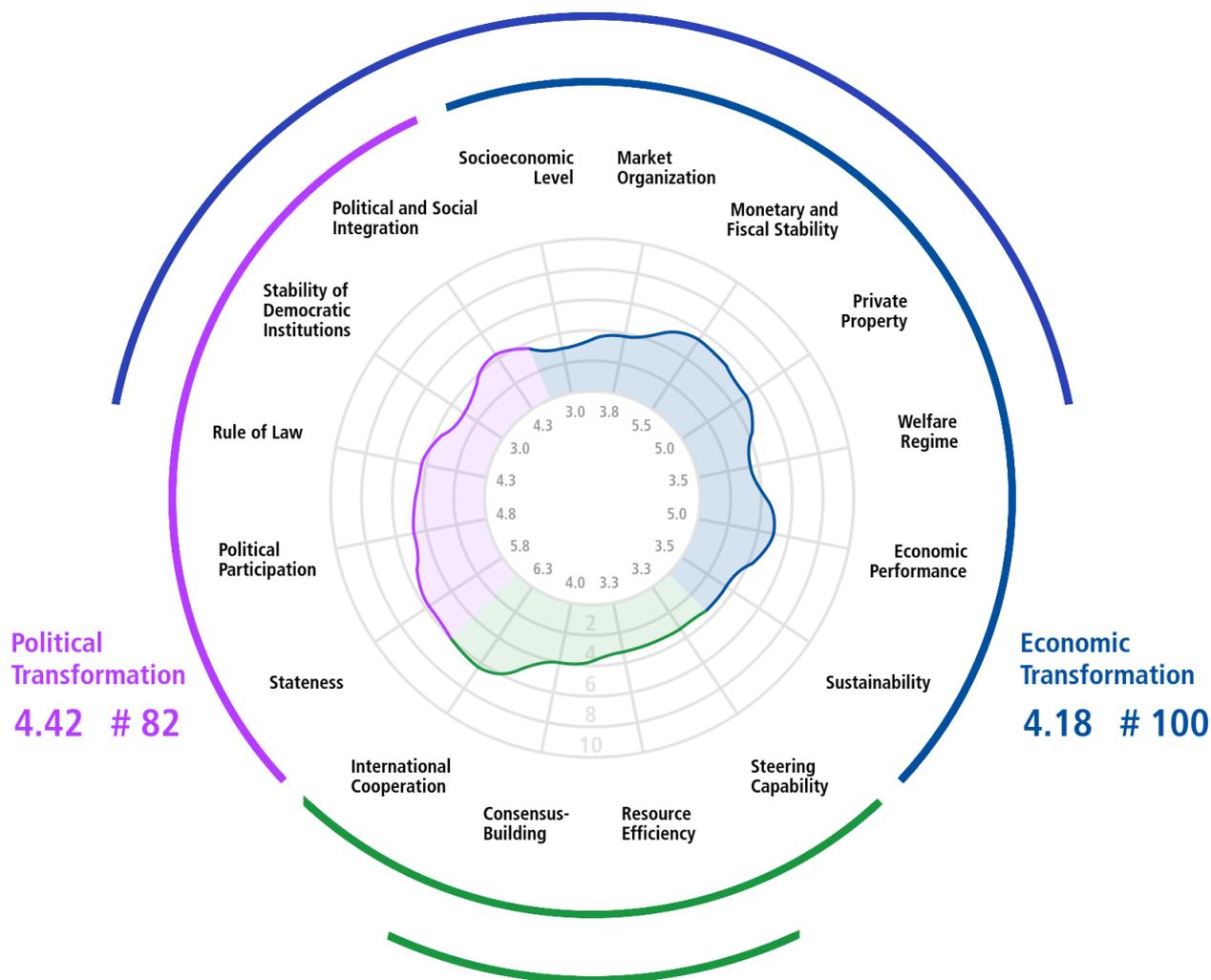


# Mauritania

## Status Index

**4.30 # 99**

on 1-10 scale out of 137



**Political Transformation**  
**4.42 # 82**

**Economic Transformation**  
**4.18 # 100**

## Governance Index

**4.00 # 94**

on 1-10 scale out of 137

This report is part of the **Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2022**. It covers the period from February 1, 2019 to January 31, 2021. 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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## Contact

Bertelsmann Stiftung  
Carl-Bertelsmann-Strasse 256  
33111 Gütersloh  
Germany

### **Sabine Donner**

Phone +49 5241 81 81501  
[sabine.donner@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:sabine.donner@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### **Hauke Hartmann**

Phone +49 5241 81 81389  
[hauke.hartmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:hauke.hartmann@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### **Claudia Härterich**

Phone +49 5241 81 81263  
[claudia.haerterich@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:claudia.haerterich@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

### **Sabine Steinkamp**

Phone +49 5241 81 81507  
[sabine.steinkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de](mailto:sabine.steinkamp@bertelsmann-stiftung.de)

**Key Indicators**

|                          |        |             |                                |              |                      |               |
|--------------------------|--------|-------------|--------------------------------|--------------|----------------------|---------------|
| Population               | M      | <b>4.6</b>  | HDI                            | <b>0.546</b> | GDP p.c., PPP \$     | <b>5257</b>   |
| Pop. growth <sup>1</sup> | % p.a. | <b>2.7</b>  | HDI rank of 189                | <b>157</b>   | Gini Index           | <b>32.6</b>   |
| Life expectancy          | years  | <b>64.9</b> | UN Education Index             | <b>0.396</b> | Poverty <sup>3</sup> | % <b>24.1</b> |
| Urban population         | %      | <b>55.3</b> | Gender inequality <sup>2</sup> | <b>0.634</b> | Aid per capita \$    | <b>91.1</b>   |

Sources (as of December 2021): The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2021 | UNDP, Human Development Report 2020. 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

Three key political developments have affected Mauritania's political and economic landscape during the review period. First, the June 22, 2019 presidential election set a new precedent while confirming an entrenched historical pattern. For the first time since independence in 1960, the country has experienced a peaceful and institutionalized transition from one president to the next. Following ex-President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz's decision not to seek a change in the constitution that would allow him to rule beyond his second term, he let his close friend and collaborator, Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, run for the 2019 presidential election. Ghazouani's victory, with 52% of the votes, was a first in the country's history. At the same time, the fact that the new president is a retired general and close partner of the former president and has also held the most powerful positions in the security apparatus and played a major role in the 2005 and 2008 coup d'états, shows that the military continues to maintain firm control within the country's authoritarian regime.

Second, developments following Ould Ghazouani's victory confirm the continuation of another entrenched pattern in which the new man in charge seeks to consolidate his power by neutralizing his predecessor, no matter how close they used to be. While all Mauritanian military heads of state have, to date, done this by accusing their predecessor of corruption, President Ould Ghazouani has taken a new approach by placing the former president's party in charge of launching a far-reaching and surprisingly efficient investigation of former President Ould Abdel Aziz activities during his ten years in office. This has involved launching inquiries into shady deals with foreign fishing companies, questionable land deals, over-the-counter contracts and similar murky agreements that have resulted in making public a vast amount of evidence. This was a risky decision because it could, and still can, undermine the position of current officeholders, including the current president, given that almost all of them served the former president. A High Court of Justice, whose unique role is to investigate current or former top officials, was created and is tasked with prosecuting the ex-president and other officials.

Third, just as President Ould Ghazouani sought to bolster his legitimacy and differentiate himself from his predecessor by signaling a liberalization of the political landscape and his intent to launch important social reforms, the COVID-19 pandemic hit. At the end of January 2020, the country recorded 421 COVID-19 related deaths and 16,636 cases, and the economy contracted by about 3%. In order to counter the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic, the government had to redirect important resources elsewhere. With the support of domestic and international funding, the government set up a national social solidarity fund, and some 120,000 poor households have received direct aid.

Economic transformation is stalling in Mauritania. About 65% of the population continues to live off agriculture. Given the harsh environmental conditions of the Sahel, this means that most people in the country live in precarious situations and face considerable uncertainty. The World Food Programme estimated that half a million Mauritians faced acute food insecurity in July and August 2020 due to the droughts that hit the region. Generally, the Mauritanian economy's performance is highly dependent on the fluctuation of commodities' international prices and on yearly climatic oscillations. While GDP per capita growth was 3.1% in 2019, the IMF estimates that it will contract 3% in 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## History and Characteristics of Transformation

As a Sahelian country located in a precarious, constraining environment, Mauritania grapples with considerable uncertainty. When the country gained independence in 1960, most of the population relied on agropastoral production, and most of the country's revenues came from the mineral exports (mostly iron ore) and fisheries, coupled with substantive developmental aid. The major droughts of the 1970s, which devastated livestock, triggered waves of unmanaged urban migration and put substantial pressure on arable land along the Senegal river valley had a devastating socioeconomic impact on the country.

These problems combined with two major political issues: first, the politicization of identities involving Arabic-speaking groups (which include the Bidhân – or White Moors – and Haratin, or Black Moors, “freed slaves”) and “Black African” communities, that is, non-Arabic-speaking groups (Haalpulaaren, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana). Tensions erupted over education policies, land tenure and ethnic representation in the politico-bureaucratic apparatus. The 1986 publication of the Manifesto of the Oppressed Black Mauritanian ushered in the repression of Black African activists, and an alleged 1987 coup attempt led to the execution of some black officers and the imprisonments, torture and purging of other black officers. From 1989 to 1991, security forces, fueled by an ideology of Arabization, deported nearly 80,000 Black Africans to Senegal, assassinated hundreds of them, and dismissed thousands from the civil service and military forces.

The Haratin continue to be treated as second-class citizens subject to social, economic and political marginalization, a situation Haratin militants have sought to change.

The politicization of identities is intricately linked to a second major issue: the military's involvement in politics. Mokhtar Ould Daddah, who ruled over a civilian one-party regime beginning in 1960, was ousted by the military in 1978 because of his disastrous involvement in the Western Sahara War. With the exception of one instance in 2007, each head of state since this first coup d'état has been an active or retired military officer, and every change in leadership – until 2019 – has involved a coup d'état. In 1991, Colonel Ould Taya, as president, agreed to adopt a liberal constitution and to organize multiparty elections. However, through coercion and the existing system of patronage, Ould Taya and his party dominated every presidential, legislative and local election until 2005, when he was ousted by his closest collaborators, including the presidential guard commander at the time, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. The military junta eventually carried out municipal and legislative (2006) as well as presidential elections (2007). Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, a civilian candidate backed by the military, won the 2007 presidential election. However, the architects of the 2005 coup, Generals Ould Abdel Aziz and Ould Ghazouani, staged a coup against him in 2008. General Ould Abdel Aziz then organized and won the 2009 and 2014 presidential elections, while his Union for the Republic (UPR) party won every legislative, regional and local elections (including the 2018 elections).

Between 2005 and 2011, jihadist armed groups launched attacks on Mauritanian soil. No other attack has been attempted since 2011. However, the explosion of violence in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger remains a problem for Mauritania, as some Mauritians have joined armed groups operating in these countries.

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

Mauritania remains the exception in the Sahel. In effect, the waves of violence in the Sahel continue to be on the rise, with states unable to put an end to domestic and transnational forces of destabilization, especially in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Worrying signs suggest that armed groups might be operating very closely to the Mauritanian and Senegalese borders, in the Malian region of Kayes. This has been a constant fear among officials, given that Mauritania was one of the first countries targeted by jihadist groups in the early 2000s and that many Mauritanian nationals are part of such groups operating across the Sahel. A significant amount of trafficking is present on the eastern border with Mali, in the region of Bassikounou, but observers believe that Mauritanian security forces exert tight formal and informal surveillance on these networks. To the north, the Polisario Front and Moroccan forces have been clashing near the boundary with Mauritania (in the area of Guerguerat) since November 2020. Algeria, which supports the Polisario Front, has deployed its troops in the area (region of Tindouf, where Sahraoui refugee camps have been installed since the 1980s). The Mauritanian government has created a new Sensitive Defense Zone to the north, in the border area with Algeria, to better monitor the movements of armed groups, traffickers and smugglers.

The politics of citizenship is a constitutive feature of postcolonial Mauritania. Since its creation in 1960, the state has failed to enact a fully inclusive vision of citizenship. Two communities in particular have been, and are still facing, major challenges: first, the non-Arabic-speaking ethnic groups (Haalpulaaren, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana, sometimes all labeled as Black Africans), which historically lived along the border with Senegal and Mali (but which can be found in many more regions). Second, the Haratin, or “freed slaves,” historically attached to the Moors (or Bidhân). Although individuals from these communities have been regularly and symbolically appointed at high-ranking positions (the current prime minister is a Haratin and the government’s Secretary-General is a Haalpulaaren), their relative exclusion from strategic positions in the security, judicial and economic apparatus remains a major obstacle.

Question  
Score

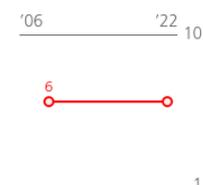
Monopoly on the  
use of force

8



State identity

6



Black Africans have been under-represented and marginalized from strategic positions in the state apparatus (the presidency; high-ranking positions in armed forces and other ministries such as defense, justice and interior). This domination has been consolidating ever since the events of 1987-1991, during which thousands of people from these ethnic minorities were killed and roughly 80,000 of them were sent to exile in Senegal and Mali. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects the security personnel involved in the assassination and deportation of ethnic minorities in the early 1990s, has yet to be repealed. According to civil society organizations, the full inclusion of Black African citizens is also undermined during census and civil registry operations; many have faced informal obstacles when attempting to obtain identity cards and be included in the official registry. A 2020 World Bank report noted that up to 10% of Mauritanian citizens are not officially registered, many of whom are Black Africans.

Haratin continue to live in the most difficult socioeconomic situations. To tackle this issue, the government passed laws in 2007 and 2015 to criminalize any slavery-related activities and create three criminal courts specifically devoted to crimes involving slavery. However, Haratin organizations argue that all these legal institutions have remained useless due to the state's unwillingness to punish alleged slaveowners.

Since the inception of these laws, very few individuals have been sentenced for the crime of slavery, and not even one has served a full sentence. In November 2019, the tribunal of Nema convicted three slave-owners in absentia and gave them 10-and 15-year sentences; none of the accused were present. In November 2020, anti-slavery associations harshly criticized the government and the Ministry of Justice when two trials against alleged slave-owners ended with ambiguous outcomes. In one that took place in Kiffa, only one of the nine accused was present. None of the victims were present.

Politically, the most vocal Haratin organizations have all been subject to repression. The most famous activist, Biram Dah Ould Abeid, ran in the 2019 presidential election and finished in second place. To date, the government refuses to authorize his anti-slavery organization, the IRA.

The question of the interference of religious dogmas is a sensitive one in Mauritania, given that the country is officially an Islamic Republic. Islam is the religion of the state. However, both Islamic and secular elements are found in its legal system. The Constitution states that "Islamic precepts are the only source of Law," but they are "open to the exigencies of the modern world." The Criminal Code combines elements of both Shariah law and the French penal code. Laws surrounding personal status (family code) are mostly inspired by the Islamic law. Yet popular sovereignty, not God, 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.

No interference of religious dogmas

4

'06 '22 10

4

1

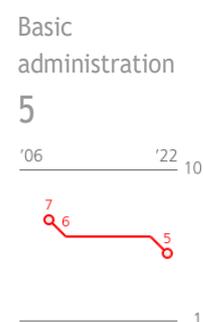
Official state agencies in charge of religious matters include the Ministry of Islamic Orientation and Basic Education and the High Council for Fatwa and Grievances. The latter was instituted through the 2017 referendum and is a fusion of the High Islamic Council, the High Council of Fatwa and the Republic Ombudsman.

The Mauritanian blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould M'Khaitir, who was sentenced to death for apostasy based on Shariah articles in the Penal Code in 2014, a sentence later commuted to two years of imprisonment, was finally released on July 29, 2020. He subsequently moved to France. Two bloggers were also arrested in March 2020 after they had discussed a major real estate development scandal involving then-President Ould Abdel Aziz and a well-known religious figure, Sheikh al-Ridha, who had scammed numerous citizens in a Ponzi scheme. Their arrest indicated not only that it was risky to discuss alleged corrupt practices of the president, but also of powerful religious figures. The two bloggers were only released in June 2020. Relatedly, a 2017 law intended to fight discrimination contains an article that provides for a jail sentence of one to five years for anyone who “holds an inflammatory speech against the official religious rite of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania.” In this context, another wave of arrests took place in February 2020, when 14 activists, including very well-known women involved in civil society organizations such as Mekfoula Mint Brahim, were arrested and accused of “contempt for the Muslim religion” and “terrorism.” These activists were calling for more secular laws and better respect for human rights.

The construction of basic administrative structures faces two types of constraints: material and sociopolitical. Firstly, like its other Sahelian counterparts, the geography and demography of Mauritania is challenging: its territory is vast, almost three times the size of Germany, and its population density is very low (a population of 4.4 million people, with a density of five people per square kilometer). It is also one of the poorest countries in the world (165th in the world). Consequently, the state’s capacity to extend its authority throughout the territory and to provide for basic administrative services faces tremendous physical and economic constraints. These administrative infrastructures have improved over the years, but with significant regional differences.

Second, from a sociopolitical perspective, not all communities have access to the same services. Haratin and many Black African communities are particularly affected. Given that access state services are often predicated upon an individual’s connection to clientelistic networks and to group identity, Haratin (“freed slaves”), for instance, may have less chances of successfully petitioning judicial and police authorities than Bidhân (White Moors).

Mauritania’s judicial apparatus is present throughout the country; all administrative regions have courts, but most are understaffed and underfinanced, and undermined by arbitrary decisions. The Mauritanian Tax Agency and the State General Inspectorate (IGE) are functioning state agencies.



Basic infrastructures have also been developed in response to the security threats. Roads, custom offices and security facilities were built with a special focus on border regions (the creation of new towns erected out of the desert, such as Nbeiket Lehwach (1200 km east of Nouakchott near the Mali border) and Chami (close to the Western Sahara/Morocco border) are good examples of this process. The extent to which these actually match social and demographic demands is another question.

The COVID-19 pandemic has not substantially altered the delivery of social services. There were two lockdown periods, March-July 2020 and December 2020-time of writing, with curfews, prohibitions against inter-regional travel, education and training facilities being shut down, and land, maritime and air borders being closed (except for goods transportation in and out of the country). The effects of major flooding (August-September 2020) in some regions impacted the delivery of services to populations in need. This crisis was partly alleviated with the help of international partners.

## 2 | Political Participation

Multiparty elections were instituted by the 1991 constitution. The constitution provides for universal suffrage with secret ballots. In practice, however, the implementation of these rights is put in question by the systematic and uninterrupted electoral victories (since 1991) of the incumbent strongman or his designated candidate, and of the presidential party.

In 2019, the country experienced a presidential election that was somewhat unprecedented. For the first time in its history, a change of succession from one head of state to another occurred through an election. After he had decided not to change the constitution and to step down after his second successive term, President Ould Abdel Aziz let his close friend and associate, General Ould Ghazouani, run on behalf of their party, Union for the Republic (UPR) in the June 22, 2019 presidential election. Ould Ghazouani obtained 52% of the votes; the turnout was estimated at 67%. The runner-up, Biram Dah Abeid, obtained 18.6% of the votes.

The election was not held in optimal conditions. No international observers were allowed except for the African Union's electoral monitoring mission. Ould Ghazouani declared himself the winner before the Independent National Electoral Commission (CENI) had published the official results. Opposition parties and protesters immediately criticized and condemned the results. In response, the government shut down the internet, police forces stormed opposition parties' headquarters and arrested several political actors, activists, and journalists, especially in connection with the Haratin candidate and the Black African candidate, Hamidou Baba Kane. Yet again, this raised important questions regarding the government's treatment of these two communities; dozens were arrested in the Senegal River Valley's main towns, where the majority of Black Africans live.

Free and fair elections

4

'06 '22 10



The Constitutional Council confirmed the results on July 1st, 2019 (the CENI had granted Ould Ghazouani 53% of the votes, while the Council lowered that to 52%). In ways very similar to all previous multiparty elections, experts agree that the ruling party candidate, himself a General who held the most sensitive government positions (minister of defense; head of the intelligence agency; etc.) benefited extensively from the informal support of the state apparatus, regional notables and local social, tribal and religious brokers. Although Ould Ghazouani only got 52% of the votes, his victory confirmed once again that the presidential party, the incumbent president or his successor cannot lose an election.

The CENI is in charge of preparing, organizing and supervising the elections; it is chaired by seven members, who are appointed by the president. The latter must choose among a list of 14 individuals submitted to him by the majority party in the National Assembly and the opposition parties. Its chair, Mohamed Vall Ould Bellal, was a minister under the Ould Taya regime and a deputy (Maghtaa Lahjar) of the then-ruling PRDS party. He also served as an Ambassador under the Ould Abdel Aziz regime. Elections were not postponed, despite of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The Mauritanian political system is characterized by its hyper-presidentialism. Formal rules and informal practices contribute to the concentration of power in the hands of the president. This reduces the power of elected representatives, namely the National Assembly, the regional councils, and local municipal councils. In any case, all these bodies are dominated by the presidential party. Informally, this hyper-presidentialism and the weak power of elected representatives stems from the fact that the current president and all his predecessors since 1978 (with one exception) have been military leaders in control of the most powerful institution in the country. Since, and because of, the Western Saharan war, the country has been ruled by military officers between 1978 and 1991, and by retired officers between 1991 and 2021 (current). The only exception was the 17-month rule of a civilian, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in 2007-2008, though even then he had been chosen by the military junta before the election and was monitored by his personal military chief-of-staff, General (now retired) Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who eventually ousted him and replaced him as the latest head-of-state, and by the current president, Ould Ghazouani. The military is the de facto dominant player in Mauritanian politics. The election of retired General Ould Ghazouani, a close friend and ally (and now rival) of former President Ould Abdel Aziz confirms this pattern.

Effective power to govern

2

'06 '22 10



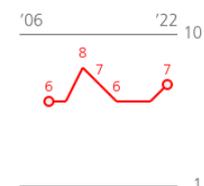
The right of association is protected by Article 11 of the 1991 constitution. Political parties of the opposition and NGOs are officially allowed to exist and operate without being repressed. Until 2020, however, the obligation for civil society organizations to obtain official recognition from the Ministry of Interior was a major legal obstacle. Many never secured this authorization, while others waited for years to receive it. This changed on 11 January 2021, when the National Assembly adopted a new “Law of the Freedom of Association,” which abolishes this obligation to obtain a formal authorization. Now, associations must simply notify the Interior Ministry of their creation and their statutes. They now also have the right to receive international funding, which was previously prohibited. Even so, some international organizations such as Human Rights Watch noticed that the new law still contains major hurdles, including the obligation to define and limit themselves to a “main domain of intervention” and the obligation to refrain from political activities. It also provides for vague definitions of justifications that could lead to their disbandment (including the vague but powerful “undermine the existence of the state”).

Beyond these legal mechanisms, the reality is, and has been, more erratic. Challenges remain important, however, for ethnic minorities and Haratin, whose associations and activists are often harassed by state authorities and accused of “threatening national unity.” Leaders and activists of the IRA movement, an anti-slavery movement representing the Haratin, as well as the Black African Don’t Touch My Nationality (TPMN) movement, have been arrested on several occasions since the early 2010s. In February 2019, authorities finally released a Haratin activist who had been in jail for two years for having made a WhatsApp post calling Haratin to defend their rights and fight discrimination. In February 2020, fourteen activists were arrested when they were celebrating the creation of their new association, the Alliance for the Refoundation of the Mauritanian State (AREM). Nine of them were eventually released, but five remained in jail until their trial in October 2020. They were found guilty and sentenced to prison terms of six to eight months, as well as fines.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, no state of emergency was adopted. However, the curfews imposed during the first wave (mid-March 2020) and later as the second wave hit in mid-December, meant that people could not assemble between 18:00 (which was changed to 20:00) and 06:00. There were no sustained waves of police violence during curfew-enforcement operations, unlike what has been seen in some other countries.

Association /  
assembly rights

7



Article 10 of the 1991 law guarantees freedom of expression. However, it is counterbalanced by more repressive laws, such as Article 348 of the penal code, which provides for jail sentences ranging from six months to five years for defamation. Also, a new law that was adopted in April 2018 revised Article 306 of the penal code and made the crime of blasphemy more easily punishable: the death penalty is now given automatically if the person found guilty of apostasy has not repented within 72 hours.

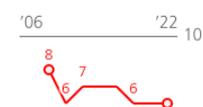
In 2006, the High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Sector (HAPA) was created to regulate the media sector. In practice, freedom of expression has been frequently endangered. The government's influence over the media landscape was visible in the nomination process for HAPA, which was created in 2006: three of HAPA's six board members, including the chair of the board, are appointed by the president; the remaining three are appointed by the president of the National Assembly, which is under the control of the presidential party.

A number of cases raised continued concerns about freedom of expression. In June 2020, a new law was adopted to tackle the problem of so-called fake news on social media. Although the government presented this law as a necessary tool against misinformation (including potential calls for racial or religious hatred), critics have noted that the terms and definitions put forward by the law are so vague that it could actually be used for the opposite objective, namely to harass and repress activists and journalists who publish posts or articles that are deemed too critical of the government.

In early February 2019, authorities finally released a Haratin activist who had been in jail for two years for publishing a WhatsApp post calling for Haratin to defend their rights and fight discrimination. In March 2019, two bloggers were arrested and jailed after they shed light on a real estate scandal involving the then-President Ould Abdel Aziz and an influential religious leader. They were eventually released in early June 2019. Two journalists were also arrested in the aftermaths of the presidential election of June 2019 (Ahmed Ould Wedia and Camara Seydi Moussa). Then there is the case of the young blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould M'khaitir. After being sentenced to death for apostasy in 2014, Mohamed Cheikh Ould M'khaitir was eventually set free by the Court of Appeals in 2017. However, he was actually being kept in a secret location by the government, officially to guarantee his own protection. In July 2019, he was freed, and subsequently went in exile in France. In January 2020, three bloggers and journalists (Mohamed Ali Ould Abdel Aziz, Abdou Ould Tajeddine and Cheikh Ould Mami) were arrested after they published a video that was critical of the president. Then, in October 2020, another blogger and journalist, Mohamed El Hacem Lebatt, was sentenced to one year in prison for defamation against the CEO of an important Nouakchott bank, after he had published an article discussing opaque transfers of money to former President Ould Abdel Aziz during the 2019 election. Similarly, in early 2021, a journalist and blogger, Mohamed Salem

Freedom of  
expression

6



1

Kerboub, was arrested and jailed after a complaint was filed by the mayor of Nouadhibou and deputy to the National Assembly (for the ruling party UPR), who accused the journalist of slander after the latter had published an article on the mismanagement of COVID-19-related funds for the city's impoverished citizens. In November 2020, the former Minister of Foreign Affairs, and close friend of former President Ould Abdel Aziz sued a newspaper (Mourassiloun) after the latter had published a report on a meeting between him and the former president.

While the case of Mohamed Salem Kerboub could be considered related, no specific restrictions were imposed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### 3 | Rule of Law

The Mauritanian political system is hyper-presidentialist, which means it grants the president enormous power. The separation of powers is weak both formally and informally. The 1991 constitution, which was slightly amended in 2006 and 2017 by way of popular referendum, provides for a semi-presidential system heavily tilting in favor of the executive branch. The president is directly elected by the population (and, since the 2006 amendments, cannot serve more than two consecutive terms). The president has the power to dissolve the National Assembly, which does not have the power to 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 the power to issue decrees; he has extensive appointment powers; he can unilaterally appoint almost all top positions in the state apparatus, including half of the most important judicial institutions, the Constitutional Council and its chairperson. No institution has the power to veto these appointments.

The judiciary is strongly influenced by the executive, such as through appointment prerogatives, financial retributions and other informal channels of interference. It is therefore unable to provide a credible check on the executive.

Like all of his military predecessors, and with the help of the current president, Ould Ghazouani, the previous president came to power through a coup d'état. The coup d'état took place in 2008; in January 2013, the National Assembly, which the president controls, passed a law that criminalizes any attempt at coup d'état and other "unconstitutional" changes of power. In 2017, the constitution was revised by way of referendum. The revision provided for the abolition of the Senate and its replacement with six Regional Councils, all elected by popular vote.

With respect to the COVID-19 crisis, no state of emergency was declared. However, on April 7, 2020 the National Assembly voted in an "Enabling Act" based on Article 60 of the constitution, which enables the government to adopt ordinances for a short period of time for matters that normally fall under the domain of the law. Moreover, authorities imposed an 18:00-6:00 curfew in mid-March 2020. Another curfew was imposed in mid-December 2020 as a second wave hit the country.

Separation of powers

3

'06 '22 10

3 4 3

1

The independence of the judiciary is guaranteed by the 1991 constitution (Article 89 of the constitution). However, the centralized presidential system provides the president with substantial power over the judiciary. Notably, the president appoints three of the six judges that sit over in the Constitutional Court, including its chairman, as well as the chair of the Supreme Court. No institution confirms or vetoes this appointment.

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 special adviser for judicial and administrative affairs to then-President Ould Abdel Aziz, which raises questions about the independence of the judiciary. His predecessor was the first president of the Supreme Court who stayed in place for the entire term prescribed by the law, five years. All his predecessors having been dismissed before the end of the term. On average, each was dismissed after two years.

The Chair of the Mauritanian Bar Association has often been a lawyer with close connections to the ruling party and the president. However, as of August 2020, the new elected Chair, Brahim Ould Ebetty, is a longstanding member of the human rights and democracy movement in the country. He is known as a vocal critic of past governments and has defended many victims of political repression. The fact that authorities have not tried to undermine his election and work in favor of a candidate with close ties to the ruling party (or at least have not done so openly, as was done in the past) is an encouraging sign.

No elements in the current period suggest that either informal political influence exerted through executive pressure, financial retributions, and/or tribal connections, or the chronic problems of an understaffed and underfinanced judiciary are receding.

The State General Inspectorate (IGE) has launched a series of investigations during the current period. In May 2020, an investigation was launched in the Fisheries Ministry, which manages highly lucrative quotas and licenses, many of which have been shown to be severely affected by corrupt practices (as revealed by the CEP report on former President Ould Abdel Aziz's management). In June 2020, the National Funds for the Fight against Coronavirus began to be investigated.

Following the arrival of the new president, the Court of Audit launched a number of well-publicized audits, including in the Port of Nouakchott, the Nouakchott National Hospital, the Nouadhibou Free Zone, the national electric company (SOMELEC), and the Fishery Ministry. All were conducted in light of the alleged corruption scandals tied to the former president and revealed by the parliamentary investigation commission (CEP).

The most significant case of public officeholders' alleged corruption and mismanagement is that of former President Ould Abdel Aziz. In January 2020, the National Assembly established a parliamentary commission of enquiry (CEP) in

Independent  
judiciary

4

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Prosecution of  
office abuse

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'06 \_\_\_\_\_ '22 10



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charge of investigating multiple cases of corruption under the Ould Abdel Aziz regime (2009-2019). The CEP interviewed hundreds of former and active officials. In July 2020, the CEP submitted its report to the National Assembly's president. The report is 800 pages long and documents more than a dozen cases relating to the mismanagement of oil revenues, public land transactions and contracting with foreign companies in which the president and members of his family and close friends and allies were allegedly involved in embezzlement and influence peddling. Courts then decided to place the persons cited in the report, including the former president, under judicial supervision and to freeze their assets. The economic crime unit then summoned the former president and detained him for a full week from August 17 to 24.

To conduct a trial of the former president, the justice system set up the High Court of Justice, a special ad hoc court provided for in the 1991 constitution (Title VIII, art. 92), that is in charge of prosecuting active or former heads of states and ministers accused of high treason. This court includes nine members: six elected deputies from the ruling party and three from the opposition. At the end of January 2021, the High Court of Justice still was not fully operational. The creation of the CEP, the one-week detention and questioning of the former president, and the creation of the High Court of Justice are significant. They set a precedent in terms of the scope and depth of the investigation, as well as the risks it could create for current officials, including the president (i.e., the outcome of such systematic and extensive investigations is difficult to predict). The fundamental criteria that will reveal the willingness and the capacity of anti-corruption agencies is whether the High Court will be able to proceed freely and complete its operations.

Although the new era initiated by President Ould Ghazouani sent positive signals regarding civil rights, it was simultaneously counterbalanced by signals of continuity with past practices. On the positive side, individuals who had been targeted by the previous administration, such as the wealthy businessmen Mohamed Ould Bouamatou and Moustapha Ould Limam Chafi and the ex-senator Mohamed Ould Ghadda, who went into exile under Ould Abdel Aziz, were able to return. However, as discussed above, the current period also saw the arrest of many journalists, bloggers and activists who denounced specific cases of corruption. The IRA, a Haratin organization, still is not officially recognized by the government, and IRA activists have been arrested, such as Mariem Mint Cheikh in April 2020.

The failure to implement anti-slavery laws against alleged owners is a reflection of the de facto discrimination against Haratin. Regarding sexual orientation, in Section IV of the Criminal Code, entitled "Violations of Islamic Mores" Article 308 specifically targets same-sex relations, stating that they shall be penalized with death by public stoning. Since the 2005 coup d'état that ousted former President Ould Taya, acts of torture have declined.

Civil rights

5

'06 '22 10



1

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains a major problem in Mauritania, with 66% of women in the country having been subjected to it (according to a 2015 report). One of the most vocal local NGOs advocating for women's rights published a report in January 2021, showing that cases of sexual violence reached a record high in 2020. A draft law that aims to tackle violence against women and girls has been in preparation at the National Assembly since 2016 but has not yet been adopted. A new draft was adopted by the government in May 2020 and sent to the National Assembly. Local associations have criticized the Assembly's inability to move fast on the question, while also criticizing lawmakers' willingness to exclude key issues from the draft law, notably spousal sexual abuse. These associations have suggested that religious authorities may have lobbied to slow down and change the draft law.

#### 4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Democratic institutions exist in Mauritania, but they do not operate according to common democratic norms. The country holds elections to elect the president, the National Assembly, the Regional Councils and municipal councils at regular intervals. The constitution also provides for the separation of powers. However, in practice, since 1978, the country has been governed by military officers. The ruling party, UPR, exerts hegemonic control over all elected assemblies. Since 1991, no opposition party has been able to control a legislative assembly. There has never been any alternation in power in Mauritania. In 2019, then-President Ould Abdel Aziz announced that he would respect the constitution and would not run after the end of his second term. He let his close friend, General Ould Ghazouani, be the candidate for their party, UPR. Ould Ghazouani won with 52% of the vote. This was the exception to the dominant pattern, which was that coups d'état were the only mechanism of presidential change in the country.

With the victory of retired general Ould Ghazouani, the presidential election of 2019 confirmed that the military has a de facto veto power over the most important position of the state apparatus. However, major political actors also proved their commitment to the constitution by respecting the presidential two-term limit. It was the first handover of presidential office through elections in Mauritania's history.

Ghazouani's party, UPR, is in full control of the legislative, regional and local assemblies, demonstrating that the party can count on the support of the state to win elections. Though the current and the former presidents have vied for the control of the party after the presidential election, the debate was never about democratic institutions as legitimate, but rather about who ought to be in charge of the party as an institution of political control and clientelistic redistribution.

Opposition parties, including the Islamist Tawassoul party, accept the democratic institutions as legitimate, but face an uneven playing field in every electoral competition, as state resources are used by the ruling party. The arrests and harassment of organizations that represent ethnic and racial minorities confirm the government's unwillingness to comply fully with the norms upon which democratic

Performance of democratic institutions

3

'06 '22 10



Commitment to democratic institutions

3

'06 '22 10



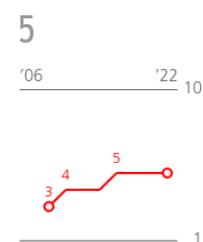
institutions are built. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has not been major disruption in the functioning of formally democratic elections. Some changes were made in the National Assembly, such as reducing the number of deputies allowed to be physically present in the building, but this did not affect its ability to function.

## 5 | Political and Social Integration

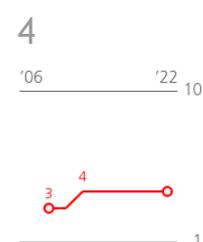
Since the formal creation of democratic institutions in 1991, the party system has not changed significantly and has been dominated by the UPR and the Republican Party for Democracy and Renewal (PRDR, or PRDS from 1991-2001). The president's party, which is a powerful patronage machine, always gets the support of most high-ranking state officials and regional notables, who act as intermediaries for the party. 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 did not get 1% of the vote and which were mostly attempts at negotiating some advantages with the government. The Islamist Tawassoul party remains the largest opposition party, but it still holds a relatively small number of seats, 14 out of 147, and remains unable to challenge the hegemonic UPR and its allies within the state apparatus. Though it is relatively diverse, Tawassoul has difficulties getting support in Black African communities. The oldest opposition parties, mainly the Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD) and the Union of the Forces of Progress (UFP), did not do well in these elections, with only three seats each. The anti-slavery activist Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid joined the Sawab party, which was longstanding but almost an empty shell at the time, revived it under the name IRA-Sawab, and obtained three seats. Some of the most intense electoral struggles actually take place within the ruling UPR. Before elections, when the party must nominate its candidates, those who are not officially appointed by the party often create their own small parties.

A significant portion of interest groups are structured around informal networks based on tribal and ethnic ties, as well as connections built through personal experiences such as village of origin, education curriculum, occupational and business experiences, and religious orientation (Sufi brotherhood or Salafi movement). These networks are very fluid, multifaceted, and both less visible and more significant than the formal networks. There are few official interest groups; these 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 capture 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 the primarily Haratin movements IRA and SOS-Esclaves, as well as the Black African Hands Off My Nationality (TPMN) movement. Some NGOs devoted to specific social issues have

Party system



Interest groups



had some success in mobilizing local and international stakeholders, such as the Association of Women Heads of Households (AFCH), whose leader was briefly arrested in February 2020 when she took part in a demonstration denouncing the lack of progress in human rights in the country. Some of the organizations and social movements cooperate with one another, although rivalries also exist among them, as well as significant internal dissension that hampers their capacity to challenge the government.

No public opinion data survey such as those conducted by the Afrobarometer is available. Ethnographic studies, however, suggest that citizens who belong to marginalized communities such as the Haratin and Black Africans have called upon the rule of law and democratic institutions to protect them against arbitrary abuses committed by state officials and powerful individuals with connections to the government. These ethnographic studies do indicate that many citizens value notions of protection from state abuse, fair representation, and the right to be treated fairly and justly. Turnout for the 2019 presidential election was 62%, which also indicates that a large number of citizens decided to participate in this process.

Mauritanians are typically 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, associations based on age sets, tribes or fractions within tribes, or self-organized microcredit women's networks. But these groupings are not free of hierarchical and vertical power relations: quite the contrary. Age, gender, lineage and social status (or "caste" status) often structure these informal groupings. However, trust is a major component of these organizations and networks, and there are several informal mechanisms to strengthen relations among members and to sanction those who violate the trust of others. Among the Bidhân population (White Moors), the importance of tribal affiliation is often said to be the most important social linkage and the one in which trust is at its strongest. Though this claim is partially accurate, the saliency of rivalry among members of the same tribe should not be underestimated, especially among those who can aspire to play important political roles. Hence, the most acute struggles often pit tribal kin one against another. No systematic statistical analysis or surveys of social capital has been undertaken in Mauritania.

Approval of  
democracy

n/a

'06 '22 10

n/a 1

Social capital

4

'06 '22 10

4 1

## II. Economic Transformation

### 6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

About 65% of the population lives off agriculture, including livestock, which is 51% of the employment in the agricultural sector. Given the harsh environmental conditions of the Sahel, a significant portion of the population lives in a precarious and very uncertain situation. The World Food Programme estimated that half a million Mauritians faced acute food insecurity in July and August 2020 due to the droughts that hit the region.

With a low level of human development, Mauritania's Human Development Index (HDI) is 0.546, and it ranks 157th in the world; it has remained within the 153rd-161st ranks for the last 10 years. HDI loss due to inequality is 32.1%. Its Gini index is 32.6. In addition, 24.1% of the population lives on less than \$3.20 a day (at 2011 international prices adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP)).

These numbers are national aggregates, and thus hide immensely important subnational differences, especially when factoring in intersectional elements such as an individual's regional, ethno-linguistic, racial and "caste" (or "social status") identities. Haratin (freed slaves) face difficult political barriers that make upward mobility difficult. This does not mean that all Bidhân ("White Moors") are well-to-do; rural villages and urban shantytowns count numerous very poor Bidhân families, but it does mean that they are better represented in the upper strata of the socioeconomic ladder.

| Economic indicators       |          | 2017   | 2018   | 2019   | 2020          |
|---------------------------|----------|--------|--------|--------|---------------|
| GDP                       | \$ M     | 6757.3 | 7051.0 | 7600.7 | <b>7778.5</b> |
| GDP growth                | %        | 3.5    | 2.1    | 5.9    | <b>-1.5</b>   |
| Inflation (CPI)           | %        | 2.3    | 3.0    | 2.3    | <b>2.4</b>    |
| Unemployment              | %        | 10.3   | 10.2   | 10.1   | <b>10.7</b>   |
| Foreign direct investment | % of GDP | 8.7    | 11.0   | -11.6  | -             |
| Export growth             | %        | 1.6    | -4.0   | 6.1    | <b>1.0</b>    |
| Import growth             | %        | 1.9    | 0.5    | 0.6    | <b>0.3</b>    |
| Current account balance   | \$ M     | -709.0 | -972.9 | -831.1 | -             |

Question  
Score

Socioeconomic  
barriers

3

'06 '22 10

3

1

| Economic indicators       |          | 2017   | 2018   | 2019   | 2020          |
|---------------------------|----------|--------|--------|--------|---------------|
| Public debt               | % of GDP | 54.8   | 58.9   | 56.8   | <b>59.2</b>   |
| External debt             | \$ M     | 5241.0 | 5225.5 | 5369.8 | <b>5710.1</b> |
| Total debt service        | \$ M     | 320.9  | 387.2  | 382.5  | <b>292.7</b>  |
| Net lending/borrowing     | % of GDP | -      | -      | -      | -             |
| Tax revenue               | % of GDP | -      | -      | -      | -             |
| Government consumption    | % of GDP | 12.8   | 13.3   | 12.8   | <b>13.3</b>   |
| Public education spending | % of GDP | -      | -      | 1.9    | <b>1.9</b>    |
| Public health spending    | % of GDP | 1.7    | 1.6    | -      | -             |
| R&D expenditure           | % of GDP | -      | 0.0    | -      | -             |
| Military expenditure      | % of GDP | 2.0    | 2.1    | 2.0    | <b>2.5</b>    |

Sources (as of December 2021): 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

Following the adoption of the 1991 constitution, Ordinance 91 provided for the market-based determination of prices; it was detailed later in the 2000 Code of Commerce (Chapter V). Since the early 2000s, successive Mauritanian governments have attempted, at least officially, to deregulate and liberalize the country's economic environment. However, a 2015 IMF report notes that there is still an "insufficiently enabling business environment characterized by administrative barriers and legal and judicial issues." Mauritania is still ranked in the lowest echelons of the 2019 Doing Business ranking; it ranked 152nd in 2020 (compared to 148th in 2018 and 160th in 2017). It takes six days to start a business (compared to eight in 2014 and 19 in 2010), with four procedures. Over the last eight years, the government has adopted a number of reforms and modifications in the fiscal, economic and legal fields, including a reform of the Tax Code (April 2019), which aims to "improve tax fairness and reduce informality," Customs Code (2017), Mining Code (2014), the Commerce Code reform (2015), and the Investments Code (2016). The informal sector remains largely dominant in Mauritania. A 2020 World Bank report explained that "labor moved from rural-agriculture to the less productive urban-related sectors that are dominated by informality and limited value added." The same organization noted that in 2017 "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 oligopolistic nature of the formal business structure impacts price setting in the



country by restraining competition. In 2016, the government implemented a law to control hikes in foodstuff pricing that might otherwise be triggered by speculation. In 2017, the government instituted a Commission to adjudicate the prices of one of the country's most valuable export goods, fisheries.

Although the 2000 Code of Commerce details competition and price regulations and theoretically condemns “anticompetition practices” (Art. 1233-1234), there are no specific procedures to implement anti-trust regulations. A Commission for the Surveillance of Markets, under the authority of the Ministry of Commerce, is in charge of ensuring that the market functions well.

In reality, the Mauritanian economy has a strong tendency towards oligopoly. A small number of businessmen and their families, usually easily related to specific Moorish (Bidhân) tribes or clans, control most of the large firms and enjoy an oligopolistic position (in banking; fishery, public infrastructures and construction, airlines, import-export of consumer goods and foodstuff, telecommunication, insurance and other fields).

In 2020, a World Bank report estimated that there are nine such groups, adding that “Informal ties between the government and the private sector may provide well-connected businessmen with rent-seeking opportunities.” This echoed an earlier report from the World Bank (2013) 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 affect many aspects of the economy, such as basic foodstuffs.

As a May 2018 World Bank report noted with respect to rice and wheat consumption for urban households, “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 those conglomerates can wax and wane. Mohamed Ould Bouamatou, who is former President Ould Abdel Aziz's cousin (both are from the Awlad Bûsba'a tribe), whose conglomerate was most probably one of the nine dominant groups, was a close ally and financier of his cousin at the time of the coup d'état of 2008 and the first presidential election (2009) but was later targeted by his cousin. He then fled to Morocco and only came back from exile in 2020, after Ould Ghazouani came to power and former President Ould Abdel Aziz was under judicial investigation.

## Competition policy

2

'06 '22 10



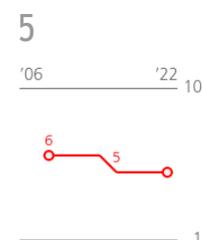
Mauritania has implemented a number of trade reforms in recent years. One such measure is the 2013 creation of a Free Trade Zone (FTZ) in the port city of Nouadhibou, a port from which iron ore and fish are shipped to international markets. Incentives for international trade include a seven-year zero tax policy and no custom fees on imports and exports in the FTZ. In the course of the unprecedented investigation on corruption practices under the Ould Abdel Aziz regime, major problems were revealed about the function of the FTZ since its inception. In September 2020, an inter-ministry commission recommended that the legal framework should be reformed, which the government did in January 2021. Often referred to as a “white elephant” demonstrating bad governance, the FTZ will be the subject of important changes, the effects of which remain to be seen.

In the 2020 Doing Business report, Mauritania ranked 144th (3 ranks below its previous ranking) for its Trading Across Borders indicator. A 2020 World Bank report noted that “Mauritania’s import tariffs are high...more than twice the level found in other regions of the world” and that “Beyond tariffs, the prevalence of non-tariff measures (NTMs) and the absence of clear procedures hinder trade.” In 2019, Mauritania’s share of simple average MFN applied was 12.1. Finally, as per the WTO review, the country does not apply any anti-dumping measures.

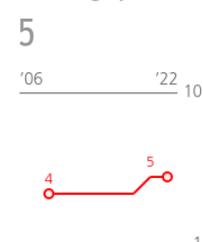
The World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index 2018 ranked Mauritania 134th (out of 140), which is significantly low, though its ranking has improved since 2016 (137th). It is important to note that “in 2020, the long-standing Global Competitiveness Index rankings have been paused.” In February 2020, the government created a Superior Council of Investments in Mauritania, which aims at promoting and protecting private investments and hopes to attract more investors by providing more secure conditions for investments. More generally, informal political patterns continue to impact foreign trade practices, as revealed by the parliamentary investigations of the Ould Abdel Aziz regime. As most experts already knew, results of the investigation have shown, that government licensing in the export-import sector is a key political tool for patronage. Illicit forms of international trade should also be considered (from traffic of persons, drug-trafficking, and the trafficking of other illegal goods (stolen cars, cigarettes, weapons, expired medications), which rests in part on complex networks that involve state officials.

The banking system is relatively underdeveloped. There are 10.9 commercial branches per 100,000 inhabitants, up from 4.27 ten years ago. Mauritania has 17 banking institutions (as estimated by the IMF in December 2018), up from 10 in 2008. There are about 20 microfinance institutions. The three largest banks’ share of assets is 39%. Mauritania was given a score of 6 (scale of 0 to 8) on the “Depth of Credit Information Index” (the latest available year is 2019), which is an improvement from 2018 (score of 4) and 2017 (score of 3). In the “Strength of Legal Right Index” of the World Bank, on a scale of 0 (weak) to 12 (Strong), Mauritania was given a score of 2 in 2019. Data are neither available on the capital to assets ratios or non-performing loans of banks.

#### Liberalization of foreign trade



#### Banking system



Mauritanian banks still have a relatively low profitability and a low penetration rate and weak financial inclusion (women, young people, and ethnic and caste groups are largely excluded). The nine oligopolistic conglomerates that dominate most economic sectors also dominate the banking sector (seven of the nine are active in the banking sector, per a 2020 World Bank report).

In July 2018, the National Assembly adopted three new laws pertaining to the reform of the banking and credit sector. They impose tighter entry conditions for the creation of new banks, impose rules of transparency in the sector (including more transparent and systematic channels of communication between banks and the BCM), and imposing new and tighter rules for Islamic banks. A 2020 IMF report noted that “the central bank tightened regulatory standards for capital adequacy and liquidity, applicable from January 2020, and banks were required to raise their minimum capital by two-thirds; 13 out of 18 banks have complied so far (as of September 2020).”

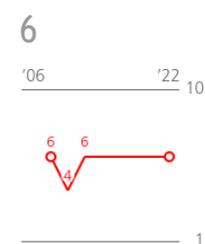
## 8 | Monetary and fiscal stability

A major change in banknotes and coins in 2018 (including a change in the notation system making MRU 10 now worth MRU 1) created inflationary pressure that year, but the inflation rate came back to a more usual level of 2.3% in 2019, while in the summer of 2020, it remained around 2.0%.

The independence of Mauritania’s central bank (BCM) has always been a major concern. The Governor is appointed by presidential decree. Under the Ould Abdel Aziz regime (2008-2019), Governors were often replaced before reaching their 5-year term. A law was adopted in 2018 to increase its formal independence. The term of the Governor has been increased from five to six years. It can be renewed, and the president can only dismiss the Governor after at least two thirds of the Bank’s General Council have voted in favor of his removal. The new law has also created the position of a Deputy Governor, who assists the Governor. A new Governor of the BCM was appointed in January 2020. The BCM’s exchange rate policies are also undermined by the significance of the black market.

External shocks, including significant changes in world commodity prices, are a constant threat to Mauritania’s price stability. Fuel and foodstuffs rank high in the country’s major imports and can drive inflation to major spikes and sudden drops. In 2019 and 2020, this fluctuation was rather minimal, but it is important to keep in mind that Mauritania imports about 70% of its foodstuff in good harvest years. In 2019-2020, imports represented two-thirds of the country’s national consumption of cereals. The real exchange rate has remained relatively stable throughout the period (100% of its 2010 index value), with a small peak of 5% in the summer of 2020 before declining slightly by the end of 2020 (98% of its 2010 index value).

Monetary stability

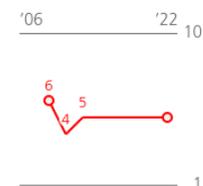


From February 2019 to 2020, most indicators were improving compared to the previous period: the current account balance was -\$831.1 million (compared to -\$972.9 in 2018). Public debt was 58.1% (compared to 61.4% in 2018); the total debt service decreased to \$382.5 million (compared to \$387.2 million in 2018), although the external debt increased to \$5,369.8 million (compared to \$5,225.5 million in 2018). The government consumption decreased slightly to 12.9% of GDP, compared to 13.3% in 2018. However, by March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic had generated increased constraints on the fiscal situation of the country, though its extent remains impossible to evaluate at this time. An estimated contraction of 3% hindered the country's economy.

Concerning revenue, iron ore exports remained strong, but fisheries revenues went down due to lower global demand. In September, the IMF noted that “The projected external financing gap for 2020 was revised upward by \$26 million to \$394 million.” With the outbreak of the pandemic, the government created a “Social Solidarity and Fight Against the Coronavirus Fund,” which provides targeted support to poor families. The government injected \$60 million in the fund, and foreign partners have contributed approximately \$200 million as well. In November 2020, the government requested a three-month extension of the Extended Credit Facility Arrangement (originally December 2017-December 2020) until March 5, 2021 due to the pandemic, which the IMF approved. In June 2020, Mauritanian authorities sought and obtained debt relief from the Paris Club and the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative. For its part, France announced in December 2020 that it was temporarily suspending the servicing of the debt contracted by Mauritania. The World Bank also announced in July 2020 that it approved a \$70 million grant to support the country in strengthening the response to the pandemic. The World Bank and the IMF urged G20 countries to establish the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) in the context of the COVID-19 crisis, and they estimated Mauritania's risk of external debt distress and risk of overall debt distress to be high, and that the potential savings under the DSSI between May and December 2020 represented as much as 1.2% of GDP (\$90.0 million). The increasing level of violence in the Sahel will also increase military spending. Of all countries in the Sahel, Mauritania spends the most on its military (3% of its GDP in 2020), at close to 11% of general government expenditure.

#### Fiscal stability

5



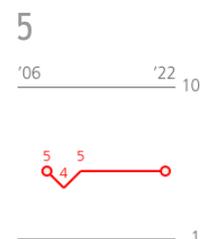
## 9 | Private Property

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 which clarifies its concrete applications) and also the Urbanism Code. According to Doing Business 2020, Mauritania ranked 103rd on the “Registering a property” indicator; this is one rank below the year before (102nd in 2019). However, this is a country in which the majority of the population lives in rural areas, as well as on partly-registered, or non-registered land in urban areas (called “gazra”). The private ownership of land therefore remains one of the most politically critical and perilous aspects of life. Since the early 2010s, the Senegal River Valley has seen many clashes, with peasant communities on one side and state officials and foreign investors on the other. One example occurred in August 2020, when hundreds of farmers protested a land-grab of 300 hectares of their land in the Senegal River Valley (Dar el Barka). A similar situation occurred in January 2021 in the vicinity of another Valley town, Mbagne. A May 2017 World Bank study noted that “land capture by urban and tribal elites” remains a major challenge. In 2015, a World Bank study revealed 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.”

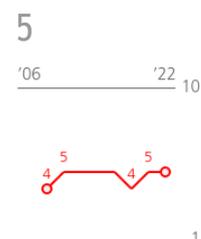
Private companies are permitted and protected. Liberalization policies have been implemented in recent years, but they coexist with major state regulations. In the ongoing licensing regime, for example, businesses are required to buy licenses in order to operate officially in almost any sector of the economy. Businesspersons therefore tend to operate informally to avoid such licenses. Those who do acquire them often do so through clientelistic (favoritism) mechanisms, as the “preferential” granting of licenses is one of the most well-known forms of politico-economic exchanges. The parliamentary investigation commission (CEP), which investigated former President Ould Abdel Aziz’s regime (2009-2019), has uncovered many such clientelistic deals, corrupt attribution of licenses, and similar offenses.

No privatization has occurred in the current period. The largest company in the country, SNIM, which extracts iron ore, is 78.35% state-owned. With 6,000 employees, it is the largest employer in the country after the public service. Other state-owned enterprises (SOEs) include the Port Autonome de Nouakchott, the Mauritanian electric company (SOMELEC), the water company (SNDE) and dozens of other companies.

### Property rights



### Private enterprise



## 10 | Welfare Regime

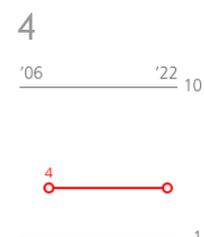
Due to Mauritania's bifurcated economy, the small employment sector that covers the resource-extraction industries and public administration provides welfare provisions, while the vast majority of the population in the urban informal and agropastoral sectors has a safety net mostly provided for by the government's cash-transfer program, NGOs and international organizations, and their immediate and extended family network. The government spends 1.7% of its GDP on health (compared to 1.9% the previous year). The latest (2021) UNDP data indicate that life expectancy is 64.9 years old, mortality under five is 7.6 per 1,000 live births, and the infant mortality rate is 51.5 per 1,000.

In November 2019, President Ould Ghazouani created the Taazour agency (the General Delegation in Charge of National Solidarity and the Fight Against Exclusion), in charge of managing social safety nets programs for vulnerable populations. The agency replaced an older one called Tadamoune. Taazour oversees an important program called Tekavoul, a conditional cash transfer system that officially seeks to serve 210,000 households. In early February 2021, the government said that 120,352 households have received direct cash transfers (57% of the targeted households). In January 2021, Taazour also announced that it would cooperate with the ministry of health to provide complete health insurance for 100,000 poor households (representing 620,000 people in all).

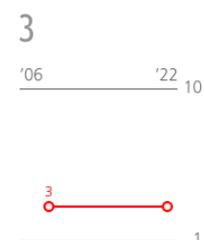
Finally, the value of migrants' remittances amounted to \$60 million in 2019, or 1.1% of the GDP according to the World Bank. These represent an important source of support for families' safety nets in Mauritania. In rural areas, for example, villages and small towns often rely on foreign NGOs and hometown associations of migrants to develop better access to health facilities, schools and socioeconomic programs. Studies suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic imposed two constraints on migrants' remittances to Mauritania: the significant increase of unemployment rates in immigration countries where migrants work, and the obstacles to crossing borders with neighboring countries.

Gender and ethno-racial identities, as well as social status (or caste) identities, and the combination of these three criteria, hinder access to quality education and health services, public office and employment. These categories face systemic discrimination (depending on the combination of these criteria). Regional disparities are also very significant. For employment, the discrimination against Black Africans and Haratin is significant in the most critical positions in the state apparatus. Poor Haratin communities in rural areas (including in the "Adwaba," villages or sections of villages inhabited specifically by Haratin), as well as in Nouakchott's poorest districts and shantytowns, face dire challenges with respect to socioeconomic opportunities. A 2020 World Bank report on "Mapping Deprivations" identified the

Social safety nets



Equal opportunity



South-Central regions (mainly Assaba, Gorgol and the two Hodhs) as the regions with the highest deprivation indicators. The 5,000 Black African returning families of refugees (who were expelled or had fled the country in the aftermath of the 1989-1991 state-sponsored violence) continue to face obstacles in accessing critical resources, mainly land and jobs (given the impossibility for them to recover the homes and land they lost after they had fled).

In the 2018 legislative elections, 27 women were elected, compared to 37 in 2013 (20 of which received seats through the national list reserved for women). Women make up 18% of the National Assembly.

For education, the female to male enrollment ratios (GPI) are 110% for both primary and secondary levels, which is an important improvement, but that ratio decreases significantly at the tertiary level (58%). In 2017, 43.4% of women were literate in comparison to 63.7% of men. On the formal job market, women represent only 31.6% of the labor force.

## 11 | Economic Performance

The performance of Mauritania's economy is highly dependent on the fluctuation of commodities' international prices and on yearly climatic oscillations. GDP was \$7,593 million in 2019. GDP per capita (PPP) was \$5,412 in 2019. GDP per capita growth was 3.1% in 2019. However, the IMF estimated that due to the pandemic, 2020 will record a 3% contraction. Mauritania's dependency on global prices partially explains the fluctuation in foreign direct investment (FDI): -11% in 2018, - and 11.6% in 2019. It is expected that FDI inflow will decrease in 2020 due to the pandemic. Most investments went directly to the extractive industries (iron ore, gold, oil and natural gas exploration) and to infrastructure projects. The current account balance has slightly improved in 2019, moving from \$- 972.9 million in 2018 to \$- 831.1 million in 2019. As for the forthcoming months, the IMF believes 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 remained steady at 2.3% in 2019, compared to 3.0% in 2018. Officially, unemployment remained just below 10%, at 9.6% in 2019. It is worth remembering that a May 2018 World Bank study noted that the real number could be closer to 30%, with higher rates for 18–34-year-olds. Gross capital formation dropped from 44.9% of GDP in 2018 to 40.9% in 2019. The public debt has decreased from 44.8% of GDP in 2018 to 40.9% in 2019. Although the fiscal deficit may increase in 2020 due to unexpected expenditures related to the pandemic, the Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) may reduce the public debt, according to the IMF. A September 2020 IMF report noted that "the risk of external and overall debt distress remains high due to threshold breaches for two debt burden indicators, namely the debt service-to-revenue ratio and PV of debt-to-GDP ratio."

Output strength

5

'06 '22 10



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## 12 | Sustainability

Located in one of the most precarious environments in the world – the Sahel – and being one of the poorest countries, Mauritania is facing quite challenging environmental conditions. It is severely affected by climate change, namely by desertification, major rainfall deficits and frequent droughts. Its capital city, which hosts about a third of the country’s population, is also at high risk from rising sea levels.

In 2020, a new law was passed to create a Police of the Environment, with a rural section (a “water, forest and hunting” unit, tied to the military, as has been the case in most former French colonies), and an urban section (in this case, civilian, not military), with the aim of improving actual implementation of environmental regulations. Meanwhile, the government welcomed the promise of a \$14 billion investment into the Great Green Wall Initiative made at the Paris ‘One Planet Summit.’ This project would restore 100 million hectares of currently degraded land from Mauritania to Djibouti and halt the desertification of the Sahel region.

According to the 2020 Environmental Performance Index, Mauritania ranked at the bottom of the international ranking at 167 out of 180 countries (dropping from the 166 in 2018), with a score of 27.7/100 (it scored 39.24/100 in 2018).

The Mauritanian government officially spends 2.6% of its GDP on education, according to the 2020 UNDP numbers. The adult literacy rate is 53.5%. Overall, the UN Education index for Mauritania is 0.396 in 2019, compared to 0.385 in 2016. There are no available data on R&D expenditure. A senior author of a July 2020 World Bank report noted that “Despite the strides made in terms of access, the poor quality of education in Mauritania is an impediment to economic growth and human capital development.” The report noted four major deficiencies in the Mauritanian education system, including “Extremely low levels of teacher competence and a shortage of qualified teachers; Poor management of the sector and high levels of teacher absenteeism; Poor condition of school facilities and inadequate learning materials; Lack of continuity in the education cycle.” Earlier, in 2018, another World Bank study found that “The low level and regressive distribution of public spending has resulted in inequitable access to education services: the poorest children receive the least benefit from overall education spending, which is biased toward wealthier regions.” There have been important improvements over the years, notably with respect to the inclusion of girls into the education system over the last two decades at the primary and secondary levels (female to male ration of 1.1). Also, the education system has doubled the mean years of schooling since 1990 (2.2 in 1990 compared to 4.7 today).

Environmental  
policy

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Education policy /  
R&D

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## Governance

### I. Level of Difficulty

As a Sahelian country, Mauritania faces immense structural constraints, namely a very large territory (almost three times the size of Germany), very low population density (4.4 million people, with a density of five people per sq.km) and a harsh Sahelian climate. A study published by academics and the Ministry of Environment noted that since 1950, “the area of fertile land decreased from 15 million hectares to 1 million hectares, and the proportion of desert and semi-desert increased from two-thirds of the total land area to more than 90%.”

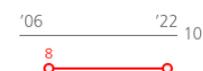
In addition, since the early 2000s, Mauritania has faced rising levels of violence and armed groups in its territory (especially from 2005-2011) and in nearby countries, notably Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. Mauritanian jihadists are particularly involved in militancy in Mali. The region of Hodh ech-Chargui near the Malian border, which was already impoverished, hosted 62,000 Malian refugees in the Mbera camp as of February 2021, mainly Malian Tuaregs and Arabs. There are 7,000 more refugees scattered throughout Mauritania. The Sahel’s militarization has several negative consequences. For a country that is already very poor, it diverts immensely scarce and needed resources toward the military instead of being injected into more productive sectors. It also potentially increases the attraction such groups may have on some, though perhaps not many, young citizens who, facing major obstacles to find a job and climb the socioeconomic ladder, could be searching for alternatives. It polarizes already strained ethnic and caste relations and increases the circulation of weapons, and overall, it contributes to the perpetuation of authoritarian rule through the false dichotomy between stability and democracy.

These security problems are closely correlated to an economy that, since the colonial period, has been built on a trajectory of dependency and based mostly on the export of a limited number of commodities (iron ore, gold, fish) and their inherent volatility. Finally, since 1978, the country was put on the track, or path dependency, of military regimes and civilian regimes led by retired military officers. As in many other countries, it has proven to be almost impossible to diverge from in Mauritania. This limits the prospects of a substantial civilian democratic system.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led the economy to contract by about 3%, while about 400 people have died and more than 16,000 people have been infected. The government has adopted a more expansive budget, supported by its international partners, to tackle the effects of the pandemic on its economy. For the moment, the

Structural  
constraints

8



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pandemic does not seem to have engendered major political consequences. Authorities have not tried to hide the reality of the pandemic and have cooperated with international partners.

Since its inception, the country has been governed by an authoritarian regime. Though it has taken various forms, it has never facilitated the development of autonomous and vocal groupings of citizens. On the formal and official side, there are very few organizations able to mobilize and promote their messages. The most vocal ones include organizations devoted to defending the Haratin (“freed slaves”), such as the IRA, whose leader was arrested many times but is now an elected deputy in the National Assembly. Women’s organizations include the Association of Women Heads of Households, which campaigns and publishes data on sexual violence annually. Trade unions representing workers of the formal economy, mostly in the extractive industries, the artisanal fishery sector, and public service, can mobilize their members and engage the state, launching strikes and other forms of mobilization, such as the strike of miners of the Tasiast mine and the strike of artisanal fishers in May 2020, or the strike of elementary school teachers in February 2020. Fieldwork research also reveals that informal associations, however, 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. They provide help to their members, and can engage the state on social, economic and political issues. Since the rise of Islamist movements in the 1990s, the state has created official organizations with the aim of co-opting Imams, Islamic scholars and other religious figures of authority, such as the High Islamic Council and the Association of Mauritanian Ulema. The government’s policy of “deradicalization” and dialogue with jailed Jihadists in the early 2010s was implemented in coordination with major Islamic authorities.

The level of social, ethnic and religious tensions is significant, although there have not been major open conflicts for some years. The potential of conflict is a constant, in large part because the root causes of these problems have not been fundamentally addressed. Although the country is almost entirely Muslim, the rise of armed groups fighting on behalf of Islam in the country and across the region (generally labeled as jihadist groups) represented a significant threat for some time after 2005, even if they were not numerically large. After a number of deadly attacks on Mauritanian soil between 2005 and 2011, they moved to neighboring Mali and nearby Burkina Faso and Niger. Jihadists do not currently have a major operational presence within Mauritania. Meanwhile, after facing years of repression, moderate Islamists now have a political party (Tawassoul), which has become the leading legislative opposition party in the 2013 and 2018 elections.

Aside from political Islam, ethnic and status (caste) polarization remains a critical issue. Haratin (freed slaves) activists who become too vocal in the eyes of the

#### Civil society traditions

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#### Conflict intensity

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government are automatically repressed by security forces, as seen in the arrests of Haratin activist from the IRA movement. Biram Dah Abeid, leader of the IIIIRA and now a National Assembly deputy, was among those arrested. Polarization also takes the form of ethnic tensions, as Black African ethnic minorities have been marginalized for decades. Associations representing Black Africans have pointed to major deficiencies in their access to the biometric civil registry, which gives access to national identity cards and passports.

## II. Governance Performance

### 14 | Steering Capability

In this authoritarian regime dominated by the military, and given the hyper-presidentialist political system, prioritization is a prerogative of the president. Priorities are in large part defined by security threats, an economy based on a small number of commodities, and on internal threats within the circle of high-ranking officers. Three main priorities seem to set the agenda of the current and past presidents. These priorities are both short-term and medium-term.

The first priority is preventing a coup and obtaining the loyalty of key officers takes much of the leader's attention. At this point, the current president is in part focused on ensuring that the former president and his allies no longer constitute a threat to him. The actual and substantial democratization of the regime does not seem to be a priority, however.

The second priority is preventing Islamic armed groups, which include Mauritians among their ranks, from perpetrating attacks on the national territory. This has entailed the rebuilding of the country's military forces and building profitable alliances with Western powers and some regional neighbors to obtain military, financial, intelligence and strategic support.

The third priority of attracting foreign investments in the extractive industries (minerals, but also oil), in the infrastructure sector and in the development sector. This objective has been successful, even if it has not generated much inclusive growth.

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed a new set of constraints on the country's limited resources. The government has been mostly successful in obtaining international support (including from the Paris Club and the G20's Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI)).

Question  
Score

Prioritization

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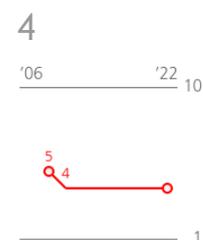
The peaceful succession from one president to the next was in itself an indication that the prevention of a coup d'état as a priority was a success. The ensuing political and legal battle between the two retired generals, which seems to be leading to the exclusion of the former president and the consolidation of the new one and his allies, confirms a pattern that goes back to the 1970s. The government has also been successful in preventing the return of violent armed groups on Mauritanian soil. However, leaked documents published in the media ten years ago suggest that this may have come at the price of ambiguous deals with these groups, which can operate freely close to the Mauritanian border. Regarding the objective of attracting foreign investments and international aid, this has proven to be relatively successful as well, though it has never generated any inclusive growth. With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has reacted quickly, faster than most of its neighbors, in implementing immediate measures. But the pandemic has delayed some of the reforms the government was attempting to implement, especially regarding its fiscal policy. The pandemic has also revealed the government's historically weak implementation of inclusive policies, with a major socioeconomic gap between the small portion of the population which could afford to work remotely and follow the stay-at-home orders, and the vast majority whose daily survival rests on the informal sector and which cannot afford such limitations to its mobility and outdoor economic activities.

Policy learning can be evaluated in at least two different ways. Considering the authoritarian nature of the regime, the domination of the military, and the historical role of intra-regime coups, from the president's and the government's perspectives, policy learning can mean adapting to challenging conditions in order to consolidate their rule. In such a perspective, the taming of opponents and intra-regime rivals is a key objective. Learning how to reach these objectives amidst changing conditions is thus one key perspective. The former president's decision to step down after two terms and let his close ally run for a presidential election was an entirely new situation in Mauritania. The current president successfully learned how to win elections without risking to lose them, while ensuring they would be endorsed by international partners. He also successfully pushed aside the former president and his networks, while obtaining the loyalty of the ruling party, which dominates all the elected assemblies of the country. Politically speaking, the new 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.

President Ould Ghazouani promises that unlike his predecessor, he will fight corruption and develop the country. But the previous president ran for years on a two-point platform (involving the fight against corruption) and government for the poor. The most recent parliamentary inquiry shows this platform to have been a failure.

From an economic perspective, the non-diversification of the economy remains a major issue. A 2020 World Bank report noted that "The lack of diversification hurts the Mauritanian economy. In 1997, mining and fish products accounted for 97.6% of merchandise exports, with almost no manufacturing exports. Two decades later, this

#### Implementation



#### Policy learning



picture has not changed much as both sectors accounted for 98.1% of total exports in 2017. The lack of diversification not only resulted in limited job creation, but it also exposed the economy to external vulnerabilities.”

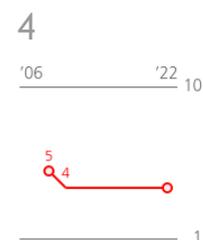
From a security perspective, the executive has learned from past experiences. Ten years have passed since the last attacks on Mauritanian soil. The new president was the minister of defense in the previous administration. He was also in charge of the counter-terrorist strategy at the end of the 2000s. However, it remains unclear whether the executive fully understands and seeks to act upon the immense sense of grievances among different social groups (including ethnic minorities, Haratin, etc.).

## 15 | Resource Efficiency

Historically, the use of administrative personnel has been undermined by political intrusions. The merging of administrative and political functions is frequent: high-ranking civil servants are often also members, if not officials, of the ruling party, UPR, a pattern that also existed in previous regimes. Dismissals and appointments are often politically motivated. Frequent reshuffling is a tool to maintain loyalty and prevent subversion from the elites. The actual implementation of meritocratic procedures in the appointments of public servants remains a major challenge, and so does the prevention of embezzlement in contracts related to public infrastructures and the governance of state-owned enterprises. The parliamentary investigation of the Ould Abdel Aziz regime has shed light on such patterns.

The current president has publicly declared that important reforms will be implemented. It is too early to draw any conclusion in that respect. Budget planning and implementation is more transparent than before. The media have published data on the forthcoming budget and the end-of-year budget revision. The media has also reported on debates in the National Assembly, notably in December 2020 and January 2021. In early January 2021, the Minister of Finance stated that the 2019 budget had generated a surplus of 11 billion ouguiyas, of which 6.6 billion was used to service the external debt. The public debt was 58.1% of GDP (compared to 61.4% in 2018). The situation seemed similar in the first quarter of 2020, until the COVID-19 pandemic hit the country. As the IMF reported, “The lockdown affected budget execution and revenues considerably... performance in the second half of the year is expected to be significantly worse due to the slowdown in economic activity affecting indirect taxes, the non-recurrence of the income tax and dividend receipts, and the ramping up of social transfers and public investment as the administration reopens.” Auditing is conducted by the General State Inspectorate (IGE), the Court of Accounts and other auditing offices. The parliamentary investigations into the former president and the alleged embezzlement and corruption practices over the last ten years sets a precedent in terms of its scope and the publication of its main discoveries.

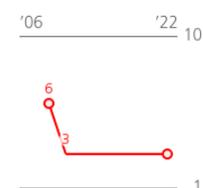
Efficient use of assets



The coordination style of Mauritania is one that is centralized, personalist and somewhat informal. Unsurprisingly given that retired military officers are in power, policy coordination has proven effective in the sphere of defense and anti-terrorism for the last ten years. But more generally, the combination of a hyper-presidentialist system and a patronage culture does not serve transparency and policy coordination well in the social domain. As an illustration, slavery has been criminalized through various legal reforms in 2007 and 2015, while agencies in charge of delivering special socioeconomic support to marginalized groups such as the Haratin have been created (Tadamoun) and then replaced by newer ones (Taazour). But the actual implementation of these legal changes on the ground does not seem to generate substantial results, in part due to corruption and patronage. Few individuals accused of slavery have been sentenced, and those who were either released before serving their full sentence or have escaped their trials. More generally, judicial and socioeconomic branches face important challenges when confronting important vested interests within and beyond the state apparatus. The fight against corruption and the effective implementation of inclusive and anti-poverty policies have suffered directly from such challenges. On these two matters, the new president has sent a strong signal that he wants to reform the system, but as someone who is a product of that system, it remains unclear to what extent there is the willingness, or the capacity, to carry out such a colossal project.

#### Policy coordination

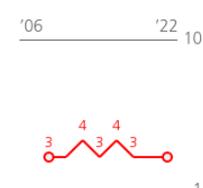
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The state agencies in charge of investigating public servants' and politicians' ethical misconduct and conflicts of interests include the Court of Accounts, whose chair is appointed by the president; the State General Inspectorate (IGE), whose inspector general is nominated by the prime minister; and more specialized agencies. The fact that all IGE Inspector Generals have been known members of the current or past presidential parties raises doubts on their real autonomy.

#### Anti-corruption policy

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The IGE and the Court of Audit have continued their auditing campaigns. After almost thirteen years without making its reports available, the Court of Audit has made past reports available. In December 2020, the Regulatory Authority for Public Procurement (ARMP) published its most recent reports. Since it had not done so prior to 2019, this is a good sign. Given that many of the problems identified by the parliamentary investigation committee on the former president's malpractices include public procurement problems, it is cause for hope that the ARMP is now making its reports available in good time. Under the previous president, political interference with the ARMP was a problem. For instance, the former president of ARMP, 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 tasked with the financial disclosure of public affairs also officially contributes to the fight against corruption by collecting the self-declarations of the 500 highest-ranking civil servants and officials' assets and properties. It then compares their state of their assets at the beginning and at the end of each of these

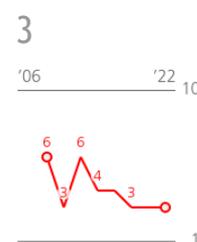
500 officials' terms. These declarations must be submitted at the beginning and at the end of each term. If some major variations are noted, the Commission can then send the case to the Ministry of Justice. Between 2013 and 2019, this was never done. However, when President Ould Abdel Aziz left in July 2019, he did officially submit such a declaration, the content of which was unknown. The new president provided such a declaration in December 2019, five months after his election.

## 16 | Consensus-Building

The presidential election of June 2019, which followed the September 2018 legislative, regional and local elections, confirmed the competitive authoritarian consensus among Mauritanian elites that had been in place since 1991, although it added a new twist. The main difference in 2019 was that President Ould Abdel Aziz agreed to leave peacefully at the end of his second term, which paved the way for the election that was to confirm his close ally's victory. That the succession did not depend on a coup d'état could set a positive precedent. This, however, does not change the authoritarian consensus about who is able to rule the country and how. For their part, the opposition parties are committed to democracy, including the Islamist party Tawassoul, which again confirmed its status as the leading opposition party after the 2018 elections. Also, in this competitive authoritarian regime, the use of naked violence is less frequent than in other authoritarian regimes, where opponents and journalists are murdered and/or jailed on a large scale. Censorship of the press and of journalists is no longer used systematically. Compared to the violent years of the 1980s-1990s, the current regime is more moderate. But the highest position in the state, the presidency, simply is not open to free and fair competition, nor is that of the dominant political party in the National Assembly.

There is a significant consensus surrounding the principle of a market economy. However, how one defines that market economy matters greatly. If one insists on the rule of law as a mechanism that regulates market relations, this would not describe officials' consensus view of a market economy. Though official rules exist on paper, their actual implementation remains the biggest challenge in practice. The fact that a parliamentary commission revealed embezzlement practices during the regime of Ould Abdel Aziz, who defined himself as the anti-corruption president, confirms this observation. Furthermore, competition within the market is hindered by the presence of powerful conglomerates connected to the president, high-ranking military officials and other businessmen, as well as by tribal and clan networks. In addition, the extent to which the market economy can be harnessed to policies that effectively support the poor raises major questions, given the immense gap that exists between a small but wealthy minority and a very large portion of the population that lives in conditions of extreme poverty, most of whom are from specific social status groups.

Consensus on goals



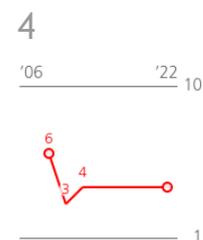
The 2019 presidential election, which saw the victory of retired General Ould Ghazouani, who had occupied the highest position in the military apparatus during the reign of his predecessor and friend, confirms the strength of the military as an anti-democratic actor. The military continues to be the most powerful institution of the country. This latest round of elections confirmed a pattern already at play under the Ould Taya regime (1984-2005): 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, partially by weakening his predecessor.

Reformists have failed to bring forward the following two basic criteria of a democracy: (1) an open and fair election for the executive position; and (2) that non-elected institution(s) do not interfere. In most cases, reformists have been coopted. Those that have remained too independent (and for some, too vocal in their criticism of the government) have been sidelined.

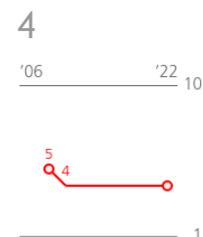
Mauritanian political leadership has not been able, or perhaps has not been willing, to depolarize the country's structural tensions. No broad consensus across the ethno-racial dividing lines seems to be materializing. Though a demographic minority, White Moors (or Bidhân) control most of the key positions in the most significant state institutions, such as the Ministries of Defense, of Justice, and of Interior; they also control most key positions in the military and intelligence apparatus. The dramatic conditions of Haratin are a major cleavage that continues to weaken the social foundations of the country. Black Africans are also under-represented in key positions of the state apparatus, and past violations of human rights against this community have not been fully tackled, including the impunity that retired and current military officers have obtained despite their role in past atrocities. There are some symbolic appointments, including the current prime minister, who is from the Haratin community. Some socioeconomic programs aim specifically at addressing the dire conditions of poor communities, of which Haratin most probably constitute the vast majority. But such programs have existed for several years with no clear signs of improvements.

Formal civil society organizations, including trade unions, domestic non-governmental organizations, local associations, and the media, can express themselves through the media. Trade unions can protest and go on strike, as they did in the period under study. They can also publish reports or memorandums on various sociopolitical problems. However, the degree of their inclusion in the national decision-making process remains low. Decision-making remains highly centralized around the presidency. International partners (UN agencies, partnering countries, international NGOs) do include civil society organizations (as part of the stakeholder category), but their impact on decisions remains difficult to assess, and the actual composition of these civil society actors must be analyzed carefully. At the local level, informal groups and networks (tribal and lineage networks, village

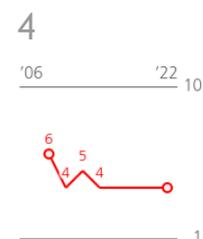
Anti-democratic actors



Cleavage / conflict management



Civil society participation



associations, religious networks, etc.), do participate in some decision-making processes. The management of the COVID-19 pandemic, mirroring the decision-making process, remains very centralized, though with significant collaboration with international organizations (notably UN agencies), but with no clear inclusion of local civil society. At the level of implementation, however, civil society was involved to some degree, often with the support of international organizations. This involvement primarily took the form of helping to communicate governmental messages on hygiene measures and distributing of basic foodstuffs to poor communities.

Like past governments, the current government has struggled to acknowledge historic and ongoing exclusion and acts of violence against Haratin and Black Africans. On the one hand, it has adopted some formal laws and policies that signal a certain extent of reconciliation, notably in laws that criminalize slavery, socioeconomic programs (direct cash transfers) and the repatriation program aimed at Black African refugees. On the other hand, the flawed implementation of these laws and programs, the systematic unwillingness to name these past and present violations and to punish perpetrators of violations constitutes major obstacles to reconciliation.

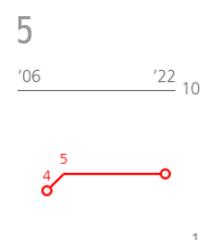
Moreover, the 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects military personnel (all from the Moor community) from the terrible violations of human rights (1989-1991) against Black Africans (Haalpulaaren, Sooninke, Wolof and Bamana) is still in place, despite local organizations calling for its revocation.

Under the Ould Abdel Aziz regime, the numerous arrests of Haratin activists demonstrated the extent to which the Haratin question remained taboo. Since the election of retired general Ould Ghazouani, some positive signals were sent including the nomination of a Haratin prime minister and the proactive role of the Taazour agency, which is in charge of providing direct support to the poorest communities. However, similar actions that were taken in the past did not result in any major changes. The new president's actual willingness to implement drastic changes remains an unknown variable at this point.

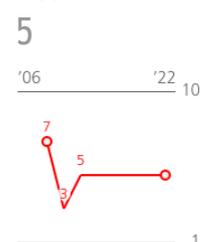
## 17 | International Cooperation

On the economic and development fronts (especially health, education, and equal opportunity), the Mauritanian government collaborates closely with its international partners, including UN agencies, the World Bank, the IMF, regional banks (African Development Bank; Islamic Development Bank), and foreign government development aid agencies. It is unclear to what extent the government will integrate international assistance for long-term development goals, as opposed to short-term political interests. Due to patronage politics, the actual implementation of development policies seems less promising with respect to inclusive growth, job creation and the redistribution of profits from the extractive sector. As a consequence, the gap between a small wealthy elite and most of the population is striking. A 2020

### Reconciliation



### Effective use of support



World Bank document explains, “The country’s policy framework was not supportive of growth in competitive labor-intensive sectors, while natural resources were not used to invest in productive sectors.”

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has collaborated very closely with international organizations, including the UN agencies and regional organizations. On the security front, the government cooperates with foreign partners (France, the United States) as well as international bodies.

Finally, for years analysts and NGOs have underlined the problem related to the capture of international support for patronage by networks close to the president’s inner circles as well as members associated with the ruling party. The 2020 parliamentary investigation commission that scrutinized the previous acts of corruption and embezzlement by the former president and other high-ranking officials who served under his administration confirms this rent-seeking pattern. The extent to which the same patterns may or may not continue under the current administration, which is led by close associates of the former, remains to be seen.

Despite the competitive authoritarian nature of the Mauritanian regime, all international partners thoroughly collaborate with the government, which is seen as a credible actor. On the security front, the government is seen as a very credible partner. Upon the Mauritanian president’s visit to NATO’s headquarters in January 2021, the secretary-general praised the Mauritanian government’s contribution to security cooperation in the region.

Experts generally agree that international partners may be balancing democracy promotion against security interests. With the ongoing security crisis in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, it appears that foreign partners do not have effective democratization as a top priority, even if the lack of democracy and accountability has been identified as a contributing factor to security crisis. On the socioeconomic front, the government has convinced international partners and foreign investors of its commitment, even though most 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. The IMF has been able to conduct all six reviews of its arrangements with Mauritania (Extended Credit Facility 2017-2021). The World Bank implemented its Country Partnership Framework (2018-2023) program, which aims at reviewing its programs in the country, in close collaboration with the government. In 2018, with the full cooperation of the government, the WTO conducted its third Trade Policy Review. It has ratified 11 of the 12 Fundamental and Governance Conventions of the ILO. The government has also maintained its cooperation with the UN Human Rights’ Office of the High Commissioner and the UNHR’s various committees, although several questions raised by these committees remain unanswered.

Credibility

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Mauritania cooperates with its regional neighbors. Regional cooperation is now mostly a question of security, even though the drivers of insecurity are largely social, political and economic. Mauritania must maintain a precarious balance between the two rival powerhouses to the north, Morocco and Algeria. In a context where both try to weaken one another, both countries are likely to interpret a friendly move from Mauritania towards one country as an attack against the other. The November 2020 clashes between the Moroccan security forces and the Western Sahara Polisario Front have raised concerns in Nouakchott. Cooperation with neighboring Mali has been positive, though at times difficult, as the two countries did not favor the same strategy for dealing with armed Islamist groups. In that regard, Mauritania has joined the G5 Sahel group (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso). It was created to foster regional cooperation on security issues, and its Permanent Secretariat is in Nouakchott, as well as the G5 Sahel Defense College. However, even though a Mauritanian General served with the G5 force in Mali, the country has sent very few of its troops outside of Mauritania. This stands in marked contrast to counterparts such as Chad.

Mauritania is an active member of the African Union. Indeed, former President Ould Abdel Aziz was its chairperson in 2014-2015. It is also a founding member of the Arab Maghreb Union, but this organization has been mostly dormant due to the tensions between Algeria and Morocco. Since Mauritania's surprising departure from the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2000, talks about a possible return have never ceased. In 2017, Mauritania signed a new cooperation agreement with ECOWAS countries to improve the economic and security situation in the region, and in 2020, Mauritania announced that it would soon implement a free trade agreement with the organization.

## Regional cooperation

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## Strategic Outlook

By having one president succeed another peacefully and through institutionalized mechanisms for the first time, the 2019 presidential election set a positive precedent. However, it does not go far enough. The new president was the closest collaborator of the former. He was a retired general and the most powerful man after the ex-president. This was not a free and fair election, and it maintained the military as the most dominant institution.

In West Africa, Ghana, Senegal, and Cape Verde are among the most stable and socially integrated countries. They share an essential feature: they are ruled by civilians and have had more than one democratic alternation in power, whereby opposition parties and candidates defeat incumbents, the latter acknowledge their defeat and step down peacefully. Mauritania ought to follow these examples. Reforming political institutions to make them more open to all citizens, more representative of the country's cultural diversity, and more accountable will generate more legitimacy and stability. Elections for the presidency and for national and local assemblies must be transparent and fair. The presidency concentrates too much power. Opposition parties must be given 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, the General Inspector, to name but a few.

Marginalized ethno-racial communities, specifically Haratin and the four different Black African groups, should have fair access to all levels of the state apparatus, not just at the bottom and middle level, including in key ministries such as Defense, Interior and Justice. The 1993 Law of Amnesty that continues to protect security forces personnel from the prosecution of past human rights violations must be repealed to let the country move forward on the path of reconciliation.

The lack of economic diversification must be addressed. Dependency on a few commodities exports makes the country too vulnerable to rapidly changing international prices and does not favor the transfer of revenues to other sections. Real diversification strategies are needed, including more support to the agropastoral sector, where 60% of the labor force is concentrated. With almost half of the population living in conditions of extreme poverty, conditions for instability remain a major threat in this Sahelian environment.

As in most Sahelian countries, the youth (under 25) constitute roughly 60% of the population in Mauritania; their integration into the labor market and the necessity to offer acceptable socioeconomic conditions should be a priority. The outbreak of violence in neighboring countries of the Sahel, with many Mauritians having joined armed groups, shows the urgency of elevating the population's well-being.

To address the detrimental effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, more direct funds need to be injected into the Taazour agency's programs that help poor households. The agency has done a good job but needs more resources. Prior to the pandemic, Mauritania already had alarming basic health indicators, especially in rural areas. The underdeveloped state of health infrastructure in rural areas was made more apparent with the pandemic and requires more attention, support, and funding.