

# BTI 2010 | Mauritania Country Report

<b>Status Index</b>	1-10	<b>3.73</b>	# 110 of 128	
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scale: 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest)    score    rank    trend

This report is part of the Transformation Index (BTI) 2010. The BTI is a global ranking of transition processes in which the state of democracy and market economic systems as well as the quality of political management in 128 transformation and developing countries are evaluated.

The BTI is a joint project of the Bertelsmann Stiftung and the Center for Applied Policy Research (C•A•P) at Munich University.

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Please cite as follows: Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2010 – Mauritania Country Report*. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2009.

**Key Indicators**

Population	mn.	3.1	HDI	0.52	GDP p.c.	\$	1927
Pop. growth	% p.a.	2.5	HDI rank of 182	154	Gini Index		39.0
Life expectancy	years	64	UN Education Index	0.54	Poverty <sup>2</sup>	%	44.1
Urban population	%	40.8	Gender equality <sup>1</sup>	0.51	Aid per capita	\$	116.6

Sources: UNDP, Human Development Report 2009 | The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2009.

Footnotes: (1) Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM). (2) Percentage of population living on less than \$2 a day.

## Executive Summary

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is still caught in the 30-year-long process of military rule and coup d'état. With the legislative and presidential elections of 2006 – 2007 some expected Mauritania might enter a new era of stable civilian rule. However, the coup of August 2008, which terminated the presidency of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi after only 17 months in office, ended a short parenthesis of democratization. The growing tension between the president and his legislative coalition, as well as accusations of corruption and nepotism, were the official justifications for the coup. Since 1978, military officers have been in charge of the country (minus the 17 months of Ould Cheikh Abdellahi's civilian presidency), and the military clearly still conceives of itself as the dominant political institution. The new High State Council (Haut Conseil d'État), the junta-led government, has promised to bring democracy back to the country and to hold new presidential elections in June 2009. But such claims have been made by every new junta since 1978, to little or no end.

On the economic front, Mauritania is facing difficult times. After a period of relative optimism, nurtured by steady growth fed by booming mineral and oil exports, economic concerns are rising. The international isolation of the military junta has reduced the country's access to bilateral and multilateral aid (although China and some Arab countries continue to offer assistance). The global economic crisis and the decrease in international prices of natural resources have had significant impact on Mauritania's export-dependent economy. Facing lower-than-expected oil production and plummeting oil and mineral prices, Mauritania's revenues have decreased. Nevertheless, major social challenges must be addressed, including the high level of poverty affecting the great majority of the population, and the socioeconomic integration of marginalized social groups such as the "freed slaves," the Haratin. A post-coup solution is needed to improve Mauritania's political and economic landscape.

## History and Characteristics of Transformation

From independence onwards Mauritania has been a poor Saharan country reliant on developmental and economic aid. As a consequence, its political rulers have taken a pragmatic view toward potential investors and financial backers. After a period of economic stagnation (1975 – 1984) characterized by socioeconomic problems resulting from the collapse of iron prices and an enduring drought, economic policies were aimed at increasing domestic demand and at an excessive expansion of the public sector (resulting in an ballooning public debt).

A first joint restructuring program was introduced in 1985, in cooperation with the World Bank and the IMF, followed by a consolidation program between 1988 and 1991. Domestic factors, coupled with the negative consequences of political events abroad, prevented the aims of these programs from being achieved. Distractions included the confrontation with Senegal (1989 – 1992) and the diminishing financial support provided by the Arab Gulf States, which were unhappy about Mauritania's siding with Iraq in the Kuwait crisis of 1990 – 1991. As a result, a third structural adjustment program was implemented in conjunction with the IMF, worsening the already very tense popular mood.

These negative socioeconomic developments, coupled with increasing domestic political tensions, have their roots in the very definition of the country's identity. The tensions between Arabic-speaking groups (Bidhan and Haratin) and non-Arabic speaking ethnic communities (Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana) have structured the political landscape since the 1940s (in the colonial period). Effects range from linguistic policies (Arabic as the official language) to education policies (the relative weight of Arabic, French and national languages in the school curriculum), and encompass issues such as land tenure policies and ethnic quotas in the state apparatus. The tensions led to the outbreak of major violence in 1989 – 1991 when about 80,000 Haalpulaar and Wolof were expelled from the country by military personnel, hundreds were assassinated, and thousands were dismissed from the civil service. In addition, despite the official abolition of slavery during the early 1980s, there are unofficial estimates which claim that large number of slaves still live in Bidhan families, as well as in some other ethnic groups. Meanwhile, former slaves of the Bidhan minority, the Haratin, are typically viewed as second-class citizens, pushed to the margins of social, economic and political activity.

In the wake of the democratization reforms that swept across Africa in the early 1990s, Colonel Ould Taya, then chairman of the Military Council, agreed to adopt democratic institutions. In July 1991, a new constitution was passed, and in January 1992 presidential elections were held, followed by legislative elections in March and April 1992. Ould Taya was elected to be the new civilian president. The constitution guaranteed him far-reaching prerogatives, and by denying the legislative control over the executive ensured that there would be a continuation of the authoritarian style of leadership. This authoritarian style was reinforced by the growth of domestic political opposition. Thus, despite Ould Taya's nominal position as a civilian head of state, the pattern initiated in 1978, under which the military has asserted control over the country's political system, continued to hold. His party won every successive legislative and municipal election (the opposition was left with a single parliamentary seat for 10 years, and

then only four seats between 2003 and 2005). President Ould Taya in each case managed to secure victory and to eliminate political opposition. Social polarization and growing social dissatisfaction within individual tribes and regions concerning the president's policy of unequal distribution resulted in two or three attempted coups in the first half of the 2000s. This was further compounded by Ould Taya's foreign policies, namely the establishment of close ties with the United States and Israel that lacked the support of the majority of the Mauritanian people and, in particular, provided the Islamist opposition with arguments for mobilizing against the president. The president's extensive authority to make decisions, so long as it was upheld by the military and the security services, enabled him to make decisions that were contrary to the feelings of most political and social actors. In June 2003, during the run-up to that year's presidential elections, a military coup was attempted. The same year, both the officially recognized and non-recognized opposition had bitterly criticized Ould Taya's policies. The government reacted by clamping down hard on all opposition to the government, especially the Islamists.

The successful military coup led by Colonel Vall on August 3, 2005 aimed to rebuild the domestic consensus in Mauritania, prevent the military from breaking into factions and convince the Mauritanian people that the state's leaders were interested in a fair distribution of the expected revenue from oil production, which was slated to begin in 2006. This transitional period, as it was called, led to the holding of the freest and fairest municipal (2006), legislative (2006) and presidential elections (2007) yet seen in the country. Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, with the support of key officers including Colonel Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (soon General), acquired the majority of votes and became the first freely elected president from a non-military background since the late 1970s. However, the new president was ousted in August 2008, after 17 months in power, by the same officers (minus one) who had staged the 2005 coup, and who had controlled the security apparatus under both the Ould Taya and the Ould Cheikh Abdellahi administrations.

Economic developments were also marked by challenges. After the successful completion of the 1999 – 2002 program (though the IMF's Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF)), a new three year PRGF was signed in July 2003. In September 2004, its implementation was halted, however, and because incorrect figures had been delivered to the IMF, demands were made that previous payments to the IMF be reimbursed. After prolonged negotiation following the August 2005 coup, the government and the IMF struck a new agreement in March 2006 to implement an IMF staff-monitored program worth \$24 million. The aim of the cooperative effort is the reduction of macroeconomic deficits through restructuring programs and the implementation of budgetary policies designed to keep prices at a reduced level. In addition, the ongoing liberalization and privatization policies, which in principle had been in existence since 1989, are to be continued. However, relations between Mauritania and multilateral institutions have deteriorated since the 2008 coup and the interruption of the Ould Cheikh Abdellahi presidency. The economy is divided into a small formal sector dominated by the oil and mining sector and the fishery industry, which is mainly export oriented, and a large informal sector producing for domestic markets. Large family- and tribal-based conglomerates, with activities in the formal and informal sectors, constitute an oligopolistic economy.

# Transformation Status

## I. Democracy

### 1 | Stateness

Self-proclaimed networks of armed Islamic groups, with various names (the most recent of which was the al-Qaeda Branch in the Islamic Maghrib) have challenged the Mauritanian government since 2005, with the highest number of incidents occurring between December of 2007 and September of 2008 (e.g., attacks on military garrisons and deadly attacks on French tourists).

Monopoly on the use of force

Although armed state forces regularly patrol the country's relatively populous regions, the state's monopoly of force is said to be weak in peripheral regions. Reports have cited major illegal trafficking of various goods (including cigarettes, drugs and weapons) across the country's borders and in the port and airport. However, the alleged participation by representatives of the state (border officers, military personnel and other public servants) in this trafficking points at the conceptual difficulty of measuring "stateness."

Ever since Mauritania's foundation, national identity and citizenship have been intensely debated political issues, especially regarding the marginalization of minority groups including the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana ethnic groups and the Haratin community (former slaves). In the current period, two important developments occurred. First, for the first time since the dramatic expulsion of minority groups in 1989 – 1991, the Mauritanian government has officially acknowledged the existence of Mauritanian refugees, rather than officially denying their existence. In early 2008, after holding a national conference on the issue of refugees, the government has organized the official repatriation of Haalpulaar and Wolof refugees, monitored by the newly created National Agency for the Support and Integration of Refugees (ANAIR), and supported by UNHCR. About 8000 individuals returned between January 2008 and February 2009. The new military junta in power seems willing to maintain this policy. However, the actual conditions of resettlement are problematic, with no clear answers to the questions of refugees' access to their former properties, access to land, or rights to their former jobs. However, threats to a stable and consensual national identity are

State identity

still present, given that the state (civilian and military) agents who participated in the killings and expulsion of these minority ethnic groups are legally protected from any judicial action, and continue to occupy top positions in the state and security apparatus. Second, in August 2007 the National Assembly adopted a law that criminalizes “enslavement practices.” Though slavery itself was declared illegal by a presidential decree in 1981, it was not considered to be a criminal offense. This is no longer the case under the new law. Unmet challenges, however, include the actual implementation of this law, and more generally, the socioeconomic improvement of the vast majority of Haratin who continue to be second-class citizens.

The role of Islam as a foundation of the state is ambiguous. Mauritania is an Islamic Republic. Islam is the religion of the state. But institutions of the state combine both Islamic and secular elements. The constitution states that “Islamic precepts are the only source of Law,” but that these precepts are “open to the exigencies of the modern world.” The criminal code combines elements of both Shari’ah and of the French penal code. The code of personal status (family law) is mostly inspired by the Islamic law. Yet popular sovereignty, not God, is the foundation for key state institutions such as the presidency, the National Assembly and the Senate, and Mauritania abides by most international conventions, including the (secular) Human Rights Charter. Meanwhile, informal societal rules often prevail over state rules. To a certain extent, these follow religious or traditional dogma.

No interference of religious dogmas

The state’s capacity to implement its formal authority across its entire territory and across all social segments is limited. All administrative regions have courts, but most are understaffed and underfinanced. Though the deployment of the state judicial presence everywhere was a major goal of the first transitional authorities (2005 – 2007), little progress has been made since then. The implementation of public social policies (particularly in the areas of health and education) is often left to international NGOs. Governors of the regions and prefects of local districts act as powerful actors outside the capital and enjoy important prerogatives, but are often involved in local political, tribal or factional intrigues without proper monitoring from the center.

Basic administration

## 2 | Political Participation

The presidential elections of March 2007 were the freest and fairest in Mauritania’s history. They were preceded by legislative and municipal elections which were also considered mostly free and fair. However, the winning bloc of elected deputies in the National Assembly was constituted of members of the ex-ruling party and “independent” candidates backed by the military authorities, indicating a certain sociological inertia by which established notables or their relatives, and those favored by the military, have won a majority. Deputies who belonged to the

Free and fair elections

opposition parties won only a minority of seats, though at 41 seats it was the largest opposition success to date. The winner of the March 2007 presidential election, Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, was also supported by key officers of the junta. Despite these problems, these elections were the most transparent in the country's history. However, this process was put to a halt when a new junta, led by the elected president's personal military chief of staff, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, staged a coup on August 6, 2008. Though the new junta has planned new presidential elections for June of 2009 – the National Assembly was not dissolved – this means there has not been a single transfer of power from one elected president to another in Mauritania's history. All presidential terms have been interrupted by coup d'état.

The military was in power from 1978 to 1991. During the 1991 – 2005 period, the president was a retired army colonel, thereby underlining the importance of the non-elected military institution as the country's ultimate decision maker. An elected civilian president was in power for just 17 months (March 2007 – August 2008). During that period, the influence of the military over elected institutions remained relatively strong. This can be seen in the fact that the colonel who headed the 2005 coup d'état and the subsequent transition, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, was appointed as the president's personal military chief of staff, and was promoted to the rank of general (incidentally becoming the second general in the country's history). As soon as President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi dismissed him, replacing him by another officer, General Ould Abdel Aziz staged a coup d'état. This indicates that elected officials can only with great risk make decisions that contravene the preferences of military officers.

The constitution guarantees the right of association. However, under previous regimes major obstacles were created to block unwanted organizations. The situation improved significantly during the military transition period (August 2005 – March 2007) and under the Ould Cheikh Abdellahi administration. This was seen most tellingly as the "Reformist" Islamic organizations, which were the target of recurrent repression under the Ould Taya regime, were finally allowed to form a political party in 2007. Even some leaders of the underground and exile organizations of Black Africans, such as the African Liberation Forces of Mauritania (Forces de Libération Africaine de Mauritanie, FLAM) returned to Mauritania. Haratin organizations, which used to denounce the perseverance of slavery in Mauritania (and which were severely criticized by the previous regime) were officially invited to discuss the issue of slavery in state-sponsored conferences. However, following the August 2008 coup d'état, groups supporting the ousted president were pressured to avoid expressing anti-coup sentiments publicly, even though no general restrictions on the right to associate was announced.

Effective power to govern

Association / assembly rights

Freedom of expression during the transitional military period (2005 – 2007) and the Ould Cheikh Abdellahi administration reached an unprecedented level. Two elements are revealing. First, the Law on the Press, which forced newspapers to submit each new issue to the Ministry of the Interior before publication, was removed. However, some restrictions were maintained, such as the vaguely defined prohibition against “offense to the president of the Republic” (Article 35) or to the “honor” of governmental and administrative office holders (Articles 37 –39). Second, the state media (including the newspaper, national television and national radio) stopped being simply the government’s voice. In 2007 and 2008 these institutions finally allowed non-governmental actors to be heard and seen. However, since the 2008 coup, the state media have fallen back to the practices of the Ould Taya regime, announcing the will of the High State Council and applauding its achievements. In one prominent case, a politician tested the limits of the freedom of speech when he criticized the military. He was arrested and accused of “threatening the morale of the Army and propagating lies,” after he said on national television that one key army corps was staffed by people of specific ethnic groups and tribes, and had been supported in the past by foreign powers. But apart from this, military leaders seem to have responded to international pressure, and have decided against curbing the freedom of expression. For instance, in October 2008, they did not interfere when the public institution monitoring the press, radio and television, the High Authority for the Press and Broadcasting (HAPA) criticized state media outlets for their bias in favor of the government.

Freedom of expression

### 3 | Rule of Law

The 1991 constitution, slightly amended in 2006 by popular referendum, provides for a semi-presidential system tilting heavily in favor of the executive branch. Whether this will change with the new military authorities is unclear, as reports on possible amendments to the constitution have come to light. The president is directly elected by the population (and as a result of the 2006 amendments, cannot serve more than two consecutive terms). The president has the power to dissolve the National Assembly, which cannot impeach him. However, the National Assembly can pass a vote of no confidence against the prime minister and his cabinet (who are appointed by the president). A few weeks prior to the August 2008 coup d’état, this eventuality loomed, as a number of deputies who had left President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi’s coalition were threatening his prime minister and cabinet with a vote of no-confidence, while the president was in turn threatening to dissolve the National Assembly. The president also has decree power, extensive appointment powers, and can unilaterally and without veto by any another institution appoint almost all top positions in the state apparatus, including half of the most important judicial institutions, the Constitutional Council and its chairperson. The president’s significant powers and resources translate in addition into informal political capital,

Separation of powers



as he feeds clientelistic networks across the country's various social, economic and political spheres. Following the 2008 coup, the military's High State Council ruled de facto like a president by decree, appointing a prime minister and a cabinet. At the time of this writing, it was not entirely clear whether the generals would also take the power to dissolve the National Assembly.

Constitutionally the judiciary is independent (as per Article 89 of the constitution). However, even formal rules seriously weaken this constitutional statement. The centralized presidential system provides the president with major powers over the judiciary, including the right to appoint three of the six judges sitting in the Constitutional Court, including its chairman; the right to appoint the chair of the Supreme Court without any confirmation necessary or veto by any other institution possible; and the right to appoint all five Islamic scholars of the High Islamic Council. Two other problems undermine judicial independence. First, informal political influence, exerted by means of executive pressure, financial retribution, and/or tribal connections (or any combination of these three channels) is a major problem. This was actually acknowledged by the Minister of Justice himself in 2006. Second, the judiciary, like any other branch of the administration (with the exception of key security agencies) is understaffed and underfinanced, hampering its day-to-day work. Some reforms were adopted in 2006 and 2007 (specifically, the reformed Penal Code and Magistrature Code, Legal Assistance). Noteworthy is the fact that in May 2007, individuals accused of being Islamist terrorists were finally given the right to a trial (since the first arrest in 1993, no such prisoners had ever come to trial). Most such accused were in fact freed, despite the claims of the Ministry of Justice. The judge even rejected alleged elements of proof which were obtained through acts of torture. But with the exception of such high profile cases, the day to day administration of justice remains highly dysfunctional. The continuing domination of the military, as seen in the 2008 coup, raises serious questions as to the possibility of improving the judiciary's quest for independence.

Independent  
judiciary

The only prosecutions brought on the basis of abuse of office have been those against government officials or civil servants who opposed the 2008 coup, and who were considered to be allies of ousted President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi. As such, these cases cannot be considered indicators of any real effort to prosecute abuse of office; rather, they are forms of political retaliation through legal action. The creation of the State Inspector General, with the power to audit any public institutions, generated some optimism, but the results so far have not reached the level of expectations.

Prosecution of  
office abuse

The violation of civil rights was a defining feature of the Ould Taya regime. Ethnic minorities (Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana) and Haratin (former slaves in Moorish society) were, in different ways, second-class citizens. This was also true of Moors (Bidhan) who belonged to tribes deemed “threatening” by the authorities. A 1993 Law of Amnesty, still in place, protects security force personnel who participated in the killings and expulsion of thousands of people from the four ethnic minorities. On the other hand, a law was passed in 2007 that criminalizes slavery activities, necessary because the country’s formal prohibition against slavery had not been previously paired with any significant legal deterrent. However, independent non-state organizations say that numerous slaves still live in rural families.

Civil rights

Women’s rights remains a complex issue. The 2001 Personal Status Code confirms elements of the Shari’ah that maintain women’s inequality, as illustrated by Article 6 which states that a “legal guardian [who must be a man, as stated in article 10] can authorize the marriage of a girl under 18 if there is an interest in it.” The ongoing practices of genital mutilation, and unreported family abuse, or a lack of prosecution when it is reported, remain extremely problematic, as U.N. agencies have reported. The creation of the National Commission for Human Rights in April of 2007 could improve the situation, though this remains a consultative body and cannot investigate matters taking place prior to its creation.

In rural areas, customary or tradition-based practices are coequal with, and often prevail over state laws. In such contexts, the rights of slaves, Haratin and of women remain a significant concern.

#### 4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

In the period that led to the 2006 legislative and 2007 presidential elections, and during the Ould Cheikh Abdellahi presidency, the performance of democratic institutions was improving, as compared to the situation prevailed under the Ould Taya regime. Even the tension between President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi and his former legislative coalition (mid-2008) could be interpreted as a normal clash between two institutions using the resources at their disposal. However, following the 2008 coup, it is now believed by most observers that key military officers were fueling this clash, supporting the faction of deputies who opposed the president. Their decision to oust the president and take control of the government points to the continuing and extreme vulnerability of democratic institutions vis-à-vis a powerful military. The legislative assembly has continued to work following the coup, but it does so amidst deep constitutional uncertainty, given the illegality of the coup that ousted the executive power.

Performance of  
democratic  
institutions

The smooth transition from the military period to that of the elected president and national assembly (2005 – 2008) raised positive expectations as to the nation's commitment to democratic institutions. However, the 2008 coup, and the ensuing support the military obtained from a large number of civil servants and politicians (most of whom had served under the Ould Taya regime) indicates that several important groups in Mauritania's political arena still lack commitment to democratic institutions. Nevertheless, a number of actors, including several (but not all) opposition political parties and civil organizations, have opposed the coup organizers and have called for the restoration of democratic institutions.

Another problem relates to the small minority of people who have joined underground networks who, in the name of Islam, favor the use of violence. The names and structures of these groups have changed over time, from Ansar Allah fi Bilad Shinguity to al-Qaeda Branch in the Islamic Maghreb.

Commitment to democratic institutions

## 5 | Political and Social Integration

The party system in Mauritania has deep historical roots. Beginning with the French introduction of a multiparty system to elect local representatives in 1952, Mauritania's elected assemblies ("Territorial Assembly" under the colonial era and "National Assembly" in the postcolonial era) have always been dominated by one hegemonic party, the party of the executive branch. Mauritania has often been a de facto (1952 – 1962; 1991 – 2005) or de jure (1962 – 1978) single-party system, led by the top executive figure in the colony and in the country. Under the Ould Taya regime the opposition had just a single parliamentary seat for over ten years (1991 – 2001) and, a meager four seats after the 2001 election. This changed after the 2005 coup. First, the legislative election in December 2006 was reasonably closely fought, with the opposition parties ultimately controlling a respectable number of seats (43%). Second, the party system switched from single-party status to a highly fragmented environment, with smaller parties and even a majority of independent deputies. However, behind this fragmentation the historical pattern remains evident: The winning coalition was in fact made of former Ould Taya supporters and military-sponsored candidates (combining official parties and independent candidates) who collectively controlled 57% of the seats. It is this coalition that supported the candidacy of Ould Cheikh Abdellahi for the 2007 presidential election, when he beat the leading figure of the opposition. Internal divisions eventually broke out and a faction of this ruling coalition turned against the president, with the support of the top military officers and elements of the opposition. Only the latter group, however, then opposed the following coup. Support for the executive power, as opposed to programmatic orientations, thus defines the party system of Mauritania, with the exception being the opposition to President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi. This becomes less exceptional if one sees the real executive power-holder as being not the elected president but rather the top military officers. In addition to these larger groups, a number of smaller parties created after the earlier 2005 coup are structured along ethnic and tribal lines.

Party system

A significant new element in the party system is the creation of a Reformist-Islamist party (Tawassoul, or at-Tajma'a al-Wataniyya lil-Islah wa at-Tanmiyya), which was finally authorized in 2007. Its leaders had tried to create such a party in 1991, but were blocked by the Ould Taya regime. Generally speaking, this party transcends tribal cleavages, though the fact that they have only four deputies may also reveal the difficulty of transcending these cleavages. However, the low numbers may also stem from the fact that members had to compete as independent candidates in 2006, as they had not yet been allowed to form a party.

Clientelism and factional struggles determine most of the party system's political games. Individuals may join the opposition to settle a factional struggle at the level of their community (comprising tribal or any other local divisions), reintegrating with the dominant party later on. In the past, fraud on election day was not always necessary, as votes in favor of the ruling party could simply be secured through the party's control of neopatrimonial channels, distributing state or public resources to those communities which supported it, and punishing those that opposed it. Hence it remains difficult for opposition parties to mobilize large sectors of the electorate.

There are few formal interest groups in Mauritania. Trade unions made up of workers, civil servants and students may be the exception. The political arena is constituted mainly by informal interest groups, informal channels and networks of often regrouping individuals who share tribal, regional, professional, Sufi, or friendly connections, or any combination of these. These channels and networks are very fluid, multifaceted, and often changing, but nevertheless constitute the political system's principal structuring factor. In a few cases they are ideologically driven (such as the case with the Arab nationalist networks labeled as "Nasserist" and "Ba'athist," or with the Islamist Muslim brothers), but in the vast majority of cases are not.

Interest groups

Quantitative surveys that measure popular support for democracy (to the extent that one has faith in these measures) do not exist. However, a few localized, qualitative and ethnographic studies have analyzed people's representations of citizenship, democracy, and legitimacy, and these suggest there is a strong attachment to these notions. For instance, some indicate that Haratin communities have called upon the state, drawing on constitutional texts, to defend their interests against the arbitrary abuses of former owner communities. Others have shown that in some towns of the Senegal River Valley people insist strongly that the abuses committed by security and governmental forces during the 1987 – 1991 period of state oppression against ethnic minorities must be addressed in the fairest and most universal way. These ethnographic studies do indicate that many citizens value notions of protection from state abuse, fair representation, the right to be treated fairly and justly. However, using an aggregation of localized studies to describe the national level remains problematic.

Consent to democratic norms

A large number of NGOs do exist, but most of them are either empty shells or schemes (created by state officials) to capture international aid. Only a few formal associations play a significant role in addressing social problems. However, on the informal side, hundreds of informal associations exist and play an important role. These may include, for instance, self-help village associations (“hometown associations”), which help connect individuals who have migrated away from their home villages with those who stayed; age-set associations; or groupings that assemble disciples of Sufi figures and which combine religious and socioeconomic activities. This type of informal association is often missed by international observers who look for formal associations.

Associational  
activities

## II. Market Economy

### 6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Mauritania is one of the world’s poorest countries, ranking 137th out of 177 countries in the 2008 Human Development Index. Socioeconomic barriers are quite significant and defined along linguistic, ethno-racial, and professional lines. Exceptions do exist and individuals may transcend these boundaries. But in general, slaves and the vast majority of Haratin are held fast at the very bottom of Mauritania’s socioeconomic pyramid. The official euphemistic expression to explain this situation is that of the “consequences of slavery” (les vestiges de l’esclavage). The new Minister of Human Rights and Reintegration is sending positive signals. But against this must be weighed the very short duration of ministers in Mauritanian governments, and any hope for real change requires that his successors show the same commitment. Ethno-racial barriers also exist with respect to the non-Arabic-speaking minorities (Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana). These communities’ situation is characterized not necessarily by the fact that they are structurally poorer than the Bidhan community (rural villages and urban shantytowns count numerous very poor Bidhan families), but rather, that their situation is structurally precarious: Ever since independence they have been considered suspect minorities by some Bidhan power-holders, and have always run the risk of being targeted by political and economic forms of punishment. The worst period was between 1989 and 1991, when thousands of individuals were expelled from Mauritania, and thousands who stayed behind lost their land and jobs in the administration. This permanent state of vulnerability constitutes a major barrier. Finally, professional lines constitute another major barrier. High-ranking military officers are comparatively speaking the richest professional category, and along

Socioeconomic  
barriers

with a few non-military businessmen (military officers are often businessmen as well) far outdistance most others. High-ranking civil servants also form another highly favored socioeconomic category. Below this, other traditional patterns within ethnic communities, whether delineated by professional lines or other cleavages, also exist.

Economic indicators		2004	2005	2006	2007
GDP	\$ mn.	1547.9	1836.6	2662.6	<b>2643.8</b>
Growth of GDP	%	5.2	5.4	11.7	<b>1.9</b>
Inflation (CPI)	%	10.4	12.1	6.2	<b>7.3</b>
Unemployment	%	33.0	-	-	-
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	25.3	44.3	5.8	<b>5.8</b>
Export growth	%	9.1	6.2	117.9	<b>4.9</b>
Import growth	%	42.5	45.3	-	-
Current account balance	\$ mn.	-	-	-	-
Public debt	\$ mn.	2081.7	2079.3	1395.4	<b>1437.0</b>
External debt	\$ mn.	2332.7	2315.7	1624.0	<b>1704.4</b>
Total debt service	% of GNI	3.5	3.5	3.5	<b>4.5</b>
Cash surplus or deficit	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax Revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	21.9	22.7	19.9	<b>20.1</b>
Public expnd. on edu.	% of GDP	3.1	2.3	2.9	-
Public expnd. on health	% of GDP	1.5	1.7	1.5	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	4.7	3.6	3.1	-

Sources: The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2009 | UNESCO Institute for Statistics | International Labour Organization, Key Indicators of the Labour Market Database | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Yearbook: Armaments, Disarmament and International Security.

## 7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

The Mauritanian economy has been increasingly deregulated over the last fifteen years. The once-substantial state ownership continues, but has declined, and trade with international partners has been liberalized. The economic legal environment has been reformed extensively, with the adoption of many codes aimed at standardizing and liberalizing the economy, including the Mining Code (1999), the Fishery Code (2000), the Investment Code (2002), the Public Contracts Code (2002), a new Labor Code (2004), and a revised Fiscal Regime of Oil and Natural Gas (2004). However, the codes lack specific implementation mechanisms and thus make their respective sectors subject to improvised and thus unpredictable and uncertain day-to-day activities. In addition, these codes lack the necessary human support in the Ministry of Justice, and in their own respective ministries, as judges and other judicial personnel lack the training to address legal disputes in this sector. The majority of economic actors remain in the informal sector. Though this sector is market-based, it is not subject to the same regulations as the formal sector. It is largely based on traditions, kinship and personal relations among market participants.

Market-based competition

No official anti-monopoly policy exists. Formal private companies form an oligopoly (concentration of ownership), owned by a few businessmen and their families or clans, they which controls vast sectors of the economy (including banks, commerce, import-export, food and more). The problematic economic and political power of these oligopolistic enterprises has been identified by most multilateral partners (including the IMF and World Bank) but reforms changing the current situation have proved difficult to implement. These groups often enjoy close ties with the executive power, and their position in the hierarchy may change as new heads of state emerge. Some changes in the power of these oligopolistic enterprises were seen in the aftermath of the 2005 and 2008 coups.

Anti-monopoly policy

Foreign trade has been largely liberalized since the mid-1990s. Officially speaking, most barriers have been lifted. However, many reports point to a number of informal mechanisms that burden foreign trade. The physical bottlenecks of foreign trade (such as the port of Nouakchott, the customs, and custom check points along national roads) comprise major informal mechanisms that undermine the notion of a liberalized foreign trade regime.

Liberalization of foreign trade

Mauritania's banking system remains underdeveloped. Problems include the banks' low capital assets, high interest rates and relatively restrictive lending policies which reserve loans for persons with special relations to bank owners and officials. Deficiencies persist in the enforcement of laws and regulations. Banks are accessible only to a minority of clients and contribute only minimally to national investments. They are also closely connected to oligopolistic commercial groups

Banking system

(with ties to tribal groups). The arrival of two major foreign banks in 2008 could send positive signals and make the system more competitive. The recent replacement of central bank governors has not helped to stabilize the system. However, since January 2007, the central bank has been made legally more independent from the executive branch, with the aim of preventing use of central bank resources to finance public expenses. However, because of the 2008 coup and, as a consequence, the hold on full cooperation with Mauritania by the World Bank and the IMF, some reports have argued that the central bank is in a deficit situation.

## 8 | Currency and Price Stability

In 2007 and 2008 inflation was mainly caused by the increase in food and oil prices. But inflation rates remained at the time below the 10% level (over all increases were above 10% in 2004 and 2005), partly due to tight monetary policies. The decline in global prices has lowered pressures from high food prices, but on the other hand, following the 2008 coup, international sanctions and the military junta's attempt to bolster domestic legitimacy have led the government to pursue inflationary measures. Because the military regime is keen to increase its popularity, it has fixed prices for several basic food items, fuel, water and electricity. Reserves of foreign exchange have decreased due to the cessation of international aid programs in the coup's aftermath. Foreign exchange rates were liberalized in January 2007 (after being pegged to the dollar between 2005 and 2007).

Anti-inflation /  
forex policy

Fiscal policies were relatively conservative and stable from 2005 to 2007, though on the eve of the legislative elections public servants' salaries were raised significantly, probably for political reasons. Since the 2008 coup, the cessation of international aid, coupled with the major drop in oil prices (and Mauritania's lower-than-expected levels of oil production) has forced the military junta to loosen its fiscal policies. More generally, the government acknowledged in 2005, under pressure from the IMF, that all the data it had published concerning its fiscal and monetary policies were inaccurate. It has since pledged to be more transparent. However, the lack of institutional resources, as well as ongoing political factors, still undermines the reliability of economic data, and therefore calls for caution regarding descriptions and prospects for macrostability.

Macrostability



## 9 | Private Property

Article 15 of the constitution guarantees the right to own property. The Law on Land Tenure (1983) guarantees private ownership of land, but this law conflicts with customary local land tenure regulations and has been a major factor in the outbreak of state violence against ethnic minorities of the Senegal River Valley. Also, the state is entitled to evict citizens, with compensation, when “economic and social development needs” apply. In 2008 there were several cases of clashes between local communities and local state authorities which had authorized the purchase of land titles by business persons in the Senegal River Valley. Regional governors are granted important powers over the attribution of property rights, and political connections with the governors often trigger local conflicts. At the end of 2008 the military government set up a program to allow impoverished dwellers of one of Nouakchott’s biggest shantytowns to acquire ownership of the land on which they had built their houses. However, property titles are already being sold on the black market by speculators.

Property rights

The transition government established tribunals of commerce in 2006 to offer better legal safeguards for commercial transactions and private ownership (especially for foreign business actors), but their actual use has remained underdeveloped.

Private enterprises are allowed to exist. Two types of enterprises dominate the Mauritanian formal sector: large conglomerates with tribal and family roots that form an oligopoly, and state-owned enterprises, of which the Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière (SNIM) mining company (78% state-owned) is the largest. More than a dozen foreign companies are present in the oil and mining sector. Most private businesses operate in the informal sector.

Private enterprise

Liberalization policies have been implemented but coexist with strict state regulations, such as the ongoing licensing regime, which requires businesses to buy licenses in order to operate officially in almost any sector of the economy. Business persons thus tend to operate informally to avoid such licenses. Those who do acquire them often do so through clientelistic (favoritism) mechanisms, as the “preferential” granting of licenses is one of the most well-known forms of politico-economic exchanges. Attempts were made to privatize the electricity company (SOMELEC) and to increase private ownership in SNIM (MITTAL was a contender) but these attempts have failed.

## 10 | Welfare Regime

A major divide separates those who work for the formal sector and those who work for the informal sector. The former, who are relatively few, have access to some underfunded forms of protection (through public retirement programs, the Caisse National de la Sécurité Sociale). However, the vast majority of the population copes with social risks by drawing on the help of family and tribal relations. The WHO ranks Mauritania 111th out of 191 countries in terms of health matters. Health centers such as hospitals and clinics are sparsely located, with the number of trained health personnel in the country low. About 33% of the population has no access to any health center within a 5 km reach. The government spends 2% of its GDP on health. To address the problem of unemployment, professional education programs (formation professionnelle) have been put in place, though there are as yet no indications as to their actual results. The national health policy adopted in 2006 has not yielded clear results so far. Local NGOs, international NGOs and multilateral agencies are important providers of health and education services.

Social safety nets

There are still significant obstacles to equal opportunity in Mauritania. The three administrations since the coup of 2005 have tried to tackle what in official parlance is called the “consequences of slavery” (“sequelles de l’esclavages”), providing support to the Haratin, the largest and poorest subnational group. There are no clear indications as to these programs’ tangible results. Since the end of 2007, programs have also been created to reintegrate the Haalpulaar and Wolof Mauritanian refugees who were expelled from the country in 1989, with a special focus on access to land and education. It remains to be seen whether these programs will actually be fully implemented and, if they are, what results they will yield. In 2008, for the first time, women were appointed to civil service positions previously held solely by men, including two female governors (Wali) and two female ambassadors. At the time of writing, there were still no female judges). Though unprecedented, these nominations remain symbolic for the moment. No mechanisms supporting equality of opportunity exist in the private sector.

Equal opportunity

## 11 | Economic Performance

In 2008, the previous years’ optimistic economic expectations declined. Mauritania’s two main sources of revenues (foreign aid and natural resources exports) have decreased significantly. First, the coup of August 2008 led Western donors and multilateral partners to cut down on aid. Second, the coup coincided with another major economic problem, the global recession and the ensuing drop in the international prices of natural resources, on which Mauritania is extremely dependent. The country’s shortfall in oil production – the fields produced about 15,000 barrels per day instead of the expected 50,000 – exacerbated the problems.

Output strength

With the decline in oil and iron prices, the economy has been hit hard. Even if a positive post-coup solution is found, and Mauritania's donor partners' sanctions come to an end, the global crisis could negatively affect the amount of resources rich countries allocate to developmental aid (both in bilateral and multilateral programs). Terrorist attacks in 2007 and 2008 have also affected another growing industry in Mauritania, that of tourism. In addition, public spending is growing as the military junta seeks to obtain domestic legitimacy. This will lead to higher budget deficits, and given the decrease of revenues will in turn increase indebtedness. As for the country's agricultural sector, it remains highly vulnerable to rainfall levels. Though in 2007 – 2008 the rainy seasons were satisfactory, some areas, including those of intensive rice culture, were subject to destructive flooding. GDP has grown constantly since 2005, with double-digit growth after the start of oil production (11.4% according to Economist Intelligence Unit estimates), though with a slowdown in that growth since 2007 (growth rates were 1.0% and 3.5% in 2007 and 2008 respectively).

## 12 | Sustainability

The development of oil extraction and the increase in mining activities have raised environmental concerns. A panel of independent experts on petroleum and natural gas activities in Mauritania advised the government to shut down two of its offshore sites because of the threat they pose to the National Park of the Banc d'Arguin, a natural reserve vital to the reproduction of fish and other ocean fauna. The panel also encouraged the government to develop more transparent and stronger norms for monitoring the access of foreign companies to domestic oil ("junior" oil companies who get in and out quickly with little regard for environmental and social consequences constitute a major problem in this sector). About twenty companies are active in Mauritania, ranging from the major ones (such as Total and Petronas) to small companies with little public exposure.

Though Mauritania's application to the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative (EITI) was accepted in 2007, the country's final and formal inclusion in the political process has been called into question, in part due to the 2008 coup and the fact that the Mauritanian civil society representatives who must take part in the process seem reluctant to associate themselves with the new junta. Mauritania's coastlines have been subject to intense fishing. The Délégation à la Surveillance Maritime et au Contrôle en Mer (DSMCM) is trying to protect Mauritania's sea zone, to ensure that no boats fish during prohibited periods (a necessity allowing for the reproduction of ocean species), but the international and domestic fishing industries are composed of powerful players with the capacity to undermine the DSMCM's work, as several reports have indicated.

Environmental  
policy

The government spends 2.3% of its GDP on education, according to a 2009 UNDP report. Though the rate of primary schooling has increased in recent years, secondary and tertiary rates remain very low (only 54% of schoolchildren enrolled in grade one reach grade five). The gender gap is also significant for these last two sectors, as most girls quit schools after primary school (19% of girls attend secondary school, and only 2% tertiary school).

Education policy /  
R&D

Colleges, high schools (lycées), and Nouakchott University (the only one in the country) are poorly funded and staff is generally poorly trained. Some private colleges fare better but are accessible only to those with the requisite financial resources. Most of the country's elite travels to Europe or the United States for higher education. There is no R&D performed in the country. The quality of diplomas remains a major issue, as allegations concerning the award of fake or unmerited diplomas reveal the lack of confidence in the educational system.

## Transformation Management

### I. Level of Difficulty

Structural constraints in Mauritania are substantial. The extreme vulnerability of the economy to external fluctuations and climatic changes have considerable effect on the country's complex sociopolitical organization, itself affected by the tribal legacy of sociopolitical interactions and ethno-racial cleavages, which continue to limit the upward mobility of most people of Haratin background and, though to a lesser extent, those of Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana background. The structural domination of the military is deeply influential. The inertia of the authoritarian elite has to date prevented the durable transformation of social, political and economic relations in the country.

Structural  
constraints

The vibrancy of associational life and civil society in general is difficult to measure. If NGOs are used as an indicator, then the civil society tradition is neither long nor solid. NGOs have flourished since the major constitutional changes of 1991, but the vast majority of these NGOs are either empty shells or controlled by individuals who travel in the circle of government elites. There are a few vocal and independent organizations, such as SOS-Esclave (which tries to establish rights for still-enslaved people and defends the rights of Haratin). Though no surveys are available, most experts would agree that trust in public institutions is relatively low, mainly because of the overwhelming presence of corruption, favoritism and nepotism. However, associations of a more informal type do exist. Some Sufi orders, reformist Islamic associations, hometown associations and informal women's organizations do in fact play a sort of civil society role, as they gather people of different tribal or ethnic backgrounds together, provide help to their members, and can at times engage the state on social, economic and political issues.

Civil society  
traditions

As already noted, significant ethno-linguistic and status or caste cleavages plague Mauritania's political system. The ethno-linguistic cleavages between the Hassaniyya-speaking (a localized form of Arabic) community on the one hand and the Haalpulaar, Sooninke, Wolof and Bamana communities on the other have become increasingly important since the 1950s, leading to the major outbreak of violence between 1987 and 1991. Since 1991 the intensity has lowered, even more so recently with the organized collective return of about 10,000 refugees to Mauritania. But the actual conditions of this return are still unclear. The National

Conflict intensity

Agency to Assist and Integrate Refugees (ANAIR), created in early 2008, is addressing returnees' immediate needs, but their mid- and long-term problems still need to be addressed. In addition, the Law of Amnesty (1993) that protects armed forces personnel from prosecution related to the era's killings and human rights violations is still a major obstacle to national reconciliation. The underrepresentation of Haalpulaar, Wolof, Soninke and Bamana in key security positions is still problematic. The status cleavage between Haratin and Bidhan ("White Moors") remains a major problem, with Haratin continuing to be marginalized in every sphere of social, political and economic life. Their full integration is probably the most critical challenge in this country.

As noted above, self-proclaimed networks of Islamic armed groups such as the al-Qaeda Branch in the Islamic Maghreb have challenged the Mauritanian government since 2005, with the highest number of incidents occurring between December 2007 and September 2008. Two military garrisons were attacked, in December 2007 at Ghallawiya (three soldiers killed) and in September 2008 at Tourine (15 soldiers killed). In December 2007, four French tourists were killed by alleged Islamist armed men, and another group of armed men shot at the Israel Embassy in Nouakchott; and in April and May 2008, gun battles pitted security forces against alleged Islamist armed groups following a police raid on a house where people responsible for the attacks against the French tourists and the Israeli Embassy were said to be located.

## II. Management Performance

### 14 | Steering Capability

The period under study, though short in time (two years) has seen three different types of administrations: a transitional military administration relatively committed to installing an electoral democracy but with little vision for substantive structural changes; a short 17-month elected administration plagued by major strife between factions (some supported by military officers); and finally a new military administration – the primary subject to be assessed here – whose intentions remain unknown and fluid. Such a context is not propitious for long-term strategic objectives. With respect to constitutional democracy, the relative optimism that came immediately after the Mach 2007 presidential elections was soon undermined by the unconstitutional coup of August 2008. However, other policies and courses of action remained in place despite the coup. The new junta kept the National Assembly intact, exercised restraint with regard to coercing members of the

Prioritization

opposition, and continued repatriation of Mauritanian refugees from Senegal. Economically, though the military junta has not reversed any major commitments made by the previous governments, the international community's reluctance to support the coup has in itself created new uncertainties in an already uncertain situation.

The implementation of political reforms proceeded at a relatively constant pace between 2005 and 2008. The occurrence of relatively free and fair legislative and presidential elections, the adoption of more liberal regulations for the press, the actual implementation of a refugees' return program and the criminalization of slavery practices, among other events, signaled a willingness to carry out reforms. However, internal factional struggles during the Ould Cheikh Abdellahi administration (which twice led to the appointment of a new cabinet), the 2008 coup d'état, and the tensions within the military itself have seriously undermined the implementation of political reforms. On the economic front, the new junta did not overturn economic policies, but its capacity to move forward has been undermined by international isolation and the global economic crisis.

Implementation

Overall, the policy learning process has seemed to gravitate toward the conservation of the status quo. Leaders have frequently seized strategic opportunities, but not for the sake of reform. Economically speaking, recent reports do not indicate any significant decrease in corruption, nepotism or clientelism. Politically, the decision to stage a coup in August 2008, which resulted in the nation's isolation from the international community (with the exception of Arab League support), does not indicate a clear process of policy learning in favor of reforms. The creation of the General State of Democracy (États Généraux de la Démocratie), a large public conference where government, pro-coup political parties and civil society organizations discussed the future of democracy in the country, was presented by the junta as a way to find new innovative ways to build a democracy. But the credibility of this attempt was undermined by two major weaknesses. First, a similar national debate had been convened by the previous military junta just three years before, hence conveying the impression that these national debates are useless, as the military has the power to interrupt the democratic game at will, only to organize a new national debate on democracy. Second, one conclusion of the États Généraux was that military officers could run in the new presidential election, provided that they resign from the military. The previous national debate (2005) had put the bar higher, prohibiting any member of the junta from standing for election.

Policy learning

## 15 | Resource Efficiency

Using unprecedentedly transparent and direct language, the national commissions convened in 2005 – 2006 to discuss the problems of the country identified nepotism and clientelism to be severely undermining efficient use of public resources and the overall functioning of the public administration. However, there are no indications that improvements have been made since then. The same lack of transparency, of meritocratic procedures in the appointment of public servants, and of efficient management of public resources seem to characterize the system today. The office of the State Inspector General, created in 2005, sent positive signals as it began to investigate cases of corruption. However, unexplained dismissals, coupled with the fact that most recent charges have been made only against supporters of the ousted president, raise suspicions as to the politicization of this institution.

Efficient use of assets

Budget deficits have increased since 2007, due to the global economic crisis but also as a consequence of the coup, and the ensuing cutbacks in donors' aid. Mauritania also has one of the developing world's highest tax rates on profits, which leads to high tax evasion. Efforts have been made to bring the budgetary process more in line with international standards, including the provision of support to elected deputies whose role in this process is crucial.

Factional struggles within the state apparatus, themselves fed by personal and political rivalries, undermine coordination of public policies. Even at the highest level of the state, among the top military officers, factional rivalries undermine the public policy process and send negative signals to the rest of the administration. Political factions also weakened the administration of President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, as top positions were allocated on the basis of the assumed political weight of various factions, whose contradicting and conflicting objectives made coordination difficult.

Policy coordination

Positive signals were sent during the transitional period (2005 – 2007), with the creation of the State Inspector General, the Anti-Corruption Police and the overall pro-transparency discourse of the authorities, including on the part of the Ministry of Justice. However, in terms of tangible and net results, no positive changes have been observed. There have not been any significant prosecutions or indictments of corrupt public officials, even though most analysts agree that levels of corruption are high. The few cases have been those of people associated with the ousted president. This does not mean that these people were not guilty of corruption, but it does convey the impression that an individual's political orientation may constitute the primary criteria in initiating an anti-corruption procedure.

Anti-corruption policy



## 16 | Consensus-Building

A significant number of political actors favor the adoption of stronger democratic reforms. However, dominant officers within the military, members of powerful political and tribal clans, and local power brokers serve as countervailing forces. The fact remains that, since independence in 1960, not a single government has replaced its predecessor by means of democratic procedures. No president has reached his end of term without being deposed by a coup d'état. Consensus does exist with respect to the role of the market. However, strong disagreements remain concerning the foundations of the market, specifically that of the rule of law as the mechanism regulating market relations. Most policies aimed at developing the rule of law in the country have been undermined. Formal laws and regulations are rarely implemented in practice, being either ignored or subverted.

Consensus on goals

With its 30-year old tradition of coup d'état (10 in the course of 30 years), the military remains the central veto player in the process of democratization. Unless its leading officers truly allow civilians to govern, the current semi-authoritarian status quo will remain. The interruption of the previous administration after only 17 months sent a worrying signal. But even during that democratic interlude, the president's support by some top military officers, one of whom became his military chief of staff, speaks to the dominant position of veto players.

Anti-democratic  
veto actors

The fact that the new military junta has maintained the repatriation of Mauritanian refugees program indicates that it acknowledges, to a certain point, the important issue of national unity. Reversing that program would have been highly problematic. However, ethnic tensions will remain significant until the government sets up some sort of reconciliation commission, revokes the Law of Amnesty that protects military personnel responsible for human rights abuses from prosecution, and appoints people from ethnic minorities at all levels of the state. The management of class and status differences has also focused on the issue of the Haratin. Some efforts have been made by the Commissariat of Human Rights, Humanitarian Action and Relations with Civil Society to address this problem specifically, and a \$4 million project was implemented (though problems with illegal use of the funds have already been discovered by the press).

Cleavage /  
conflict  
management

The current military government allows members of civil society to express themselves, to a degree that did not exist under the Ould Taya regime. Organizations like SOS-Esclave issue public reports on issues that used to be taboo under the older regime, such as exposing cases of individuals still held in slavery, and telling their personal histories. The demonstrations against the diplomatic ties with Israel, organized by associations such as Ribat, may have influenced the government's decision to maintain these relations. However, simply allowing civil society voices to exist does not imply any inclusion in the decision-making process, and no indicators currently point to significant inclusion.

Civil society  
participation

The Ould Cheikh Abdellahi regime and the current military junta both have supported the organized return of refugees of non-Arabic-speaking communities, who were expelled from the country in 1989 – 1991. In doing so, they have ended the previous state policy, which denied the very existence of any Mauritanian refugees in neighboring countries. Though this is a step towards reconciliation, the current authorities have yet to address two major steps: first, ensuring the real integration of these returnees (providing and/or returning to the refugees their jobs, land, houses, and identity cards), and second, acknowledging the full responsibility of the state in the killings and expulsions, and investigating the role of military personnel responsible for human rights violations.

Reconciliation

## 17 | International Cooperation

The Ould Cheikh Abdellahi administration worked closely with international partners, though his stay in office was too short to come to a firm conclusion regarding his government's willingness to make full use of international support. The 2008 coup has led most international actors to freeze their activities in Mauritania, with the exception of the Arab League, some individual Arab countries like Qatar, and China. Programs with most multilateral institutions (including the World Bank, the IMF and the European Union) are on hold.

Effective use of support

The military junta in power since August 2008 has attempted to convince its international partners that it is committed to bringing democracy back on track. As of the time of this writing, in February 2009, the regime had not been successful in presenting itself as a credible partner. The following months will be crucial in that respect; finding an acceptable solution to the current crisis is a major task. The plan to hold a presidential election in June of 2009 appeared to provide a clearer plan, but other issues remained intensely debated, including the question of the status of the ousted president, as well as the question of whether current junta leaders would be able to run for election.

Credibility

Relations with other regional powers were quite positive under the 2005 – 2007 military regime and under the Ould Cheikh Abdellahi regime. However, since the latest coup, this cooperation has been put on hold by Mauritania's regional partners. The African Union is putting strong pressure on the current junta. The Arab league, however, opposes sanctions against Mauritania. Some of Mauritania's neighbors, including Senegal, Morocco and (though not a direct neighbor) Libya, have provided official diplomatic support to military authorities and are engaged in active diplomatic efforts supporting the military regime, or in the case of Libya, in efforts to find a political solution to the situation.

Regional cooperation

## Strategic Outlook

The main challenge ahead for Mauritania consists in building legitimate institutions that fit both international and domestic expectations. The overwhelming domination of the military, uninterrupted since 1978 (despite the civilian façade of the 1990s and 2000s) continues to undermine the process of democratization. Military officers' de facto and de jure control over the political arena combines with the continuing presence of deputies, civil servants, local notables and businessmen who at one time nurtured the authoritarian regime of Colonel Ould Taya. Even during the 2005 – 2008 period, this class retained its influence, and contributed to the downfall of the Ould Cheikh Abdellahi presidency. Significant reforms were implemented before the 2008 coup, including the adoption of more liberal press and media regulations, the authorization of a democratic Islamist party to represent the interests of those who identify themselves with such a program, the beginning of a recognition of the 1989 – 1991 atrocities against non-Arabic-speaking minorities, and the criminalization of slavery. These reforms need to be pursued by legitimate political institutions.

In addition, clientelism and nepotism need to be addressed as major political and economic problems. These informal institutions continue to hurt people who do not have access to the right family, tribal or personal connections, and continue to be marginalized as a consequence. The judiciary must be made constitutionally, politically and financially more independent from the executive. In the past, this independence and related judicial reforms have often been limited to economic issues such as commercial transactions; but an independent judiciary is as important for social and civil reforms as it is for a well-functioning market economy.

Reforms are needed to provide for the creation of mechanisms to oversee presidential nominations (by the Senate and or the National Assembly) and prevent excessive executive domination of the judiciary.

Agencies of the central administration in rural areas must be made more accountable. Actions by governors and prefects need to be monitored so as to prevent the arbitrary seizure of land. This policy requires the implementation of safeguard mechanisms against arbitrary decisions made by local representatives of the state (whether governors, prefects or gendarmes). Similarly, legitimate political institutions need to implement transparent land-title mechanisms in large urban areas.

The full liberalization of the media is needed, including the right to create non-state-owned radio and television companies. In other nations, these media actors have proved very valuable, for instance during election times in countries such as Ghana that have successfully alternated between civilian governments.

Elections must also be monitored and organized by an independent institution that has even more powers and autonomy than CENI, the current national electoral board.

A truth and reconciliation commission is needed to address and ameliorate the scars of the 1989 – 1991 period. This would also entail the removal of the 1993 Law of Amnesty that protects military personnel from prosecution. Mauritania's international bilateral and multilateral partners need to provide the necessary support. Politically, they must provide attention not only to the electoral process but also institutions supporting the rule of law. Economically, though oil and mining are important generators of revenue, more localized and durable projects are needed. Sustainable agriculture has been neglected as have, in recent years, microcredit institutions. These deserve much more international support, even if they lack the attraction for major investors held by the oil, mining and fisheries industries.