

World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples - Mauritania : Overview

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Environment

Mauritania is located in north-west Africa and spans North and sub-Saharan Africa. In the north-east it borders Algeria; in the north it borders Western Sahara, in the east and south it borders Mali, and in the south-west it borders Senegal. To the west, Mauritania has a 700 kilometre coastline on the Atlantic. The north lies in the Sahara Desert and most of the country is arid. Many Mauritaniens subsist through herding and small-scale agriculture, made more difficult through worsening desertification. Mauritania's flatlands and plateaus are punctuated by peaks containing mineral deposits, including iron ore. Mauritania has rich coastal fishing stocks, but these are in danger of depletion through over-fishing. The country began oil production in February 2006.

Peoples

Main languages: Arabic (official), Hassaniyya - a dialect of Arabic (83%), Peulh or Pulaar and Toucouleur (5%), Soninké (1%), Wolof (0.3%), French

Main religions: Sunni Islam

Minority groups include Black Africans (Peulh and Toucouleur, Soninké, and Wolof, 45%) and Haratine (40%). It is difficult to provide transparent data on the ethnic composition of the population, as Mauritania is in the process of elaborating census results from 2011.

[Note: Data on White Moors (Beydan), Black Moors (Haratine) and Afro-Mauritanians (MRG's World Directory of Minorities, 1997 WDM. Linguistic data come from Ethnologue in the following years: Hassaniyya (2002), Peulh and Toucouleur (year not listed), Soninke (year not listed), Wolof (1993).]

Four-fifths of Mauritania's small population live in the Sahel and the fertile lands along the Senegal River in the south-west called Chemama. The Arab Berbers or Maures (Moors) who make up perhaps 60 per cent of the population are divided into a dominant group, Beydan (Bithan) or White Maure, and their former slaves, Haratine, who are black but of the same Arab-Berber culture as their former masters. Both speak the Hassaniyya dialect of Arabic. Beydan control the instruments of state and foreign trade. Although slavery was abolished several times, most recently in 2007, these have never been enforced and measures to provide for the ex-slaves' economic integration have never been enacted. Beydan and Haratine still retain a form of master-slave relationship in rural areas. Many of Mauritania's approximately 3 million citizens are traditionally nomadic but have been migrating into towns as drought and desertification destroy their traditional livelihoods.

History

The original inhabitants of Mauritania were the Bafour, ancestors of the Soninké.. During the third century Berbers migrated south from North Africa, often enslaving black Africans already living in the territory of today's Mauritania. Three main Berber clans who formed the Sanhadja Confederation controlled trade routes throughout the Western Sahara. They traded gold, ivory, copper, and also slaves. From the seventh century CE, Islam filtered southwards from North Africa. The Ghana Empire attacked the Sanhadja Confederation in 990 and in then in 1039 radical Islamic monks attacked the Sanhaja Berbers and converted them to Malekite Sunniism. The Ghana Empire receded, and Mauritania remained under a theocracy until the mid-thirteenth century, when Beni Hassan Arabs entered the region from the north. Their migration sparked widespread conflict in the region, despite a shared Islamic faith.

From 1644-1674, the Berbers made a last unsuccessful effort to oust the Beni Hassan. The loss resulted in a cultural fusion. The descendants of Hassaniya Arabs became the so-called White Moors, forming the upper stratus of Mauritanian society. The lowest caste was the Haratine, who were almost all blacks.

Trade with Europeans expanded in the 17th century, and the 1814 Treaty of Paris granted France territorial rights to Mauritania. Initially the French left the Hassaniya to govern themselves in the north while concentrating their efforts on the south. But in the late 19th century Paris decided to attempt a consolidation of control over all of Mauritania. Military control was largely established by 1912.

The French ruled southern Mauritania together with Senegal, investing in agricultural development and education for the largely Peuhl, Soninké and Wolof population. While many among these peoples took part in colonial administration, France exercised control in the north more indirectly through the zawiya, a Berber caste of religious scholars who collected taxes for France. In the south, land titles and aid were distributed to the elite, who used slave labour to establish oases, dams and cultivation plots. Escaped slaves often became slaves of the southern land-owning elite (primarily Tucouleur). Partly to deal with struggles over slave ownership, the French allocated plots to groups of escaped slaves. Conscription during World War II, coupled with the real threat of famine as food imports were disrupted, generated considerable unrest in the country. At the end of the war France responded to this by expanding African representation in the French as well as the local legislature, which in Mauritania brought about the unification of the country and the election of Mauritanian, rather than Senegalese representatives.

Mauritania became independent as the Islamic Republic of Mauritania in 1960 with the leader of the Union Progressiste Mauritanienne (UPM), Moktar Ould Daddah, as President. Daddah was a French-educated lawyer from a prominent marabout family and this background gained him supporters among both Francophone southern blacks and Arab-oriented northerners. France continued to provide aid, and with a strong fishing industry and mineral resources, hopes were raised for the economic prospects of the country. At the time of independence, the vast majority of Mauritaniens were still nomadic.

In 1969 Ould Daddah began a programme of Arabization making Hassaniya Arabic the official language of education and government, amidst protest from southern Mauritaniens. Several ministers and black civil servants were purged and discussion of ethnic problems was banned. Settled black Africans in the south who prospered in relative terms under colonial rule were now dominated by northerners.

When Spain withdrew from the Western Sahara in 1976, the territory was split between Mauritania and Morocco, ignoring the demands of the Sahrawi liberation movement, Polisario and a ruling by the International Court of Justice that Western Sahara should be independent. From 1976 Mauritania was at war with the Sahrawi, who are ethnically close to the Beydan, following Ould Daddah's decision to send troops into the territory. Black Africans and Haratins were drafted into an army that expanded from 1,500 to 17,000 over the course of the war, although they opposed expansion into Sahrawi territory that would increase the Beydan majority. The war was not only unpopular, but also caused a severe drain on the economy despite French and Moroccan support. In 1978 a group of soldiers pledging to end the war overthrew Ould Daddah, and Col. Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidalla became the new head of government. Mauritania renounced claims to Western Sahara in 1979.

A resurgence of ethnic unrest began in early 1979, again centering on the Arabization issue. The results of the 1977 census had been suppressed and black students fared badly in exams which favoured Arabic-speakers. Teachers and students rebelled, supported by a black opposition movement, the Union Democratique Mauritanienne (UDM) based in Senegal. Some minority concessions on the use of French were made but arrests of blacks continued into 1980. Haidalla announced a new ban on slavery in 1980, but the practice persisted in the interior of the country, and became even more repressive through full implementation of Shari'a law following an attempted coup in 1981. In December 1984, Haidalla was overthrown in a bloodless coup by Col. Maaouya Sidi Ahmed Taya, following alleged mismanagement and corruption. Taya accepted an

IMF structural adjustment programme and relaxed Shari'a, thus winning favour among some Mauriticians.

In April 1986 the Dakar-based Forces de Liberation Africaine de Mauritanie (FLAM) published the *Oppressed Black Minorities* manifesto. Distribution of this document provoked the arrest of 30 black Africans in September 1986. Twenty were sentenced to prison. As a wave of civil disturbances swept across the country in October, the military regime responded with further arrests. In municipal elections in late 1986 black candidates were bypassed in favour of government sponsored lists and black voters were allegedly intimidated when trying to vote.

Claiming to have discovered a plot to stage a coup against him, Taya dismissed more than 500 Toucouleur officers from the army and arrested 51 Toucouleur officers, three of whom received death sentences. Riots followed the executions in Nouakchott, Borghe and Kaedi. A state of emergency existed in Borghe for six months, while black people were purged from the police and army.

In April 1989 two Senegalese farmers were allegedly killed in a dispute with Mauritanian herders over rights to grazing in the Senegal River valley border region. Rioting broke out in Dakar and on 3 May 1989 the Mauritanian government announced that it would begin repatriating Senegalese who had settled there since 1986. However, the expulsion of Senegalese also affected the black Mauritanian population. Of the estimated 80,000 who appeared to have fled or been forced to leave Mauritania by July 1989, at least 30,000 were thought to be Mauritanian. Many blacks were rounded up in their villages, stripped of their identity cards and shipped across the river to Senegal. More than 90% of them were Fula agro-pastoralists and herders. Despite foreign mediation, Senegal and Mauritania broke off diplomatic relations.

In 1991 Taya set in motion some political reforms including a resumption of diplomatic relations with Senegal and an amnesty for political prisoners. Arabic became the sole official language. A national referendum in July 1991 provided for universal suffrage and elections for president, senate and prime minister. Elected in 1992 in the country's first multi-party election amidst allegations of fraud, Taya appointed some black cabinet members but his regime continued to be criticized for discriminating against blacks. Parliamentary elections in 1992 and 1996 yielded increases for opposition parties in Mauritania, although the process remained unfair. Taya was re-elected in 1997 and 2003, also amidst unfair election conditions. Although Taya clung to power, attempted coups in 2003 and 2004 led to violence. In August 2005, Ely Ould Mohamed Vall and other military officers overthrew Taya, ending his rule of over 20 years.

Governance

The new Military Council for Justice and Democracy (MCJD) under Vall released political prisoners, and many political activists returned to Mauritania from political exile. Islamists were among those pardoned, but the MCJD largely continued Taya's policy of close co-ordination with the United States in its 'war on terror'.

In cooperation with political parties and civil society organizations, the MCJD introduced a plan to lead to elections, including the creation of an independent election commission. Provisional results from legislative and municipal elections in November 2006 indicated that opposition parties continued to demonstrate gains. The Rally of Democratic Forces (RDF) won 12 of 43 seats in the lower house of the National Assembly and opposition parties won a further seven seats including the Progressive Popular Alliance, which represents former slaves. Mauritania has a bicameral National Assembly, with 95 seats in the lower house filled through elections every five years, and Senators selected by a vote of municipal leaders and serving for six years.

In March 2007 elections, Sidi Ould Sheikh Abdallahi, a former cabinet minister under Taya, was elected president. However, he quickly indicated his intention to break with the past, especially over two issues: black Mauritanian refugees living in camps in Senegal and Mali, and slavery.

In the July 2009 presidential elections General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz won, having earlier after he staged a coup against Sidi Ould Sheikh Abdallahi in August 2008. This had , which eventually led to the suspension of the country from the AU. Mauritania was readmitted again just before the presidential elections, the result of which was dismissed by the chair of the Independent National Electoral Commission on the grounds that it was fraudulent, for fraudulent results but confirmed by the Constitutional Court. In its 2010 report Amnesty International reported on excessive use of military force against demonstrators protesting against the electoral results, amongst them many women, including former ministers, members of parliament and human rights defenders, and the president of an anti-slavery NGO, SOS Esclaves.

Current state of minorities and indigenous peoples

On 12 November 2007, following the election of the new government, Mauritania and Senegal signed a deal which could allow the repatriation of 12,000 refugees from the 1989 crisis, administered under the auspices of the UN High Commission for Refugees. The agreement seemed to mark the end of Africa's most protracted refugee crisis - but difficulties ahead remain, especially where the return of land and property is concerned.

In October 2010, the UNHCR resumed its repatriation operation for Mauritanian refugees from Senegal following a 10-months break. Since then, more than 24,000 Mauritanian refugees have returned home. Repatriation was able to resume after successful tripartite negotiations between Senegal, Mauritania and the UNHCR, which strengthened the role of Mauritania in the process. According to UN figures, there are still 14,000 Mauritanian refugees in Senegal and another 12,000 in Mali, of the initial 60,000 who fled to both countries in 1989 in the aftermath of repression against the black Mauritanian population.

Returnees face a number of obstacles. Disputes over ownership of property and land are frequent, as other families have often occupied lands left vacant by the fleeing refugees. Some children of returnee families, born in Senegal, do not speak local languages.

The 2010 Amnesty International report notes the harsh policies of Mauritanian authorities against people trying to migrate to Europe. It reports of collective expulsion and arbitrary arrests of 1,750 people at a detention centre in Nouadhibou before being expelled.

According to UNHCR, in the wake of the 2012 conflict in Mali about 200,000 refugees fled to camps in Mauritania.

Persistence of slavery

Despite the eventual adoption of a law criminalising slavery in 2007, SOS Slavery estimates that 10-20 per cent of Mauritania's population still lives in slavery today, the vast majority of them thought to be Haratine. It is a deeply ingrained practice, dating back hundreds of years, to when Arab and Berber tribes launched slave raids against the African population. Those enslaved were converted to Islam, and have been treated as inheritable property. While the new law has been welcomed by campaigners, it has also been pointed out that as with previous attempts to introduce tougher punishments, much will depend on the authorities' willingness to enforce the law, if the practice is to be eradicated.

Slavery is reported to be most prevalent in the Hodh el Gharbi, Hodh ech Chargui and Trarza regions, where poverty, lack of education and adherence to a hierarchical tradition create conditions in which destitute parents are forced to give their children up to become slaves in master's households or tending herds. Enslaved women and girls are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence.

Dozens of slaves have escaped or been freed since the 2007 law, but most cases against their former masters have been resolved outside of the courts. In November 2011, MRG supported the first successful prosecution under the 2007 anti-slavery legislation, in a case involving the enslavement of two young boys. The accused was given a two-year sentence and ordered to pay compensation to the children; their lawyer appealed on the grounds that the judgment was too lenient. The owner was released on bail after four months' detention.

MRG is following up four other cases of slavery through a Haratine lawyer in Mauritania. All the cases involve psychological or physical ill-treatment of the individuals. The backlog of cases in the courts presents one of the biggest obstacles in obtaining a final decision and compensation for the victims.

The UN Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of slavery, Gulnara Shahinian, conducted an official mission to the country in autumn 2009 in order to establish the effectiveness of laws, policies and specific programmes to combat slavery. The Special Rapporteur concluded that despite all these initiatives de facto slavery continues to exist in Mauritania. She indicated that Haratine, or 'Black Moors', are the ethnic group most at risk. In this situation, she reported, women suffer 'triple discrimination: firstly as women, secondly as mothers and thirdly as slaves. They are viewed by their masters firstly as labour and secondly as producers of a labour force.' Among other violations, they are systematically denied the right to a family life, and have no rights in their children. Her key

recommendations included a comprehensive and holistic national strategy, the amendment of the 2007 Slavery Act to contain a clearer definition of slavery to aid judicial enforcement, the provision of assistance to for victims' assistance, and socio-economic programmes to aid victims' reintegration into society. Current Mauritanian family law, which is based on the Shari'a law, offers little protection to those living in slavery.

Mauritania also received an official mission from the UN Special Rapporteur for contemporary forms of racism in January 2008. According to his report released in March 2009, despite of the absence of a State-approved racism, 'Mauritanian society has been deeply marked by continuing discriminatory practices of an ethnic and racial nature, rooted in cultural traditions and pervasively present in social structures', in State authorities, in the police and in the judicial system. He also observed the use of ethnicity as a political tool, e.g. in language policies. He recommended the adoption of a comprehensive legislation that incorporates a definition of discrimination and the amendment of the Constitution to recognise the multicultural and multi-ethnic character of Mauritanian society.

Protests over the new census

In April 2012 seven members of the anti-slavery organization, pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste en Mauritanie (IRA Mauritania), were arrested with their leader after he burned religious texts at a protest. At least one demonstrator for their release died in June, reportedly due to the effects of tear gas used by the police. The activists were provisionally released in September; however, they reportedly continued to receive threats.

In March 2013 the government created the Agence Nationale de Lutte contre l'Esclavage (National Agency for the Fight of Slavery), but the organization's mandate and composition has not yet been determined.

In May 2011 protests broke out against a new government census to systematize national identity documents, led by the movement "Touche pas ma nationalité" (Don't touch my nationality). Critics argue the census will increase racial discrimination and deprive many Black Mauritians of their citizenship. The census only recognizes four ethnic groups which can appear on the identity documents: Moorish, Soninké, Fulani and Wolof. It fails to mention the Haratines.

Protests led to violent riots in September 2011 in the southern region of the country. A number of people were injured and two people killed during clashes between protesters and security officers. The government decided to push ahead with the census process, dismissing claims of discrimination.

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