

# Mauritania: Domestic Politics and Regional Tensions (Maghreb / Sahel)

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### Domestic Politics

After the period of turmoil linked to the 2019 presidential transition, the years 2020 and 2021 were marked by relative tranquility in Mauritania, consecrated by the soft power strategy implemented by the presidency of Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. This position must, however, be considered with caution, if we consider the judicial proceedings advanced against the country's previous presidency, and the implementation of a new legal framework easily read as limiting – or at least aimed at substantially increasing control – of public opinion and individual liberties.

Issues related to the fight against poverty should also be highlighted as elements on the national panorama. The period marked by the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic outbreak – which was not particularly dramatic in terms of health, with only about a thousand officially recognized deaths – had very significant economic effects in the country, with a recognized slowdown of 4% in the national growth rate. In addition, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic must also be related to the difficulties experienced by many vulnerable families, in a country where about 30% of the population still lives below the poverty line (ANSADE, 2021).

At the level of domestic politics, it is important to highlight the arrest in June 2021 of Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, Mauritania's President between 2009 and 2019, on corruption charges (linked with fisheries, public infrastructure and hydrocarbon contracts), after a par-

liamentary commission assessed his conduct while in office. This must be signaled as a major event, as it questioned, probably for the first time in the country, the long-acknowledged relationship between corruption and central political power. Some of Aziz's close associates, from political and business circles, have also been charged, and former President Aziz is currently under house arrest, waiting for trial procedures to start (for an overview of his period in office, see Ould Mohamed Baba Moustapha, 2022).

This revolutionary process – if we consider local political practices – can also be seen as a perilous and symbolic exercise of the sort of leadership implemented by Ould Ghazouani. Will the latter assure the independence of the judiciary bodies watching over public interest, or will he manipulate a largely subservient political class to his wishes? We are still at the early stages of his tenure in office, and an effective assessment of his presidency cannot be made at this point.

The Mauritanian political landscape was also marked during this period by the prevalence of the national identity question, which can in fact be recognized since the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (1960), linked to the cohesion of a multi-ethnic country, although clearly led (demographically and politically) by Hassaniya-speaking groups.

### Legal Changes to Civil Liberties

In November 2021 the Mauritanian Parliament approved a law concerning the “criminalization of attacks on the authority of the State” (*Loi portant protection des symboles nationaux et incrimination des atteints à l'autorité de l'État et à l'honneur du citoyen*). A legislative effort focused, once again, on the issue of guaranteeing national unity, through which

an attempt will be made to control the production of fake news and other expressions that threaten state institutions (with applicable penalties of between two and four years of effective imprisonment).

## Recent cases of convictions for blasphemy, in fact, raise questions regarding the real ambitions of this new legal framework

Although clearly mentioning democratic values and the State's affiliation with the preservation of human rights, this legal text was strongly questioned as a mechanism that in practice will serve to monitor published content (both in physical format and on digital platforms / social networks) and, in this way, limit freedom of expression. In the legal text, we read that offences against the "sacred principles of Islam," national unity, territorial integrity, the President of the Republic, the flag or the national anthem, will now be punished as hate crimes. This legal article also stipulates that hate speech and incitement to hatred among different segments of the population will henceforth be punished with sentences of between two and five years in prison (up to ten years in prison for repeat offenders).

Recent cases of convictions for blasphemy (Freire, 2021), or the mention of the President of the Republic as a possible target of verbal abuse, in fact, raise questions regarding the real ambitions of this new legal framework, which could easily result in discretionary limitations on freedom of expression, which can lead to practically arbitrary accusations by the state leadership of contesting actors or movements. These elements also seem to point to a – more conservative – refocusing on the part of the State and the ethical and legal frameworks that support it. Both the RFD (*Rassemblement des Forces Démocratiques*), recognized as the traditional democratic opposition, as well as the Islamist Tawassoul party, have condemned this law, anticipating that it could lead to severe limitations of civil liberties.

A series of official meetings between President Ghazouani and the leader of the abolitionist movement Biram Dah Abeid, the outspoken protagonist of

the abolitionist movement in Mauritania, have also taken place. This particular rapprochement is quite significant, marking a state-sponsored effort to deal with the Haratin issue (associated with populations descended from slaves and demographically a very significant segment of the Mauritanian population). These talks amount to an official recognition of the importance of this movement and its incorporation in the traditional political arenas. Its leader (who has been imprisoned in the past for expressing his ideas) has now been rehabilitated as a valid political interlocutor, marking what could be viewed as a reconciliation between the regime and some branches of the so-called radical opposition. This sign of political openness could also indicate the growing maturity of Mauritania's political system. Despite this, it is also worth mentioning the emergence of different splinter movements, which have recently left Biram's IRA (*Initiative pour la Résurgence du Mouvement Abolitionniste*), accusing its leader of spurious connections with the state apparatus.

## Regional Tensions

In the regional context, we would like to highlight two aspects: Mauritania's involvement in the G5 Sahel, and the negotiation of the country's new role in the strategic rearrangement to be developed after the Spanish (and the United States) endorsement of the Moroccan plan for Western Sahara.

Mauritania remains very active within the framework of the G5 Sahel, which is probably the most solid and dynamic, foreign policy engagement of the country. While acting as host for this organization's executive committee, Nouakchott has engaged in projects that go well beyond a mere focus on defence and anti-terrorist activities. Globally considered as development and infrastructure programmes, the financing managed through the G5 Sahel has served as a platform to promote reforms in the field of electricity and telecommunications networks, education, urbanism and territorial planning (for an overview of the major trends currently involving the Sahel, see Villalón and Bodian, 2021). The current presidency of Mauritania is in a privileged position for the management of this dossier, since the current President Ghazouani was, during his military career, a very active element in the international coalitions implemented in the region, be-

ing President in office of the G5 Sahel between February 2020 and February 2021.

Regarding Mauritania's northern frontiers, it is crucial to mention the position taken by the socialist government of the Kingdom of Spain in March 2022, when it formally declared its support for the Moroccan position in the resolution of the Western Sahara conflict. This profound change in the region's geopolitical landscape aligns with a recent trend, with the endorsement of the United States, different countries of the Persian Gulf and Israel of the Moroccan plan of extended autonomy for Western Sahara. The Islamic Republic of Mauritania has maintained a "neutral" role since the 1980s in relation to Western Sahara, and regarding this recent development, it hasn't yet made any official comment. Will the Mauritanian position on Western Sahara evolve according to the new diplomatic arrangement? It is worth noting the rapprochement between Mauritania and Spain, expressed by the visit of President Ghazouani to Madrid in March 2022, the month that saw the Spanish political shift on the Western Sahara conflict.

## Nouakchott is currently being charmed by Morocco and Algeria as a potential ally

Despite its official silence on this sensitive topic, Nouakchott is currently being charmed by Morocco and Algeria as a potential ally. Formal political encounters between Rabat and Nouakchott have already taken place, and Algiers also seems committed to attaining Nouakchott's support, by offering significant economic aid to Mauritania (notably regarding the energy sector and the development of infrastructure that might facilitate the transit of cargo and people from southwestern Algeria to northern Mauritania). Mauritania's "neutrality" over the question of the Western Sahara – unsubstantiated in any legal document – is not easily understood by the actors involved, thus relegating Mauritania's relations with the two regional powers (Morocco and Algeria) to a fragile balance that is permanently renegotiated with each new diplomatic development, or military escalation. Besides its position over the Western Sahara conflict,

deeper transregional significance is also attributed to Mauritania by its northern neighbours, regarding political, economic and even religious developments (with Morocco and Algeria having shown interest in the West African Sufi orders that often have direct links with the Mauritanian Islamic landscape).

On a global level, it is also worth mentioning the signing, during 2021, of two significant memorandums of understanding endorsing industrial projects meant to produce green hydrogen in Mauritania. Project Aman and project Nour (signed with CWP Global and with Chariot), if implemented, might bring significant changes to Mauritania, with profound impacts on the country's economy. The importance of projects of this sort should mitigate the country's dependency on livestock production (small ruminants, cattle and camels), helping to free the country's economy from increasingly significant contingent aspects, which we can associate with global climate change, and which in the last two years have been translated into Mauritania's most severe periods of drought in the last fifty years.

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