them from covering a sit-in by the National Association of Lawyers. In August, the editor of Taqadoumy, Hanevy Ould Dehah, was fined and sentenced to six months in jail for "offending public decency." Press freedom groups denounced his punishment as excessive. Dehah completed his prison sentence on December 24, but was held through year's end without explanation.

Several private newspapers compete with state-run Arabic and French dailies, although their reach is limited by low circulation and literacy rates. There are no private radio or television stations licensed in the country, but Radio France Internationale broadcasts in the capital, and some residents have access to satellite television. The government sometimes attempts to restrict internet access, though little more than 1 percent of the population uses the medium.

Mauritania was declared an Islamic republic under the 1991 constitution, and proselytizing by non-Muslims is banned. In practice, however, non-Muslim communities have not been targeted for persecution. Academic freedom is respected.

The 1991 constitution guaranteed freedoms of association and assembly, and conditions grew more permissive when civilian rule was restored after the 2005 coup. In the wake of the 2008 coup, however, the junta banned protests and allowed only supporters to demonstrate. Amnesty International reports that the police violently broke up three peaceful protests against the proposed presidential election in April 2009.

Workers have the legal right to unionize and bargain for wages, but unions must be approved by the public prosecutor and often encounter hostility from employers. Although only about a quarter of Mauritania's are formally employed, the vast majority of workers in the industrial and commercial sectors are unionized. The right to strike is limited by notice requirements and bans on certain forms of strike action.

The judicial system is heavily influenced by the government. Many decisions are shaped by Sharia (Islamic law), especially in family and civil matters. Prison conditions are harsh, and security forces suspected of human rights abuses operate with impunity. There are reports that prisoners, particularly terrorism suspects, are subject to torture by authorities.

Mauritania has suffered a series of small-scale attacks by Islamist militants in recent years. In July 2009, a U.S. national was shot dead while trying to resist kidnapping; Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) claimed responsibility, and three suspects have been arrested. AQIM also claimed responsibility for kidnapping three Spanish aid workers and two Italians in November and December. Also in December, the government introduced a new anti-terrorism law, which expands the powers of security services.

The country's three main ethnic groups are the politically and economically dominant Moors of Arab and Berber descent; the black descendants of slaves, also known as Haratin or black Moors; and black Africans who are closer in ethnic heritage to the peoples of neighboring Senegal and Mali. Racial and ethnic discrimination persists in all spheres of political and economic life, almost universally to the disadvantage of darker-skinned communities. Despite a 1981 law banning slavery in Mauritania, an estimated half a million black Mauritania's are believed to live in conditions of servitude. A law that took effect in 2008 set penalties of 5 to 10 years in prison for slavery, but it drew criticism for not covering related practices such as forced marriage and indentured labor. In March 2009, the government announced a \$3.7 million program aimed at alleviating poverty among former slaves. Human trafficking is a serious problem, particularly the trafficking of children for various forms of forced labor and sexual exploitation. The U.S. State Department placed Mauritania in Tier 3, the worst possible ranking, in its 2009 Trafficking in Persons Report.

The Aziz government continued Abdellahi's initiative to facilitate the return of some 30,000 black Mauritania's who had been expelled to Senegal and Mali following communal violence in 1989. More than 17,000 reportedly returned during 2009. They have received housing assistance, but

many faced difficulty recovering confiscated land.

Under rules established after the 2005 coup, party lists for the National Assembly elections had to include district-based quotas of female candidates. At the municipal level, women were guaranteed 20 percent of all seats. Women won 17 seats in the 2006 National Assembly elections and 30 percent of all municipal council seats. Nevertheless, discrimination against women persists. Under Sharia, a woman's testimony is given only half the weight of a man's. Legal protections regarding property and pay equity are usually respected only in urban areas among the educated elite. Female genital mutilation is illegal, but it is estimated that sixty-five percent of women have undergone some form of the practice. Abortion is prohibited except when the life of the mother is in danger.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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