

Mauritania

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Overview:

On December 21, Mauritania held the second round of its parliamentary elections, which were boycotted by 10 opposition parties, including the main Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD). The ruling Union for the Republic (UPR) and its allies won the vast majority of the expanded national assembly, with UPR winning 74 of the 147 and its allies winning 34 seats. Opposition parties won 37 seats, with the largest number, 16, won by Tawassoul Islamist Party. The UPR similarly won 70% of the communes in the municipal elections.

While slavery has been abolished in Mauritania for decades and the government has previously rejected its existence, in 2013 it agreed to create an agency—named “The National Solidarity Agency for the Fight Against the Vestiges of Slavery, for Integration, and for the Fight Against Poverty”—in order to fight the practice. However, many anti-slavery activists remain skeptical of the agency and the government’s will to fight slavery.

In May 2012, the Mauritanian army increased its presence along the border with Mali, which was fighting an Islamist rebellion, but the Mauritanian government ruled out direct intervention. The opposition alliance has criticized the government stance on Mali, as well as the death of Mauritanian citizens during the ongoing conflict. In early 2013, the RFD and other opposition parties demanded assurances that the Mauritanian army would not get involved in the conflict. By the end of 2013, Mauritania was host to about 70,000 Malian refugees who had fled the fighting.

In October 2013, Mauritania experienced unprecedented flooding that affected 5,600 people.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 11 / 40 [[Key](#)]

A. Electoral Process: 3 / 12

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 a newly expanded 147-seat National Assembly, elected by popular vote, and the 56-seat Senate, with 53 members elected by mayors and municipal councils and 3 members chosen by the chamber to represent Mauritians living abroad. One-third of the Senate is elected on a rotating basis every two years. The last Senate elections were held after presidential elections in 2009, during which UPR held 38 seats and two of its allies had one seat each. An opposition parliamentary group comprised of RFD and UFP held 12 seats. As presidential, national assembly, and municipal elections were repeatedly postponed, no Senate elections have taken place. One third of the Senate will be elected by the Municipal Councils elected in December 2013, but this had not occurred by the end of the year.

President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz came to power through a military coup on August 6, 2008. Upon removing the government, then-general 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, the domestic reaction was mixed. A majority of lawmakers and

mayors expressed support, while a coalition of four parties that supported the ousted president 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. Under international pressure, the HSC handed power in June 2009 to a transitional government to supervise an election.

Aziz won the July 2009 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. However, the election was declared satisfactory by international observers. The opposition 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 of Democratic Forces recognized Aziz's presidency in September 2010, citing the need for unity in the face of increased terrorist attacks by Islamist militants.

On August 3, 2013, Mauritania's communications minister, Mohamed Yahya Ould Hormah, announced that the country would hold National Assembly and municipal elections on October 12. The previous elections had been held in 2006, and had been postponed repeatedly. After the opposition threatened to boycott the elections, they were further postponed by six weeks in hopes of increasing party participation. However, talks between the opposition and the government failed by early October, and 10 out of the 11 parties within the Coordination of Democratic Opposition (COD) opposition coalition announced that they would boycott the elections, with only Tawassoul participating.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 3 / 16

Mauritania's party system is poorly developed, and clan and ethnic loyalties strongly influence the country's politics. While political parties are free to operate, the vast majority have boycotted the recent elections due to what they consider a system dominated by the president and his party, both of which have won with large majorities in the last elections. The military remains strongly influential and the shooting of President Abdel Aziz in 2012 brought the security apparatus in charge of civilian institutions for the duration of the President's treatment, drawing criticism from the opposition and complaints on the outsized role of the military in politics.

C. Functioning of Government: 5 / 12

Corruption is a serious problem, and political instability has prevented fiscal transparency. While several senior officials were charged with corruption in 2012—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 119 out of 177 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Civil Liberties: 23 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 10 / 16

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 2013, eight private television channels and thirteen radio stations received licenses, in addition to foreign channels also being allowed to broadcast in the country. 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.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 4 / 12

The 1991 constitution guarantees freedom of assembly, though organizers are required to obtain consent from the authorities for large gatherings. The environment for civil society groups and 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. In a protest in September, five activists from an unauthorized nongovernmental organization (NGO) were arrested and, according to the group, demonstrators were beaten while protesting against the government's failure to pursue criminal charges against an alleged slave master in Boutilimit. Similarly, a February protest by the February 25th Youth Movement was violently dispersed.

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 Mauritians are formally employed, about 90% of workers in the industrial and commercial sectors are unionized. Nevertheless, workers are often wrongfully terminated, and organized workers are sometimes subject to pressure to withdraw their union membership or forego legal processes. The right to strike is limited by notice requirements and bans on certain forms of strike action. In June, Capital Drilling reportedly dismissed workers who had participated in a strike, allowing them to return only if they gave up union membership as well as their permanent contracts. Security forces used tear gas and batons against strikers in the cities of Zouerate and Nouadhibou in May.

F. Rule of Law: 4 / 16

The judicial system is heavily influenced by the government. Many judicial decisions are based on Sharia (Islamic law), especially in family and civil matters, which discriminates against women. 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. A June report by Amnesty International found that authorities tortured men, women, and children who were being held on both terrorism and other charges.

Members of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb have carried out a number of attacks in Mauritania in recent years. A 2010 antiterrorism law removed previous restrictions on wiretaps and searches, allowed for individuals under 18 to be charged (which is illegal under Sharia), and granted immunity to terrorists that inform the authorities of a terrorism plot.

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. Racial and ethnic discrimination persists in all spheres of political and economic life, with discrimination targeting almost exclusively black Africans.

Same-sex sexual activity is illegal in Mauritania, and punishable by death for men. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals generally hide their sexual orientation.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 5 / 16

Despite a 1981 law banning slavery in Mauritania, an estimated half a million black Mauritians are believed to live in conditions of servitude. According to the 2013 Global Slavery Index, Mauritania has the highest prevalence of slavery in the world. 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 October, antislavery group the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA) alleged that judicial authorities convinced a plaintiff to drop a slavery complaint in exchange for a nominal sum. Those slave masters who are arrested are often released without charges. In September, the IRA reported that police refused to investigate a slavery complaint against a prominent family, and then protected the suspects in temporary custody while claiming that they had fled. Property disputes are frequent between slaves or former slaves and their masters, and human rights groups say that local authorities will favor the latter. The new antislavery agency established in 2013 will be tasked to deal with these issues.

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. In 2013 the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report downgraded Mauritania to Tier 3 from the Tier 2 Watch List.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)

X = Score Received

Y = Best Possible Score

Z = Change from Previous Year

[Full Methodology](#)