

Freedom in the World 2013 - Mauritania

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2013 Scores

Status: Not Free
Freedom Rating: 5.5
Civil Liberties: 5
Political Rights: 6

Overview

Legislative elections planned for March 2012 were postponed several times during the year, with the political opposition requesting that they be held only after the implementation of reforms ensuring fair elections. In October, President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz was shot – allegedly accidentally – by members of a military patrol, and sustained minor injuries. The authorities violently dispersed a number of protests throughout the year, including ones led by students and antislavery activists.

Following independence from France in 1960, Mauritania was ruled by a series of civilian and military authoritarian regimes. In 1984, Colonel Ahmed Taya ousted President Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah. Although Taya introduced a multiparty system in 1991, he 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.

In August 2005, soldiers led by Colonel Ely Ould Mohamed Vall overthrew Taya's government in a move that received 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 established an independent electoral commission to administer elections. Independent candidates, mostly former PRDS members, secured a majority of seats in the 2006 legislative and municipal elections. Independents also won a majority of seats

in the February 2007 Senate elections, while Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, an independent, won the presidency in March. 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) for inviting hard-line Islamists and former members of Taya's regime into the cabinet. The government resigned in July 2008 under the threat of a parliamentary no-confidence vote, and Abdellahi formed a new cabinet that included only PNDD members. However, this failed to restore lawmakers' confidence, and a top military officer, General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, mounted a successful coup on August 6.

Aziz and his allies announced that an 11-member junta, the High State Council (HSC), would run the country until new elections were held. While the international community strongly condemned the coup, and key donors suspended non-humanitarian 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 refused to participate in the junta-led government.

In April 2009, Aziz announced that he would resign from the military in order to run for president. Despite initial resistance, opposition parties agreed to participate in the presidential vote after six days of negotiations. Under international pressure, the HSC handed power in June to a transitional government to supervise an election set for July 2009.

Aziz won the election in the first round with 52.6 percent of the vote. Four opposition parties claimed that the results were predetermined, electoral lists had been tampered with, and fraudulent voters had used fake ballot papers and identity cards. The parties lodged a formal appeal with the Constitutional Council that was ultimately rejected, and the head of the electoral commission resigned over doubts about the election's conduct. While some opposition parties continued to protest the outcome, the Rally for Democratic Forces recognized Aziz's presidency in September 2010, citing the need for unity in the face of increased terrorist attacks by Islamist militants.

In May 2011, Aziz initiated a new census, the finalization of voter lists, and the automation of national identity cards. Nevertheless, municipal and legislative elections planned for October were postponed indefinitely in August. The Mauritanian Coordination of Democratic Opposition (COD) had requested the delay, claiming that a promised dialogue with Aziz on wide-ranging political and electoral reforms had yet to occur. In January 2012, legislative elections were set for March 31, but were repeatedly postponed throughout the year. The COD asked that they be postponed indefinitely pending reforms to ensure fair elections, including the establishment of a national registration process and the formation of an independent electoral commission.

On October 13, Aziz was shot and wounded while returning to Nouakchott from a weekend outside the capital city; he sustained minor injuries and was flown to France for treatment. According to official government reports, a military patrol mistakenly opened fired on his unescorted vehicle near an army checkpoint, possibly because the soldiers had been startled as he drove by and did not recognize him. However, some analysts claimed that the shooting was an assassination attempt; the investigation was ongoing at year's end.

In 2012, the Islamist rebellion in neighboring Mali continued to impact Mauritania, which had launched a joint military operation with Mali the previous year against rebel troops from Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). In May, the Mauritanian army increased its presence along the border with Mali, though the government ruled out direct intervention. By the end of 2012, Mauritania was host to more than 100,000 Malian refugees who had fled the fighting.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Mauritania is not an electoral democracy. The constitutional government created after the 2006 and 2007 elections was ousted by the 2008 military coup. The legitimacy of the 2009 presidential election, which installed coup leader Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz as the civilian president, was challenged by the opposition but declared generally free and fair by international observers. Legislative elections scheduled for October 2011 have been postponed indefinitely.

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 by popular vote, and the 56-seat Senate, with 53 members elected by mayors and municipal councils and three members chosen by the chamber to represent Mauritania's party system is poorly developed, and clan and ethnic loyalties strongly influence the country's politics.

Corruption is a serious problem, and political instability has prevented fiscal transparency. While several senior officials were, for the first time, charged with corruption – including a senior military official and the former minister of finance – these cases have either been dismissed or officials have been ordered to reimburse the government for the amount they supposedly embezzled, with no further legal ramifications. Mauritania was ranked 123 out of 176 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2012 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Despite constitutional guarantees for press freedom, some journalists practice self-censorship, and private newspapers face closure for publishing material considered offensive to Islam or threatening to the state. In 2011, the government ended a 51-year monopoly on broadcast media with a call for applications for licenses from private outlets. By the end of 2012, two private television channels and five radio stations received licenses, and applications for three other television channels were being reviewed at year's end. Defamation was decriminalized in 2011, though fines can still be levied. There were no reports of government restrictions on the internet.

Mauritania was declared an Islamic republic under the 1991 constitution, and proselytizing by non-Muslims is banned. Non-Muslims cannot be citizens, and those who convert from Islam lose their citizenship. In practice, however, non-Muslim communities have not been targeted for persecution. Academic freedom is respected.

The 1991 constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, though organizers are required to obtain consent from the authorities for large gatherings. In 2012, a series of demonstrations were organized by the opposition, led by the COD; the February 25 movement, a youth group inspired by popular uprisings in the Arab world; university students; and antislavery activists. The opposition and February 25 movement called for the resignation of the president, while students demanded educational reform and later the "demilitarization" of universities after police arrested and attacked student protestors. The largest protests occurred on March 12 and April 22, which were led

predominantly by the February 25th movement, as well as on May 2, May 7, and May 10, which were organized largely by the COD. These protests, calling for the resignation of the president, were violently dispersed by security forces, often using tear gas, and arrests were made. In June, one student was injured by antiriot police and had to be evacuated to Senegal for medical treatment.

The environment for civil society groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Mauritania has improved during the last few years, with fewer restrictions on their activities. However, antislavery activists continue to face harassment and arrest.

Workers have the legal right to unionize, but unions must be approved by the public prosecutor and 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. The Mauritanian Lawyers Association (ONA) condemned the 2011 arrests of several judges on drug trafficking charges as politically motivated. Many judicial decisions are shaped by Sharia (Islamic law), especially in family and civil matters. Suspects are routinely held for long periods of pretrial detention, and security forces suspected of human rights abuses operate with impunity. Prison conditions are harsh, and there are reports that prisoners, particularly terrorism suspects, are subject to torture by authorities.

Members of AQIM have carried out a number of attacks in Mauritania in recent years. In A 2010 antiterrorism law removed previous restrictions on wire taps and searches, allowed for individuals under 18 to be charged (which was illegal under Sharia), and granted immunity to terrorists that inform the authorities of a terrorism plot.

Racial and ethnic discrimination persists in all spheres of political and economic life. The country's three main ethnic groups are the politically and economically dominant White Moors of Arab and Berber descent; the black descendants of slaves, also known as Haratins or Black Moors; and black Africans who are closer in ethnic heritage to the peoples of neighboring Senegal and Mali.

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 2007 law set penalties of 5 to 10 years in prison for all forms of slavery, but the law is hampered by a requirement that slaves themselves file a legal complaint before any prosecution can occur. In November 2011, six individuals were successfully prosecuted for enslavement and sentenced to jail, to pay a fine, and to make financial restitution to the victims. In April 2012, Biram Dah Abeid, the head of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA) antislavery group, and seven other IRA activists were arrested for burning Islamic texts supporting slavery. In August 2012, four IRA activists were arrested for taking part in an antislavery protest and given six-month suspended sentences; police used tear gas and batons to disperse the protestors.

Under a 2005 law, party lists for the National Assembly elections must include district-based quotas for female candidates, and 20 percent of all municipal council seats are reserved for women. 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 rarely respected in practice. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is illegal but widely practiced. Abortion is

legal only when the life of the mother is in danger. The country is a source and destination for women, men, and children trafficked for the purposes of forced labor and sexual exploitation.

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