Mauritania | Freedom House

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 11 / 40 (+2)

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 5 / 12 (+2)

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 1 / 4

The president is chief of state and is directly elected to up to two five-year terms by popular vote. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who first came to power through a military coup in 2008, won a second term in 2014 representing the UPR, taking 82 percent of the vote. Most opposition parties, including the main opposition coalition, the National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDU), boycotted the election, claiming that the process was flawed and biased. The antislavery activist Biram Dah Abeid ran as an independent and captured 9 percent of the vote. His allegations of electoral misconduct and fraud were dismissed by the authorities.

The prime minister is head of government and is appointed by the president. Mohamed Salem Ould Bechir of the UPR, a former energy minister, was appointed to the post in November 2018, after the year’s parliamentary elections.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 2 / 4 (+1)

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 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.

An opposition coalition called the elections fraudulent, but most Mauritanian politicians as well as AU observers deemed them credible. The AU observers said “imperfections” in the process did not appear to have affected the polls’ credibility.

Abeid, the former presidential candidate 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 came weeks before the election, and was reportedly carried out in the absence of a warrant. IRA Mauritania denies the allegations against him. In late December, 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.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to the organization of legislative and municipal elections that were generally considered credible, and which featured the participation of many opposition parties.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 2 / 4 (+1)

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, 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 the year, the new electoral commission organized the year’s elections, which were generally viewed as successful.

Score Change: The score improved from 1 to 2 due to the formation of a new electoral commission, which organized credible legislative and municipal elections.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 2 / 16

B1. 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 to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 1 / 4

A number of obstacles prevent parties from successfully mobilizing their bases. Authorities often break up or otherwise prevent demonstrations organized by political parties. The ruling party is frequently successful in efforts to co-opt leaders of smaller parties with comparatively fewer resources. 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.

B2. 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-option. In combination with advantages inherent in UPR’s incumbency, it is very difficult for opposition groupings to increase their support through elections.

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 has 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. Are the people’s political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 0 / 4**

The political choices of Mauritanians are greatly influenced by the military, which dominates 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.

Traditional religious leaders exert influence on voters, often backing the ruling UPR and urging voters to support its initiatives.

**B4. 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 Mauritanians 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 Mauritanians 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. Thirty-one seats in the National Assembly are held by women.

**C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 4 / 12**

**C1. 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. 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 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.

C3. 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: 21 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 9 / 16

D1. 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 arrest. In March, a French-Moroccan journalist who was investigating the issue of slavery was arrested, held for three days, and expelled from Mauritania.

In 2014, a court in Nouadhibou sentenced Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M’Kheitir, an independent blogger, to death for apostasy in an expedited judicial process. Ould M’Kheitir 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. In May 2018, the government said that Ould M’Kheitir remained in custody under “administrative detention” for reasons of his own security; he was still in custody at the end of the year.

Criminal defamation laws remain on the books, and are sometimes enforced against journalists. In August, 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 potentially contentious issues such as the military, corruption, and slavery.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 2 / 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, 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. **Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 3 / 4**

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

D4. **Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 2 / 4**

Individuals have faced reprisals for expressing views critical of the government on social media, including termination of employment from government agencies. In October 2017, Abdellahi Ould Mohamed Ould El Haimer was fired from his job at the National Rural Water Agency after writing a Facebook post critical of the prime minister. The director of the agency claimed he was fired for “gross misconduct.” In January 2018, activist Abdallahi Salem Ould Yali was arrested in connection with a Facebook post in which he urged members of the marginalized Haratin community to resist racial discrimination. In October, he was charged with incitement to violence, and remained in pretrial detention at year’s end.

In January the government adopted a new law that toughens sanctions for discrimination and racism, but penalties are very heavy: in April, at least two people received one-year prison sentences for insulting other Mauritanians by denigrating them as slaves on social media.

**E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 4 / 12**

E1. **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 2018, protests and demonstrations, including several organized by IRA Mauritania activists denouncing the arrests of their leader, were often violently broken up by authorities. In 2017, police had used tear gas to suppress a peaceful demonstration in Nouakchott convened to address youth unemployment, and arrested over two dozen participants.

E2. **Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights– and governance-related work? 1 / 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, he was released after receiving a sentence shorter than the time he had already served. In July, two other members of IRA Mauritania were released after spending two years in prison. Separately, in February, visiting representatives of Human Rights Watch (HRW) were denied permission to hold a press conference at a hotel in the capital.

E3. 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. Approximately 25 percent of Mauritanians are employed in the formal economy, but around 90 percent of workers in the industrial and commercial sectors are unionized. 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.

In July, police violently repressed a protest by striking dockworkers at the Nouakchott port.

F. RULE OF LAW: 4 / 16

F1. 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. 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. In August 2017, Mohamed Ould Ghadda, a senator who opposed the 2017 referendum to abolish the Senate, was arrested on vague corruption charges. Ould Ghadda was released and placed under judicial control in September 2018, after spending a year in prison.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 1 / 4

Torture and abuse at Mauritania’s prisons and detention centers remained a problem in 2018, and perpetrators are rarely held accountable. Police frequently beat suspects following arrest. In July, Mohamed Ould Brahim died at a police station only five hours after his arrest by antidrug forces. The government claimed that he died of a
heart attack, while family members and civil society representatives maintain that he died as result of police brutality.

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. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 1 / 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.

There were reports of refugees being expelled and ultimately abandoned just across the border in Senegal.

**G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 4 / 16**

**G1. 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 July 2018, authorities blocked five activists from traveling to Switzerland to participate in the UN Committee against Torture’s periodic review of Mauritania.

**G2. 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. 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**
According to UNICEF’s 2016 *State of the World’s Children* report, 37 percent of 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 remained problems in 2018, 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. 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 2018, 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, a court handed down 10- and 20-year prison sentences to three people for practicing slavery.

 Trafficking in persons remains a problem in Mauritania in 2018. The government failed to prosecute a recruitment agency that allegedly recruited more than 200 women under false pretenses into forced prostitution and domestic slavery in Saudi Arabia in 2016.