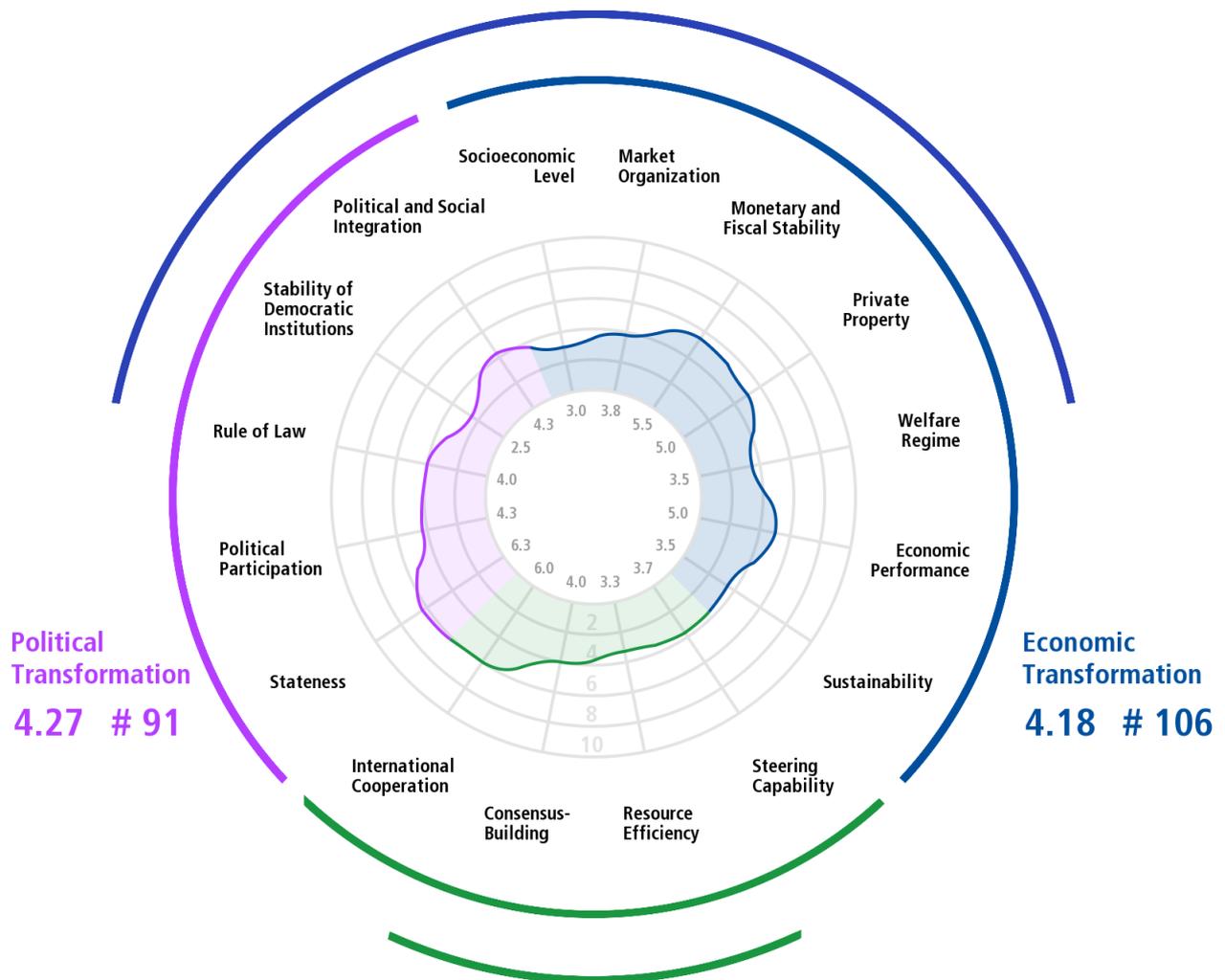


# Mauritania

## Status Index

**4.22 # 102**

on 1-10 scale out of 137



**Political Transformation**  
**4.27 # 91**

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**4.18 # 106**

## Governance Index

**4.00 # 98**

on 1-10 scale out of 137

This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2020**. It covers the period from February 1, 2017 to January 31, 2019. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of governance in 137 countries. More on the BTI at <https://www.bti-project.org>.

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**Key Indicators**

Population	M	<b>4.4</b>	HDI	<b>0.527</b>	GDP p.c., PPP \$	<b>4190</b>
Pop. growth <sup>1</sup>	% p.a.	<b>2.8</b>	HDI rank of 189	<b>161</b>	Gini Index	<b>32.6</b>
Life expectancy	years	<b>64.5</b>	UN Education Index	<b>0.389</b>	Poverty <sup>3</sup>	% <b>24.1</b>
Urban population	%	<b>53.7</b>	Gender inequality <sup>2</sup>	<b>0.620</b>	Aid per capita \$	<b>66.4</b>

Sources (as of December 2019): The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2019 | UNDP, Human Development Report 2019. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.20 a day at 2011 international prices.

## Executive Summary

Between 2017 and early 2019 three political developments affected Mauritania's political landscape. First, the legislative, regional and local elections held in September 2018 confirmed a pattern observed since 1991 when the country officially democratized its institutions: the president's party systematically controls all elected assemblies. In 2018, the patronage machine that connects state officials and regional notables once again crafted another victory for the presidential party. This was preceded by a national referendum held in 2017, which served to partially reform the constitution, the main aspect of which was abolishing the Senate and replacing it with thirteen regional councils. These regional councils are likely to be regional conduits for political patronage (the ruling Union for the Republic won all 13 regional councils).

A second development was the uncertainty regarding President Ould Abdel Aziz's willingness to honor his constitutional obligation of stepping down after his second term in 2019. He finally made it clear he would not change the rules to stay in power. But the autocratic nature of the regime is unlikely to change, as the most probable successor will be another military officer, General Ould Ghazouani, a close friend of the president, currently the minister of defense, and a comrade during the 2005 and 2008 coup d'états. The rule of the security apparatus, which has controlled the country since 1978, is expected to continue, and many believe that Mauritania will experience a Medvedev-Putin scenario, with a return of Ould Abdel Aziz in 2024.

A third key political development is the government's continuing harassment of Haratin ("freed slaves") and Black African activists. Biram Dah Abeid, leader of the IRA movement (Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste), was arrested in August 2018 and released only in December (he was elected as a deputy in the National Assembly while in jail). IRA is still not officially authorized by the government. Black African organizations ("Touche pas à ma nationalité" (TPMN) and Kawtal) have also been targeted, and some activists were arrested in late 2017 and early 2018. The entire Sahel region has witnessed a dramatic rise in levels of violence, spreading from northern to central Mali, and then to Burkina Faso and western Niger. Mauritania

has not been subject to armed group attacks on its soil during the review period, but the jihadist groups operating in neighboring countries include many Mauritians. As a member of the G5 Sahel joint force and host of the permanent secretariat of the organization, regional insecurity remains a threat. On the economic front, Mauritania has incrementally recovered from the global downturn in international commodity prices, though the price of iron ore remains low. Mauritania's GDP growth oscillates between 3.5% (2017) and 2.2% (2018) (close to its 2016 level of 2%). The government has opted for conservative fiscal and macroeconomic policies, but the country remains highly dependent on the fluctuating global prices of commodities. The weak diversification of the economy, coupled with non-inclusive growth, means that the country's economy remains bifurcated: the profitable (and formal) extractive and fishery sectors and the informal urban and underdeveloped agricultural and livestock sectors. The HDI index lists Mauritania as "Low Human Development," and ranks it 159th in the world.

## History and Characteristics of Transformation

As a Sahelian country located in a very precarious and constraining environment, Mauritania has always faced major challenges. Since independence (1960), Mauritania has relied on basic agropastoral production, the export of minerals (primarily iron ore) and fishery, assisted by substantive developmental aid. The country experienced a difficult economic stagnation in the period 1975 to 1984, characterized by socioeconomic problems resulting from the collapse of iron ore prices, extensive droughts and the disastrous consequences of Mauritania's involvement in the Western Saharan war.

During the same period as these socioeconomic problems, Mauritania saw increasing domestic political tensions around two major issues: the definition of the country's identity and the role of the military in political life. The politicization of identities, between Arabic-speaking groups (comprising Bidhân/White Moors and Haratin/freed slaves/Black Moors) and Black African communities (comprising Haalpulaaren, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana) has shaped the political scene since the colonial period. Tensions have erupted over policies related to national languages, education, land tenure and ethnic representation in the politico-bureaucratic apparatus. Between 1989 and 1991, security forces, fueled by an "Arabization" ideology, deported approximately 80,000 "Black Africans" to Senegal. Hundreds were assassinated, and thousands were dismissed from the civil service. Meanwhile, the former slaves of the Bidhân community, the Haratin, are almost exclusively second-class citizens, and are marginalized in the social, economic and political spheres. Political organizations of Haratin have sought to mobilize this community. Some were eventually co-opted by the regime while others have joined opposition groups.

The politicization of identities is intricately linked to a second dynamic: the role of the military in politics. Mukhtar Ould Daddah's civilian one-party regime (1960 – 1978) was ousted by the Mauritanian army during the war of Western Sahara. Since this first coup d'état (1978), every head of state since has been a military officer (with one short exception between 2007 and 2008). Every leadership change has occurred through a coup d'état. In 1991, Colonel Ould Taya, agreed

to adopt a new democratic constitution, while organizing multiparty elections. However, through a combination of coercion and patronage, Ould Taya and his party dominated every subsequent presidential, legislative and local election. Ould Taya was ousted by his closest collaborators in 2005, including then-residential guard commander, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. This led to a transitional period which saw the holding of the country's freest and fairest municipal and legislative (2006) and presidential elections (2007). Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi won the presidential election, though clearly with the support of key officers including Colonel Ould Abdel Aziz (soon-to-be general). Those officers, led by Ould Abdel Aziz and Ould Ghazouani, eventually ousted the president in August 2008, seventeen months after he came to power. The new strongman and current president, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, then organized and won the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, while his party, Union pour la République (UPR), won every legislative, regional and local election, including the latest one, held in September 2018. He also won the 2017 referendum on the reform of the constitution, which abolished the Senate and created regional councils (all 13 councils were won by UPR in 2018). After many months of ambiguous signals, Ould Abdel Aziz finally announced that he would not amend the constitution to enable him to run for a third term in mid-2019. Instead, he stated that his close friend and collaborator, General Ould Ghazouani, would succeed him in the 2019 presidential election, confirming the continuing political power of military officers.

Between 2005 and 2010, jihadist armed groups attacked military garrisons as well as foreigners in Mauritania. The presence of radical Islamist groups throughout the Sahel has led Western countries to channel a considerable amount of financial and material resource to Mauritania, in tandem with strong diplomatic support. The outbreak of the war in Mali in 2012, and the continuation of jihadist attacks despite the presence of both a substantial United Nations operation and a French military operation, poses a significant problem for Mauritania, as many Mauritians (White Moors and Haratin) have joined these groups. The country now hosts the regional G5 Sahel joint forces, which aims to combine troops from the five Sahelian forces in Mali and deploy them in any other country as required.

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

## Transformation Status

### I. Political Transformation

#### 1 | Stateness

Instability and violence in the Sahel reached new levels during the review period, affecting more countries and subnational regions. Yet Mauritania, which was one of the first countries targeted by Islamist militants in the early 2000s, has not experienced any attacks for over a decade. Since 2010, the state has consolidated its infrastructure along the Malian border, while receiving significant support from its foreign partners. Sources suggest that an informal arrangement was struck between state authorities and jihadi groups. But given the unpredictable nature of the latter, the situation remains uncertain.

The definition of who is considered a Mauritanian has been at the center of Mauritanian politics since independence. Two categories of citizens in particular find themselves at the heart of this problem: the “Black African” ethnic groups (Haalpulaaren, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana), which historically lived along Mauritania’s borders with Senegal and Mali. Second, the Haratin/freed slaves/Black Moors and the Arabic-speaking but socially marginalized community historically attached to the ruling White Moors (or Bidhân). Black African activists argue that the Mauritanian state has increasingly been monopolized by Bidhân, demonstrated by the latter’s control of the most strategic positions in the state apparatus. This domination was consolidated during the period 1987 to 1991, when thousands of Black Africans were killed and approximately 80,000 were exiled to Senegal. A 1993 law of amnesty, which protects security personnel involved in the assassination and deportation of ethnic minorities during the period 1989 to 1991 is still in effect. Organizations such as “Don’t Touch my Nationality” (Touche pas à ma nationalité – TPMN) and Kawtal denounce the problems Black Africans face when trying to register on the civil registry. In June 2017, security forces prevented Kawtal from organizing an event to teach minorities how to enroll on the civil registry. In December 2017, activists of TPMN were arrested when demonstrating against the referendum which, among many new measures, proposed to change the national flag. The activists were eventually given a three-month suspended sentence. Activists of the association which represents the Black African victims of the 1989 to 1991 state repression, were arrested in November 2017 while protesting during the president’s visit to the largest Black African town along the Senegal River valley. They were released with no charge after six days in jail.

Question  
Score

Monopoly on the  
use of force

9



1

State identity

6



1

For their part, Haratin live in very difficult socioeconomic conditions. The government has passed a series of laws to criminalize slavery-related activities (in 2007, 2012 and 2015). It also established three criminal courts devoted specifically to crimes of slavery (based in Nouakchott, Nema and Nouadhibou). However, Haratin organizations argue that these legal institutions have been completely ineffective, rarely prosecuting former masters. They point out that the few who have been sentenced to jail have been released after a few months. The most vocal Haratin organizations have all been subject to repression, especially their leaders, the most famous of whom is Biram Dah Abeid. The government considers his organization (“Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste” – IRA) illegal, and he and many members of the group have been arrested on several occasions over the years. The government accuses IRA of stirring up racial divisions and denies that slavery exists in the country. In August 2018, Abeid was once again arrested (for the fourth time since mid-2000) with some of his fellow activists and spent five months in jail. He was released on December 31, 2018.

Mauritania is an Islamic Republic. Islam is the official religion of the state, but in reality, the state’s institutions combine both Islamic and secular elements (originating from the French civil code). The constitution states that “Islamic precepts are the only source of law,” but they are “open to the exigencies of the modern world.” However, popular sovereignty, rather than religion, is the foundation of most key state institutions (the presidency, the National Assembly, the Senate), and Mauritania abides by most international conventions, including the (secular) Human Rights Charter. In December 2014, blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould M’Kheitir was accused of apostasy (he argued against the use of Islam to justify the marginalization of the low-status “caste” of blacksmiths) and sentenced to death, on the basis of Shariah articles in the penal code. However, in January 2017 the Supreme Court, stating that the trial had been undermined by irregularities, ordered that the case be referred to the court of appeals. In November 2017, the court of appeals reversed its original decision and commuted his death sentence to two-years imprisonment. Though Ould M’Kheitir should now be free, he has not yet been released and is kept in a secret location. This case illustrates how the courts are able to counterbalance radical Islamic movements who were calling for his immediate execution. However, the president organized public meetings with those who called for the blogger’s execution, expressing his support for their cause. In April 2018, the law was changed so that the death penalty automatically applies if a person found guilty of apostasy has not repented within 72 hours. In the National Assembly, while ostensibly claiming to fight against discrimination, passed a law applying a jail sentence of one to five years for anyone who holds an inflammatory speech against the official religion of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.

No interference of religious dogmas

4

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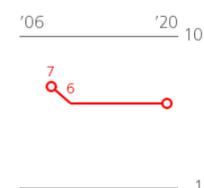


1

Like the majority of its Sahelian neighbors, Mauritania has a challenging geography, with a vast territory and a very low population density. While improving, the state's capacity to extend its authority throughout its territory and to provide basic administrative services varies significantly from one region to another, and also between social groups. Access to state services, for instance, is often predicated upon an individual's connection to clientelistic networks and to group identity. Haratin/freed slaves are less likely to be able to successfully petition judicial and police authorities than the Bidhân/White Moors. The state's judicial apparatus exists throughout the country: all administrative regions have courts, but most are understaffed, underfinanced and undermined by arbitrary decisions. The Mauritanian tax agency (*direction générale des impôts – DGI*) and the state general inspectorate (*inspection générale de l'État – IGE*) are functioning. The IGE announced in 2018 that it had uncovered the embezzlement of more than MRO 1.2 billion. Following the 2017 referendum, the 13 regions (*wilayat*) were regrouped into six larger regions. The capital city has four new gendarmerie bases and since March 2018 a new anti-drug agency.

Basic administration

6

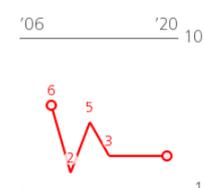


## 2 | Political Participation

Presidential, legislative, local, and – for the first time in 2018 – regional elections are held regularly. They feature universal suffrage and secret ballot. Dozens of political parties participate. The independent national electoral commission (CENI) is in charge of preparing, organizing and supervising the elections. It is chaired by seven members, appointed by the president from a list of 14 names chosen by a commission comprising an equal number of deputies from the majority party and the opposition.

Free and fair elections

3



On August 5, 2017, a national referendum was held. It proposed changes to key aspects of the constitution. This included abolishing the Senate and replacing it with elected regional councils. Abolishing the high Islamic council and the ombudsman of the republic (*médiateur de la république*), as well as changing the national flag. The “yes” vote won with 86%. Officially, the turnout was 54%, which was deemed by the government sufficient to legitimize the results (only 35% of eligible voters voted in Nouakchott). The main opposition parties called for a boycott of the referendum, and several demonstrations were held throughout the referendum campaign, many of which were severely repressed by security forces. Opposition parties claimed that the referendum was illegal and that it served to bypass the Senate's “no” vote. In 2018, local, two rounds of regional and legislative elections were held in September.

2018 saw participation of the main opposition parties for the first time since 2006 and 2007, when relatively democratic elections were held in the aftermath of the coup d'état against former president, Ould Taya. Elections since have been boycotted by the opposition. The results confirmed once more the complete hegemony of the

presidential party in elected assemblies. President Ould Abdel Aziz's UPR won 93 seats out of 157 in the National Assembly (including the four seats allocated to the Mauritians of the diaspora that it won in January 2019). Parties that are members of the ruling coalition (loyal to the president), such as Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès (UDP) which won six seats, further consolidate the president's control over the legislative branch. UPR also won all 13 of the newly created regional councils, and 162 out of the 218 municipal councils. The leading opposition party in the National Assembly remains the Islamist Tawassoul, with 14 seats (two less than in 2013). More than 70 parties received less than 1% of the votes. Only the African Union was allowed to place observers in the field during the elections. With most high-ranking state officials being members of the UPR, as are most local notables across the country, the patronage machine easily delivered a win for the UPR. There have been criticisms over the electoral registry, which the independent national election commission (CENI) must compile in collaboration with the interior ministry, including accusations by Black African activists that their community faces unfair hurdles when attempting to register. The main opposition parties, regrouped under the National Front for Democracy and Unity (FNDU) and the Electoral Alliance of the Democratic Opposition, denounced the appointment of CENI officials, pointing out that their candidates did not make it on the list, while noting that CENI officials, including its chair, are publicly affiliated to the ruling party. Its chair, Ould Bellal, was a former minister of foreign affairs in President Ould Taya's government. 2018 saw the first elections for the regional councils, which have replaced the Senate following the 2017 constitutional referendum. With all 13 councils won by the ruling UPR, suspicion is strengthened that these councils will become mechanisms to consolidate clientelistic relations between regional notables and the regime.

The Mauritanian political system is "hyper-presidentialist:" the president enjoys significant formal and informal powers. The legislative branch is informally submitted to the executive branch. The president enjoys considerable power because he is a (retired) military officer and came to power through a coup d'état, like all of his predecessors since 1978 (with a 17-month exception in 2007/2008). Partly due to the Western Saharan war, Mauritania had been formally ruled by active military officers between 1978 and 1991, and has been ruled by retired officers between 1991 and 2019. The non-elected military institution is a dominant veto player in Mauritanian politics. As President Ould Abdel Aziz is set to end his second and last term in mid-2019, most experts believe he will be replaced by his close collaborator chosen from the security apparatus, General Ould Ghazouani, currently minister of defense.

Effective power to govern

2

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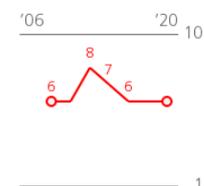


Article 11 of the 1991 constitution protects the right of association. Like the majority of rights set out in the constitution, this protection was rarely observed up until the mid-2000s, following the ousting of Ould Taya. Most opposition political parties and NGOs are allowed to exist and operate without being repressed. Challenges remain, however, for Black African minorities and Haratin, whose associations and activists are regularly harassed by state authorities and accused of “threatening national unity.” In the past decade, there have been arrests of the leaders of the Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste (IRA) movement, an anti-slavery movement representing the Haratin, as well as the leaders of Touche pas à ma nationalité (TPMN) and Kawtal ngam yellitaare, representing Black Africans. Just as he was about to start campaigning for the September 2018 legislative elections, IRA leader Biram Dah Abeid was arrested (August 2018). He was released five months later. His association is denied any official recognition and thus any activity they undertake can be deemed illegal and subjected to repression. TPMN activists were arrested in December 2017. In December 2017, five members of an association representing the widows and orphans of the Black African military personnel executed by the state in 1990 were arrested in Kaedi. Foreigners who come to Mauritania to report on these issues are often expelled, as seen in the expulsion of two French journalists in May 2017, accused of working for IRA and TPMN. Anti-slavery African-American activists were not allowed to enter the country in September 2017. Since the creation of the first Haratin movement, El Hor, in the 1970s and the large-scale repression of Black African activists in 1986, Haratin and Black African associations have always walked a fine line between official acceptability and repression.

The 1991 constitution guarantees the freedom of expression through article 10. Under the Ould Taya regime, this article was often de facto violated. Following his ousting in 2005, a major formal obstacle to the freedom of the press was eliminated, as press outlets no longer had to meet certain criteria dictated by the state for prepublication. In 2006, the high authority for the press and audiovisual sector (HAPA) was established to regulate the media sector. However, the executive branch’s influence over the media landscape can be seen in the nomination process of HAPA personnel: three of the six board members, including the chair, are appointed by the president; the remaining three are appointed by the National Assembly (and formerly by the Senate as well) which is under the control of the presidential party. In November 2017, associations of independent newspapers and media accused the HAPA committee in charge of allocating subsidies to private press outlets of threatening to if they were too critical of the president and government. They also criticized HAPA’s decision to shut down, in October 2017, all five independent TV outlets in Mauritania for financial reasons. In August 2018, two journalists, Babacar Baye Ndiaye (from the web media group CRIDEM) and Mahmoudi Ould Saibout (from Tawadoum media) were arrested and detained at a police station for a full week, before finally being referred to court, sued for libel by a friend of the president. They were eventually freed without charges on August 31, 2018. The young blogger Ould

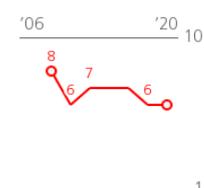
#### Association / assembly rights

6



#### Freedom of expression

6



M'Kheitar, who had been sentenced to death in 2014 for apostasy, and whose sentence was commuted to two years in jail in 2017, has still not been released and his location is unknown.

### 3 | Rule of Law

The Mauritanian political system is hyper-presidentialist: the separation of powers is both formally and informally weak, that the president is dominant. The 1991 constitution, slightly amended in 2006 by way of popular referendum, provides for a semi-presidential system. The president is directly elected by the population (and since the 2006 amendment, cannot serve more than two consecutive terms). Though the possibility of extending his rule beyond the second term was left open for several years, President Ould Abdel Aziz has announced that he will step down at the end of his second and last term in mid-2019. 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 from another institution appoint almost all top officials in the state apparatus, including half of the most important judicial institutions, the constitutional council and its chairperson. After the current president came to power through a coup d'état, in 2008 (like all of his military predecessors except for one case), the National Assembly, which the president controls, passed in January 2013 a law which criminalizes coup d'état and other "unconstitutional" changes of power. The president decided to alter the constitution again in 2017, abolishing the Senate and replacing it with regional councils, as well as making changes to the national flag. The National Assembly voted in favor of the constitutional change, but the Senate opposed it (33 out of 56 senators opposed the abolition of their own institution, despite being promised major material incentives, including parcels of land). The president decided to circumvent this obstacle by resorting to Article 38 of the constitution which, his legal experts claimed, allowed the constitutional change via national referendum. The change was approved, with a majority of 85%. The referendum also contained a provision that went against the trend of centralization of power in the hands of the executive: the Constitutional Council, which is composed of nine members, will now have three of its members proposed by the leader of the opposition in the National Assembly. Behind these formal institutions is an informal institutional configuration whereby the president, high-ranking military officers, and economically affluent businessmen wield significant political influence. There can be tensions; when they begin to pose a threat, either the president eliminates his rivals, or he is eliminated by some of them. This has been the pattern since 1978, with tensions culminating in coup d'états.

Separation of powers

3

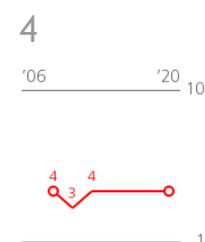
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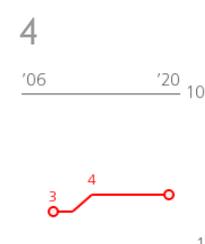
The independence of the judiciary is guaranteed by the 1991 constitution (article 89). However, the centralized presidential system grants the president major powers over the judiciary: he appoints three of the six judges sitting in the Constitutional Court, including its chairman; and he appoints the chair of the Supreme Court. There is no institution with the right to confirm or veto these appointments. Informal practices also weaken the judiciary. The current president of the Supreme Court, El Houssein Ould Naji, was nominated in May 2017. Immediately before his nomination, Ould Naji was the president's personal adviser for judicial and administrative affairs, which raises questions concerning the independence of the judiciary. His predecessor was the first president of the Supreme Court, who held the role for the entire five-year term prescribed by the law, all his predecessors having been dismissed before the end of their terms (on average after two years). The chair of the Mauritanian bar association (*batônnier de l'ordre national des avocats*) was re-elected for a second three-year term in 2017. He is a member of the Constitutional Council, and also a member of the former ruling party during the Ould Taya regime (1991 – 2005); this confirms the impression held by many that the executive exerts significant control over the judiciary. One of his predecessors stated in January 2018, that the government is instrumentalizing the justice system to pursue current and potential opposition figures. Nothing occurred during the review period to suggest that informal political influence, exerted through executive pressure, financial retributions, and/or tribal connections, and the chronic problems of an understaffed and underfinanced judiciary were receding.

#### Independent judiciary



Generally, corruption is a problem at all levels of the state. State agencies in charge of investigating the ethical misconduct and conflicts of interest of public servants and politicians include the court of accounts (*cour des comptes*), which was established in 1993, with a chair appointed by the president; the state general inspectorate (IGE), created in 2005 and led by an inspector general (nominated by the prime minister), which has the power to investigate all public institutions; as well as more specialized agencies such as the finance general inspectorate (embedded in the ministry of finances). IGE has launched many investigations over the review period, including (but not limited to) an investigation that led to the arrest of the director general of the government's largest rural development agency, SONADER, in July 2018, for embezzlement (MRO 162 million). In December 2018, it investigated mismanagement and corruption at the national television station, TVM, and estimated that MRO 170 million were embezzled. An executive from the national radio (*Radio Mauritanie*) was arrested in December 2017 after an investigation by IGE, but was eventually released; he is a relative of the UPR's chair. In November 2018, it was announced that the IGE had conducted 80 missions over the previous three years and that mismanagement errors and embezzlement amounted to almost MRO 700 million during that period. IGE's independence from the executive branch is unclear. The fact that all IGE chairs have been known members of the ruling party and/or of the previous Ould Taya regime raises doubts over their autonomy: Mint Verges was

#### Prosecution of office abuse



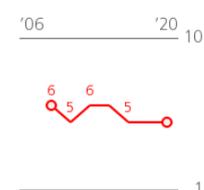
appointed as chair of the IGE in 2011 while also being the chair of the women commission of the presidential party (UPR); her predecessor was the executive secretary of the UPR; Mahfoudh Ould Mohamed Aly (IGE chair from 2013 – 2015) served as a minister under the authoritarian regime of Ould Taya (1991 – 2005); Mohamed Ould Guig, was appointed as IGE chair in early 2015, but had previously served as prime minister during the Ould Taya regime; and in December 2015 the current chair Abderrahmane Ould Mohamed was appointed. The cour des comptes has not published an annual report since 2006. The national security general directorate (the police) has a special division assigned to economic and financial crimes.

The state of civil rights in Mauritania has improved since 2005, with the ousting of Ould Taya. But the regime remains authoritarian and as such significant problems remain. The situation for Black African minorities and Haratin remains problematic. The law of amnesty of 1993, which prohibits any investigation and prosecution of military officers involved in acts of assassination and torture against Black African minorities in 1989 to 1991 is still in place; victims of these acts are still unable to seek justice. On this matter, in May 2018, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination noted that Mauritania submitted its responses to the committee's previous report after a nine-year delay and expressed its concern that racial discrimination and the marginalization of Haratin continues. It was also concerned about the very limited representation of Black Africans and Haratin in political and public affairs. It criticized the fact that the Mauritanian government provides little information on complaints, investigations, prosecutions, judgments, and convictions. The committee also raised questions regarding both the huge challenges victims of slavery face in their attempt to process their complaints through the judicial system, and the ineffectiveness of the system to impose penalties on those found guilty of crimes of slavery.

A dozen senators, including Ould Ghadda (who had opposed the abolition of the Senate), journalists, and union activists were arrested in August and September 2017 and charged with corruption. Most observers suggested that they were in fact harassed by the government because they were considered local allies of Mohamed Ould Bouamatou, a cousin of the president and one of his closest allies in the early days of his presidency, before the two fell out and Bouamatou took refuge in Morocco. In July 2018, the United Nation's High Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Mauritanian government to immediately release Senator Ould Ghadda, who has been in jail since August 2017. In July 2018, the commissioner also urged the government to repeal the anti-blasphemy law it had adopted after a blogger's death penalty was commuted. The repression of anti-slavery and Black African activists, including activist and National Assembly deputy Biram Dah Abeid, highlight the precarious situation of civil rights in Mauritania.

Civil rights

5



#### 4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Democratic institutions in Mauritania exist officially, but they do not operate according to common democratic norms. The country holds elections regularly to elect the president, the National Assembly, the regional councils (since 2018), the Senate (1992-2017) and municipal councils. An independent national electoral commission, with support from the interior ministry, is responsible for organizing elections. The constitution provides for the separation of powers. However, in practice, since 1978 the country has been governed by military officers (whether in their military or civilian guises). Following his 2008 coup against democratically elected president, Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (a civilian), retired General Ould Abdel Aziz has held two presidential elections, in 2009 and 2014, both of which he won, the latest with more than 81% of the votes. His party (UPR) exerts control over all elected assemblies; this was again confirmed in the 2018 legislative, regional and local elections. Since 1991, no opposition party has been able to win more than a dozen seats in the legislative assembly, let alone win a majority. In 2018, the largest opposition party won just 14 seats out of 147. There has never been a democratic transition of power in Mauritania. The only mechanism of presidential change has been that of coup d'état. President Ould Abdel Aziz has promised to step down after his second and last term in 2019, and if he does so, he will probably be replaced by his close friend, General Ould Ghazouani.

The legislative, regional and local elections of September 2018 confirmed that the president and his party (UPR) exploit their control over the state apparatus to maintain their control over all elected bodies in Mauritania. Many politicians from the presidential party (UPR) have called for President Ould Abdel Aziz to amend the constitution in order to extend his presidency beyond the current two-term limit. He has pledged not to run in 2019, but some observers suggest that he could run at the end of his successor's first term (in a Putin-Medvedev scenario). Most observers believe that his successor will be General Ghazouani, confirming the army's hegemonic control of the Mauritanian political arena since 1978. Opposition parties, including the Islamist Tawassoul party, accept as legitimate the democratic institutions, but face an uneven playing field in every electoral competition, as the resources of the state are exploited by the ruling party. The arrests and harassment of organizations representing ethnic and racial minorities confirm the government's unwillingness to comply fully with the democratic norms upon which democratic institutions are built.

Performance of democratic institutions

3

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Commitment to democratic institutions

2

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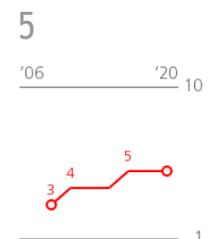


## 5 | Political and Social Integration

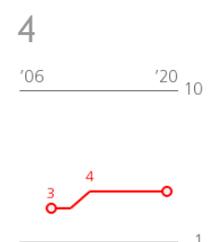
Since the formal creation of democratic institutions in 1991, the party system has not changed significantly. Under both Ould Taya (1991 – 2005) and Ould Abdel Aziz (2008 – present), the party system is dominated by the presidential party, allied with small pro-president parties. The presidential party, acting as a powerful patronage machine, obtains the support of most high-ranking state officials as well as regional notables. UPR won 93 seats out of 147 in the National Assembly in the 2018 elections. The opposition parties are often split among themselves, disagreeing over whether or not to boycott in protest. In 2018, the main opposition parties decided not to boycott the legislative, regional and municipal elections; it was the first time since 2006 that they all participated. Almost 70 parties competed, including a large number of parties that failed to win even 1% of the vote. The Islamist Tawassoul party remains the largest opposition party, but it still holds a relatively small number of seats, 14 out of 147. It is unable to challenge the hegemonic UPR and its allies within the state apparatus. Though it is relatively ethnically diverse, Tawassoul has difficulty winning the support of Black African communities. The longest-standing opposition parties, mainly the RFD and the UFP, did not do well in the most recent elections, winning only three seats each. The anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid joined the old but quasi-empty shell party, Sawab party, revived it (calling it IRA-Sawab), and obtained three seats. Some of the most intense electoral struggles took place within the ruling UPR. In periods before elections, people who are not appointed as UPR candidates often create their own small parties, declaring themselves loyal to the president but against the UPR (and quite often returning to the UPR a few months or years later).

The Mauritanian political landscape is primarily structured around informal networks based on tribal and ethnic ties, as well as personal connections built through one's village of origin, education, occupational and business experiences, and religious orientation (Sufi brotherhood or Salafi movement). These networks are very fluid and less visible than formal ones, although they are far more significant. There are few official interest groups; those that do exist include the few trade unions representing civil servants, students, and the workers of the relatively small industrial sector, as well as the employers association, and a large number of NGOs, many of which are empty shells or schemes created by people related to state officials or politicians to siphon off or solicit international aid. Only a few NGOs play a significant role in addressing social problems, notably those dedicated to the interests of ethnic, racial and gender groups, such as IRA, SOS-esclaves, Touche pas à ma nationalité (TPMN) and the association of female household chiefs (association des femmes chefs de famille).

### Party system



### Interest groups



There are no quantitative surveys conducted in Mauritania – such as the Afrobarometer – that seek to measure popular support for democracy. Ethnographic studies, however, suggest that Haratin communities have called upon the state, drawing on constitutional texts, to defend their interests against the arbitrary abuses of former masters. These studies also point at associations of Black African minorities who have petitioned the state to address the abuses committed by security and government forces during the 1987 to 1991 period of state oppression against ethnic minorities. These few existing studies indicate that many citizens value notions of protection from state abuse, fair representation, and the right to be treated fairly and justly.

No systematic statistical analysis or survey of social capital has been undertaken in Mauritania. As explained above (5.2 interest groups), Mauritians in general are connected to various networks whereby trust, cooperation and loyalty are defined by village, tribal, religious and/or personal relations. This can include informal hometown associations, brotherhoods organized around Sufi saints, age set associations, tribes, and self-organized microcredit women’s networks. But these groupings are not free of hierarchical and vertical power relations. Age, gender, lineage and social (caste) status often structure these informal groupings. However, trust is a major component of these organizations and networks, including informal mechanisms that sanction those who violate the trust of others. Among Bidhân communities (White Moors), the importance of tribal affiliation is often said to be the most important social linkage where trust is at its strongest. However, the salience of rivalry among members of the same tribe should not be underestimated, especially between those who aspire to play an important political role. Hence, the most acute struggles often pit tribal kin one against one another.

Approval of  
democracy

n/a

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n/a 1

Social capital

4

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4 1

## II. Economic Transformation

### 6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Mauritania’s economy is a bifurcated one: on the one hand, the mining, fishery and oil sectors represent about 75% of its revenues but make little contributions in terms of employment: for example, the mining sector represents 31% of total revenues of the Mauritanian state, but only 2% of all employment. These sectors are also highly vulnerable to dramatic changes in international prices. Since 2014, global prices of natural resources have fallen considerably. The price of iron ore dropped significantly in 2015 and only regained some of its value in 2017 and 2018. For its part, employment in the formal public sector accounts for 11% of total employment. The majority of Mauritians work in the agricultural and informal sectors, and a

Question  
Score

Socioeconomic  
barriers

3

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3 1

significant amount of money flows into the economy in the form of remittances from the diaspora, as well as official and private foreign aid. Mauritania is a “Low human development” country. Its HDI score is 0.520, and it ranks 159th in the world. It has been around this ranking (157 – 161) for many years (the best year being 2015 at 157th, and the worst year 2012 at 161th). The reduction in HDI score due to poverty is 33%. Mauritania’s Gini index is 32.6. In terms of gender, there is much progress to be made: Mauritania’s gender inequality index is 0.617, and its gender development index is 0.845. Other indicators point to the many challenges faced by girls and women: maternal mortality ratio (death per 100,000 live births) is high, at 602, and the mean years of schooling for female is 2.6 years. About 70% of women have been subjected to female genital mutilation. Ethno-racial and caste (or social status) identities, as well as regional origins affect individual and collective position in the socioeconomic pyramid. Haratin face significant political barriers that make upward mobility difficult. Black Africans face major hurdles and are underrepresented in top positions in the state administration. This does not mean that all Bidhân (White Moors) are well-to-do; rural villages and urban shantytowns count numerous poor Bidhân families, but it does mean that they are better represented in the upper strata. In Nouakchott, wealthy families, and the very small middle class, send their children to one of the burgeoning number of private schools. Public schools, which are understaffed and underfinanced, are attended mostly by Haratin children.

Economic indicators		2015	2016	2017	2018
GDP	\$ M	4832.5	4727.9	4975.4	<b>5365.9</b>
GDP growth	%	1.4	2.0	3.0	<b>3.6</b>
Inflation (CPI)	%	3.3	1.5	2.3	<b>3.1</b>
Unemployment	%	10.8	10.4	10.3	<b>10.3</b>
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	10.4	5.7	11.8	<b>1.3</b>
Export growth	%	7.0	2.1	-2.4	<b>-4.0</b>
Import growth	%	2.1	-5.5	1.6	<b>1.5</b>
Current account balance	\$ M	-955.9	-706.8	-709.0	-
Public debt	% of GDP	75.2	77.4	75.9	<b>83.0</b>
External debt	\$ M	4647.2	4786.0	4967.9	<b>4983.9</b>
Total debt service	\$ M	217.1	224.9	273.6	<b>329.6</b>

Economic indicators		2015	2016	2017	2018
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	22.6	20.8	21.9	<b>21.7</b>
Public education spending	% of GDP	-	2.6	-	-
Public health spending	% of GDP	1.8	1.6	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	2.8	2.9	2.9	<b>3.0</b>

Sources (as of December 2019): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

## 7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

Since the early 2000s, successive Mauritanian governments have attempted, at least officially, to deregulate and liberalize the country's economic environment. However, Mauritania is still ranked in the lowest echelons of the 2019 World Bank Doing Business report. However, it has improved over the last four years; it is now ranked 148th, compared to 160th in 2017. Mauritania has improved in 50% of the Doing Business indicators, while the other 50% are unchanged. It takes six days to start a business, four procedures, and an associated cost (GNI per capita) of 19.3%, placing the country at a respectable 46 out of 190 in the "starting a business" subindex. Some of the administrative improvements that led to a higher ranking during the review period include eliminating fees for deed registration, increasing the transparency of the land registry and streamlining registration procedures. The most recent significant changes in the economic and legal fields include the reform of the investments code (2016 and 2018), the mining code (2014), and the commerce code (2015). The investment code now covers new economic sectors into which foreign direct investments are allowed to be made (including road infrastructures, ports, health and water infrastructure). The informal sector remains dominant in Mauritania. A 2018 IMF report noted that the "importance of the informal sector" constitutes a major feature of the Mauritanian economy. A 2017 World Bank report estimated that 84% of all employment is informal. A systematic country diagnostic report by the World Bank (2017) stated that "the private sector is generally underdeveloped and largely informal, with its participation in the formal sector confined to a discrete and concentrated set of interests." The national currency, the ouguiya, can be exchanged in Mauritania only.



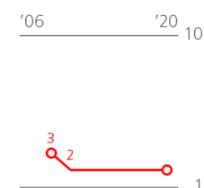
The legal basis for competition policy is the French commercial code, which was adopted by Mauritania in 2000. It prohibits the abuse of a dominant position, cartel behaviors and any agreements and concerted practices between competitors that (directly or indirectly) result in price fixing, or limit production and/or distribution of goods and services. Mauritania does not have any regulation governing mergers. In July 2018, Mauritania became a member of the new ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) regional competition authority (based in Bijilo, Gambia).

The Mauritanian economy has a strong oligopolistic tendency. A small number of businessmen and their families, usually related to specific Moorish (Bidhân) tribes, control most of the large firms and enjoy an oligopolistic position. A 2017 World Bank report stated that the functioning of key product markets (including rice importation, fisheries, construction, hotels and credit provision by banks) appears to be heavily influenced by oligopolistic structures. The import-export of consumer goods and public infrastructures and construction could all be added to this list. This is a long-standing trend, as illustrated by a 2013 World Bank report, which observed that “large firms with political connections continue to dominate state procurement contracts and import markets, even in the presence of cheaper local producers. These monopolies, whether public or private, are indifferent to inflation and the exchange rate because they can pass costs on to their captive markets.” This can strongly influence consumer prices, as a 2018 World Bank report observed: “imported rice in Nouakchott cost more than double the world price, while imported wheat was 60% more expensive, reflecting monopolistic practices in food import markets.” Politically, the fate of conglomerates can fluctuate. For example, a cousin of the president and once a very close ally of his (both are from the same tribe), Mohamed Ould Bouamatou, who controls one of the top three conglomerates, has become a target of President Ould Abdel Aziz over the last few years. He had to flee to Morocco, and a dozen senators, union leaders and journalists have been arrested in 2018, accused of serving as his proxies in Mauritania (e.g., channeling funds on his behalf, organizing lobbies against the president). In order to fight against cartels, Mauritania amended a leniency program in 2018 to allow the initiators or coercers of cartels to apply for leniency and receive a 50% reduction in fines.

Mauritania has implemented a number of trade reforms in recent years. One such measure was the creation in 2013 of a free trade zone (FTZ) in the port city of Nouadhibou, a port from which iron ore and fish are shipped to international markets. Incentives for international trade include a seven-year zero tax policy and a 0% custom fees on imports and exports in the FTZ. However, this FTZ has failed to attract many investors. Investors from Spain and Morocco are the most prominent. The Danish company, Maersk, pledged to invest €30 million in September 2018 in order to modernize the FTZ’s infrastructure. The port of Nouadhibou still requires major improvements to increase its attractiveness. This led to a government announcement in April 2018 that it will soon transform the port into the country’s

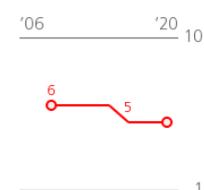
## Competition policy

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## Liberalization of foreign trade

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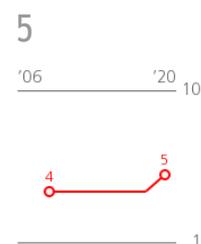


first deep-sea port. The 2018 Doing Business report observed that the Mauritanian government “made trading across borders easier through a series of initiatives at the Port of Nouakchott, such as eliminating the requirement to weigh all import containers, investing in infrastructure, streamlining the movement of cargo and consolidating the payment of fees.” In the 2019 Doing Business report, Mauritania ranked 141 in its trading across borders indicator. The 2018 WTO review notes that Mauritania is “still behind in submitting a large number of WTO notifications, inter alia with respect to state-trading enterprises, technical barriers to trade, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, and intellectual property rights.” The report went on to note that “WTO technical assistance to Mauritania has been hampered” by the latter’s failure to pay its contributions. At the WTO, Mauritania has bound 41% of its tariff lines, while the simple average of bound rates for all of these products is 20.4%. The WTO review also concluded that Mauritania does not apply any anti-dumping measures. The World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index 2018 ranked Mauritania 131 (out of 140), although this has improved since 2016 (137th). As noted above, Mauritania is still ranked in the lower echelons of the World Bank’s 2019 Doing Business index, but has seen improvements over the review period.

The majority of the preceding observations relate to the formal economy. Informal politics are important to keep in mind (the licensing in the export-import sector is a key political tool for patronage), as well as illicit international trade. The country experiences drug-trafficking, as well as the trafficking of other illegal goods (e.g., stolen cars, cigarettes and expired medications), which run through complex networks that involve state officials.

Mauritania has 17 banking institutions (estimated by the IMF in December 2018), up from 10 in 2008. It has a further 20 microfinance institutions. The three largest banks’ share of assets is 39%. In 2018, there were 8.32 commercial branches per 100,000 inhabitants, up from 6.6 in 2013. The Mauritanian financial sector’s capital to assets ratio is estimated at 12.3%, while non-performing loans are 23.0%. On a scale of 0 to 8, Mauritania was scored 3 on the depth of credit information index in 2017. In 2018, in the World Bank’s strength of legal right index, Mauritania scored 2 on a scale of 0 (weak) to 12 (strong). Mauritanian banks have relatively low profitability, low penetration rate and weak financial inclusion (women, young people, ethnic and caste groups are generally excluded). Many analysts also suspect that banks are involved in illicit activities on behalf of certain tribes. In a 2018 interview, the governor of the Mauritanian central bank (BCM) stated that the banking rate was 15.0%, but that it rises to 30.0% if microcredit institutions are included. In July 2018, the National Assembly adopted three new laws pertaining to the reform of the banking and credit sector. These reforms impose tighter entry conditions for new banks, rules governing transparency in the sector, and new, tighter rules for Islamic banks. The BCM now has more auditing power over banks. In a December 2018 report, however, the IMF suggested that although the 2018 reforms were significant, “bank regulations and supervision should continue to be strengthened with a view to addressing financial

#### Banking system

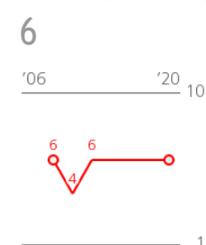


sector vulnerabilities, supporting credit to the economy, and improving financial inclusion” and that “the refinancing of Islamic banks remains an issue due to the lack of Shariah-compliant refinancing mechanisms.” A June 2018 report by the World Bank observed that “financial sector risks remain elevated as commercial banks face tight liquidity and a weak banking supervision framework. The financial sector suffers from poor asset quality, low profitability, and highly concentrated deposits and credits.” Overall, as a May 2018 IMF report observed, “insufficient provisioning against bad loans, low banking services penetration in the economy” constitute major constraints on the banking sector. Given the fact that the vast majority of Mauritians do not have access to bank accounts, microcredit and informal credit associations (“tontines”) based on family or neighborhood relations, continue to be central pillars of financial survival for normal Mauritians.

## 8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

In January 2018, the Mauritanian central bank (BCM) changed the country’s banknotes and coins. Banknotes lost a zero in the new system (ten ouguiya became one ouguiya). The new polymer banknotes were meant to be of a higher quality and harder to counterfeit. Though there was supposed to be no devaluation, the change had inflationary effects in the first months and the ouguiya’s value decreased on the foreign exchange black market. The BCM’s independence vis-à-vis the president’s office has always been a concern. In 2015, just a few months after his second five-year term had been renewed, the BCM governor was sacked and replaced by Abdel Aziz Ould Dahi, the current governor. In July 2018, one of the three laws adopted by the National Assembly to reform the banking sector focused specifically on the BCM and aimed at making it more autonomous from the president. The governor now serves a six-year term, renewable once, and the president can dismiss the governor only after at least two-thirds of the bank’s general council has voted in favor of the removal, which must be based on one of four predetermined criteria (ranging from physical or mental illness to grave professional misconduct). The new law created the position of deputy governor of the central bank. The extent to which the BCM’s independence is now guaranteed remains to be seen. External shocks, including significant changes in world commodity prices, are a constant threat to Mauritania’s price stability. Fuel and foodstuff rank high in the country’s major imports and can drive inflation and deflation. Mauritania imports between 70% of its foodstuff in good harvest years and 85% in bad harvest years. Imported wheat and rice were sold at higher prices during 2017/2018 than in the previous year, according to a 2018 famine early warning system network report. Inflation has fluctuated over the period: 2.3% in 2017 and 3.3% in 2018. The BCM’s capacity to intervene is weakened by the heavy circulation of money in the informal economy. Its exchange rate policies are also counterweighted by the significance of the black market. The real effective exchange rate has stabilized vis-a-vis the dollar since 2017, after a period of depreciation between 2014 and 2016.

### Monetary stability



A November 2018 IMF review considered the risk of external debt distress in Mauritania to be high and the overall risk of debt distress also to be high. This is explained in part by a substantial increase in external debt between 2015 and 2017 to finance infrastructure and external deficits. Mauritania's external debt increased from \$3.8 billion (2015) to \$3.9 billion in 2016. The total debt service has increased from \$217.1 million in 2015 to \$232.6 million in 2016. However, the public debt-to-GDP ratio has decreased from 2016 (99.3%) to 2017 (77.3%). The current account balance has worsened from -\$706.8 million in 2016 to -\$709 million in 2017, although these numbers have improved from previous years (-\$956 million in 2015 and -\$1,226 million in 2012). Government consumption increased from 20.8% of GDP in 2016, to 21.7% in 2017. The court of accounts (cour des comptes), which is in charge of controlling public spending at the national, regional and local level, has been granted more autonomy and power under the organic law on the court of accounts, passed by the National Assembly in May 2018. In the same month, the National Assembly passed the organic budget law, which the government claims will "considerably improve public financial management by unifying the government budget, promoting the introduction of program budgeting, capping the public debt, and improving budget formulation in a multiyear framework." It is too early, to assess the impact these two laws will have. It is probable that the 2018 legislative, regional and local elections caused an increase in government spending, and that the forthcoming 2019 presidential elections will have a similar effect, given that the patronage nature of the Mauritanian political system requires that a significant amount of resources be channeled through vast political networks to sustain the presidential campaign and the presidential party. The increasing level of violence in the Sahel will also increase military spending. The country's dependence on commodity exports (iron ore, fish and gold), and its incapacity to diversify its economy to reduce its vulnerability, represent continuing threats. Iron ore's international prices dropped dramatically between 2014 and 2016 (when it reached \$40 per ton) but have recovered slightly since then (to reach \$70 per ton by December 2018. However, this is still far from the \$180 per ton of 2011).

## Fiscal stability

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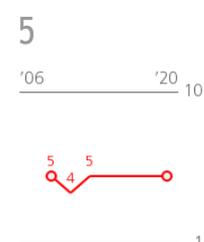


## 9 | Private Property

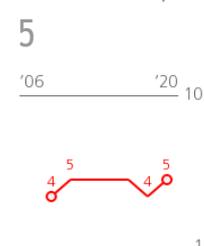
Private property is guaranteed by the 1991 constitution (article 15). The investments code (reformed in 2016) also contributes to the protection of private property. Land property is regulated under the 1983 law on land tenure and under a 2000 decree that clarifies its concrete applications. It is also regulated under the urbanism code. The World Bank's Doing Business 2019 report ranked Mauritania 102nd under the registering a property indicator (49 days and 4 procedures). However, in a country where the majority of the population live in rural areas, or on partly-registered, or unregistered land in urban areas (called gazra), the clear ownership of private property remains a critical issue that is not yet fully resolved. The arrests of Haratin and Black African activists between 2014 and 2018 were often a direct response by the state to protests against poor access to land and expropriation of land. A May 2017 World Bank study found that "lack of clarity on land acquisition policies for private investment in agriculture have created social tensions" and stated that a major challenge in Mauritania remains the "land capture by urban and tribal elites." A 2015 World Bank study revealed that out of the 27,000 title deeds recorded nationally, women held fewer than 8%. The report also found that "most holders of temporary land titles are seeking to formalize them but face multiple obstacles, including overlapping jurisdictions, lack of coordination, and the absence of a land administration system." These problems are facilitated by the fact that many state agencies are involved in land attribution, with overlapping responsibilities: the ministry of finance, the ministry of urbanism and housing, the interior ministry's governors and prefects, and the agency for urban development.

Private companies are officially permitted and protected. Liberalization policies have been implemented in recent years but they coexist with major state regulations, as seen in the ongoing licensing regime, which requires businesses to buy licenses in order to operate officially in almost any sector of the economy. Those who do acquire licenses often do so through a clientelistic mechanism, as the "preferential" granting of licenses is one of the most well-known forms of politico-economic patronage. No privatization has occurred in the review period. The largest company in the country, SNIM, which extracts iron ore, is 78% state-owned. Other SOEs include the Port Autonome de Nouakchott, the Mauritanian electric company (SOMELEC), and the water company (SNDE). In February 2017, a new law on public-private partnerships (PPP) was adopted. According to a 2018 WTO report, this was to "define the legal regime and the institutional framework for PPP contracts in Mauritania."

Property rights



Private enterprise

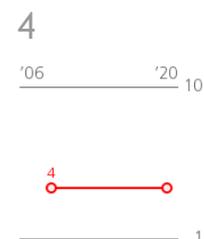


## 10 | Welfare Regime

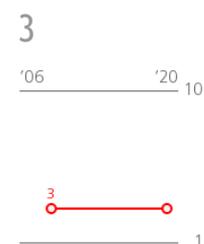
Due to Mauritania's bifurcated economy, the small formal employment sector, which spans the resource-extraction industries and the public administration, provides welfare provisions, in contrast with the vast majority of the population in the urban informal and agropastoral sectors, in which safety nets are mostly provided for by the government's cash-transfer program, NGO and international organizations (United Nations agencies) programs and kin network (including the diaspora). According to the latest data available (2017), the government spent 1.9% of GDP on health (compared to 1.7% the previous year). The latest data indicate that life expectancy is 63, mortality under 5 is 8.5 per 1,000 inhabitants, and the infant mortality rate is 65 per 1,000. The national social registry, which officially registers vulnerable families seeking governmental social transfers, and the government's conditional cash transfer program, TEKAVOUL, are continually expanding, with the as yet unmet objective of reaching 150,000 households. 10,000 households benefited from TEKAVOUL in 2017 (latest data available). The government agency in charge of TEKAVOUL toured the country in the fall of 2017 and throughout 2018 to publicize the program across the country. The value of migrants' remittances amounted to \$244 million in 2017, representing 4.85% of GDP. Remittances represent an important source of support for families in Mauritania. In rural areas, villages and small towns often rely on foreign NGOs and hometown associations of migrants to develop better access to health facilities, schools and socioeconomic programs.

In Mauritania, gender identities, ethno-racial identities, and social status (or caste, including freed slaves/Haratin) combine to hinder access to quality education and health services, public office and employment. These categories face systemic discrimination. In terms of employment, there is significant discrimination against Black Africans and Haratin in the most critical positions in the state apparatus, especially the major ministries (justice, interior ministry and defense) and high-profile positions (e.g., governors, prefects and police chiefs). The state agency TADAMOUN was created in 2013 – but its president and board of directors were only formally confirmed in 2016 – to help vulnerable Haratin families and Black African returning as refugees from Senegal. In the 2018 legislative elections, 27 women were elected, compared to 37 in 2013. 20 women won a seat through the national list reserved for women, representing 18% of women in the National Assembly. A woman is presiding over Nouakchott's regional council (following the 2018 elections). In education, gender inequalities in primary schools are insignificant, with a female to male enrollment ratio of 110%, but inequality increases at the secondary level (ratio of 90%) and tertiary level (50%). In the formal job market, women comprise only 31.3% of the labor force. Female genital mutilation (FGM) remains a major problem in Mauritania, affecting approximately 70% of women. A similar situation prevails for underage marriages of young girls, which constitute a widespread practice despite the personal status code that regulates marital practices.

### Social safety nets



### Equal opportunity

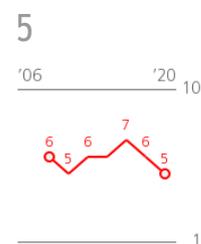


28% of girls aged 15 to 19 are married, and 16% were married below the age of 15. A law on reproductive health was finally adopted in January 2017, after years of fierce opposition from conservative deputies. The law recognizes reproductive health as a universal right and authorizes the implementation of reproductive health programs and family planning in public and private health institutions. It also criminalizes FGM. A 2018 Human Rights Watch report on sexual violence stated that the country is still in need of a law that clearly penalizes sexual violence.

## 11 | Economic Performance

As an exporter of natural resources, Mauritania's economy is affected by international commodities prices' global fluctuations. GDP was \$5.024 billion in 2017, compared to \$4.739 billion in 2016. GDP per capita (PPP) was \$3,950 in 2017, compared to \$3,042 in 2013. GDP per capita growth was 0.7% in 2017, an improvement on the -0.8% in 2016 and -1.5% in 2015. These trends can be partly attributed to the fluctuation of FDI, which mirror commodities' international prices; FDI ranged from 10.4% of GDP in 2015, to 5.7% in 2016, and then 11.7% in 2017. Most FDI is focused in extractive industries (iron ore, gold, oil and natural gas exploration) and infrastructure projects. The current account balance has improved marginally, from -\$955.9 million in 2015 to -\$706.8 million in 2016 and -\$709 million in 2017. The IMF predicts that "after improving substantially in 2017, the current account deficit is projected to widen in 2018 driven by the effects of rising world oil prices and lower prices for iron ore." Inflation has remained at relatively low levels compared with neighboring countries (2.3% in 2017 and 3.3% in 2018). Officially, unemployment is 10%, but a May 2018 World Bank study noted that the real number could be closer to 30%, with higher rates for 18- to 34-year-olds. Gross capital formation has increased from 47.7% of GDP in 2016 to 56.8% in 2017. Public debt decreased in 2017, to 77.3% of GDP, compared with 99.3% in 2016 and 98.4% in 2015. Despite this improvement, a December 2018 IMF document concluded that "vulnerabilities remain elevated due to limited economic diversification and high external public debt at 72.5% of GDP at end-2017."

Output strength

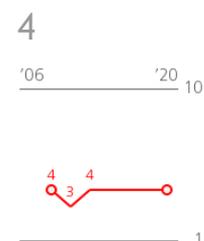


## 12 | Sustainability

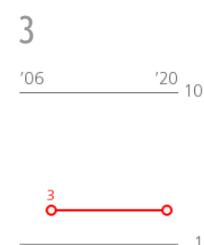
Mauritania is located in the Sahel, one of the most precarious environments in the world and is also one of the poorest countries in the world. The government clearly prioritizes growth over sustainability, given the poverty of the country. However, Mauritania is severely affected by climate change: desertification, major rainfall deficits and frequent droughts, and its capital city (which hosts about a third of the country's population) is at high risk from rising sea levels. In 2000 the government adopted a code of the environment, which has become the main legal framework regarding the environment. After a first action plan for the environment, which produced no substantial results, a second action plan was adopted for the period 2012-2016, which also failed to result in clear outcomes. The strategy and national action plan for biodiversity 2011-2020 has been similarly disappointing. According to the 2018 environmental performance index (EPI), Mauritania ranked 166th out of 180 countries, with a score of 39.24 out of 100 (it scored 27.19/100 in 2014).

The Mauritanian government officially spends 2.6% of GDP on education. The adult literacy rate is 45.5%. Overall, the UN education index for Mauritania is 0.389 (2017, compared to 0.385 in 2016). There are no available data on R&D expenditure. A 2018 World Bank study found that the “low level and regressive distribution of public spending” in Mauritania caused a lack of equitable access to education. It claimed that “the poorest children receive the least benefit from overall education spending.” The report identifies the key challenges facing Mauritania to be high attrition rates and a lack of education quality. A common observation is that “challenges in enacting the 1999 education reforms, including bilingualism, have further contributed to poor learning outcomes.” As many as 39% of all young people, according to another World Bank study, are considered NEET (neither in education, employment, or training). 33% of Mauritians do not have formal education, and a mere 33% go on to pursue secondary studies. Just 5% continue into higher education. Some higher education institutions have been created to address major gaps in professional schools (especially related to the country's natural resources sectors), including the higher institute for the study of technologies (in the southern town of Rosso); the school for civil engineering; the Mauritanian school for mining; the national school for public works, the naval academy and two other higher education institutes. A 2015 French study found the number of students enrolled at public schools increases by 5% on average annually, compared to 60% in private schools. In Nouakchott, a government report found that 45% of children attend private primary schools, and 50% attend private secondary schools.

### Environmental policy



### Education policy / R&D



## Governance

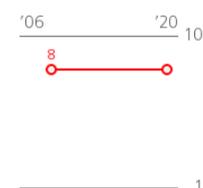
### I. Level of Difficulty

Mauritania, like its Sahelian neighbors, faces severe structural constraints: a very large territory, low population density, a process of desertification that has now engulfed 78% of its territory. Rising levels of violence in countries in the region – notably Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, in which Mauritanian jihadists are involved – creates a permanent threat along Mauritania’s borders. The already impoverished region of Hodh el Gharby hosts 58,000 Malian refugees in the Mbera camp (as of December 2018), mainly Malian Tuaregs and Arabs (plus an additional 2,000 refugees in the main cities). In 2018, 5000 new Malian refugees reached the camp. The militarization of the region has had negative consequences for Mauritania. For a country that is already very poor, it diverts immensely scarce resources toward the military instead of being invested in more productive sectors. Jihadist groups can look attractive to young citizens who face major obstacles in finding a job. It leads to a further polarization of the already strained ethnic and caste relations in the country. There has been an increase in the circulation of weapons in the country. Finally, it perpetuates authoritarian rule, through the false dichotomy of: “it’s either stability through the military or chaos.” These security problems are closely correlated to an economy that is overdependent on commodity exports and the inherent volatility associated with this. Constraining environmental conditions also affect the majority of the population’s daily survival. Ethnic relations are fragile; if environmental conditions worsen, the arable land owned by Black African communities along the Senegal River Valley will be increasingly coveted, potentially leading to more conflict.

No systematic study has been conducted in Mauritania to measure civil society. Since its inception, the country has been governed by an authoritarian regime, which does not facilitate the development of autonomous and vocal groupings of citizens. Officially, there are very few organizations that have clear mobilizational capacities and can influence policy. The most vocal ones include organizations devoted to the defense of Haratin, such as IRA (whose leader has been arrested many times) and women’s organizations such as the association of female household chiefs, which campaigns and publishes annual data on sexual violence. Trade unions representing employees in the formal economy, mostly in the extractive industries, the fishery sector, and the public service, can mobilize their members and engage the state,

Structural  
constraints

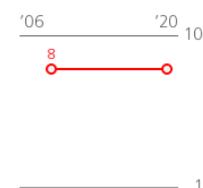
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Civil society  
traditions

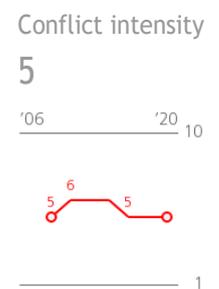
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launching strikes and other forms of mobilization. This was seen in the Mauritel (National phone company) strike in January 2019, or the national printing company (which prints all newspapers) strike in June and October 2018, the Port of Nouakchott dockers' strike in July 2018, or the strike of May 2018 by doctors and the public health union. Fieldwork research reveals that informal forms of associations constitute the main form of organization for civil society. They can be very efficient but are harder to observe in action. They include Sufi brotherhoods, reformist Islamic associations, hometown associations, small microcredit associations (tontines), and very importantly, tribal networks. Informal associations function in a quasi-civil society role, providing help to their members, and engaging the state on social, economic and political issues. However, the majority are highly fragmented and would have difficulty mobilizing large sectors of society.

Since the inception of the country, the politicization of ethno-racial identities, of tribal solidarities, of social status (caste), and of religion, has been a defining feature of the political landscape. Though the country is 100% Muslim, in recent years the radicalization of a small but vocal number of Islamists has made headlines in Mauritania, as well as across the Sahel. After a number of deadly attacks in Mauritania in the 2000s, these Mauritians have joined armed groups in neighboring countries, primarily Mali and Algeria. After facing years of repression, moderate Islamists now have a political party (Tawassoul), which has become the leading legislative opposition party in the past two elections (2013 and 2018). Besides radical Islam, ethnic and status (caste) polarization remains a critical issue. Haratin activists who become too vocal in the eyes of the government are repressed by security forces, as demonstrated by the arrests of Haratin activists from the movement IRA, including that of its leader, and now National Assembly deputy, Biram Dah Abeid. Polarization also takes the form of ethnic tensions. Black African ethnic minorities have been marginalized for decades. The 1993 law of amnesty, which protects military personnel (all from the Moor community) from being investigated over the terrible violations of human rights committed against Black Africans (1989 – 1991), is still in place, despite some local organizations calling for its revocation. Movements such as *Touche pas à ma nationalité* and *Kawtal* build upon their predecessors from the 1960s to denounce the exclusion of Black Africans from the civil registration process and from other official spheres. In his May 2016 declaration, the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, declared that “there is a systematic absence from almost all positions of real power, and a continuing exclusion from many aspects of economic and social life, of the Haratin and the Afro-Mauritians. These groups make up over two-thirds of the population, but various policies serve to render their needs and rights invisible.” Alston added that “the Government’s adamant insistence that it can take no account of ethnicity in its policies serves to reinforce the status quo.”



## II. Governance Performance

### 14 | Steering Capability

Prioritization is a prerogative of the president in Mauritania's hyper-presidentialist political system. However, given the importance of informal politics, these priorities are not necessarily those that are officially enunciated. The priorities of the present government only partially conform to the normative framework of market economy and liberal democracy, especially regarding the latter.

Since 2000 (i.e., for the current president and his predecessor) there appears to have been three consistent short- and medium-term priorities. The first priority, given that staging a coup d'état has been the only mechanism through which to transfer power in Mauritania, is preventing a coup from occurring. This means ensuring that no rival from his close inner circle emerges (as all coup d'états have been perpetrated not by distant opponents but by the closest allies of the ruler). President Ould Abdel Aziz has finally signaled that he will not alter the constitution and will therefore step down at the end of his second term in mid-2019. It was therefore important for him to carefully select who would succeed him (i.e., someone from the security apparatus, who will perhaps be willing to step down after his first term à la Medvedev-Putin). The second priority is preventing Sahelian Islamic armed groups, which include Mauritians among their ranks, from perpetrating attacks in Mauritania. This entails building profitable alliances with Western powers to obtain military and financial support. The third priority is attracting foreign investment, primarily in the extractive industries (e.g., minerals, oil and gas), and in infrastructure. This objective has been met, although it has not generated inclusive growth. The appointments of various prime ministers since 2000 reflect this third priority. The three prime ministers who have served under President Ould Abdel Aziz were all engineers; they were all technocrats and managers who could develop good relations with foreign investors and international donors. All three also came from the Eastern regions, which represents the country's largest electoral pool.

Question  
Score

Prioritization

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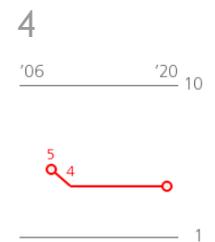
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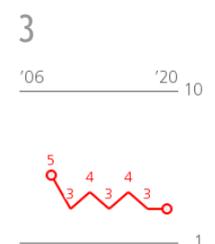
The government has been relatively successful in meeting the objectives identified above, which, as explained, do not include the broadening of democracy nor the upward mobility of marginalized ethno-racial groups. Regarding the prevention of a coup d'état and the rise of a rival, President Ould Abdel Aziz has decided not to amend the constitution and therefore not to extend his rule beyond his second term. He appears to have chosen a solid pick to succeed him in 2019: it is most likely to be his close friend, General Ould Ghazouani. Many analysts believe that his successor will agree to rule for only one term, thereby allowing Ould Abdel Aziz to return to the presidency in 2024. Regarding the neutralization of potential rivals, the hunt for the country's most important businessman, the president's cousin and once his close ally, Mohamed Ould Bouamatou (now exiled in Morocco), as well as his alleged proxies (such as senator Ould Ghadda, who has spent more than a year in jail over the course of 2017/2018), illustrates the president's constant need to monitor and manage his entourage. The government has been successful in preventing the rise of violent Islamist groups on Mauritanian soil. However, leaked documents published in the media suggest that this may have come at the price of ambiguous deals with these groups, who are allowed to operate freely close to the Mauritanian border. Regarding the objective of attracting foreign investment, this has also proven to be relatively successful, although it has not led to inclusive growth. Foreign direct investment in the extractive and fishery sectors is increasing.

Policy learning can be evaluated in two different ways. From the president's and the government's perspective, policy learning can mean adapting to challenging conditions in order to consolidate their rule. Through this lens, the taming or neutralization of opponents and rivals can be seen as key objectives. The ruling party dominated its opponents in the September 2018 elections, enjoying a hegemonic position in all elected assemblies at the national, regional and local levels, while arresting opponents that expressed too vocally their frustration over ethno-racial inequalities. Politically speaking, the president and the executive have in fact proven that they displayed good policy learning, though not in the sense of contributing to the development of democracy. From an economic perspective, the extent to which the booming years of the late 2000s encouraged the government to learn from past experiences and to effectively and truly adopt growth-inclusive and redistributive measures is unclear. The lack of diversification in the economy remains a major issue, despite years of recommendations by international observers and stakeholders. The profits generated by the extractive and fishery sectors have not been redirected toward other sectors. An IMF report in May 2018 repeats many observations made twenty years ago, referring to "the insufficient diversification of the economy, insufficient private sector capacity, a relatively untrained workforce, limited access to primary health care services," and finally, the perennial problem – also identified by a 2018 World Bank study – of "growth without much job creation."

#### Implementation



#### Policy learning

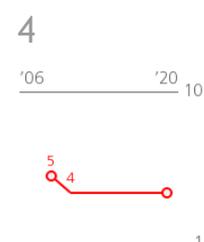


## 15 | Resource Efficiency

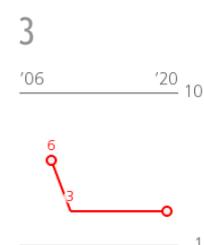
The management of administrative personnel remains undermined by politics. The merging of administrative and political functions is frequent: high-ranking civil servants are often also members of the ruling UPR party, a pattern also observed under previous regimes. Dismissals and appointments are often politically motivated. Frequent cabinet reshuffling can be seen as a tool to maintain loyalty and prevent subversion by the elites. The actual implementation of meritocratic procedures in the appointments of public servants remains unfulfilled, as does the prevention of embezzlement in contracts related to public infrastructure and the governance of state-owned enterprises. Budget planning and implementation is more transparent than previously. The media have published data on the forthcoming budget and the end-of-year budget revision. Auditing is undertaken by the general state inspectorate (IGE), the court of accounts (cour des comptes) and other auditing offices. However, political considerations continue to play a major role in this process. A June 2018 World Bank study noted that “more work remains to be done to address weak administrative and fiscal audit capacity.” The government has taken tangible steps toward balancing its budget in 2017. For the first half of 2018, an IMF report noted that “the budget yielded a primary surplus (excluding grants) of 2.6% of GDP in the year to August 2018.” However, analysts believe that the 2018 elections, and the forthcoming 2019 presidential elections, will have a significant impact on government spending (as public resources are channeled through patronage networks to boost support for the president and his party). The dependence of the government on mining and fishery revenues remains a liability, making it vulnerable to the inevitable fluctuations of global prices. The 2017 constitutional reform created a new administrative level, the regional councils. The 13 councils were won by the ruling party in September 2018. Though this signals some willingness to decentralize, the regional councils’ financial dependence on the central government (through the regional development fund) raises questions concerning their autonomy, their capacity to fulfill their duties, and finally their informal function as local mechanism of patronage.

Policy coordination has proven effective in the sphere of defense and anti-terrorism, at least over the review period. However, more generally, the combination of a hyper-presidentialist system and a culture of clientelism does not serve transparency and policy coordination. As an illustration, slavery has been criminalized through various legal reforms in 2007, 2012, and 2015, and social programs such as the TADAMOUN agency and the EMEL shops (which provide subsidized food at cheap prices for poor families) all aim at supporting marginalized groups such as the Haratin. However, the actual implementation of these legal changes on the ground appears to generate negligible results, thanks mostly to corruption and tribal connections being used in the justice system. Few individuals accused of slavery have been sentenced, and those who have been, are released early: in one case a man who was sentenced to five years

Efficient use of assets



Policy coordination



in 2016, was released after a few months. In March 2018, a woman received the second longest sentence yet (10 years), but was released after only three months. Meanwhile Haratin activists have been harshly treated when protesting the situation of their people (as seen in the arrests of activists between 2014 and 2018). Similarly, the project of creating a cash transfer program targeting the poorest households in the country has been slow to materialize: 150,000 poor households were to benefit from this program, but so far it has only reached 10,000.

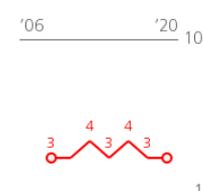
The main auditing agency, the general state inspectorate (created in 2005), conducted 80 missions during the review period. The *cour des comptes*, another public body responsible for auditing, which can tackle corruption practices, has generated less visible results: they have failed to publish any report on their activities since 2006. The *autorité de régulation des marchés publics* (AMRM – regulatory authority for public procurement) is another body responsible for auditing. Its last published annual report was in 2016. Commenting on the only annual reports available (2012–2016), a 2018 WTO analysis noted that “the annual audits carried out by the ARMP show that most of the criteria employed in connection with the awarding and performance of contracts are not respected.” Political interference is likely to play a role in this. For example, the former president of AMRP (who was still in charge in the first months of 2018) campaigned actively for the ruling party in his hometown in September 2018. The *commission de transparence financière dans la vie publique* (financial disclosure commission for public affairs) also officially contributes to the fight against corruption by collecting the self-declarations of the 500 highest-ranking civil servants and officials covering assets and properties. It then compares their assets at the beginning and end their term in office. If major variations are noted, the commission can refer these cases to the ministry of justice. However, its latest ceremony was held in early January 2013 and no similar ceremony has been conducted since then.

## 16 | Consensus-Building

The September 2018 legislative, regional and local elections confirmed once again the “competitive authoritarian” nature of a regime that has been in place since 1991, when it emerged after 31 years of single-party and military rule. Every head of state since 1978, including President Ould Abdel Aziz, came to power through coups d’état. Since 1991, those military officers who staged a coup eventually organized elections, which they systematically won (with the exception of the short-lived presidency of Ould Cheikh Abdallahi between 2007 and 2008, who has publicly admitted that he had been chosen by the military). At stake in the 2019 presidential election is not the identity of the next president, but who President Ould Abdel Aziz will pick as his successor. Officials are not strongly committed to democracy. However, the fact that President Ould Abdel Aziz chose not to amend the constitution to extend the number of terms he can serve – unlike dozens of African presidents –

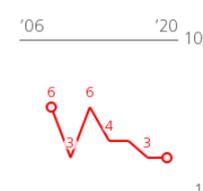
Anti-corruption policy

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Consensus on goals

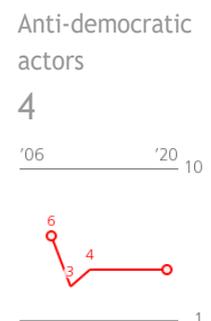
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is a sign that he was unwilling to violate this basic democratic norm. The opposition parties are committed to democracy, including the Islamist party Tawassoul, which regained its status as the leading opposition party after the 2018 elections. In this competitive authoritarian regime, the use of naked violence is less frequent than in other authoritarian regimes where a large number of opponents and journalists are murdered and/or jailed. Censorship of the press is significantly less than it used to be in the past. Compared to the violent years of the 1986 to 1991 period, the current regime is more moderate. However, the highest position in the state, the presidency, is not subject to free and fair competition. This also applies to the National Assembly. The government's handling of Haratin and Black African activists also sends a negative signal.

There is a significant consensus surrounding the principle of a market economy. However, if the rule of law as a mechanism that regulates market relations is included in the definition of a market economy, then this would not tally with Mauritanian officials' view. Though official rules exist on paper, their implementation remains wildly inconsistent. Competition within the market is hindered by the presence of powerful conglomerates connected to the ruling circles, high-ranking military officials and other businessmen, as well as by tribal and clan networks. In addition, the extent to which the market economy has been harnessed to support effective pro-poor policies is open to question, given the immense gap that exists between a small wealthy minority and a large majority of the population that lives in conditions of extreme poverty, most of which is determined by social status.

The legislative, regional and local elections of September 2018, and most likely the forthcoming 2019 presidential election, confirm the strength of anti-democratic actors. The military officer who stages a coup will eventually garner international legitimacy by winning an election he cannot lose and will consolidate his grip through his party's dominance over elected assemblies. Reformists have failed to achieve the following two basic criteria of a democracy: (1) an open and fair election for the executive position. The 2019 presidential election might be the first one in the country's history where a president replaces another not through a coup d'état, but it will likely be one where a retired general appoints his successor, another general, from his inner circle, thereby perpetuating the same dynamic of authoritarian rule; and (2) that non-elected institutions do not interfere in democracy: the military continues to be the most powerful institution in the country.

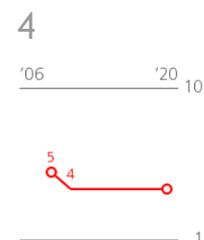


The Mauritanian political leadership has been unable, or perhaps rather, has been unwilling, to address the country's structural tensions. A broad consensus across the ethno-racial dividing lines is far from being achieved. As stated above, White Moors (or Bidhân) control most of the key positions in state institutions such as the ministries of defense, justice, and the interior. They control most key positions in the military and intelligence apparatus. The dire condition of Haratin is a major cleavage that continues to weaken the social foundations of the country. The repression of some Haratin and Black African movements, which continued in the review period, represents a continuation of this trend. For their part, radical Mauritanian Islamists who had joined armed groups between 2000 and 2010 have been jailed, and those who were released have agreed to live a peaceful life in Mauritania. Those who wished to continue on the jihadist path have left the country and operate in other Sahelian countries, but the situation remains precarious and it is hard to tell if they will not one day return to Mauritania.

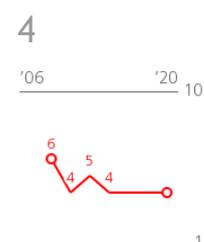
Formal civil society organizations, including trade unions, domestic NGOs, local associations, and the media, are able to express themselves through the media. Trade unions can protest and organize strikes. They can also publish reports on various sociopolitical problems. However, the extent of their inclusion in the national decision-making process remains negligible. Decision-making is highly centralized around the presidency. International partners (United Nations agencies; partnering countries; international NGOs) include civil society organizations as stakeholders, but their impact on policies remains difficult to assess, and the actual composition of these civil society actors must be analyzed carefully. Informal groups and networks (defined above as informal religious organizations such as Sufi orders; tribal and lineage networks and village associations), do participate in various ways in some decision-making processes, usually at the local level. However, in these cases, there are serious issues of representation.

The comprehensive inclusion of Haratin in the political sphere, as well as their socioeconomic development, is a major issue that has still not been addressed by the government. The numerous arrests of Haratin activists during the review period demonstrate the extent to which the Haratin question remains taboo. The gap between the official toughening of anti-slavery laws and the meager results in the courts of justice on the ground is another indicator. The 1989 to 1991 ethnic massacres and deportations of Black Africans and their ensuing marginalization are problems that have never been truly addressed. The return of Mauritanian refugees from Senegal between 2008 and 2012 was a positive development. But there has been a lack of long-term support for these refugees, resulting in difficulties for them reclaiming their land; not being compensated for their material loss (livestock, houses, and other goods); and no pension plans for returning deported civil servants (something they are entitled to). The fact that the 1993 law of amnesty, which protects military personnel who committed human rights atrocities in 1989-1991, has not been repelled. This constitutes a major obstacle to reconciliation. Haratin and Black

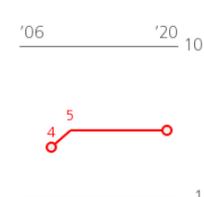
#### Cleavage / conflict management



#### Civil society participation



#### Reconciliation



Africans continue to be underrepresented in key positions at the top of the state apparatus, raising doubts over the government's willingness to achieve sustainable reconciliation.

## 17 | International Cooperation

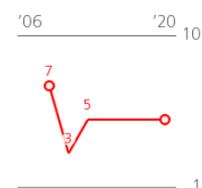
Mauritania collaborates closely with its international partners, including United Nations agencies, the World Bank, the IMF, regional banks (African Development Bank; Islamic Development Bank), and foreign government development aid agencies. The extent to which the government integrates international assistance for long-term development goals is arguably limited; the goals do not appear to be liberal democracy and a sound market economy. On the one hand, the Mauritanian government has signaled a real openness to working with its international partners, but the implementation of development policies covering inclusive growth, job creation and the redistribution of profits from the extractive sector is inconsistent. The considerable gap between a small wealthy elite and the vast majority of the population is striking. As a May 2017 World Bank report explains, “the weak management of extractive rents is a binding constraint to inclusive growth in the short to medium term, as it limits both the optimal and pro-poor use of revenue and impedes economic diversification.” Since the rise of Islamist violence across the Sahel, Mauritania has strengthened its relations with Western and International partners to consolidate its security and anti-terrorism policies. Nouakchott has joined the French-backed G5 Sahel force, which gathers troops from the five Sahelian neighbors in Mali; G5 Sahel's permanent secretariat is located in Nouakchott. Finally, analysts and NGOs have drawn attention to the problem of international financial support being captured and used for patronage. This relates to individuals close to the president's inner circle as well as members of the ruling UPR party.

Despite the authoritarian nature of the Mauritanian regime, all international partners collaborate with the government. International partners are apparently willing to balance the promotion of democracy with their security interests. The constant threat posed by armed Islamist groups in neighboring countries, especially with the ongoing security crisis in Mali, exerts a strong influence on these decisions. Effective democratization is not on the agenda. The Mauritanian government's credibility may have declined after rumors emerged of a secret cease-fire with the Islamists.

In terms of the development of a liberal economy, the government has convinced international partners and foreign investors of its commitment to this. However, most observers agree that informal practices, corruption and oligopolistic tendencies continue to be dominant features of Mauritania's economy. Mauritania collaborates with most international institutions or mechanism that monitor compliance. For instance, in its 2018 review, the WTO highlights the country's steady economic growth and macroeconomic stability, but also notes that “Mauritania's participation

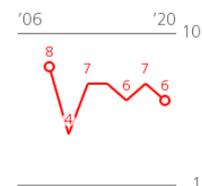
Effective use of support

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Credibility

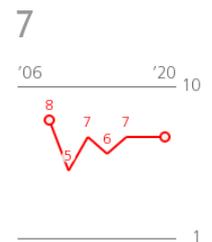
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in WTO activities was limited” and that “it had yet to ratify the Trade Facilitation Agreement or the Protocol Amending the TRIPS Agreement. It is still behind in submitting a large number of WTO notifications.” The United Nations Human Rights Council has published a number of reports over the course of the review period that note some improvements, but also a number of major deficiencies with respect to the human rights of Haratin, Black Africans and women. The May 2018 committee on the elimination of racial discrimination noted that “certain traditional social structures and cultural prejudices continue to stoke racial discrimination and to marginalize the Haratin community, particularly in terms of access to education, employment, housing, health care and social services.” The UN Human Rights Council’s special rapporteur stated in June 2017 that “to deny the relevance of ethnicity and insist that all citizens are treated in the same manner, without any effort to target particularly disadvantaged groups, is a recipe for the maintenance of the status quo. Such denial policies also fuel instability.”

Mauritania cooperates with its regional neighbors. Regional cooperation is at present primarily centered on security, although the drivers of insecurity are mostly of a social, political and economic nature. Mauritania must maintain a precarious balance between the two rival power-houses to the north, Morocco and Algeria, in a context where both try to weaken one another, interpreting Mauritania’s friendly move toward one as an attack on the other. Mauritania has joined the G5 Sahel group (with Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso), and hosts the permanent secretariat of the organization, whose goal is to combine forces to provide stability in Mali. Mauritania hosted the 31st summit of the African Union in July 2018. It is a member of many other regional organizations such as the Union of the Arab Maghreb, NATO’s Mediterranean Dialogue (which includes seven non-NATO members, including Mauritania). It also signed the African Continental Free-Trade Area agreement in March 2018.

#### Regional cooperation



## Strategic Outlook

The most stable and socially integrated countries in West Africa include Ghana, Senegal, Benin and Cape Verde. These countries share one feature: they are ruled by civilians and they have experienced more than one democratic transfer of power, in which opposition parties and candidates defeat incumbents, the latter acknowledge their defeat and relinquish power peacefully. Mauritania should follow the example of these countries. Reforming political institutions in a way that makes them more open to all citizens, more representative of the country's cultural diversity, and more accountable will generate legitimacy and stability. Elections for the presidency and national and local assemblies must be open, transparent and fair. The office of the president holds too much power. Mauritania's hyper-presidentialist system must be reformed. Opposition parties must be granted more power in the National Assembly's commissions and in the nomination process of high-ranking state officials in the judiciary and in agencies such as the independent national electoral commission and the general inspector. With more autonomy from the executive, auditing officers could more effectively perform their task and investigate any agency and public official. This would contribute to fighting corruption and clientelism.

In a regional environment plagued by the rise of armed groups, the military must focus on maintaining security in the country, and not in remaining the ultimate political decision-maker, as it has been consistently since 1978. Ethno-racial communities, specifically Haratin and the four different Black African groups, should have fair access to all levels (including the highest positions) of the state apparatus, including key ministries such as defense, interior and justice. The 1993 law of amnesty that continues to protect security forces personnel from being investigated and prosecuted over the state-sponsored violence against ethnic minorities in the period 1989-1991 must be repelled, thereby initiating a genuine process of reconciliation.

Growing revenues from the extractive sectors are a positive trend. However, vulnerability to wildly fluctuating international prices remains a major threat. Revenues generated by these sectors must be redirected into funds that would help diversify the economy, provide considerably more support to the agropastoral sector (where 60% of the labor force is concentrated), and develop welfare programs that reach poor households. For example, the cash transfer program, Tekavoul, has been implemented too slowly. It is understaffed and underfinanced. With almost half of the population living in conditions of extreme poverty, conditions for instability remain a major threat. As in most Sahelian countries, in Mauritania the youth (under 25) constitute approximately 60% of the population. Their integration into the labor market and a wider initiative to improve socioeconomic conditions in the country should be a priority. The outbreak of violence in neighboring countries of the Sahel (perpetrated by armed groups that many Mauritians have joined) highlights the urgency of improving the population's well-being.

Decentralization and deconcentration of power are needed: Mauritania is a country characterized by excessive centralization. The creation of regional councils is positive in theory. However, their fiscal dependence on the central government makes them an easy target for patronage politics.

Agents of the central administration in the rural areas, specifically the governors and prefects, must be made accountable, especially regarding land allocation and local corruption. Safeguarding mechanisms against arbitrary decisions are needed. The situations in Mali and Burkina Faso illustrate that when state officials in local areas are seen as drivers of insecurity and anxiety, they can fuel subsequent local insurgencies.