



Mauritania

Political instability, military rule, and Islamist terrorist threats have been recurrent challenges in Mauritania. Yet the country recently underwent its first electoral transfer of power after a president completed two elected terms in office, and it is the only country in the Sahel region not to have experienced a deadly terrorist attack since 2011. U.S. engagement has expanded since the early 2000s, as regional security threats have grown, and as U.S. officials have come to see Mauritania as an able counterterrorism partner. U.S. firms also have interests in Mauritania’s growing offshore natural gas production. Human rights concerns—particularly regarding the enduring practice of hereditary slavery—and military coups in 2005 and 2008 have nonetheless constrained bilateral ties.

Mauritania’s recent positive security trends—remarkable given the enduring crises in neighboring Mali and in Burkina Faso and Niger—may be attributable to improvements in its counterterrorism capacity, de-radicalization programs, and/or a rumored non-aggression pact with regional Al Qaeda-aligned networks (see below). Mauritania may nevertheless remain vulnerable to Islamist insurgent attacks or other forms of violent unrest.

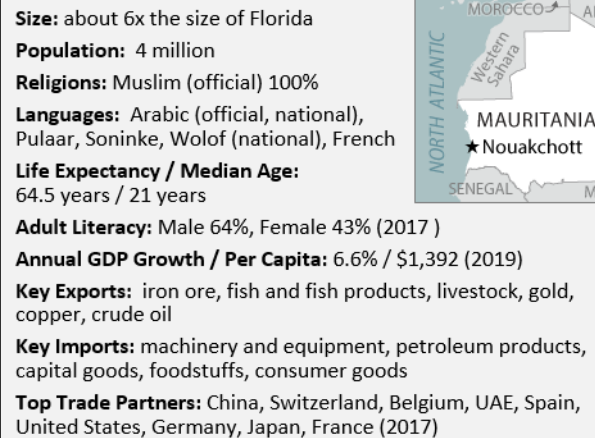
Hereditary slavery and racial exclusion have shaped Mauritanian culture and history. Society is divided along racial and linguistic lines into three broad identity groups: *bidane* or “white” Arabs who have long comprised the elite, *haratine* or “black” Arabs who are slave descendants or in some cases active slaves, and “Afro-Mauritians,” a collective term for sub-Saharan African ethnic groups whose native language is not Arabic. Each group reportedly comprises around one-third of the population, although there are no authoritative data.

Most of Mauritania’s territory is desert, aside from the relatively fertile Senegal River valley in the south. Despite the country’s mineral resources and emergent energy sector, development prospects remain hampered by poor infrastructure, limited arable land, low rates of education, and regional insecurity. Since the 1970s, droughts have forced what was once a largely nomadic pastoralist population toward sedentary and/or urban life. The population of the capital, Nouakchott, rose from about 38,000 in 1970 to an estimated 1.3 million in 2020, per U.N. data—nearly a third of the country’s total population.

Politics

President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, a retired military general, was elected in 2019 with 52% of the vote in a six-way contest. He succeeded his political patron and former military peer, Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who became Mauritania’s first leader to abide by term limits without being overthrown first. Abdel Aziz was first elected in 2009 after ousting the country’s first democratically-elected leader in a coup, and his tenure was marked by tensions with opposition parties and human rights activists.

Figure 1. Mauritania at a Glance



Source: CRS graphic. Data from CIA World Factbook, International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2019); 2020 estimates unless noted.

Prominent anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid—who won a seat in parliament in 2018—came in second in the 2019 race with 19% of the vote. The State Department recognized Abeid as a Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report Hero in 2016. Abeid’s political party has been denied legal recognition; to campaign, he has registered as an independent or on other parties’ tickets.

The Islamist Tawassoul party did not run its own presidential candidate, instead backing a former prime minister who came in third. The party may nonetheless remain the most broad-based opposition movement with 14 out of 157 seats in parliament, the second-largest block after the ruling Union for the Republic (UPR). (A change to the constitution under Abdel Aziz dissolved the Senate, leaving the National Assembly as a unicameral parliament.)

Protests erupted after the 2019 presidential results were announced. State security forces responded by banning demonstrations, detaining opposition figures, and cutting access to the internet. Ultimately, tensions eased and opposition figures were released. Ghazouani has since moved to consolidate power, including by curtailing the influence of Abdel Aziz loyalists in the UPR, sparking an unexpected power struggle. It remains to be seen whether Ghazouani will open up new space for democracy and/or address the legacy of racial and ethnic exclusion. Ghazouani and Abdel Aziz are both members of the *bidane* elite, as were all previous heads of state, along with the senior military officer corps.

Selected Human Rights Concerns

Mauritania nominally abolished slavery by decree in 1981, but the practice was not explicitly criminalized until 2007. A constitutional amendment in 2012 declared slavery a crime against humanity, and parliament adopted a new anti-

slavery law in 2015. In practice, norms have been slow to change. State institutions are reportedly reticent to prosecute slavery cases—notwithstanding the establishment of a National Agency for the Fight against the Vestiges of Slavery, known as Tadamoun, in 2013—presumably due to the political influence of elite *bidane* families. The government has denied legal recognition to various local anti-slavery and human rights groups, and has subjected activists to harassment, mistreatment, and intimidation.

Afro-Mauritanian activists, for their part, have protested national policies and discrimination favoring Arabic speakers, along with a lack of accountability for state-backed violence and mass expulsions targeting Afro-Mauritanian communities in the 1980s and 1990s. In 2011, Afro-Mauritanians protested the conduct of a national census as an apparent effort to deny them citizenship rights.

Mauritania is the only self-described Islamic Republic in North and West Africa. Only Muslims may be citizens, and apostasy and blasphemy are crimes punishable by death. Foreign proselytization is prohibited and non-Sunni Islamic religious activity regulated.

Terrorism

In the mid-2000s, Mauritania was among the first targets of armed attacks in the Sahel by the Algerian-led regional network that later became Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). Mauritanian nationals have held prominent positions in AQIM and its various splinter factions and affiliates, and at one time were represented in core Al Qaeda leadership. Mauritania has not experienced a terrorist attack since 2011, however—despite the proliferation of Islamist armed groups in neighboring Mali, a wave of large attacks in and near several West African capital cities in 2015-2018, and a public threat of attack by AQIM in 2018.

Documents seized in the 2011 U.S. raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan suggested that AQIM and Mauritania had discussed a de facto non-aggression agreement. Whether a deal was concluded is unclear; the Mauritanian government has denied any such accord.

Mauritania hosts the political headquarters of the G5 Sahel, an ad hoc regional group—also comprising Mali, Niger, Chad, and Burkina Faso—that launched a “joint force” initiative to counter shared terrorist threats in 2017. A lack of capacity, distrust, and divergent priorities have hampered the initiative’s effectiveness. Donors have pledged funds, but not all have materialized. Ghazouani holds the rotating chair of the G5 Sahel in 2020. Unlike other G5 Sahel countries, Mauritania has declined to contribute troops to the U.N. peacekeeping operation in Mali.

Economy

Mauritania is a top African exporter of iron ore. It also exports gold and copper. Modest offshore oil production began in 2006, and in recent years there have been significant offshore natural gas finds. Half the population reportedly depends on agriculture and livestock for livelihoods. A U.S. firm, Kosmos Energy, is active in the gas sector, as is the multinational firm Shell. China is Mauritania’s largest trading partner and export destination by a wide margin. Commercial ties with former colonial power France remain prominent, and Arab Gulf states have pledged sizable development aid.

According to IMF data, annual GDP growth ranged from 4.7%-5.6% the start of the 2010s, then collapsed to 0.4% in 2015 due to a fall in global metal prices. Growth has since recovered but has not been sufficient to alleviate poverty significantly. The national debt has also grown as a percentage of GDP, reaching 83% in 2018, per the IMF. Gaps in infrastructure, service delivery, and access to education remain key challenges. Income inequality and poverty are skewed along racial and ethnic lines, although there is also divergence within the *bidane* community.

U.S. Relations and Aid

U.S. diplomatic relations have varied along with political conditions in Mauritania. Mauritania broke off ties from 1967 to 1970 in the wake of the six-day Arab-Israeli War. Some U.S. aid was suspended after Mauritania’s 2005 and 2008 coups, in line with restrictions in annual aid appropriations legislation, then restored after elections. A 2019 State Department fact sheet on Mauritania cites “growing trade and investment relations” with Mauritania, “a rising player on the world natural gas stage.” At the same time, concerns over slavery have resulted in aid restrictions.

“As Mauritania consolidates democratic gains after this year’s historic election by promoting national unity, we look forward to working together to advance human rights and social equality to ensure peace and stability, to promote investment and fair labor practices to spur economic growth, and to bolster security cooperation in the region.” – Secretary of State Pompeo, November 28, 2019

Mauritania is designated as “Tier 3” (worst) under the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA; Div. A of P.L. 106-386, as amended), due in part to tolerance of slavery and related practices. Since FY2019, in a break with prior practice across Administrations, President Trump has not waived restrictions on aid to Mauritania under the TVPA, which apply to “nonhumanitarian, nontrade-related foreign assistance” to the government and to U.S. support for international financial institution funding. The precise impact on U.S. programs has not been publicly detailed. In January 2019, citing “forced labor practices,” President Trump separately ended Mauritania’s eligibility for trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA, Title I, P.L. 106-200, as amended).

U.S. aid is focused on counterterrorism, countering violent extremism, and humanitarian relief. State Department and USAID-administered bilateral aid funding—totaling \$3 million in FY2019 appropriations—is limited, but additional funds have regularly been allocated under regional and global programs (including emergency humanitarian aid), and by the Department of Defense (DOD). Some, but not all, counterterrorism aid has been suspended under the TVPA; in early 2020, Mauritania hosted DOD’s flagship annual multinational military exercise in North-West Africa. Congressional appropriators have directed millions of dollars in Economic Support Fund (ESF) aid for “West Africa anti-slavery programs” in recent years, which have focused in part on Mauritania.

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