



# World Directory of Minorities

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## Haratin

### Profile

The black African origin of Haratins ('Black Moors') is beyond doubt. Their language, culture and identity are, however, Arab, the product of centuries of enslavement to Beydan masters. Beydan ('White Moors') are descended from Berber Arabs and black African groups from the Sahara. Beydan and Haratines can appear racially indistinct and both speak dialects of Hassaniyya related to Bedouin Arabic.

Moor society is traditionally divided on social and descent criteria. The slave community is divided into three levels: the total subject, the part slave, and the true Haratin. The government has long described all forms of slave as 'haratine' or 'newly freed', thus implying the end of slavery.

### Historical context

In post-colonial Mauritania, urbanization and migration to some extent broke down the slave system, and certain districts of the capital Nouakchott became a haven for escaped slaves. These escapees formed the basis of the emancipation movement El Hor (the free), formed in 1974. El Hor argued that emancipation was impossible without practical measures to enforce anti-slavery laws and provide former slaves with the means to gain economic independence. To this end, it called for land reform and encouraged Haratins to set up agricultural co-operatives. El Hor's emphasis on social issues and its demand for redress and justice inevitably brought it into confrontation with the government. A substantial number of the movement's leaders were arrested, tortured and many of them exiled at the end of the 1970s.

In January 1980, a military coup brought President Mohamad Khouna Ould Haidallah to power, whose government embarked on a policy of undermining the El Hor movement by appearing to satisfy its demands. The 1980 'abolition' of slavery, which was accompanied by the co-option of some of El Hor's spokespeople, was also prompted by the government's desire to forestall any possible political links between the opposition and black opposition groups. This divide-and-rule tactic meant that El Hor, despite representing the largest population group, did not constitute a significant political force. Indeed many Haratins were responsible for attacks and discrimination against black Africans. In 1981, the Anti-Slavery Society (UK) estimated that there were around 100,000 people still enslaved, plus approximately 300,000 Haratins.

Into the 1990s, human rights groups accused the Mauritanian government of continuing to tolerate the persistence of some forms of slavery, particularly in the interior. A Commissariat for Human Rights, Poverty Alleviation and Integration was established in May 1999, but Human Rights Watch (2001) has said that the Mauritania government must do more to address the legacy of slavery as a form of caste and descent-based discrimination, and to strengthen enforcement of slavery-specific legislation, and legislation promoting the civil rights of former slaves. The government again moved to formally outlaw slavery in 2003, but a failure to enforce the legal prohibition led to a continuation of the practice. Women

### Current issues

Following March 2007 elections, new legislation criminalizing slavery in Mauritania was swiftly passed by the new

parliament. 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 practise is to be eradicated. Haratin activists view other legal measures such as land reform and the effective ability to sue former masters as critical to the emancipation of remaining slaves.

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