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Freedom House

Freedom in the World 2020 - Mauritania

PARTLY FREE

34

/ 100

[Political Rights](#) 13 / 40[Civil Liberties](#) 21 / 60

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

32 / 100 Not Free

Global freedom statuses are calculated on a weighted scale. [See the methodology.](#)

Status Change

Mauritania's status improved from Not Free to Partly Free due to a relatively credible presidential election that resulted in the country's first peaceful transfer of power after the incumbent completed his term, signaling a departure from a history of military coups.

Overview

Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who first came to power through a military coup in 2008 and won a second term in a deeply flawed 2014 election, stepped down peacefully after Mohamed Ould Ghazouani won the presidency in a relatively credible 2019 election. The poll came on the heels of successful legislative elections held the previous year, which were more pluralistic than past elections. A variety of media outlets operate, but journalists risk arrest for reporting on sensitive topics and many self-censor. Black Mauritians, the Haratin population, women, and LGBT+ people face discrimination. The government has taken increased steps to implement laws that address the problem of institutionalized slavery and discrimination, but continues to arrest antislavery and antidiscrimination activists.

Key Developments in 2019

- In June, Mauritians elected a new president, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, to replace Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, whose second constitutional term came to an end. Local and international observers noted irregularities, but praised the poll's peaceful conduct and found it generally satisfactory. For the first time in its history, Mauritania experienced a peaceful transfer of power after the incumbent completed their term, signaling a departure from a history of military coups.
- In June, following a protest by the opposition denouncing alleged electoral fraud, the government cut access to the internet across the country for 11 days.
- The government continued to harass bloggers and journalists. In March, two bloggers were arrested and then spent over two months in prison for sharing information on Facebook about a corruption scandal in which individuals close to then President Ould Abdel Aziz were implicated.
- In July, the blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'kheitir was freed from prison and went into exile in France. Ould M'kheitir had been handed a death penalty in 2014 for apostasy in an expedited judicial process, for criticizing the unequal social order in Mauritania and the prophet Muhammad.

Political Rights

A Electoral Process

A1 0-4 pts

Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through 2 / free and fair elections? 4

The president is chief of state and is directly elected to up to two five-year terms by popular vote. In June 2019, Mauritians elected Mohamed Ould Ghazouani to replace Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, whose second term came to an end. Six candidates, including those from major opposition parties, competed in the election. Ould Ghazouani, who represented the ruling Union for the Republic (UPR) and is reputedly close to Ould Abdel Aziz, won 52 percent of the vote in the first round. The antislavery activist Biram Dah Abeid came second with 19 percent followed by the candidate of the Islamist party Tawassoul, with 18 percent.

Allegations of electoral misconduct and fraud by opposition candidates were dismissed by the authorities. Local and international observers noted irregularities, but praised the poll's peaceful conduct and found it generally satisfactory. For the first time in its history, Mauritania experienced a peaceful transfer of power after the incumbent completed his term, signaling a departure from a history of military coups.

The prime minister is head of government and is appointed by the president. President Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani appointed Ismail Ould Bedda Ould Cheikh Sidiya of the UPR, a former minister of housing and employment, as prime minister in August 2019.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to the organization of a competitive presidential election that, despite some irregularities, was generally credible.

A2 0-4 pts**Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair 2 / elections? 4**

Constitutional reforms adopted through a 2017 referendum dissolved the Senate, leaving the 157-seat National Assembly as the country's legislative body. Members are directly elected to five-year terms in a mixed system of direct and plurality voting; four members are directly elected by the diaspora.

In September 2018, a new National Assembly was elected. Ninety-eight political parties participated in the polls, including parties of the opposition coalition the National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDU), which had boycotted previous elections. The ruling UPR took a majority, with 89 seats, and the Islamist party Tawassoul confirmed its position as the leading opposition party with 14 seats.

A coalition of opposition groupings called the elections fraudulent, but most Mauritanian politicians as well as African Union (AU) observers deemed them credible. The AU observers said "imperfections" in the process did not appear to have affected the polls' credibility.

Abeid, a former presidential candidate from 2014 and now the 2019 elections, who is also head of the antislavery group the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement in Mauritania (IRA Mauritania), won a seat in the new parliament, though he was being held in pretrial detention at the time of the election while authorities investigated claims that he had threatened a journalist. His arrest was reportedly carried out in the absence of a warrant. IRA Mauritania denies the allegations against him. In late December 2018, he was released after receiving a sentence shorter than the time he had already served.

The UPR posted a strong performance in concurrent municipal elections.

A3 0-4 pts**Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the 2 / relevant election management bodies? 4**

In April 2018, the government appointed a new Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) following a series of dialogues with some opposition parties. However, the FNDU, which had boycotted the dialogue process, rejected the new commission and demanded its dissolution. In July 2018, the government appointed a new president of the CENI who had once been a member of the FNDU. Despite the controversies over its composition during the first half of that year, the new electoral commission organized the year's elections, which were generally viewed as successful. In May 2019, prior to the presidential elections, government and opposition groups agreed to a compromise that allowed members of the opposition greater participation in the CENI.

B Political Pluralism and Participation**B1 0-4 pts****Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles 1 / to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4**

A number of obstacles prevent parties from successfully mobilizing their bases. A decree from May 2018 commanded the government to dissolve all political parties that are unable to gain at least 1 percent of votes in two consecutive district elections. In March 2019, 76 political parties were disbanded under the decree, bringing the number of parties to 28, from 107 previously.

Authorities often break up or otherwise prevent demonstrations organized by political parties. Authorities have denied registration to activist parties, including the Forces of Progress for Change, which opposes racial discrimination. The party's legal petition to gain recognition has been pending before the Supreme Court since 2015. The ruling party is frequently successful in efforts to co-opt leaders of smaller parties with comparatively fewer resources.

B2 0-4 pts

Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 1 / 4

Most opposition parties lack an institutional base, and many are formed by splinter factions of the ruling party that later rejoin it, sometimes as a result of active co-optation. After boycotting elections for years, opposition parties participated in the recent presidential and legislative elections. Although the UPR benefitted from incumbency advantages in the 2019 presidential election, opposition parties managed to gain sizable amount of votes, totaling over 47 percent.

Most opposition parties boycotted both the 2013 parliamentary elections and the 2014 presidential election, citing a system dominated by the UPR, which since its creation in 2009 had won every election handily. Though opposition parties took part in the September 2018 elections, the ruling party remained dominant, winning a solid majority of legislative seats. Opposition parties fared somewhat better in the municipal and regional elections.

B3 0-4 pts

Are the people's political choices free from domination by forces that are external to the political sphere, or by political forces that employ extrapolitical means? 1 / 4

The political choices of Mauritians are greatly influenced by the military, which plays a key role in the political system. Since 1978, Mauritania has either been under military rule or led by a military leader, with the exception of 18 months of civilian government between 2007 and 2008. Mohamed Ould Ghazouani is a former defense minister and military general, though he was elected in a competitive and democratic poll. In recent years, the overt influence of the military in politics has receded somewhat.

Score Change: The score improved from 0 to 1 because the overt influence of the military in the country's politics has receded somewhat.

B4 0-4 pts

Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 0 / 4

The Bidhan ethnic group dominates the Mauritanian government, while black Mauritians and the Haratin ethnic group are underrepresented in elected positions and in high-level government roles. Discrimination hinders the ability of these groups to gain power. Thousands of black Mauritians who were forced out of their villages by the military in 1989 have been allowed to return, but face difficulties when trying to enroll in the census and register to vote.

Women participate in politics at lower levels than men, largely due to traditional cultural norms, and women's interests are poorly represented in national politics in practice. Thirty-one seats in the National Assembly are held by women.

C Functioning of Government

C1 0-4 pts

Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 1 / 4

The executive dominates the legislative branch: the president has the power to dissolve the National Assembly, but the legislature has no impeachment power over the president. The military remains a powerful force in the Mauritanian government, and still has a great deal of influence on policymaking.

C2 0-4 pts

Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 2 / 4

Although the government has adopted numerous anticorruption laws and in 2005 signed the African Union Convention on Preventing and Combating Corruption, corruption remains widespread and the laws are not effectively enforced. Public contracts are typically awarded in exchange for bribes or on the basis of patronage. Bribes are often necessary in order to ensure the completion of ordinary government processes like obtaining licenses and permits.

A report published in 2017 by Sherpa, a nongovernmental organization (NGO), documented multiple cases of corruption at the highest levels of the Aziz administration that have gone unpunished. Among other cases, the report alleges that the former president’s son used his influence to ensure that the French subsidiary of a Finnish company, Wärtsilä, received a contract to construct a power plant in exchange for a payment of over \$11 million.

In October 2019, government and banking institutions adopted new measures to fight against money laundering and terrorism financing.

C3 0-4 pts

Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 1 / 4

The government does not operate with transparency, particularly in granting mining and fishing licenses, land distribution, government contracts, and tax payments. The construction of a new airport in Nouakchott that opened in 2016 drew criticism—a company with no experience in airport construction won a contract to build the facility through an opaque procurement process.

Civil Liberties

D Freedom of Expression and Belief

D1 0-4 pts

Are there free and independent media? 2 / 4

Mauritania has a vibrant media landscape, with several privately owned newspapers, television stations, and radio stations in operation. However, journalists who cover sensitive topics or scrutinize the political elite can face harassment and have their communication devices wiretapped. In July 2019, Ahmedou Ould Wediaa, a journalist known for his critiques of former president Ould Abdel Aziz, was arrested without charge in Nouakchott. In June, another journalist, Camara Seydi Moussa, had his communication devices confiscated and spent a week in prison after being accused of contesting the results of the presidential elections in a private phone conversation.

In July an independent blogger, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'kheitir, was freed from prison and went into exile in France. Ould M'kheitir was sentenced to death in 2014 for apostasy in an expedited judicial process. He had criticized the unequal social order in Mauritania and the prophet Muhammad. In November 2017, an appeals court in Nouadhibou reduced Ould M'kheitir's death sentence to two years in prison, which he had already served, but the government had refused to release him, arguing that he was kept in custody under “administrative detention” for reasons of his own security.

Criminal defamation laws remain on the books, and are sometimes enforced against journalists. In August 2018, two journalists were arrested on charges of defamation after each had separately republished a third-party article that criticized a lawyer close to the government; they were held for over a week before being acquitted. Most journalists practice a degree of self-censorship when covering issues such as the military, corruption, and slavery.

D2 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 4

Mauritania is an Islamic republic. Non-Muslims cannot proselytize or become citizens, and those who convert from Islam to another religion lose their citizenship. In practice, however, non-Muslim communities are generally not targeted for persecution.

Apostasy is a crime punishable by death. To date, no one has been executed for the crime. However, in April 2018, the parliament passed a new law that strengthens the existing death penalty punishment for certain blasphemy offenses. The new law removes the possibility of repentance as a way to avoid a death sentence for committing some forms of blasphemy.

D3 0-4 pts

Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 4

Academic freedom is largely respected. However, in 2018 the government instituted a new rule prohibiting high school graduates aged 25 and above to register in public universities. In October 2019, a protest by those affected by the new measure was violently repressed by the police. The rule was suspended in November of that year.

The increasing use of Arabic as the lingua franca at universities has hindered access to education for black Mauritians, who mainly speak other languages. Student activists sometimes face pressure from university administrators, including threats of expulsion and intimidation.

D4 0-4 pts

Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics 2 / without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4

Individuals have faced reprisals for expressing views critical of the government on social media, including termination of employment from government agencies. In March 2019, two bloggers were arrested and then imprisoned for over two months for sharing on Facebook information about a corruption scandal that implicated individuals close to then President Ould Abdel Aziz.

In January 2018 the government adopted a new law that mandated severe penalties for discrimination and racism. Later in the year, at least two people received one-year prison sentences for insulting other Mauritians by denigrating them as slaves on social media.

E Associational and Organizational Rights**E1 0-4 pts****Is there freedom of assembly? 1 / 4**

While the constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, organizers are required to obtain consent from the government for large gatherings, which is often denied. In June 2019, the police violently repressed protests that erupted following the publication of the election results, arresting several opposition figures. In an apparent attempt to quell further protests, authorities then cut internet access across the country for 11 days.

E2 0-4 pts**Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are 1 / engaged in human rights- and governance-related work? 4**

NGOs, particularly antislavery organizations, frequently encounter intimidation, violence, and repression in carrying out their activities. The antislavery group IRA Mauritania has repeatedly been denied permission to register as an NGO. In 2018, Abeid, the leader of IRA Mauritania, spent five months in prison awaiting trial on charges of incitement to hatred and violence following a complaint by a journalist he allegedly threatened. In late December of that year, he was released after receiving a sentence shorter than the time he had already served. In July 2018, two other members of IRA Mauritania were released after spending two years in prison. Separately, in February 2018, visiting representatives of Human Rights Watch (HRW) were denied permission to hold a press conference at a hotel in the capital. In March 2019, the government denied entry to a mission of Amnesty International that was to investigate human rights abuses.

E3 0-4 pts**Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 2 / 4**

Workers have the legal right to unionize, but unions require approval from the public prosecutor to operate and often confront hostility from employers. The right to collective bargaining is not always respected, and the government sometimes pressures union members to withdraw their membership. The right to strike is limited by notice requirements and other onerous regulations.

F Rule of Law**F1 0-4 pts****Is there an independent judiciary? 1 / 4**

Mauritania's judiciary lacks independence. The president has the power to unilaterally appoint many key judges, including three of the six judges on the Constitutional Court and the chair of the Supreme Court. The courts are subject to political pressure from the executive branch. Instances of judges facing retaliatory measures for issuing rulings against the government have been reported.

F2 0-4 pts**Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 1 / 4**

Due process rights are often not respected in practice. Suspects are frequently arrested without being informed of the charges against them. Lengthy pretrial detentions are common. Arbitrary arrests of opposition politicians, journalists, and human rights activists occur with some frequency.

F3 0-4 pts**Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war 1 / and insurgencies? 4**

Torture and abuse at Mauritania's prisons and detention centers remained a problem in 2019, and perpetrators are rarely held accountable. Police frequently beat suspects following arrest. Prisons are plagued by violence, are overcrowded, and lack basic sanitation. Food shortages are also common in prisons. Children are sometimes held with the adult prison population.

F4 0-4 pts**Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the 1 / population? 4**

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Mauritania and punishable by death for men. LGBT+ individuals generally hide their sexual orientation or gender identity due to severe discrimination. Racial and ethnic discrimination remains a serious problem.

Sharia law as it is applied in Mauritania discriminates against women. The testimony of two women is equal to that of one man. Female victims of crime are entitled to only half the financial compensation that male victims receive. In the past few years, Parliament has twice rejected a bill that aimed to sanction gender-based violence.

G Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights

G1 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 1 / 4

While the Bidhan population is relatively free to make personal decisions about residence, employment, and education, the choices of black Mauritians and the Haratin are often constrained by racial and caste-based discrimination. People lacking government identity cards are not allowed to travel in some regions, which disproportionately affects black Mauritians.

In 2019, authorities refused to issue a passport to former Guantanamo detainee, Mohamedou Ould Slahi without any justification, preventing him from traveling to seek medical treatment. In July 2018, authorities blocked five activists from traveling to Switzerland to participate in the UN Committee against Torture's periodic review of Mauritania.

G2 0-4 pts

Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or nonstate actors? 2 / 4

Though the law guarantees property rights, these rights are not always enforced in practice, as it can be difficult to get property disputes fairly adjudicated in court. Complex laws and an opaque bureaucracy present challenges to starting a business.

Many black Mauritians who left their homes in the Senegal River Valley in the wake of the 1989 conflict have returned, but have been unable to regain ownership of their land. Local authorities reportedly allow the Bidhan to appropriate land used by the Haratin and black Mauritians.

G3 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 1 / 4

Many girls are married before the age of 18. In January 2017, the government sent the parliament a bill that would ban marriage for girls under 18. The bill failed in the National Assembly, largely due to pressure from religious leaders.

Female genital mutilation is illegal, but the law is rarely enforced and the practice is still common. Domestic violence and rape remain problems, victims rarely seek legal redress, and convictions for these crimes are rare. Laws banning adultery and morality offenses discourage victims of sexual assault from reporting it to police.

G4 0-4 pts

Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 0 / 4

Despite amendments to the antislavery law passed in 2015 meant to address the problem more robustly, slavery and slavery-like practices continued in 2019, with many former slaves still reliant on their former owners due to racial discrimination, poverty, and other socioeconomic factors. The government cracks down on NGOs that push for greater enforcement of the law and rarely prosecutes perpetrators, but at the same time has shown an increased commitment to enforcing laws against slavery. In March 2018, a court handed down 10- and 20-year prison sentences to three people for practicing slavery.

ecoi.net summary:

Annual report on political rights and civil liberties in 2019



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