

# BTI 2012 | Mauritania Country Report

<b>Status Index</b>	1-10	<b>4.41</b>	# 99 of 128	
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scale: 1 (lowest) to 10 (highest)    score    rank    trend

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## Key Indicators

Population	mn.	3.5	HDI	0.453	GDP p.c.	\$	1944
Pop. growth <sup>1</sup>	% p.a.	2.4	HDI rank of 187	159	Gini Index		39.0
Life expectancy	years	58	UN Education Index	0.366	Poverty <sup>3</sup>	%	44.1
Urban population	%	41.4	Gender inequality <sup>2</sup>	0.605	Aid per capita	\$	87.1

Sources: The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2011 | UNDP, Human Development Report 2011. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$2 a day.

## Executive Summary

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania remains mired in a 30-year long cycle of military rule and successive coups d'état. Since 1978, the military has for the most part held the reins of power in the country and shows little sign of relinquishing this hold; unpredictable and often disorderly coups for some time have been the source of regime change in Mauritania. President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, for example, after being democratically elected was removed from office after only 17 months by a military coup in August 2008. Coup leader General Ould Abdel Aziz then organized a presidential election, which he himself won in July 2009; his party, the Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR) controls the National Assembly and the Senate. Since 2006 however freedoms of expression and association have not been significantly curtailed, indicating that the current regime still allows a certain level of democratic freedoms in political life.

President Ould Abdel Aziz has campaigned against corruption, and has stated that corruption harms the country's economy. While auditing and anti-corruption efforts have been active, agencies led by military officers and other highly influential supporters of the president have been mostly left alone. The actual implementation of the rule of law, of policies concerning transparency and anti-clientelism, remains highly discretionary. The Mauritanian economy is not diversified and its performance depends largely on the global prices of natural resources. The current high prices for oil and minerals, however, has been good for this producer of iron ore, gold, copper, uranium and oil; yet this situation too has had adverse consequences, notably the skyrocketing of food prices which hit the poor the hardest. The country's high poverty levels as well as the political exclusion of one of the country's larger demographic groups, the Haratin (the former slaves of the Moorish community), are social issues that need to be addressed. The constant threat of armed Islamist groups is yet another reason to fully integrate socially and politically marginalized populations. In addition, non-Arabic speaking minorities which live along the Senegal River Valley (and in Nouakchott) feel underrepresented in the state apparatus

and are still awaiting the full recognition of the state's role (most notably, that of the armed forces) in the ethnic massacres and deportations of 1989-1991.

## History and Characteristics of Transformation

Since independence Mauritania has remained a poor Saharan country that is reliant on developmental and economic aid. After a period of economic stagnation (1975-1984) and resulting socioeconomic problems following a series of events that included the collapse of iron prices, long periods of drought, the disastrous consequences of Mauritania's involvement in the Western Saharan War, and the formation of policies that led to the excessive expansion of the public sector (and resulting increase in public debt), Mauritania in 1985 organized its first restructuring program with the IMF and the World Bank. This initial program was then followed by other economic restructuring programs.

These socioeconomic challenges were combined with increasing domestic political tensions that have root in the very definition of the country's identity. The politicization of identities, 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 colonial period. The state has fought many a political battle over linguistic policies, education policies, land tenure policies and ethnic quotas. Mounting tensions led to the outbreak of major violence in 1989-1991, when military personnel deported about 80,000 Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana people. Hundreds more meanwhile were killed and thousands were dismissed from the civil service. Former slaves of the Bidhan (or Moor) community, the Haratin, are viewed as second-class citizens and live on the margins of the country's social, economic and political spheres. Political organizations such as El Hor have sought to mobilize the Haratin; some community members were eventually co-opted by the regime while others have joined opposition groups.

In 1991, Colonel Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya agreed to adopt a new democratic constitution while organizing multiparty elections at the presidential, legislative and municipal levels. The constitution however guaranteed the president far-reaching powers. Ould Taya's party, the Democratic and Social Republican Party (Parti Démocratique, Républicain et Social, PRDS) dominated every single election and thus controlled the legislative assembly (the opposition held only one seat for 10 years and then only four seats from 2003-2005). Social polarization and growing social dissatisfaction within individual tribes and regions concerning the president's policies 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 policy, namely the building of close ties with the United States and Israel which a majority of Mauritians did not support, and thus provided the Islamist opposition with arguments for mobilizing against the president.

On 3 August 2005, Colonel Ould Taya was ousted by his closest collaborators, National Security Chief Ely Ould Mohamed Vall and Presidential Security Battalion (BASEP) Commander Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. The coup aimed to prevent the military from breaking into factions and convince Mauritians that state leaders were really interested in a fair distribution of future oil revenue. This transitional period led to the country's freest and fairest municipal (2006), legislative (2006) and presidential elections (2007). Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi won the presidential election, though clearly with the support of key officers including Colonel Ould Abdel Aziz (soon to be general). However, the elected president was ousted after 17 months in power in August 2008 by the same officers (minus one) who had staged the 2005 coup and who had since controlled the state security apparatus. Ould Abdel Aziz's coup was severely condemned by most bilateral donors and by the African Union. After negotiations between Ould Abdel Aziz and opposition parties, presidential elections were scheduled for July 2009 under the supervision of a national unity government. This government, however, had been in place for only 21 days, which did not provide much time to prepare the elections. Ould Abdel Aziz won the election in the first round with 53% of the vote, eliminating the need for a second round. His party, Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR), which controls a majority of seats in the National Assembly and which includes many political figures from the older Democratic and Social Republican Party (Parti Démocratique, Républicain et Social, PRDS) of Ould Taya, won 14 of 17 seats in a senate election in November 2009, while the remaining three seats went to other pro-Ould Abdel Aziz candidates.

Since 2005, the country has fought off attacks led by al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). This armed movement has targeted military garrisons in the country's desert areas and has also kidnapped and killed a total of 10 foreigners. The presence of this radical Islamist group throughout the Sahel has led Western countries, mostly France and the United States, to direct financial and material, as well as diplomatic, support to Mauritania.

The BTI combines text analysis and numerical assessments. The score for each question is provided below its respective title. The scale ranges from 10 (best) to 1 (worst).

## Transformation Status

### I. Political Transformation

#### 1 | Stateness

Mauritania continues to be threatened by a transnational armed group operating across the Sahel region which calls itself al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), whose roots date back to the Algerian Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Armé Islamique, GIA). It is alleged that local cells have worked with AQIM. AQIM's main actions included the assassination of an American NGO worker in June 2009, the kidnapping of three Spanish NGO workers in November 2009 and two Italian tourists in December 2009. In August of 2009, a suicide-bomber attacked the French embassy (the attacker alone died) and another bombing in August 2010 targeted a military base in eastern Mauritania (killing one officer). Given the information available, however, it is important to note that AQIM, which maintains permanent camps on Malian territory, only temporarily operates on Mauritanian soil. In July and September 2010 Mauritanian forces attacked several AQIM camps by crossing the border to Mali. If looked at from a purely quantitative perspective, AQIM's actions on Mauritanian soil have not been highly disruptive as compared to other African insurgencies (Senegal security forces have suffered more casualties in its Casamance region for instance). The country's low population density and sheer vastness makes it more difficult for the state to effectively control its territory. In these remote areas, however, the value of human intelligence in what is a relatively tight-knit society compensates in some ways. Finally, though information is extremely difficult to obtain, illegal trafficking (especially of drugs, European stolen cars and cigarettes, but also human emigrants) seems to be flourishing at the country's northern and eastern borders. The government has created a new "administrative district" (moughataa) in the easternmost region of Hodh al-Sharqi, called the Dhar Moughataa, to strengthen state presence in this peripheral area. However, the possibility that state officials themselves may play some role in illegal trafficking (directly or indirectly) raises important questions on how to conceptualize the notion of "stateness"; the problem in such cases is not the absence

Question

Score

Monopoly on the  
use of force

6

of the state or the challenges posed by non-state forces, but the very loyalty of state officials.

National identity and citizenship have been intensely debated political issues since the foundation of the country. Key in this discussion has been the marginalization of minority groups, such as the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana ethnic groups and the former slave Haratin community. From 2009-2011 the policy of repatriation by which thousands of Mauritanian refugees who had been deported to Senegal and Mali continued. Almost monthly dozens of families returned to Mauritania under the supervision of the National Agency for the Support and Integration of Refugees (Agence Nationale d'Appui et d'Insertion des Réfugiés, ANAIR). According to this agency, since 2008 it has repatriated more than 20,000 people, representing about 5,000 families. These "returnees" have settled in 118 sites along the Senegal River Valley, from which they were expelled 20 years ago. There have been efforts to provide the returnees with jobs, land and education, though most returnees still live in relocation sites that are very poorly equipped and have underdeveloped infrastructures. The very sensitive issue of how returnees can reclaim their land remains unanswered, mostly because after the deportation other people settled the land and have remained there since 1989. Also, the 1993 amnesty law, which protects security personnel involved in the assassination and deportation of ethnic minorities in 1989-1991, has not been repealed. Without investigation into the past human rights violations and potential legal action, the ethnic peace remains fragile. Finally, recent nominations to strategic state ministries, such as the defense, justice and interior ministries, show a relatively low proportion of individuals from the four ethnic minority groups.

The situation of the Haratin has not changed substantially in 2009-2011. Since the adoption of a law in 2007 that criminalizes enslavement, no cases have been brought to justice. Local NGOs claim that in most cases local state authorities (police offices and prefects) have never taken legal action against individuals or families accused of perpetrating enslavement. The main problem is the actual implementation of the law in a context where slave-owning families are socially and informally protected from legal action. For example, leaders of a local NGO that promotes the rights of slaves and former slaves were arrested in December 2010. More generally, the most challenging task facing Mauritania is the question of citizenship in a socioeconomic context. National symbols are still sensitive; Francophone students, of mostly minority group origin, staged massive protests after the prime minister made a controversial remark on the status of Arabic as the dominant national language.

The role of Islam as the foundation of the state is ambiguous. Mauritania is an Islamic republic, and 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 they are "open to the exigencies of the

State identity

6

No interference of religious dogmas

4

modern world.” The criminal code combines elements of both Shari’ah law and of the French penal code. The code of personal status (family code) is mostly inspired by the Islamic law. Yet popular sovereignty, not a God, is the foundation of most key state institutions (the presidency, the National Assembly and the Senate), and Mauritania abides by most international conventions, including the (secular) United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Informal, societal rules often prevail over state rules, and follow to a certain extent religious dogma. The government has become more aware of religious questions following the rise in problems with al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). As one reaction, the president inaugurated the country’s first religious radio station (Radio Quran).

The state’s capacity to establish its authority and provide for basic social services across the entire territory and for all social groups varies significantly. All administrative regions have courts, but most are understaffed and underfinanced. In 2009-2010, the Mauritanian Tax Agency (Direction générale des impôts, DGI) tried to push through more effective tax collection among banks, which was only partially successful. Most government actions however are concentrated in the capital and in the main cities. State agencies are currently computerizing administration systems to be more effective. As agents of the interior ministry, regional governors and prefects of local districts act as powerful actors outside the capital and enjoy a certain level of power but are often mired in local political and tribal or factional issues, without proper monitoring from the center. Officials are also often involved in scandals of illegal or abusive land attribution. In the provision of health and education services, it must be noted that NGOs and other non-state actors complement, and at times replace, efforts by the state.

Basic  
administration  
6

## 2 | Political Participation

After General Ould Abdel Aziz removed democratically elected President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi from office in 2008, he organized a two-round presidential election on 18 July 2009. A second round of voting was not needed, however, as the general won the first round with 53% of the votes. There were no legislative elections after the coup. Following the presidential election a majority of deputies created a new party called Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR), which was officially linked to Ould Abdel Aziz. Whether the election was fair is difficult to evaluate, given that the main candidate sponsored the military coup and was the most powerful military officer at the time of the election. It is unclear whether citizens felt free to vote for the candidate of their own choosing, or also whether the administration in charge of the election, which since colonial times has always obeyed the strongman of the moment, felt free to organize a truly transparent contest. The transitional government under which the election was to take place had been in power for only 21 days. Regarding the election itself, the

Free and fair  
elections  
5

independent election commission (Commission Électorale Nationale Indépendante) along with the interior ministry was in charge of most of the operations. Though the commission had up to eight days to analyze and publish the election results, it actually needed only two days to do so.

Given the election constraints, the government cannot be considered to be fully democratically elected. The military is obviously a powerful veto actor. Because of and since the Western Saharan War, the military has held power from 1978 to 1991. From 1991-2005, Mauritania's president was a retired army colonel who while officially democratic maintained a de facto authoritarian rule; this also points at the importance of the military as an institution, as the country's ultimate political decision maker. The period during which an elected president from a non-military background was in power lasted only 17 months (March 2007 to August 2008). During this period the influence of the military over elected institutions was still relatively strong. For example, the colonel who was the main person behind the 2005 coup d'état and the subsequent transition, Ould Abdel Aziz, was appointed as President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi's personal military chief of staff; the president also appointed Ould Abdel Aziz to the rank of general (becoming the second general in the country's history). As soon as President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi dismissed him and replaced him with another officer, Ould Abdel Aziz staged a coup and then eventually won the presidential election he himself organized in 2009. This indicates that elected civilian officials make decisions that go against the preferences of military officers at their own peril. The military is the de facto dominant veto player in Mauritanian politics.

Effective power to govern

2

The constitution guarantees the right of association. Though this right was highly constrained at the beginning of the 1990s, it has since become increasingly respected in practice, and in 2005 after the ouster of Colonel Ould Taya, the right of association became well established. Political parties and NGOs are allowed to operate without serious problems. In 2009-2011, there were few constraints on the right of assembly with the exception of one known case. The interior ministry refused to grant an official authorization to an anti-slavery organization (Initiative pour la Resurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste); its leader was temporarily arrested and jailed at the end of 2010, but was released in February 2011.

Association / assembly rights

8

Freedom of expression since 2005 has been respected and is on the increase. Generally speaking, citizens and journalists can express opinions freely and harassment is rare; the one exception is when the theme is corruption. When the media reports on specific cases of corruption, and especially if said cases involve high-ranking people, then there may be some pushback and curtailing of freedom of expression. The state-owned television and radio enjoy a complete monopoly in broadcasting. The legal environment is changing, however, so private television and radio companies could be created in the near future. Until this happens, however, the state-owned TV and radio monopoly will remain a roadblock to political

Freedom of expression

7

pluralism. The main media supervisory body (Haute Autorité de la Presse et de l'Audiovisuel, HAPA) has pledged to liberalize the airwaves.

In 2010, Mauritania ranked 112th out of 196 in the Global Index of Press Freedom and is considered “partly free.”

### 3 | Rule of Law

The 1991 constitution, slightly amended in 2006 by way of popular referendum, provides for a semi-presidential system heavily tilting in favor of the executive branch. The president is directly elected by the population (and since the 2006 amendments, cannot serve more than two consecutive terms). The president has the power to dissolve the National Assembly, which in turn 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). The president also has decree power; he has extensive appointment powers; he can unilaterally and without veto power from 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. Beyond this formal institutional architecture which already provides the president with substantial powers lays an informal institutional configuration whereby the president, high-ranking military officers, and economically affluent businessmen wield significant political influence.

Separation of  
powers  
4

Constitutionally the judiciary is independent (Article 89 of the constitution). However, the centralized presidential system provides the president with major powers over the judiciary, including his right to appoint three of the six judges sitting in the Constitutional Court, including its chairman; his right to appoint the chair of the Supreme Court, with no institution provided with the right to confirm or veto this appointment; the right to appoint all five Islamic scholars of the High Islamic Council, and the right to pardon convicts. As a number of cases have shown, the judiciary may act at the will of the executive or influential individual figures. Informal practices also weaken the judiciary. For instance, the president of the Supreme Court normally serves a five-year term. However, there have already been three changes of Supreme Court presidents in the last three years. None of them have served more than two years. The last president was appointed in July 2010. Furthermore, informal political influence, exerted through executive pressure, financial retributions and/or tribal connections (or any combination of these three channels) is a major problem. The judiciary, like any other branch of the administration (minus key security agencies) is understaffed and underfinanced and can hardly accomplish its tasks.

Independent  
judiciary  
4

Ould Abdel Aziz has made the fight against corruption a central theme of his presidency. The results, however, are mixed. On the one hand, the State General Inspectorate has conducted many investigations in a large number of state agencies. Two high-profile public servants, the chair of the national anti-AIDS agency and the chair of the National Human Rights Commission, were arrested and charged with corruption. Also, several other officials have been dismissed, though the reasons were not clear; though most believe corruption was the underlying cause. These officials include the Public Import-Export company (Sonimex), the chair of the public microcredit agency (Procapec), the director of the National Center for Oncology, two governors (from the Nouakchott and Nouadhibou regions), and the directors of the pivotal Central Commission of Public Contracts (one was dismissed in August 2009 and his successor in January 2011). On the other hand, the fact that both the current and previous general inspectors are members of the president's UPR party raises concerns regarding the potential for bias in the investigations. No public or para-public agencies that are chaired by military officers have been audited. In 2010, the Cour des Comptes, another institution in charge of auditing, published its report for the 2006 fiscal year. Though in its report the institution identifies important problems with corruption, the real test will be when it audits public agencies and state officials serving under the current Ould Abdel Aziz regime.

Prosecution of  
office abuse  
4

The level of civil rights violations in Mauritania has diminished significantly in the last four years, since the ouster of Colonel Ould Taya from power. The country's main challenge, however, is that civil rights are still not uniformly applied; an individual's ethnic, racial, social and family background constitutes a major variable that will impact his or her capacity to see his or her rights fully respected, to have access to due process before the law and to be considered innocent until proven guilty. The current problem of terrorism at the country's borders led the government to adopt a new anti-terrorism law in 2010 that restricts further the rights of citizens deemed guilty, or suspected of, terrorist activities, which are very broadly defined. Local NGOs, Amnesty International and local newspapers alerted the public to the terrible treatment of prisoners and conditions of imprisonment. Problems cited include the extra-legal period of detention without trial and the prisoners' reliance on their families to obtain food and medicine (thereby causing poor prisoners, who form the vast majority, to live in extremely harsh conditions). A dozen of prisoners died in September-October 2010 due to bad health conditions.

Civil rights  
6

The issue of slavery directly impacts the problem of civil rights. Though the government recognizes only the "consequences" (sequelles) of slavery, local NGOs argue that many individuals are in fact kept in conditions of slavery; when such cases are reported, the "master" families always succeed, through informal means, in preventing the courts from pursuing the matter under anti-slavery laws. In rural

areas, customary rules are coequal with and often prevail over state laws. In such contexts, the rights of Haratin and of women remain a significant concern.

#### 4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Under the short reign of President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, democratic institutions were strengthened as compared to under the Ould Taya regime (1984-1991 and 1991-2005). The coup that ousted Ould Cheikh Abdellahi and the subsequent victory of General Ould Abdel Aziz highlights an important issue. The fact that after 30 years of military rule the first elected civilian president was ousted after only 17 months in power indicates the difficulty of implementing democratic rule in Mauritania. Democratic institutions are subordinated to the military. A more optimistic view would show that, despite Ould Abdel Aziz's coup and subsequent election, the level of state violence has remained relatively low and that the rights of expression and assembly have not been seriously violated. This suggests however that democratic institutions are very weak and that the quality of democratic practices ultimately depends on the will of the military strongman of the moment. It also indicates that the seat of power is very precarious; the shift of power from one head of state to the next is the result of power struggles among military factions.

Performance of  
democratic  
institutions  
3

In retrospect, the 2008 coup and the 2009 one-round presidential election illustrate the limits of Mauritania's commitment to democratic institutions. The fact that many civilian and military elites who had served under Ould Taya still hold important office also highlights the difficulty of breaking with past authoritarian practices. The degree or intensity of authoritarian rule, however, has softened since the 2005 departure of Ould Taya. Opposition parties and civil society groups are able to criticize the government without fearing outright oppression, as can be the case in other North African countries, for instance. The two-chamber parliament does function to a certain degree, and was not dissolved after the coup in 2008.

Commitment to  
democratic  
institutions  
3

#### 5 | Political and Social Integration

The Mauritanian political system is highly president-centric; the legislative branch is usually at the service of the president, and has been systematically dominated by the president's party, the cohesion of which in turn mainly depends on its members' belief in the president as the strongest man in the country. In 2006, because relatively free legislative elections were held before the presidential election, the party system became more diverse and fragmented (yet still the majority of deputies supported the military's presidential candidate). Under the Ould Taya regime, the opposition held just one seat over 10 years (1991-2001) and then held a meager four seats after the 2001 election. This changed after the 2005 coup. First, the following legislative election (December 2006) saw opposition parties finally controlling a

Party system  
4

larger number of seats (43%); following the 2008 coup and the 2009 election of Ould Abdel Aziz, the party system has returned to “normal,” with the dominant party serving the head of state. Ould Abdel Aziz’s party, Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR), which was formed just before the presidential election in 2009, is thus the heir of its predecessors, the Democratic and Social Republican Party (Parti Démocratique, Républicain et Social, PRDS) (1991-2005) and the Mauritanian People’s Party (Parti du Peuple Mauritanienne, PPM) (1960-1978), and one could also say the colonial-era Mauritanian Progressive Union (Union Progressive Mauritanian, UPM). As was the case under Ould Taya, there are now two to three main opposition parties represented in the National Assembly, and those parties have been led by the same men since the early 1990s. Parties’ names and labels have changed over time, individuals have defected from one party to another (usually in favor of the ruling party), but the ultimate pattern is the same: one ultra-dominant party; some smaller parties affiliated with the “presidential coalition”; and two or three main opposition parties. Factionalism within the ruling party continues to be the main feature of this system, as local rivals compete to head the ruling party’s local branch, with the losing faction either creating an “independent” group, defecting to the opposition until it is co-opted back, or staying within the ruling party but trying to undermine its rivals until the next election. Since 2007, the only noticeable difference with past practice has been the creation of a moderate Islamist party, which was finally granted official recognition after 16 years; Tawassoul, or at-Tajma’a al-Wataniyya lil-Islah wa at-Tanmiyya. 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 neo-patrimonial channels or distributing state/public resources (at varying degrees) to all communities to support it and punishing those that opposed it; hence the difficulty for opposition parties to mobilize large sectors of the electorate.

There are few interest groups in Mauritania, in the formal sense of the concept. Exceptions include workers’ trade unions, civil servant unions and student unions, as well as an employers’ association (patronat) and, in rural areas, official associations of peasants and livestock owners. But these constitute a small share of the workforce. Consequently, a less formal and restrictive definition of “interest group” is needed. This would point to an understanding of interest groups as informal networks or channels through which societal interests are de facto and informally represented in the political system. These networks and groups regroup individuals who share tribal, regional, professional (including factions of the military), Sufi or friendly connections or any combination of these. These channels and networks are very fluid, multifaceted and often changing, but they constitute the principal way by which the political system is structured below the formal level of institutions. In a few cases there are ideologically driven groups, such as with the unofficial and informal, but very real and influential, Arab nationalist networks called “Nasserist” and “Ba’athist,” as well as the moderate Islamists who claim

Interest groups  
4

some affiliation with the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. In the vast majority of cases these groups do not have an official political agenda. The representativeness of these informal networks, however, raises some concerns. For the majority of citizens, who are poor, there are few significant political organizations outside tribal or clan organizations. In the urban centers, some NGOs may act as intermediaries and representatives of their needs and interests (for instance, the few women's organizations or anti-slavery organizations).

Quantitative surveys that measure popular support of democracy (to the extent that one has faith in these measures) do not exist. However, there are a few, more localized, qualitative and ethnographic studies that analyze people's perceptions of citizenship, democracy or legitimacy, and they suggest that 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 on the need to address in the fairest and most universal way the abuses committed by security and governmental forces during the 1987-1991 state oppression against ethnic minorities. These ethnographic studies do indicate that many citizens value the notions of protection from state abuse, fair representation and the right to be treated fairly and justly. However, the aggregation of localized studies to the national level remains problematic.

Approval of  
democracy  
n/a

No surveys or large statistical analysis have been conducted on the issue of social self-organization and social trust. As with the notion of consent to democratic norms, ethnographic studies may provide hints about the status of social capital. 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. But they are usually localized and many do not have extensive horizontal reach. These may include, for instance, self-help village associations ("hometown associations"), which help to connect individuals who have migrated away from their home villages with those who stayed; age-set associations; groupings that assemble disciples of Sufi figures and who combine religious and socioeconomic activities, as well as self-organized microcredit groupings of women. This, however, does not mean that these groupings are free of hierarchical and vertical power relations; quite the contrary. Age, gender and social status often structure these informal groupings. However, trust is a major component of these organizations and networks, and there exist several informal mechanisms to strengthen relations among members and to sanction those who violate the trust of others.

Social capital  
4

## II. Economic Transformation

### 6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Question  
Score

Mauritania has a GDP per capita (PPP) of \$2,118, and 44% of the population lives on \$2 a day. The country ranks 154th in the Human Development Index 2010. Its economy is split, with the oil and mining sector (and fishing) which represent about 75% of revenue but only 3% of the country's employment on one hand, and agricultural and informal sectors on the other.

Socioeconomic  
barriers  
3

Socioeconomic barriers are significant, and are partly defined by one's ethno-racial, linguistic and professional background. Exceptions do exist and individuals may transcend these boundaries. However, some patterns nonetheless persist. Specifically, the vast majority of Haratin continue to occupy the very bottom of Mauritania's socioeconomic pyramid. The official euphemism to describe this situation is called the "consequences of slavery" (les séquelles de l'esclavage). 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 are also home to many very poor Bidhan families), but rather, that their situation is structurally precarious; ever since the country's independence powerful Bidhan actors have been considered these groups as suspicious minorities, and the groups have always run the risk of being the target of political or economic punishment. A World Bank study, based on a local survey, indicates that female unemployment is very high and that on average women earn much less than men. Local NGOs have denounced the harsh conditions of poor young women, usually from the former slave group Haratin, who work as domestic servants and are subject to physical abuse and are underpaid.

Positions in the state institutions are still prized, for it is through these avenues where the benefits of foreign aid and revenue from natural resources (minerals, oil, iron ore, gold, uranium; and non-mineral, mainly fisheries) flow. Therefore, connections to clientelistic networks are important to move up the socioeconomic ladder, but still these networks are already biased in favor of established families and clans. In Nouakchott, wealthy families and the very small middle class (usually made up of the small formal sector) send their children to private schools, where public schools, which are understaffed and underfinanced, are attended mostly by Haratin children.

Economic indicators		2007	2008	2009	2010
GDP	\$ mn.	2837.5	3588.6	3027.0	<b>3636.3</b>
GDP growth	%	-5.7	3.5	-1.2	<b>5.0</b>
Inflation (CPI)	%	7.3	7.3	2.2	<b>6.3</b>
Unemployment	%	-	-	-	-
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	4.9	9.4	-1.3	<b>0.4</b>
Export growth	%	-	-	-	-
Import growth	%	-	-	-	-
Current account balance	\$ mn.	-	-	-	-
Public debt	% of GDP	96.9	90.4	111.4	<b>85.6</b>
External debt	\$ mn.	1704.1	1985.6	2047.6	<b>2461.3</b>
Total debt service	\$ mn.	120.7	63.2	77.6	<b>109.1</b>
Cash surplus or deficit	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	21.6	18.8	20.5	<b>17.8</b>
Public expnd. on edu.	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Public expnd. on health	% of GDP	2.7	2.6	2.5	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	-	3.4	3.8	-

Sources: The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2011 | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook 2011 | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database 2011.

## 7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

The Mauritanian economy has been increasingly deregulated over the last 15 years. While official state ownership continues to be substantial, it has gradually declined and trade with international partners has been liberalized. The economic legal environment has been extensively reformed, with the adoption of many “codes” with the aim to both standardize and liberalize 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 for oil

Market-based  
competition

3

and natural gas (2004). However, the codes lack specific implementation mechanisms and thus make their respective sectors subject to improvised and thus unpredictable day-to-day activities that are often dominated by leading figures. In addition, the ministry of justice nor the respective sector ministries have offered serious support of the codes, as judges and other judicial personnel do not have the training to address sector legal disputes. A study indicates that the fiscal regime and the administration of the tax system are important deterrents. Regulations are heavy and stymie the creation of new enterprises (unless personalized contacts are established with key office-holders or intermediaries).

The Public Contracts Central Commission (Commission Centrale des Marchés, CCM) is meant to make the allocation of public contracts more transparent, with the goal of preventing arbitrary state intervention. Local media, however, has disclosed a number of cases where public contracts were not allocated according to the rules of transparency and open competition among bidders. Also, in early 2011, the CCM's main office-holders were quietly replaced (but appointed to other top positions), in part because they had allocated too many public contracts without competition ("over-the-counter" contracts, or marchés de gré-à-gré).

As most studies indicate, a majority of actors operate in the informal economic sector. Though this sector is market-based, it is not subject to the same regulations as the formal sector. A World Bank study estimates that 85% of the labor force works in the informal sector and that 30% of GDP is generated by the informal sector (the small but lucrative mining and fishery sectors account for the lion's share of GDP).

The national currency, the ouguiya, must be exchanged only in Mauritania.

Most key sectors of the economy are under the control of a few large firms which enjoy an oligopolistic or sometimes even a monopolistic position. The businessmen heading these conglomerates do change with each change of regime, but the system itself has not altered significantly since the 2005 coup that ousted Ould Taya. A World Bank study echoes what most observers and media have observed, which is that small and medium enterprises can hardly break into the Mauritanian market because of the power of the oligopolistic conglomerates which dominate all lucrative markets (banking, fishery, public infrastructure and construction, the import and export of consumer goods and foodstuffs, telecommunications, insurance, and so on), and have been able to adapt easily to reforms. There has been no official (or unofficial) government policy formulated to date to change this system.

Foreign trade has been formally liberalized over the past decade, yet the degree of liberalization depends significantly on each individual sector. In oil and mining, liberalization has perhaps reached its highest point and there are few barriers to

Anti-monopoly  
policy

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Liberalization of  
foreign trade

6

entry for foreign companies. The surge in global raw material prices in 2010 once again stoked the growth of new foreign oil and mining companies in Mauritania. Political and social groups have demanded that the Mauritanian state ought to increase its share of revenues generated by oil and mineral exploration and extraction. In the import-export sector, licenses are used as a mechanism to nurture clientelistic networks. The local industrial sector is underdeveloped; yet, the oligopolistic domination of a few conglomerates has hurt the few homegrown industrial projects, as illustrated by the dairy industry. This local industry is capable of producing high-quality products (given the historical role of Mauritanian livestock, especially camels and cows), but the import of European dairy products by oligopolistic firms weakens local producers. The physical locations of points of foreign trade (the ports of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou; customs checkpoints along national roads) comprise major informal mechanisms that undermine the notion of a liberalized foreign trade. There have been no recent WTO trade policy reviews of Mauritania.

Another form of foreign trade that has grown increasingly important is the transnational smuggling of goods, most especially cigarettes and stolen cars (from Europe), and more worrisome, drugs from Latin America and other West African states (which are then exported to Europe). Analysts should not overlook the economic and political consequences that these activities can have on the country.

Banking reform is officially underway, and a new banking law seeks to increase banks' minimum capital and begin an audit of banks' financial statements. Regardless, the banking system remains underdeveloped. Problems include the low capital assets; high interest rates; financing that is limited and restrictive; favoritism between bank owners, officials and special individuals. Deficiencies persist in the enforcement of laws and regulations. The IMF in a 2010 report asked for important reforms of the banking sector. Only a minority of clients has access to banks, and banks in general target only a small proportion of investments nationally. Banks are also closely connected to oligopolistic commercial groups (with ties to tribal groups). In the 2010, the Mauritanian Tax Agency (Direction Générale des Impôts, DGI) tried to recover taxes from most of the country's banks, but was met with complex political obstacles. For instance, the CEO of the BCI Bank, was an institution targeted by the DGI, is also a high-ranking official of the president's Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR) party. The DGI chairperson was fired a few weeks after the tax recovery operation and a journalist investigating the case was arrested. A 2010 IMF study reports that non-performing loans compromise 27% of all loans in the country.

Banking system

4

## 8 | Currency and Price Stability

Given the country's undiversified economy and reliance on natural resources exports (oil, minerals and fisheries), not to mention that it is a net importer of foodstuffs, fuel and natural gas, Mauritania is vulnerable to global prices' volatility, inflation and foreign exchange shocks. Even though inflation management has improved since 2006, increased government spending points to an again rising potential of higher inflation rates. In early 2011 inflation was rising, reaching about 6% (as compared to 7% in August 2010 and on average 2% in 2009); basic food prices rose significantly at the end of 2010 and early 2011. To respond to this situation, the prime minister called for a lowering of prices, and with the Food Security Commissariat and the State-Owned Enterprise of Import-Export (SONIMEX), has established 600 small, state-owned food stores that offer reduced prices (the "Solidarity 2011" food stores) to force regular stores to lower prices. This food price inflation has hit the entire region at the end of 2010, including North Africa, and also acted as a trigger in the social upheavals in Tunisia and Algeria. During 2009-2010, the ouguiya was stable but in early 2011 the currency reached unusually low levels. Domestically, the gap between the formal and informal foreign exchange markets is important. The Central Bank of Mauritania (CBM) is formally autonomous; the fact that its governor is directly appointed by the president (by presidential decree) opens the door to informal pressures. For instance, the current governor, appointed in August 2009, was the president's own electoral campaign chief of staff during the 2009 presidential election. The governor's autonomy thus depends heavily on the president or strongman of the moment, and on his willingness not to interfere with CBM policies. A former CBM governor along with three powerful businesspeople were accused of corruption and jailed in 2009 during the Ould Taya era.

Anti-inflation /  
forex policy

6

Given the country's reliance on the export of natural resources, it is vulnerable to external shocks. Mauritania created in 2006 the National Fund for Oil Revenues (Fonds National pour les Revenus des Hydrocarbures, FNRH), which is used in part to accumulate savings and in part to finance the yearly budget (though with a pre-fixed cap). Other lucrative industries such as mining and fisheries are subject to great volatility. In 2008-2009, the global economic crisis hit the country hard as global prices plummeted; whereas in 2010 the recovery generated significant revenues for the country (notably coming from the oil, gold, iron ore, copper and uranium sectors), and inspired new investments in mining exploration and extraction. Also, the government has been trying to increase the share of internal fiscal revenues with more effective internal tax collection. To better anticipate and control its expenditures, the government conducted a census of all civil service employees and has sponsored the computerization of its public employee payroll (the wage bill is one of the largest in Africa), though it faced much resistance within

Macrostability

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the different ministries. Presidential promises during the 2009 campaign to increase military expenditures, due to the potential threat of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), and spending for housing and other projects for some of the poorer urban Bidhan communities, put continuing pressure on state expenditures. The budget deficit represented 7.4% of GDP in 2008, 6% of GDP in 2009, and 7.3% of GDP in 2010. External debt was \$1.99 billion in 2009 and \$2.40 billion in 2010.

## 9 | Private Property

Article 15 of the constitution guarantees a citizen's right to own property. The law on land tenure (1983) enables the state to take possession of any land that is not used and to sell it to private individuals. However, this law conflicts with local customary land tenure regulations and has been a major factor in the outbreak of state violence in 1989 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 2009 and 2010, President Ould Abdel Aziz made several promises regarding poor people's access to land, especially in Nouakchott and urban areas where thousands of people have settled without property titles. The titling of land and thus land acquisition and land ownership is presented as a major anti-poverty policy. In practice, however, this has created an informal market of land titles whereby wealthy individuals have bought land in these areas. Two governors were fired in 2009-2010 after it was reported that they had conducted illegal land transactions.

In 2006, then transitional government established commerce tribunals to offer better legal safeguards regarding commercial transactions and private ownership (especially for foreign businesses). In 2010, the government announced that it would modify the investment code, the function of which, among many things, is to protect private ownership; the government pledged to modernize the code and make it more efficient.

There are four main types of enterprises in Mauritania. First, state-owned enterprises, of which the mining conglomerate (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière de Mauritanie, SNIM) (78.35% state-owned) is the most important; second, large conglomerates, dominated by tribal figures who enjoy an oligopolistic position in the market, which control large sectors of the economy (banking, insurance; transportation; import-export; telecommunications); third, foreign oil and mining companies; and fourth, small family-owned businesses (usually corner shops), which usually operate within the informal economic sector. Liberalization policies have been implemented in recent years but they have worked in conjunction with major state regulations, as seen in the ongoing licensing regime, which requires businesses to buy licenses to operate officially in almost any sector. Businesspersons thus tend to operate informally to avoid purchasing licenses. Those

Property rights  
5

Private enterprise  
5

who do acquire them often do so through clientelistic avenues, as the “preferential” granting of licenses is one of the most well-known forms of political-economic exchanges. Attempts were made to privatize the electricity company (SOMELEC) and to increase private ownership in SNIM but these attempts have failed. The government has pledged in an attempt to improve the business environment to adopt a new investment code in 2011 to replace the 2002 code.

## 10 | Welfare Regime

As stated above, the bifurcation of the economy, its small formal sector (made up of the public sector and a part-foreign, part-local private sector) and large informal sector, generates important consequences in terms of welfare and social safety nets. For those working in the formal economy, there are basic social safety nets, though for the most part these are underfunded, as was seen recently in the case of retired public employees’ complaints about the delays in their pension payments and their decreasing value. The dissolution of the National Social Security Agency (Caisse Nationale de la Sécurité Sociale) in 2009, most probably because of corruption, increased the anger of retired civil servants. For those involved in the informal sector, social safety nets are provided by family and clan-based networks, which compensate for the lack of formal resources (in such cases, family members who can count on a regular wage usually bear a heavy social burden). The territorial coverage (in the capital, in regions and in districts) of health centers (hospitals and clinics) and health personnel is low. There are 1.3 physicians per 10,000 inhabitants, and some 33% of the population has no access to any health centers within 5 kilometers of where they live. According to the latest World Health Organization (WHO) report, the government spends 2.6% of GDP on health care. To address the problem of unemployment, professional education programs (formation professionnelle) were established, though there are no indications of their effectiveness. A national health policy (Politique Nationale de Santé) adopted in 2006 has not yet yielded clear results. Local NGOs, international NGOs and multilateral agencies are important players in the provision of health and education services.

Social safety nets  
4

The prime minister, in his 2010 inaugural declaration to the National Assembly, surprised his audience in admitting unequal treatment in the past and stating that his government would adopt “affirmative action” policies in favor of population who were victims of injustice and exclusion; it is believed this was the first time that a government official suggested such a policy direction. It is not clear, however, how this speech will translate into concrete action. In effect, ethno-racial and gender differences continue to be serious obstacles to equal opportunity in Mauritania. The former Moor slave group, the Haratin, is probably the most disadvantaged group in Mauritania. Possibly related to the prime minister’s affirmative action speech, the

Equal opportunity  
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government has since formed a “program for the prevention of conflicts and the consolidation of social cohesion,” meant to help very poor Haratin communities in the two eastern regions as well as black African refugees (returned after a 20-year exile in Senegal and Mali). Major problems remain, however. The frequently published lists of new appointments in major ministries (justice, interior and defense), though not a perfect indicator, do indicate that black African minorities (Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana) are underrepresented. The National Assembly has a 20% quota for women; municipal councils share the same quota. In practice, women represent 19% of National Assembly deputies, 30% of municipal councilors, and 12% of senators. A World Bank study indicates that unemployment rate among women (at 39%) is double that of men (at 18%), with all age groups considered, yet these numbers mostly represent the formal economy. In the informal sector, local NGOs have denounced the lack of protection for the large number of women and girls who work informally, with or without wages, in the “domestic” sphere.

## 11 | Economic Performance

Though Western bilateral partners and international and regional organizations condemned the 2008 coup and stopped channeling aid to Mauritania, after the August 2009 election (won by coup leader and former General Ould Abdel Aziz) they resumed their support. At the same time, the country’s economy was hit by the global economic crisis. GDP growth of 3.5% in 2008 was followed by a -1.0% slump in 2009. In 2010, signs of a global recovery could be felt, with GDP growth of 5%, largely fed by growing demand for and increasing prices of natural resources, as well as a growth in mineral and oil company investments (with new prospecting licenses in uranium, gold and copper, as well as increased investments in the country’s largest mining conglomerate, SNIM). This has impacted tax revenues, which rose from MRO 107 billion in 2009 to MRO 137 billion in 2010. Local media reported that royalties obtained from mining companies rose from MRO 3 billion in 2008 to MRO 7 billion in 2009 and MRO 15 billion in 2010. Inflation has followed GDP growth, with 2.2% inflation in 2009, which then rose to 6.0% (7.0% in August 2010). Unemployment remains high, especially for young people, though difficult to measure given the bifurcated nature of the wage market (formal versus informal sectors). In 2009 the budget deficit represented about 6% of GDP (a deficit of MRO 44 billion) and rose to 7.3% of GDP in 2010 (MRO 70 billion). External debt rose from \$2 billion in 2009 to \$2.4 billion in 2010. The trade balance was negative in 2008 (\$154 million) and in 2009 (\$83 million) but moved positive in 2010 thanks to the global recovery and the growing demand for mineral resources (\$81 million).

Output strength

6

## 12 | Sustainability

Environmental policies do not constitute top priorities. The country is ranked close to the bottom of all countries surveyed by the Environmental Performance Index (161th out of 163 countries), and falls third to last among all African countries as well (though the harsh environment of Sahel countries is underestimated by the EPI). Though several components of this index are highly debatable for Sahel countries, there are legitimate concerns regarding Mauritania's soft approach toward the fishery industry, including the small number of protected areas and weak anti-trawling policies. On the other hand, Mauritania is facing heavy pressure from powerful fishing countries, mainly Spain and Portugal (with the European Union behind them) and China, South Korea and Japan. Promises of development aid in exchange for soft fishing regulations are difficult to resist. The country's lack of resources to patrol maritime zones is another major constraint. The country's maritime and fishing oversight organization (Délégation à la Surveillance des Pêches et au Contrôle en Mer, DSPCM) is trying to protect Mauritania's ocean territories, to ensure that no boats are allowed to fish during the two-month fishing prohibition period (necessary for fish reproduction). The DSPCM purchased a satellite tracking system in 2009 which is helping to better monitor the country's maritime zone. Also, the country's booming oil and mineral sectors attract many foreign companies, and tough environmental laws are depicted as inimical to foreign direct investment.

Environmental  
policy  
4

The government announced that in 2011 it will organize a general review of its national education system (États Généraux de l'Éducation). The last reform of the education sector in 2003 yielded no significant results and the system is still highly deficient. The government spends 4% of GDP on education, or 15.6% of total government expenditures, according to 2010 UNESCO data. Though the rate of primary schooling has increased in recent years (79% for girls and 74% for boys), secondary and tertiary rates remain very low at 20% for boys and girls. The transition from primary to secondary levels is 34%. The gender gap is also significant in these last two sectors, as most girls quit school after primary school (with 19% of girls in secondary level, compared to 23% for boys), and 1% at the tertiary level (compared to 5% of boys). Though hard data is not available, it is reported that it is mostly the wealthy (and the small middle class) who send their children to private schools while the vast majority of the population, many of whom are Haratin, attend public school. In the medium term, this class and ethno-racial gap could prove problematic. Professional and technical education is making inroads, as the government seems to realize that the increasing presence of mining and oil companies could be used as leverage to develop local professional and technical skills; a mining school was created in Nouadhibou in 2010. The government also announced in February that a new fund will be created with the

Education policy /  
R&D  
3

royalties paid by mining companies (0.1% of the companies' profits) to finance professional and technical training. International partners (mainly China and Kuwait) will finance the construction of a new campus for the University of Nouakchott.

## Transformation Management

### I. Level of Difficulty

Mauritania is constrained by major structural pressures. At the regional level, the rise of a small yet troublesome transnational armed Islamist movement, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), diverts scarce and needed resources toward the military; the perpetual Moroccan-Algerian rivalry, which offers fertile ground for AQIM, also weighs on Mauritanian domestic politics (military factionalism and coup d'états are not unrelated to this regional rivalry). At the national level, the country's very large territory, small population density and brutal desert and semi-desert environment all are challenges for the government. The desert is moving southward and threatens the small arable and cultivated land close to the Senegal River. That Mauritania is rich in natural resources is an economic boon, as was seen in 2010-2011 as global demand and prices rose. Yet Mauritania's undiversified economy is dominated by key figures from a number of influential tribes; and while oil and minerals provide most of the country's resources, these sectors barely mobilize 5% of its workforce.

Structural  
constraints

8

The vibrancy of associational life is difficult to measure, mostly because one needs to take both the formal and informal sectors of the economy, the latter requiring in-depth knowledge of the country's social fabric. The formal dimension of civil society is mainly made of trade unions, NGOs and other official civic associations. Overall, this formal civil society is underdeveloped, highly personalized and does not weight heavily on economic, social and political affairs. For instance, many NGOs are either empty shells or controlled by individuals who gravitate in the circle of government elites. It must be said, however, that in recent years a few associations and organizations have skillfully used new information and communications technologies to have their voices heard, including associations devoted to the defense of former slaves, as well as those advocating women's rights. 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. Informal associations, however, do exist. They can be very efficient but are harder to observe in action. Some Sufi orders, reformist Islamic associations, home-town associations, women's informal organizations or tribal networks, do in fact play a sort of civil society role,

Civil society  
traditions

8

providing help to their members and engaging the state on social, economic and political issues. However, many groups are relatively segmented and would have a difficult time mobilizing large society groups.

Significant ethnolinguistic and status (caste) divisions weigh heavily on Mauritania's political system. The ethnolinguistic divisions between the Hassaniyya-speaking (a localized form of Arabic) community and the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana communities have become increasingly important since the 1950s, and led to a major outbreak of violence in 1987-1991. Since 1991 the intensity of such conflict has decreased, even more so recently with the organized, collective return of about 10,000 refugees to Mauritania. But the actual conditions of their return are still unclear. As well, the law of amnesty (1993) that protects armed forces personnel from being prosecuted for killings and violations of human rights during this campaign is still a major obstacle to national reconciliation. The underrepresentation of Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana in major ministries is still problematic. The status division between Haratin and Bidhan remains a major problem as well, with the continuing marginalization of Haratin from every sphere of social, political and economic life. Their full integration is probably the most critical challenge for the country. Finally, though they are small in numbers, radical armed Islamist groups (mainly al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) have become more threatening in the past two years, attacking military compounds and attempting suicide attacks in Nouakchott and the eastern territories. The latter have all failed, but the threat remains serious. Very importantly, the growing insecurity caused by radical Islamist groups diverts much needed resources to the military and security sector.

Conflict intensity

6

## II. Management Performance

### 14 | Steering Capability

The relative instability in government leadership in recent years makes it difficult to evaluate the country's capacity to look long-term. In six years there have been four different heads of state: Ould Taya (ousted in 2005), Ould Mohamed Vall (who resigned before the 2007 election), Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (ousted in 2008), and Ould Abdel Aziz (first, a military junta leader in 2008 and then an elected president in 2009). In Mauritania, coup d'états form the only mechanism of leadership change, and coups are systematically prepared by the closest collaborators of the president. In such a context and despite official rhetoric, preventing a coup takes much of the leader's attention and energy. The unpopular and small, but

Question  
Score

Prioritization

4

increasingly lethal al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb is another component in this short-term mentality.

President Ould Abdel Aziz has declared that the fight against corruption is his main goal, and this focus has transpired with some highly publicized arrests. It is not clear, however, whether the top actors in the business of corruption are truly threatened, including military officers who also are very active in business. The domination of the president's Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR) party is reminiscent of previous ruling parties such as Ould Taya's Democratic and Social Republican Party (Parti Démocratique, Républicain et Social, PRDS). This can be seen both in terms of people who belong to the party (the majority of whom were PRDS cadres and politicians) and in the party's behavior, which echoes that of its predecessors. The president seems personally in favor of furthering political change, but it is far from clear that the informal institutions of clientelism and neopatrimonialism can be dismantled that easily. The paradox is that the political system provides the president with much power, but at the same time he revolves in a neopatrimonial structure that strongly resists significant change. From a democratic perspective, however, the ousting of the only democratically elected president in 2008 confirms the difficulty of putting executive power in the hands of a civilian without close military supervision.

There has only limited improvement in terms of policy implementation. Many of the country's problems were clearly and directly identified during the 2005-2007 transition. These included significant weaknesses in the judiciary and with the legal system in general; the country's socioeconomic gap between a small, powerful economic and military elite and the vast majority of the population; stagnation in the elite cadres; the country's inefficient and underdeveloped education system. Implementing policies to address these problems, however, has proven highly challenging. Some positive steps include the more proactive role of the state general inspectorate, which has conducted a number of investigations to fight corruption; the creation of development projects targeted specifically at Haratin; respecting the National Assembly's, and especially opposition parties', rights of expression and thus of criticism where the government is concerned. On the other hand, the government's refusal to target powerful figures involved in corruption; its incapacity to change political actors who have lingered since the Ould Taya regime; the continuing economic domination of oligopolistic conglomerates; the underrepresentation of Haratin and black Africans in critical ministries; and the non-implementation of the criminalization of slavery law, among other issues, highlight important challenges in the implementation of strategic priorities.

The government has not demonstrated any particular pattern of policy learning in the goal of solving its many, major challenges. The only sector where it has shown a capacity to adapt has been in the security sector, as security forces have, at least up until now, successfully thwarted major attacks by the transnational armed group,

Implementation  
4

Policy learning  
4

al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. On the economic front, the country remains highly dependent on global demand for raw materials, despite the market's abrupt ups and downs. Yet, there have been no clear attempts to use occasional high profits to invest in the diversification of the economy so as to make the economy overall less vulnerable to fluctuations in the market. Socially, no innovative decisions have been taken. And politically, the recent change of leadership has simply reproduced the same political pattern in place since 1978, with coups staged by close partners as the only effective method of leadership change.

## 15 | Resource Efficiency

The role of nepotism and clientelism severely undermines the use of public resources and overall functioning of public administration. Though there is no concrete data, it seems reasonable to claim that appointing public servants based on merit remains a major challenge. Key positions are typically assigned with an eye to maintaining presidential or clientelistic power structures. Despite a number of anti-corruption campaigns, the appointment of civil servants and managers on clientelistic grounds has yet to be investigated thoroughly by auditing or inspecting agencies. The government has launched a census of the public administration and its payroll to determine the actual number of civil servants and the amount of their salaries, but faces major challenges by groups reluctant to be audited (as reported by the individual in charge of this operation). Budget planning and implementation is slightly more transparent than before. The fact that the media could publish the government's actual budget, as it was adopted by the National Assembly, is an improvement from the past. A 2009 World Bank report stated that the government has progressed in its computerization of budget formulation planning and implementation, which led to the speedier execution of budgets, but that the political situation continued to generate obstacles (though the term "political situation" remains vague in the World Bank's language).

Given the formal and informal centralist nature of the political system, most policy decisions are made by the president. However, the actual implementation of policies is undermined by clientelism and factionalism within the civil service. For instance, after the adoption of the criminalization of slavery law, its actual implementation fell flat as local police and judges were reluctant to investigate and prosecute "master" families accused of owning slaves. Similarly, the president announced that the government would help farmers specifically and the agricultural sector more generally by reforming agricultural policies. On the ground, however, local media and observers have noted that help has not trickled down to the local level, as public resources are either diverted or different ministries neither coordinate efforts nor pool resources (the interior ministry manages land titling and land attribution; the commerce ministry oversees pesticides and inputs; the rural

Efficient use of assets

4

Policy coordination

3

development ministry provides agricultural machinery; the oil ministry provides fuel; and so on). Another problematic situation is unfolding as the government attempts to institute land titles in urban areas where shantytowns are growing quickly. The objective is to assist very poor families secure land ownership; yet on the ground, an informal market of land titles has developed, led in part by wealthy landowners. This has resulted in many shantytown families being financially deceived, mostly because of their lack of understanding of the rules of land tenure and land ownership.

The General Inspectorate (Inspection Générale de l'État, IGE), created in 2005, launched an investigation into a large number of state agencies in 2009-2010. Its investigations led to the prosecution of the director of the national AIDS agency and the director of the Human Rights Commission. Many other civil servants were dismissed as part of the IGE investigations (including the director of the National Aviation Agency and the director of the National Petroleum Commission), though without prosecution. The fact that the last three general inspectors were members of the president's Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR) party raises important concerns regarding political autonomy vis-à-vis the president and his supporters who head state agencies. The Cour des Comptes, another auditing body, has also been relatively active, though its anticipated report only covers 2006, which was before the current president came to power; whether the auditing body will maintain its severity when it investigates and reports on key public institutions under President Ould Abdel Aziz remains to be seen. In 2010, all high-ranking public servants and politicians, as well as the president, made asset declarations before a financial transparency commission (Commission de Transparence Financière dans la Vie Publique). These declarations, however, were not public and the commission cannot verify their authenticity. The media are relatively free and can criticize officeholders. However, it must be noted that three journalists were arrested recently (yet eventually released) after they investigated cases of corruption involving public officials. More generally, as the president himself said in a rare interview in December 2010, that setbacks in the country's development were caused by bribery, corruption and the lack of support in favor of behavior that is in the country's national interest. He added that Mauritania was rich but that its development had been compromised by systematic plunder.

Anti-corruption  
policy  
4

## 16 | Consensus-Building

Support in favor of some form of democracy (which form is seldom clearly defined and varies significantly from one person or group to another) is significant. Opposition parties are committed to democracy, including the Islamist party Tawassoul and other more secular parties (how those in opposition would rule if and when in power, however, cannot be predicted, as has been witnessed in other

Consensus on goals  
6

African countries). However, events in 2008-2009 suggest that some high-ranking officers within the military, members of powerful political and tribal clans as well as local powerbrokers have not shown themselves to be fully committed to democratic principles. This being said, the level of repression is low and it seems that straightforward repression of anti-government opinion and press censorship is no longer a viable political option, as it used to be in the past. Consensus does exist, however, with respect to the role of the markets. Yet strong disagreements remain concerning the foundations of the markets, specifically that of the rule of law as the mechanism to regulate them. Most policies to develop a rule of law advance with difficulty. Another important question relates to which law shall be the foundation, as important differences exist among more secular groups to more religiously orthodox groups, which are in favor of a stricter application of Shari'ah law.

Military strongmen have been in power since 1978, with the exception of the short 17-month reign of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (2007-2008). Though the only elected civilian president did make mistakes, the fact that he was ousted by military officers after less than two years indicates that the successful installation and reign of a democratically elected president is still an elusive goal for now. It is worth mentioning that even Ould Cheikh Abdellahi had been selected by military officers to be their candidate, which means that they had already weighted in strongly on the election. Unless leading officers allow civilians to govern, the current semi-authoritarian status quo will remain in place.

Anti-democratic  
actors

4

Ethno-racial tensions related to the political and social status of Mauritania's four non-Arabic speaking groups (often called black Africans or Negro-Mauritanians, and which includes the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana) have remained relatively calm in 2009-2010, with one exception, following a controversial remark by the prime minister identifying Arabic as the major national language. The fact that refugees continue to return to their homeland is a positive sign. Yet the lack of substantial government support once refugees have returned (including unresolved land tenancy issues) raises the question whether the government is willing to work to properly reintegrate these groups in Mauritanian society. Also, tensions rose in 2010 over official language policies, as well as linguistic policies in education. The unequal status of Arabic (the language of the Moors, or Bidhan) vis-à-vis Pulaar, Sooninke and Wolof, not to mention French (which these groups learn more than most Bidhan) have been tense issues on the University of Nouakchott campus. Moreover, the fact that these groups are misrepresented in key ministries also raises some community concerns. The socioeconomic stagnation of the Haratin, the former slave families of the Bidhan, is also a major issue; the government has put pressure on some local associations devoted to the defense of Haratin. The fact that the criminalization of slavery law has not been effectively implemented is seen as an indicator that state authorities, mostly controlled by Bidhan individuals, do not want to implement it.

Cleavage /  
conflict  
management

4

Members of formal civil society, including official NGOs, associations, trade unions and journalists, are able to express themselves, comment on political and social issues, and publish reports or memorandum on various sociopolitical problems. However, these groups are not included in state decision-making. Their participation is more important in decisions that involve international partners, such as bilateral donors or international organizations, such as the World Bank or branches of the United Nations. Even in cases where civil society participation is required, however, the actual composition of these civil society groups must be carefully analyzed. Informal groups or networks (defined as informal religious organizations, such as Sufi orders; popular religious scholars and their networks; tribal networks; village leaders; and so on), however, do participate in some form in decision-making; in such cases issues of representation and horizontal segmentation can raise concerns.

Civil society participation  
5

The ethnic massacres and deportations of black African minority groups from Mauritania in 1989-1991 still require a thorough and extensive process of reconciliation. Positively, the return of Mauritanian refugees from Senegal started in 2008 and continues today. The lack of long-term support for returning refugees, however, remains a major challenge (problems include the difficulty of reclaiming land; material compensation (for lost livestock, houses and other goods); reclaiming pension rights; and so on). However, that the 1993 amnesty law, which protects military personnel who conducted human rights atrocities in 1989-1991, has not yet been repealed constitutes a major obstacle to reconciliation goals.

Reconciliation  
5

## 17 | International Cooperation

After the military coup in 2008 that ousted President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, all Western bilateral partners (not China), as well as international financial institutions (The World Bank and the IMF) ceased collaboration with the Mauritanian government. Although some of these bilateral partners were still not entirely satisfied with the 2009 election of Ould Abdel Aziz, after the election all partners resumed their cooperation. The sector which has garnered much international attention recently has been that of security. The actions of the group al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) have led Western partners (mostly France and the United States, but also Britain and Spain) to increase their security cooperation with Mauritania. The World Bank and the IMF have resumed economic aid, with a special focus on the liberalization of the economy and the standardization of trade policies, taxation and budget planning and monitoring. U.N. agencies and bilateral aid agencies, for their part, provide much needed support in the social sector, with a focus on education and health. The government has gradually realized that royalties obtained from foreign companies in the growing mining sector activities could be used for development purposes, so as to complement the health and educational

Effective use of support  
5

support provided by international organizations and NGOs. Whether this will actually be implemented is an open question. It is not clear whether international aid is viewed as temporary or permanent (that is, whether mining and oil revenues can be used to replace, at least partially, international aid for social services and resources). Local media and a number of expert studies, however, show that international support is partly diverted to serve political and clientelistic purposes. Two World Bank studies, for instance, anticipated that oil and mining revenues could be channeled through clientelistic networks rather than being used primarily for sound investments. For obvious reasons, the dismantling of clientelistic and neopatrimonial networks, which have provided the structure of the political economy for decades, cannot be dismantled quickly or easily; the pressure from clan, tribal, and political networks are strong. Also, security threats and other geopolitical concerns, namely the threat of AQIM, may be used to soften international pressures on the government.

Though the international community was very critical of the military removal in 2008 of elected President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, it eventually recognized the electoral victory of coup leader Ould Abdel Aziz. One can hypothesize that the leading international actors, France and the United States, were working to balance their parallel interests in security and the promotion of democracy. The presence of al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and the need for a strong Mauritanian government to confront it did weigh heavily in the balance. Security concerns often trump other considerations, such as those related to democratization. In addition, the current president has always stated that he would maintain Mauritania's current liberal economy, and foreign investors have faced no obstacles (especially those in the oil and mining sectors). International financial institutions have all considered the current administration as credible, at least with respect to its commitment to a liberal political economy (yet still problems in the implementation of these policies constitute a major obstacle).

Mauritania has always had to find a precarious balance in its relations with the two regional powerhouses, Morocco and Algeria. The rivalry between these two countries forces Mauritania to play a very skillful diplomatic game. Any move toward one country is immediately scrutinized by the other. Relations with Mali were strained early in Ould Abdel Aziz's rule, but have improved significantly since and mostly on the security front; in an unusual move, Mali allowed Mauritanian forces to attack an al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) camp on Mali soil. The common threat posed by AQIM has helped consolidate regional relations (slightly less so with Algeria, however). Before Ould Abdel Aziz's election (August 2009), when his junta was criticized internationally, the Arab League and some of Mauritania's neighbors, namely Senegal, Morocco and (though not a direct neighbor) Libya and also Iran, have offered official diplomatic support.

Credibility

7

Regional  
cooperation

7

## Strategic Outlook

The main challenge in Mauritania consists in building legitimate institutions that fit both international and domestic expectations. The uninterrupted domination of military strongmen, in both military and civilian plainclothes, with the exception of the 17-month rule of democratically elected civilian Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, continues to undermine the process of democratization. Military officers' de facto and de jure control over the political sphere is bolstered by the clientelistic presence of deputies, civil servants, local notables and businessmen, who nurtured the authoritarian and neopatrimonial regime of Colonel Ould Taya and who now sit with the current president's party, the Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR). Though not a guarantee for the successful democratization of the regime, until the military cedes control to elected civilians and allows them to govern effectively, Mauritania's power structure will not change. Providing an institutional framework for leadership transitions would constitute a major improvement to Mauritania's political structure. Yet the military still has a major role to play, as illustrated by the current threat of radical armed Islamist groups. Still, the coup d'état has been the standard format of leadership change in the country. Coups not only are unstable and unpredictable, but also as a strategy distract incumbent leaders who must constantly look over their shoulder to guard against potential rivals and or other coup plotters.

Achieving national unity is a significant challenge. The country's four ethnic groups, the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninke and Bamana, need to be treated as and should feel that they are full Mauritanian citizens. To do so, the government must repeal the 1993 amnesty law that protects military personnel guilty of atrocities in 1989-1991 and authorize investigations into crimes committed and thus enable a collective healing process. Ethnic minorities must also be fairly represented in key ministries. Returning refugees must be offered fair compensation for losses, including access to land for those who cannot recover their original holdings.

The president has stated directly that corruption and clientelism are major problems. Anti-corruption institutions do exist but they must be allowed to fulfill their mission. This includes the appointments of non-political actors, as current and past General Inspectorate (IGE) inspectors were. IGE inspectors must also be allowed to investigate all public agencies, including all those run by military officers.

The social, economic and political integration of former slaves, the Haratin, is a major challenge. The growing threat of armed Islamist groups (such as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) in recent years) should be considered added impetus to integrate populations that have been socially and political marginalized. Programs, such as the program for the prevention of conflicts and the consolidation of social cohesion, are good starting points but they must be extended throughout the territory. Access to land and decent housing is still problematic, though some

efforts at leveling the playing field have been made (but were soon subverted by wealthy owners eager to acquire valuable urban real estate).

Rural agencies of the central administration must be made more accountable. Governors and prefects' actions need to be monitored so as to prevent the arbitrary seizure of land in rural areas. This policy requires the implementation of safeguards against arbitrary decisions taken by local state representatives (governors, prefects and gendarmes). Similarly, legitimate political institutions need to implement transparent mechanisms of titling in large urban areas.

In a context where revenues extracted from the oil and mining sectors are rising significantly, the government ought to create funds that should, first, be entirely devoted to the diversification of the economy and to poverty-alleviation programs, and second, be protected from clientelistic pressures. Full transparency, sustained by frequent and thorough auditing, ought to guarantee the proper use of these funds.