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Human Rights in Africa: Review of 2019 - Mauritania [AFR 01/1352/2020]

The Mauritanian authorities continued to restrict human rights. Human rights defenders, journalists, bloggers and political activists were subjected to intimidation, harassment, arbitrary arrests and detentions, with a peak around the presidential elections in June. Internet was shut down. Police forces used excessive force against peaceful protesters. Slavery and discriminatory practices persisted with impunity.

Background

The Minister of Interior and Decentralisation issued on 6 March a decree dissolving 76 political parties, as they failed to meet the benchmark of 1% of the votes cast over the last two municipal elections or because they did not participate to the municipal elections for the second time. The presidential election took place on 22 June.

Freedoms of Expression and assembly

The Mauritanian authorities continued to silence dissenting voices.

Cheikh Ould Jiddou and Abderrahmane Weddady, bloggers whose Facebook posts criticized alleged government corruption, were arrested on 22 March, charged with malicious accusation, and detained at the central prison of Nouakchott. They were released on bail on 3 June and a judge dropped all the charges against them on 29 July.

On 23 June, the day after the presidential election, internet access was blocked after the ruling party's candidate, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, declared victory. While demonstrations were repressed, the blockage of internet prevented journalists, human rights defenders, activists and opposition members from freely accessing and exchanging information. Internet connection was restored on 3 July.

In the days following the presidential ballot, several journalists, opposition figures and civil society activists were arbitrarily arrested. These include: Samba Thiam, the leader of the Progressist forces for change (*Forces progressistes pour le changement*) arrested on 24 June and released on 3 July; Cheikhna Mohamed Lemine Cheikh, campaign manager of the Coalition Sawab/Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (*Coalition Sawab/Initiative de resurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste*) in Ksar, arrested on June 24 and released on 2 July; Yahya Sy, of the human rights group COVISSIM, arrested on July 3 and released 6 days later without charge; Moussa Seydi Camara, journalist, was arrested on 26 June, accused of questioning election results and released on 3 July; Ahmedou Ould Wediaa, anti-slavery activist, journalist and member of the opposition party (Tawassoul), arrested on 3 July, following statements against the mass arrests of foreign nationals blamed by the authorities for the election-related protests. He was released on 15 July. Also, 10 activists of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement were arrested in late June. Four of them were sentenced to 3 months in prison. They were all released in November.

The authorities also banned the demonstrations scheduled to take place on 27 June by opposition groups to contest the results of the 22 June presidential election.

In October, police forces used excessive force to disperse peaceful protests organized by students against a 2018 decision of the government limiting university enrollments. Dozens of students were wounded. The limitation was lifted on 6 November. Demonstrations organized during the year by a group of victims of alleged property scams were frequently violently dispersed by security forces.

The blogger and prisoner of conscience, Mohamed Mkhaitir, arrested in 2014 for having published a blog that denounced discrimination in the name of religion, was released on 29 July after more than five years in arbitrary detention. He should have been freed in November 2017 following an appeal court ruling, but the authorities detained him at an undisclosed location until his release. He had limited access to his family and no access to his lawyers.

Freedom of association

The Mauritanian authorities continued to violate the right to freedom of association.

An Amnesty International delegation was barred access to the country upon arrival at the Nouakchott–Oumtounsi International Airport on 17 March 2019.

On 3 April, four policemen informed the leadership of the association Hand in Hand (Main dans la Main) that they had to close their premises in Nouakchott. The association which promotes the values of fraternity, justice and diversity was created in 2006 and received a formal authorization to operate in Mauritania.

Unlawful killings

On 16 March, a member of the Mauritanian contingent of the Joint Force of the Group of Five for the Sahel killed a civilian in Nbeiket el Ahouach, near the border with Mali. The Mauritanian authorities opened an investigation.

Slavery and discrimination

Slavery and discriminatory practices persisted with impunity.

Academics, NGOs and human rights defenders continued to express concerns about the persistence of slavery in Mauritania. In its concluding observations on the report of Mauritania adopted in August 2019, the UN Human Rights Committee expressed its concerns regarding the persistence of situations of slavery and the difficulties that victims of slavery encounter in filing complaints in order to enforce their rights. As of 1 January 2019, the United States terminated its trade agreement with Mauritania due to forced labor practices and reprisals against anti-slavery activists.

On 22 November, the Special Court of Nema, close to the Malian border, convicted three individuals for slavery and sentenced respectively to a five-year suspended sentence, ten years imprisonment and fifteen years imprisonment. They appealed the decisions and remain free.

The Human Rights Committee also expressed concerns about the continued marginalization of “the Haratin and black African communities (...), particularly in terms of access to education, employment, housing, health care, social services, land and natural resources”. It raised concerns about legal provisions discriminating against women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex people. Article 308 of the Criminal Code criminalizes “unnatural acts” and carries the death penalty.

Impunity

On 28 November, the Mauritians celebrated the Independence Day but also commemorated the 30th anniversary of the ‘passif humanitaire’, a three-year period that began in 1989 during which black African were victims of torture, arbitrary detention, extra-judicial executions and mass expulsion. Impunity for the perpetrators of these serious human rights violations and abuses still prevailed as the authorities did not repeal the law 1993 law granting amnesty for alleged perpetrators.

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