

BTI 2016 | Mauritania Country Report

| | scale | score | rank | trend |
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This report is part of the Bertelsmann Stiftung’s Transformation Index (BTI) 2016. It covers the period from 1 February 2013 to 31 January 2015. The BTI assesses the transformation toward democracy and a market economy as well as the quality of political management in 129 countries. More on the BTI at <http://www.bti-project.org>.

Please cite as follows: Bertelsmann Stiftung, BTI 2016 – Mauritania Country Report. Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016.

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Key Indicators

| | | | | | | |
|--------------------------|--------|------|--------------------------------|-------|----------------------|--------|
| Population | M | 4.0 | HDI | 0.487 | GDP p.c., PPP \$ | 3911.8 |
| Pop. growth ¹ | % p.a. | 2.5 | HDI rank of 187 | 161 | Gini Index | 37.5 |
| Life expectancy | years | 61.5 | UN Education Index | 0.352 | Poverty ³ | % 32.5 |
| Urban population | % | 59.3 | Gender inequality ² | 0.644 | Aid per capita \$ | 75.2 |

Sources (as of October 2015): The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2015 | UNDP, Human Development Report 2014. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.10 a day at 2011 international prices.

Executive Summary

The period under review has been marked by legislative and municipal elections in the last quarter of 2013, and a presidential election in the summer of 2014. These elections confirmed the recent trend where senior a figure seizes power through a coup d'état and consolidates through "controlled" elections. In the 2014 presidential election, the incumbent, President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, won 81% of the vote in the first and only round of the election. Similarly, his party, the Union pour la République, supported by smaller allied parties, confirmed their complete control of the National Assembly. No change of power has been achieved through free and fair elections in the history of this country. The president's strategy has been to maintain "asymmetrical equilibrium." This strategic approach ensures all regions and ethnic groups are represented in the government and the public administration, but that some groups are more favored than others. The Bidhân, also known as "White Moors," are the primary beneficiaries of asymmetrical equilibrium. In particular, senior positions within the Ministries of Defense, Interior and Justice as well as the security forces are reserved for individuals of Bidhân ethnicity. Furthermore, those Bidhân who come from the president's own region and tribe are especially well favored. For example, senior positions within mining organizations are disproportionately held by individuals from the Awlâd Busba'a tribe, the president's tribe.

However, the current president seems to rely more heavily than his predecessors on technocratic figures, who have little political influence and are more likely to remain loyal to him.

Mauritania's national economy performed well over the last three years, with the extractive sectors performing particularly well and attracting more FDI than before. However, the dual nature of the economy persists, with the formal commodity sector on one hand and the informal agro-pastoral sectors on the other. While the vast majority of the population earn their living through the latter sectors, the underdevelopment of these sectors has meant that many have not experienced much by way of economic improvement over the years. Hence, high levels of poverty remain and most MDGs appear unattainable, especially with respect to the Haratin community, also known as

“former slaves” or “freed slaves.” In addition, the non-Arabic speaking, “Black African”, communities of the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Soninko and Bamana continue to be excluded from strategic positions in the state apparatus and participation in decision-making processes.

Security in the region continues to be problematic. For example, armed Islamist groups are present in Mali and southern Algeria, with further local (though growing) groups in Nigeria, Niger and Chad. While the lack of any attacks within Mauritania suggests that President Ould Abdel Aziz has been successful in addressing these security threats, the situation remains highly precarious. The armed forces, which have been the institutional home of all coups d'état since 1978, have been well treated by the president, with the president introducing higher salaries, increasing nominations for senior positions as well as transferring military personnel to lucrative business positions.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

Since achieving independence in 1960 Mauritania has been a poor Sahelian country with a basic agro-pastoral economy that exports fish and minerals. It has been and continues to be dependent on international development aid. Between 1975 and 1984, the country's economy stagnated. This period of economy stagnation was exacerbated by socioeconomic problems resulting from a collapse in the price of iron, persistent droughts and the disastrous consequences of Mauritania's involvement in the Western Sahara War.

These socioeconomic problems as well as increasing domestic political tensions revolved around two major issues, namely the very definition of the country's identity and the role of the military in political life. First, the politicization of identities, between Arabic-speaking groups (the Bidhân, who are also known as “White Moors,” and the Haratin, who are also known as “freed slaves” or “Black Moors”) and non-Arabic-speaking ethnic communities (the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Soninko and Bamana, who are often called “Black Africans”). This politicization of identity has structured the political game since the colonial period. Tensions erupted over policies related to language, education, land tenure and ethnic representation in the political and bureaucratic apparatus. Between 1989 and 1991, 80,000 Black Africans were deported by security forces, many hundreds more were assassinated, while thousands were dismissed from the civil service. Meanwhile, despite being the single largest ethnic group in Mauritania, the Haratin, former slaves of the Bidhân community, are treated as second-class citizens. As such, they are socially, economically and politically marginalized. Political organizations of Haratin sought to mobilize this community. Some were eventually co-opted by the regime while others have joined opposition groups.

The second major issue, which is linked to the politicization of identities, is the role of the military in Mauritania's political processes. The civilian regime (1960-1978) was ousted during the Western Sahara War. During this war, the size of the military quadrupled amidst military defeats by Western Saharan insurgents. Since the first coup d'état (1978), every single head of state has

been a military officer (with one short, 17-month exception, between 2007 and 2008). Every leadership change occurred through a coup d'état.

In 1991, Colonel Ould Taya agreed to adopt a new democratic constitution, while organizing multiparty elections at presidential, legislative and municipal levels. However, through a combination of coercion and incentives (thanks to his control over public resources), he maintained power for 14 years and his party controlled the National Assembly, dominating every election to the legislative assembly.

In 2005, Colonel Ould Taya was ousted by his closest collaborators, including then Presidential Guard Commander, Ould Abdel Aziz. This transitional period led to the holding of the country's freest and fairest municipal and legislative elections in 2006, and presidential elections in 2007. Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi won the presidential election, though clearly with the support of key officers including Colonel Ould Abdel Aziz (soon General). However, the elected president was ousted in August 2008, after 17 months in power, by the same officers who had staged the 2005 coup and who had controlled the security apparatus since then. Ould Abdel Aziz's coup was severely condemned by most bilateral donors and by the African Union. Ould Abdel Aziz then organized a presidential election in 2009, which he won in the first round. His party, the Union pour la République (UPR) controlled a majority of seats in the National Assembly. By 2014, Ould Abdel Aziz and the UPR had consolidated their grip on political power.

Between 2005 and 2010, the country was targeted by armed jihadist groups, which attacked military garrisons and foreigners. The presence of radical Islamist groups throughout the Sahel has led Western countries, notably France and the US, to channel more financial and material resources to Mauritania, and increase their diplomatic support for the regime. The outbreak of the war in Mali in 2012 is a problem for Mauritania, as a growing number of Mauritians (White Moors and some Haratin) have joined these groups. Despite the relative calm in Mali since 2013 and the absence of any attacks in Mauritania, these groups remain a serious threat.

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

Unlike in previous review periods, there has been no attack by armed groups on Mauritanian soil during the current period. The government has been able to assert its control over Mauritanian territory. When French forces launched Operation Serval, in northern Mali in January 2013, analysts noted the possibility that armed groups may move into Mauritania. While there has been no indication that this has occurred, the border with Mali remains under tight surveillance. The region of the Wagadu forest, which straddles the border, is especially closely monitored, as a number of attacks have been launched from this region in the past. The town of Nbeiket Lahwach, built in 2010 and the official capital of the new department of Muqata'a since 2011, has become a strategic outpost from which to monitor part of the Mali-Mauritania border. Since the end of the French operation and reduction in the military presence in Mali, it is possible that Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) militants have returned to the northern towns of Mali. In January 2015, AQIM launched an attack against the Malian army base of Nampala and killed dozens of Malian soldiers. Nampala is located only a few kilometers south of the border with Mauritania. Sources have indicated that the AQIM militants came from the Wagadu forest.

Issues of identity and equality among Mauritians remain a major challenge. Non-Arabic speaking communities (i.e., the Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana) and the Arabic-speaking Haratin (also known as freed slaves), continue to be marginalized. Positions of power in the political, economic and security apparatus are typically held by Bidhân (Arabic-speaking “White Moors”) individuals.

Many non-Arabic-speaking people feel politically unrepresented and believe that the official vision is of an exclusively Arab Mauritania. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects the security personnel involved in the assassination and deportation of ethnic minorities between 1989 and 1991, has not been repealed yet. Without due investigation of past human rights violations, and the ensuing legal actions, the ethnic

Question
Score

Monopoly on the
use of force

8

State identity

6

peace remains fragile. Also, very few individuals from these ethnic groups are nominated in key positions in strategic state ministries, such as the Ministries of Defense, Justice and the Interior. That no non-Arabic-speaking army officers were nominated for promotion to a senior level in October 2014 provides further evidence of this trend. Finally, tensions have arisen about the population census and registration process that the government has been carrying out since 2011. Refugees who were expelled from Mauritania in 1989, but have since returned, continue to experience administrative hurdles when attempting to obtain proper identity cards.

The Haratin, who were historically the servants of Bidhân families, continue to live in the most difficult situation. In 2007, a law was passed criminalizing slavery-related activities. It was reinforced in 2012 with the addition of an article that eliminated the 10-year applicable limitation (“prescription”). However, since 2007, no “master” has received a custodial sentence after being convicted of slavery practices. In January 2014, the government has decided to create a special tribunal on matters related to slavery. However, this decision remains to be implemented. NGOs claim that the relevant judicial tools already exist and that the main challenge is the reluctance of state officials to use these tools.

The leaders of one of the main Haratin organizations, Biram Dah Ould Abeid and Brahim Ould Bilal, and of Haalpulaar organization, Djiby Sow, were arrested in Rosso in the southwest of Mauritania in November 2014. Following their arrest they were successfully prosecuted and received custodial sentences. At the time of their arrest, they had been participating in an event that aimed to educate Haratin as to their land and property rights. They were accused of belonging to an illegal organization and of participating in an unauthorized meeting that threatened public order. They were convicted and given two-year jail sentences. One of these individuals, Biram Dah Ould Abeid, had been a candidate in the 2014 presidential election. This verdict was interpreted as an attack on the rights of ethnic minorities.

Officially, Mauritania is an Islamic republic. However, the role of Islam as a foundation of the state is ambiguous. Islam is the religion of the state. But institutions of the state combine both Islamic and secular elements. The constitution states that “Islamic precepts are the only source of Law,” but they are “open to the exigencies of the modern world.” The criminal code combines elements of both Shariah and French law. The code of personal status (family code) is mostly inspired by the Islamic law. Yet popular sovereignty, not God, is the foundation of most key state institutions (i.e., the presidency, the National Assembly and the Senate), and Mauritania abides by most international conventions, including the (secular) Human Rights Charter. In December 2014, a young man accused of apostasy (he argued against the use of Islam to justify the marginalization of the low social status of blacksmiths) was sentenced to the death penalty, on the basis of Shariah law. The president hosted the religious groups who spearheaded the demonstrations against the apostate and promised that the all necessary measures would be undertaken to protect

No interference of religious dogmas

4

Islam and its Prophet, and reaffirmed the republic's position that Islam is above everything, including democracy and liberty. This was the first individual to be sentenced to death for the crime of apostasy. Informal social norms, which follow religious dogma, often prevail over formal law.

The state's capacity to broadcast its authority throughout the territory and to provide for basic administrative services is improving, but it varies from one region to another. For example, the presence of the state is strongly asserted in the capital-city, but much less so in peripheral regions. Access to public services is often predicated upon an individual's group identity. Haratin, for instance, have less chance of successfully petitioning judicial and police authorities than Bidhân. All administrative regions have courts, but most are understaffed and underfinanced, and undermined by arbitrary decisions. The judicial system is becoming more specialized, however, with courts dedicated specifically to "economic crime" and, since 2014, a court specializing on crimes related to slavery. Although, the latter court exists on paper only as of yet. The Mauritanian Tax Agency (Direction générale des impôts; DGI) and the State General Inspectorate (IGE, Inspection générale de l'État) often undertake visible operations that send a message about the state's capacity to collect taxes and to discipline unlawful actions by agents or agencies of the state. The president announced, at the end of 2014, that the State General Inspectorate would be more systematic in its investigation of the administration's various agencies, though political objectives may trump this announcement.

Basic
administration
6

2 | Political Participation

Mauritania has held two major elections during the period under review, with the first round of the local and national legislative elections taking place on 11 November 2013 and the second round on 21 December 2013. The presidential election was held on 21 June 2014. Since the establishment of a multiparty system in 1991, a pattern has emerged in which the incumbent dominates presidential, national and local elections. In this instance, the incumbent was retired General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who staged the 2008 coup d'état and won the following 2009 presidential election. His party completely controls the National Assembly and a majority of municipal councils. With the exception of a short-lived Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi presidency between 2007 and 2008 that ended in a coup d'état, all heads of state have come to power through a coup d'état, and retained power through elections. Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz won the recent election in the first round without the need for a second, with 81.89% of votes. Most opposition figures boycotted the election, arguing that conditions for a transparent election had not been met. The leading figure of the Haratin movement, Biram Dah Ould Abeid, came second with 8.7% of votes. Biram Dah Ould Abeid has since been arrested and sentenced to jail. Voter turnout in the last presidential election was a relatively low 53%.

Free and fair
elections
3

After a delay of two years, officially attributed to problems with the civil registry, legislative and municipal elections were held. There were so many problems with the organization of the elections that authorities had to postpone the second round from 7 December to 21 December 2013. These problems remain highly debated, as opposition parties claim that many voters, especially from marginalized groups, had been excluded. To add to these problems, the British firm contracted to print the ballot papers is currently being prosecuted in the UK for corruption.

President Ould Abdel Aziz's party, the Union for the Republic, like that of his predecessor, Ould Taya in the 1990s and early 2000s, won a majority of seats in the National Assembly, 75 out of 146 seats. If other parties loyal to the president are added, the presidential coalition controls a total of 108 seats or 74% of the National Assembly. It also won control of 154 out of 218 municipal authorities. The majority of opposition parties boycotted the local and national elections, having formed the Democratic Opposition Coordination. Two parties, however, chose not to join the boycott. These were the Islamist party, Tawassoul, and the Progress Popular Alliance led by Messaoud Ould Boulkheir, a key figure within the Haratin movement.

Since the 2008 coup d'état, Ould Abdel Aziz controls the state apparatus. In particular, Ould Abdel Aziz controls the Interior Ministry, which has a significant role in organizing elections and provides support to the Independent National Electoral Commission. This Commission is chaired by seven members, who are appointed by the President. The latter must choose amongst a list of 14 individuals submitted to him by the majority party in the National Assembly and the opposition parties.

In November 2013, only two weeks before the local and national elections, the government created a new National Electoral Observatory. With only fourteen days before the first round of elections, opposition parties and civil society criticized the Observatory for a lack preparation to properly fulfill its mission. They also pointed to the fact that no civil society organizations were consulted about the creation of the Observatory and that there many overlaps between the mission of the Observatory and that of the Independent National Electoral Commission.

Mauritania's political system can be defined as hyper-presidential. The president has significant formal and informal power. Other elected institutions - the National Assembly, the Senate and local municipal councils - are highly dependent on the president. Furthermore, all presidents since 1978, with one short exception, were previously officers in the armed forces. Due to the Western Sahara War, Mauritania was ruled by serving officers between 1978 and 1991 and by retired officers since 1991. The only exception to this pattern was the 17-month rule of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi between 2007 and 2008. However, even in this case Abdallahi had been chosen by the military junta that held power before his election. Once attaining office, Abdallahi was monitored by his personal military chief-of-staff, the now retired

Effective power to govern

2

general and current president Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who eventually forcefully replaced him as president. In summary, the military is the de facto decision-maker in Mauritanian politics. While the Western Sahara War brought the military to the forefront of politics, the recent presence of armed Islamist groups in the region has enabled the military to consolidate its hold on power. For example, Ould Abdel Aziz was able to gain an advantage during the 2014 presidential election based on his security credentials.

Article 11 of the 1991 constitution guarantees the right of association and assembly. Though initially ignored in practice, its implementation has increased, especially since 2005 and the ousting of Ould Taya. Opposition parties and NGOs are allowed to exist and operate without being repressed. Although once banned, the Islamist movement and its associated political party have been officially recognized since 2007. There are, however, issues that remain highly sensitive and elicit strong pressure from the state, such as advocating for the rights of the Haratin and other ethnic minorities. For example, leaders of the “Initiative pour la resurgence du mouvement abolitionniste” (an anti-slavery movement), “Touche pas à ma nationalité” (a group that defends the rights of Black Africans) and Kawtal ngam yellitaare (also known as “Rassemblement pour le progrès en langue peule” and represents the Peul ethnic group) were arrested in July 2013, April 2014 and December 2014. The arrested individuals had taken part in a long walk to educate Haratin and other marginalized groups about land ownership rights. They were prosecuted and found guilty of belonging to illegal organizations and to organizing unauthorized meetings that threatened public security. They were sentenced to two years in jail.

Association /
assembly rights

6

Generally speaking, citizens and journalists have not been harassed for publicly expressing the opinion. Political opinions can be expressed relatively freely, as Article 10 of the constitution guarantees freedom of expression. However, when the media report on specific cases of corruption, and if these cases involve high-ranking people, the limits to freedom of expression may be felt. Twenty years after many of its African neighbors, the Mauritanian government finally authorized the creation of independent television and radio groups; until 2011, the state-owned TV and radio enjoyed a monopoly of airwaves. There are now five private television stations. The Haute autorité de la presse et de l’audiovisuel (HAPA) supervises the sector of the media and the liberalization process. However, few operating licenses have been granted; independent TV and radio companies face difficult financial constraints, and at times political ones. Issues related to ethnic minorities’ mistreatment and the conditions of Haratin cannot be easily discussed. A journalist resigned from a TV station after he was prohibited from interviewing a leading non-Arabic speaking figure in 2014. This is the same station that from which senior staff had resigned three years earlier, having been pressured not to provide too many non-Arabic language programs. Some journalists have been harassed by private individuals. There is

Freedom of
expression

7

evidence that senior officials are using informal means to put pressure journalists, rather than relying on security forces, to be discreet and avoid criticism. Well-known journalist Hanevy Ould Dehah, who was arrested in 2009, was attacked by three men in January 2015. Hanevy Ould Dehah had published an article pointing to instances of corruption by close relatives of the president. He later indicated that his assailants were nephews of the president. In addition, Hanevy Ould Dahah's brother was fired from his job at the Nouakchott Port.

3 | Rule of Law

The Mauritanian system can be defined as hyper-presidential, meaning that the president has substantial power. The separation of powers is both formally and informally weak. The 1991 constitution, slightly amended in 2006 by way of popular referendum, provides for a semi-presidential system heavily tilting in favor of the executive branch. The president is directly elected by the population (and since the 2006 amendments cannot serve more than two consecutive terms). The president has the power to dissolve the National Assembly, which in turn cannot impeach him. However, the National Assembly can pass a vote of no confidence against the prime minister and his cabinet (who are appointed by the president). The president also has decree and extensive appointment powers; he can unilaterally and without veto from another institution appoint almost all top positions in the state apparatus, including half of the most important judicial institutions, the Constitutional Council and its chairperson. After the current president came to power through a coup d'état in 2008, the National Assembly, which the president's party dominates, passed in January 2013 a law that criminalized unconstitutional changes of power, including a coup d'état. In addition to the substantial formal power provided to the president, informal institutional arrangements ensure that the president, high-ranking military officers and affluent business leaders hold significant political influence. Tensions between these latter groups have led to a series of coups d'état since 1978.

Separation of powers

3

Formally, judicial independence is guaranteed by Article 89 of the 1991 constitution. A constitutional change was made in March 2012, which provides for more autonomy for judges and attorneys (the High Council of the Judiciary is now divided in two distinct sections, one with jurisdiction for judges, the other for public prosecutors). However, the centralized presidential system provides the president with major powers over the judiciary, including his right to appoint three of the six judges sitting in the Constitutional Court, including its chairman; his right to appoint the Chair of the Supreme Court, with no institution provided with the right to confirm or veto this appointment; the right to appoint all five Islamic scholars of the High Islamic Council. Informal practices also weaken the judiciary. For instance, the Chair of the Supreme Court normally serves a five-year term, but the President has already replaced the Chair of the Supreme Court on four occasions in the last five years. The

Independent judiciary

4

latest change occurred in May 2012, when Judge Ould Ghaylani was replaced by Ould Mohamed Youssouf after only two years into his term. At the time of writing, Ould Mohamed Youssouf remains Chair of the Supreme Court. In early 2015, the first and only female judge was appointed (to a lower court). Furthermore, the informal political influence, exerted through executive pressure, financial incentives and tribal connections is a major problem. The judiciary, like all other branches of the administration excluding key security agencies, is understaffed and underfunded. In July 2014, the new Chair of the Mauritanian Bar Association (Batônnier de l'Ordre National des Avocats), Cheikh Ould Hindi, was elected. For many, the victory of Ould Hindi, who was a member of the Constitutional Council and the former ruling party, was proof of the substantial influence of the executive on the process. Ould Hindi is said to be close to the presidential circle, which had sought to prevent a well-known human rights lawyers gaining control over the lawyers' association. The conviction of the Haratin and Black African activists in December 2014 also raised suspicions about judicial independence.

Corruption and embezzlement, by state officials and civil servants, was a major theme in President Ould Abdel Aziz's election campaigns of 2009 and 2014. Two main state agencies are in charge of investigating public servants' and politicians' ethical misconduct and conflicts of interests, namely the Court of Accounts (Cour des Comptes) and the State General Inspectorate (Inspection générale de l'État, IGE). The Court of Accounts was created in 1993 is led by a chairperson appointed by the president, while the IGE was created in 2005 and is led by an inspector general who is nominated by the prime minister. The IGE had the freedom to investigate all public institutions. Its independence from the executive is at stake, however. In 2014, the IGE launched a series of high-level inspections across the country. Among those targeted were the Nouadhibou Port, regional branches of the Finance Ministry, Municipal Councils, the National Electric Company and the Food Security Commissariat; as well as Mauritanian embassies abroad. This was a clear signal that the IGE intended to closely monitor public agencies for corruption. However, the IGE's chairpersons can be appointed and dismissed easily and many appointed chairpersons are officially members of the ruling party. Therefore, suspicions remain as to the capacity for IGE to act independently. For example, in 2011, Aicha Vall Mint Verges was appointed chair of the IGE while also being the chair of the ruling party's Women's Commission. Her predecessor was the executive secretary of the UPR, the presidential party. Between 2013 and 2015, the IGE's chairperson was Mahfoudh Ould Mohamed Aly, who had served as a minister under the authoritarian regime of Ould Taya. He was dismissed in early January 2015 and replaced by Mohamed Ould Guig, who had served as prime minister under Ould Taya. Such close political connections with the current ruling party (UPR) and the previous ruling party of Ould Taya, raise concerns their capacity to act independently of executive power, and those formally and informally associated with the current President. A key test that could signal the independence of the State General Inspectorate has to include

Prosecution of
office abuse
4

the inspection of public agencies chaired by close allies of the president and high-ranking military officers.

The Cour des Comptes has also undertaken some investigations. However, its latest annual report was published in 2006. Since then, no report has been published. In September 2014, another institution has been created to tackle corruption, the Committee in Charge of Implementing the National Strategy against Corruption.

The state of civil rights in Mauritania has improved since 2005, but the regime remains authoritarian and as such significant problems persist.

Civil rights
5

Nouakchott's main prison, Dar Naim, is renowned for its frequent violations of human rights. Officially, there are only 1,700 prisoners and 16 prisons, but two thirds of these prisoners are located in the Dar Naim prison. At the end of January 2015, alleged Jihadist prisoners took two Dar Naim prison guards hostage, claiming that they had not been released despite serving their prison sentence. The case of other Islamist terrorist prisoners is also problematic. National security concerns make it almost impossible to know whether due process is being followed. After receiving custodial sentences, they are sent to secret institutions and kept in secret conditions.

The fate of slaves and former slaves remains a central civil rights issue. Though the government now has an additional legal tool it can use to fight slavery (i.e., the 2012 law which makes slavery and torture crimes against humanity illegal), only one person has been convicted of slavery and this person was released early from jail. NGOs still great difficulty bringing cases of slavery to justice. Slave owning families always succeed, through informal means, in circumventing the anti-slavery law. In rural areas, customary rules are coequal with, and often prevail over, state laws. In such contexts, the rights of Haratin and of women remain a significant concern. Similarly, the arrests of the leaders of the Haratin and Black African rights' movements in 2013 and 2014 send a negative signal to human rights activists.

Finally, the Law of Amnesty of 1993, which prohibits any investigation and prosecution of military officers involved in acts of assassination and torture against Black African minorities between 1989 and 1991 remains in place. Some of the officers involved in these dramatic events are still active, including the recently nominated Director of the National Security General Directorate. In October 2014, the Human Rights National Commission has put in place a new Mechanism for the Prevention of Torture. Whether this new mechanism will receive sufficient resources to operate and undertake substantive inquiries remains yet to be seen.

4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Democratic institutions in Mauritania exist, but they do not operate according to common democratic norms. On the one hand, the position of president as well as seats in the National Assembly, Senate and on municipal councils have been publicly elected since 1991. An Independent National Electoral Commission, with support from the Interior Ministry, is in charge of organizing elections. The constitution also provides for the separation of powers. However, in practice, since 1978, the country has been governed by military officers in fatigue or in civilian clothes. Following his coup against democratically elected president Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (a civilian) in 2008, General Ould Abdel Aziz organized two presidential elections, in 2009 and 2014, which he won, the latest with more than 81% of the votes. His party exerts hegemonic control over all elected assemblies, like that of the former PRDS party under the 1991 to 2005 regime of Ould Taya. Since 1991, no opposition party has been able to win a legislative assembly. The only mechanism of presidential change has been that of coup d'état with all heads of state, excluding the short Ould Cheikh Abdellahi reign, having been military officers. Consequently, the military systematically controlling the political arena. The likelihood of a full retreat of the military is small, especially given the securitization of the state in response to Jihadist operations in neighboring countries.

Performance of democratic institutions

3

Top officials do not accept democratic institutions. The re-election of Ould Abdel Aziz confirms the dominance of military officers in Mauritanian politics. His party's control over all elected assemblies perpetuates a pattern established by previous presidents. The degree or intensity of authoritarian rule, however, has softened since the departure of Ould Taya (2005). Opposition parties and civil society groups are able to criticize the government without fearing outright oppression as in other North African states for instance. However, the systematic arrests of Haratin and Black African activists, critical of the equitability of the distribution of land rights and the economic remuneration of labor, indicates severe limits to the ability to democratically express dissenting opinions.

Commitment to democratic institutions

2

5 | Political and Social Integration

Since the creation of formal democratic institutions in 1991, the party system has not changed significantly. Under both Ould Taya (1991 - 2005) and Ould Abdel Aziz (2008 - present), the party system is fully dominated by the military-turned-civilian president's party (Ould Abdel Aziz's Union pour la République, UPR, since 2009 and previously the PRDS under Ould Taya), allied with small pro-president parties. The opposition parties are often split among themselves, disagreeing as to whether to boycott elections or not. In the last legislative election, the presidential party and its allies captured 108 out of the 146 seats of the National Assembly (i.e., 74% of seats).

Party system

5

Similar to other authoritarian systems, factionalism within the ruling party is a major source of competition and tension, as local rivals compete for the ruling party's local branch, with the losing faction either creating an independent group, defecting to the opposition or seeking to undermine their rival while staying within the ruling party. With most opposition parties boycotting the 2013 legislative elections, the Islamist party, Tawassoul, became the official opposition despite only holding 16 out of the 146 in the National Assembly.

Political parties are not well institutionalized. The ruling party is a constellation of local notables, businessmen and civil servants, who pledge allegiance to the president. Their positions are dependent on the formal and informal patronage of the president. However, the capacity of the ruling party to co-opt former opponents is very high. This has been the case since the introduction of party politics in the 1940s. Opposition parties can count on small loyal social bases, defined by ethnicity, region or caste. These opposition parties are always susceptible to being co-opted by the ruling party. Tawassoul is more socially diverse, despite counting very few Black Africans among its rank and file, but its social basis is also relatively small.

In the past, fraud on election day was not always necessary. Votes in favor of the ruling party could simply be secured through its control of neo-patrimonial channels. For example, this could include the distribution of public resources to communities that supported it, while withdrawing resources from those that opposed it. Consequently, opposition parties find it difficult to mobilize large sectors of the electorate. The neo-patrimonial character of the party system is also an explanation for the recent reform of the electoral code (January 2013), whereby the number of seats in the National Assembly has increased from 95 to 146, of which 20 are constituted by a women-only national list. This 46% increase in the number of seats cannot be explained by any major demographic changes.

The representation of societal interests in Mauritania is rarely undertaken through formal interest groups. Informal networks - based on tribal and ethnic ties, as well as personal connections through village life, education, occupational experiences and religious orientation - constitute the main mechanism of representing different interest groups. These networks are very fluid and multifaceted. They often change and are less visible than formal networks, but are much more significant. There are a number of formal groups, which include civil servant, students and labor unions as well as the employers' associations and a large number of NGOs. Most NGOs, however, are either empty shells or entities created by individuals to capture international aid. Only a few NGOs play a significant role in addressing social problems, which include some anti-slavery organizations (IRA and SOS-esclaves) as well as some that target minority rights issues, such as ethnic rights (Touche pas à ma nationalité, TPMN), women's rights (Association des femmes chefs de famille) and human rights.

Interest groups

4

Quantitative surveys, like those of the Afrobarometer, that measure popular support for democracy do not exist. Ethnographic studies, however, suggest that Haratin communities have drawn on constitutional texts to defend their interests against the arbitrary abuses of power by former slave owners. These ethnographic studies do indicate that many citizens value notions of protection from state abuse, fair representation, the right to be treated fairly and justly. However, the aggregation of localized studies to the national level remains problematic.

Approval of
democracy
n/a

No systematic survey or statistical analysis of social capital has been undertaken in Mauritania. As explained in section 5.3 on Interest Groups, Mauritians in general are connected to various networks whereby trust, cooperation and loyalty are defined by village, tribal, religious and/or personal relations. This can include informal local associations, brotherhoods organized around Sufi saints, age-set associations, tribes, or self-organized micro-credit 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 exist several informal mechanisms to strengthen relations among members and to sanction those who violate the trust of others. Among the Bidhân population, the importance of tribal affiliation is often said to be the most important social linkage, where trust is at its strongest. However, the saliency of rivalry between tribal members should not be underestimated, especially among those who aspire to play an important political role. Hence, the most acute struggles often pit tribal kin one against the others.

Social capital
4

II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Despite being rich in natural resources, Mauritania and its Sahelian neighbors are among the poorest African countries. Mauritania is defined as a low human development country. Its Human Development Index score for 2014 was 0.487 and it ranked 161 out of 187 countries, a loss of two places on its previous ranking. As measured by the UNDP, 42.8% of the population lives in severe poverty. At the time of writing, Mauritania's Gini index is 40.7. Mauritania has a GNI per capita (Atlas Method) of \$1,060, below the African average of \$1,657. The mean year of schooling is low, at 3.7 years. Gender-wise, there is still much progress to be made, with a Gender Inequality Index score of 0.644 with a rank of 142 out of 187 countries. The maternal mortality ratio is high at 510 deaths per 100,000 live births. Also, only 8%

Question
Score

Socioeconomic
barriers
3

of women (25 years and older) have at least some secondary education, compared to 21% of men (2005-2012), according to the UNDP.

These numbers point to larger socio-political patterns. First, Mauritania's economy is a highly bifurcated. The formal economy (i.e., oil & mining sector, fishery and government sector) accounts for only 13% of the employment. The remaining household income is made up by agricultural and other sectors of the informal economy, remittances from abroad as well as official and private foreign aid. Second, ethnicity, caste (or 'social status'), and regional identities impact individuals' and groups' socioeconomic positions. Upward social mobility among the Haratin as well as other ethnic minorities is restricted by political barriers. In Nouakchott, wealthy families and the very small middle class (usually made of the small formal sector) send their children to the burgeoning private schools, whereas public schools, which are understaffed and underfinanced, are attended mostly by Haratin children. As a recent 2015 IMF report suggests, most MDGs appear to be out of reach.

| Economic indicators | | 2005 | 2010 | 2013 | 2014 |
|---------------------------|----------|--------|--------|---------|---------------|
| GDP | \$ M | 2184.4 | 4337.8 | 5057.8 | 5061.2 |
| GDP growth | % | 9.0 | 4.8 | 5.7 | 6.4 |
| Inflation (CPI) | % | 12.1 | 6.3 | 4.1 | 3.5 |
| Unemployment | % | 32.1 | 31.1 | 31.0 | - |
| Foreign direct investment | % of GDP | 37.3 | 3.0 | 22.3 | - |
| Export growth | % | 0.0 | 3.2 | 6.7 | -9.0 |
| Import growth | % | 26.8 | 19.0 | -1.9 | -9.2 |
| Current account balance | \$ M | - | - | -1261.8 | - |
| Public debt | % of GDP | 154.8 | 80.3 | 76.4 | 76.6 |
| External debt | \$ M | 2321.8 | 2705.2 | 3570.5 | - |
| Total debt service | \$ M | 65.5 | 112.8 | 165.1 | - |

| Economic indicators | | 2005 | 2010 | 2013 | 2014 |
|----------------------------|----------|------|------|------|-------------|
| Cash surplus or deficit | % of GDP | - | - | - | - |
| Tax revenue | % of GDP | - | - | - | - |
| Government consumption | % of GDP | 25.2 | 19.9 | 20.3 | 21.1 |
| Public expnd. on education | % of GDP | - | 4.4 | 4.0 | - |
| Public expnd. on health | % of GDP | 2.0 | 2.1 | 1.8 | - |
| R&D expenditure | % of GDP | - | - | - | - |
| Military expenditure | % of GDP | 3.1 | - | 2.9 | 2.9 |

Sources (as of October 2015): The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2015 | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook, October 2015 | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database 2015.

7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

Since the early 2000s, the 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." This is supported by the World Bank's 2015 Doing Business, which ranked Mauritania 176 out of 189 countries, a loss of three places compared to 2014. In other words, Mauritania ranked in the bottom 15 countries of the world. The economic legal environment has been reformed extensively, with the adoption of many codes whose task is both to standardize and liberalize the economy. Recent reforms have aimed to make the investment environment safer, in order to attract more domestic and foreign investment into the economy. These have included reforms to the Investments Codes in July 2012, the Mining Code in February 2012 and the Public Contracts Code in 2010. Workshops on Public Contracts reforms were held throughout 2014, but no reform proposal has been presented. The World Bank representative in Mauritania highlighted this problem in 2014. More generally, the actual implementation of these codes seems very challenging. Furthermore, the informal sector dominates Mauritanian economy. A 2015 IMF report indicated that employment in the formal sector represented only 13% of total employment.

At the end of 2014, some changes were introduced that make it easier to start a business. The creation of a new public agency has reduced the number of procedures required to register a business from nine to seven and the number of days to do so from 19 to five.

The national currency, the Ouguiya, can be exchanged in Mauritania only.

Market-based
competition
3

The Mauritanian economy has a strong oligopolistic tendency. 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; private security). The businessmen heading these oligopolistic conglomerates do change with each change of regime, but the system itself has not changed significantly. Depending on the ruler of the moment, and his relationship with one or some of these families, some conglomerates will fall while others will rise (two of these enormous companies went through some turbulences during the transitional period between the Ould Taya regime and the current regime). A 2013 World Bank report confirmed, as most analysts had been saying, 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.” For instance, one of Mauritania’s three most prominent conglomerates, which is run by Ould Bouamatou, the cousin and former ally of the current president, has become a target of President Ould Abdel Aziz’s presidency. As in many other countries, the strategy used against Ould Bouamatou consisted of a tax audit. Audits are political tools, used against potential rivals, former allies, opponents and the like. In this case, tax audits were launched against three of Ould Bouamatou’s and the country’s largest companies: GSM the most important bank in Mauritania, Mattel a telecommunications enterprise and BSA Ciment, a cement company. The Tax agency claims Ould Bouamatou owes €10 million in unpaid taxes. Ould Bouamatou has since moved to Morocco.

A 2013 IMF report stated that the Mauritanian economy was hampered by a “rent economy, concentrated on very few sectors that is easily captured by a very small political and economic elite.” A 2014 risk analysis report similarly noted that “because oligopolistic local conglomerates dominate the mining industry, it is common for contracts and licenses to be awarded to the relatives and associates of local politicians.” It is worth recalling that a 2011 IMF report (the IMF being generally very cautious and diplomatic in tone) explained that “oligopolistic structures in many key domestic markets interfere with an efficient allocation of resources, limiting productivity and employment growth.”

The government has signaled its desire to further liberalize Mauritania’s international trade. This has included the establishment of a free trade zone in the port city of Nouadhibou, which was made possible through a January 2013 law. The port of Nouadhibou is key for the export of iron from Mauritania to international markets. The agency in charge of this free trade zone, however, has faced difficulties attracting investors for this project with no international investors having been found. A 2015 IMF report noted that non-tariff barriers continue to be a significant problem. In 2015,

Anti-monopoly
policy

2

Liberalization of
foreign trade

5

Doing Business reported that Mauritania had lost two places from the previous year in its Trading Across Borders indicator, dropping from the 149 to 151. The World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Index for 2014 and 2015 provides further evidence of similar patterns with Mauritania ranked 141 out of 144 countries. The WTO 2011 review indicates that "since its previous Trade Policy Review (TPR) in 2002, Mauritania has experienced a marked slow-down in the pace of its trade measure reforms." In line with the importance of the informal economy, the export-import sector, especially licenses, can become political tools to reward those loyal to the regime and punish those seen as a threat. Also, international trade is not limited to legal goods and services. For example, Mauritania, like other countries of the region, is not immune to drug trafficking or other illegal goods (e.g., stolen cars, cigarettes, weapons or expired medications). The trafficking of illegal goods and services rests on complex networks that involve public officials.

In 2015, Mauritania has about 20 banks, excluding informal credit organizations. However, they have a low profitability and low penetration rate, and a weak financial inclusion rate. Women, young people, and ethnic and 'caste' groups are largely excluded from it. Only 17% of the population have accounts in a formal financial institution, according to the World Bank. Distribution of branches is also thin with only five commercial branches per 100,000 inhabitants, compared to 23 in Morocco, 18 in Tunisia and four in Mali. As a 2013 World Bank report stated, "in effect, most local banks behave as if they were departments of commercial and industrial groups, and deal mainly with the members of those groups; customers that do not belong to a group have difficulty obtaining financial services."

Banking system

4

In the World Bank's 2014 assessments of "bank capital to assets ratio" and "bank nonperforming loans", Mauritania does not appear due to a lack of data availability. Although a 2015 IMF report estimates that in 2013, the capital to asset ratio was 18.7%. Also, the World Bank scored Mauritania two out of 12 for its Strength of Legal Right Index (where zero is weakest and 12 is strongest) and zero out of eight for its Depth of Credit Information Index (where zero is weakest and eight is strongest).

At the end of 2014, the Central Bank of Mauritania (CBM) terminated the agreement it had with two banks, the Tamkeen Bank and the Maurisbank. This almost shut them down. The CEO of the Maurisbank appeared before court in early 2015, while the CBM Governor was sacked a few weeks later. The CBM's lack of control over Mauritania's bank system allows the banks to continue their operations despite obvious deficiencies. Many analysts argue that Mauritania's banks can undertake highly suspicious activities free from the monitoring of public authorities. The development of the banking system followed that of the mining and oil sector, but has not been regulated in any efficient way. These banks are also closely connected to oligopolistic commercial groups, with ties to specific tribal groups.

Accordingly, the IMF concluded in 2015 that “the financial system remains small, underdeveloped, and constrained by dependence on short-term funding.” Also, it stated that “the banking sector is well capitalized and liquid,” while also stating that it “remains fragile to shocks. High credit concentration (including credit to the public sector), foreign-exchange risk exposures, and low profitability due to a constrained business model and higher competition exacerbate banking vulnerabilities.”

More importantly, for average Mauritians, most of whom do not have access to bank accounts, it appears that microcredit is on the rise. A 2007 law clarified the micro-finance sector. The law separated the regular banking sector and the micro-finance sector, while opening it to various legal entities, including NGOs and associations. There is one national micro-credit organization. The Islamic banking system is also developing, with five banks, though with little regulatory framework to monitor this sector at the moment.

8 | Currency and Price Stability

The Mauritanian economy is strongly exposed to fluctuations in world commodity prices for both exports (e.g., oil, minerals and fish) and imports (e.g., fuel and foodstuffs).

Anti-inflation /
forex policy

6

Between 2013 and 2014, inflation increased from 4.1% to 5%, and is forecasted to reach 5.5% in 2015). External shocks, including significant changes in world commodity prices, are a constant threat to the price stability of commodities in Mauritania. Fuel and foodstuffs rank high in the country’s major imports and are key determinants of inflation. A decrease in fuel prices in the second half of 2014 ensured inflation remained at a moderate level.

During this period, the BCM (Central Bank of Mauritania) has not taken any significant anti-inflationary measures. But its independence vis-à-vis the president’s office continues to be a central issue and constitutes a central recommendation of the IMF, namely “improve CBM independence by clarifying the conditions of dismissal of the governor and protecting the staff vis-à-vis decisions made as part of their mandate.” A few months after his 5-year second term had been renewed, the BCM governor was sacked and replaced in early 2015.

Official exchange rates in Mauritania, regulated by the BCM, often contrast with exchange rates in informal markets. In 2014, the Ouguiya depreciated against the dollar, though not against the euro. In early 2015, the IMF noted that “weaker foreign exchange repatriation from mining companies to Mauritania and no EU fishing compensation have decreased gross reserves to US\$639 million in December 2014 from US\$996 million at end-2013, to close to five months of prospective imports excluding those related to extractive industries.”

In Mauritania, as in the other Sahelian countries, food prices, and access to food more generally, proved problematic. The whole region, including Mauritania, has seen a significant drop in cereal production in 2014, due to a severe drought. The government, through the Food Security Commissariat (CSA), which provides low priced foodstuffs to the population and Emel stores which also plays a similar role, had to intervene to provide support to affected communities. The EU and the African Development Bank provided extra support in 2014 to tackle these problems that affected the rural sector. Unfortunately, the main auditing agency, the State General Inspectorate, found serious corruption-related problems within the CSA in 2014 and in many Emel stores (including misappropriation of cereals and other foodstuff), thus hindering their capacity to truly play their role.

A 2015 IMF report noted that no progress on reducing national debt had been observed. Mauritania's vulnerability is closely associated with its debt distress, which is defined as high. In 2012, it had been defined as moderate. This situation is exacerbated by a decreased in revenues from the extractive industries in 2014. National debt levels remain elevated and are primarily comprised of public debt, either multilateral or bilateral. It is nonetheless considered as sound precisely because of the multi- and bilateral sources of its creditors. Specifically, the public debt is relatively high, at 87.6% of GDP in 2013. Foreign debt increased slightly from \$3.3bn in 2012 to \$3.6bn in 2013 to \$4bn in 2014. The total debt service has increased from \$143bn in 2012 to \$164bn in 2013. In 2015, the IMF noted that the Central Bank of Mauritania "stepped up its volume of foreign exchange sales in both fixing sessions and direct sales from US\$1.2 billion in 2012 to US\$1.5 billion in 2013, and kept a similar trend during 2014 with sales totaling US\$1.5 billion." At the end of 2014, "reserve levels remained stable (6½ months of prospective imports excluding those related to the extractive industries," according to the IMF, with \$0.9bn in 2013 and an estimated \$1.1bn in 2014. For its part, the current account balance has deteriorated, from a negative \$1.32bn in 2012 to a negative \$1.37bn in 2013 and to a negative \$1.58bn in 2014. This is largely due to falling prices of export commodities, such as iron ore and oil (respectively the largest and third largest sources of revenue). Government consumption remained steady in 2012 and 2013, at 17% of GDP. In 2014, tax revenue collection increased, but government spending also increased. Hence, "fiscal consolidation did not result in improved non-extractive fiscal balances and external debt maintained an upward trend and remains elevated at 73% of GDP at the end of 2014," the IMF noted. On 1 January 2015, the National Assembly approved a \$5.1bn budget for 2015.

Macrostability
5

9 | Private Property

Private property is guaranteed by Article 15 of the 1991 constitution, with further property rights outlined by the Investments Code, reformed in 2012. Land property is regulated under the 1983 Law on Land Tenure, which was clarified in a 2000 decree, and also the Urbanism Code. The number of procedures to register a business have been reduced from nine to seven and the number of days to do so from 19 to five.

With the majority of the population living in rural areas or on partly- or non-registered urban land, private property rights remain one of the most politically critical and perilous aspects. For instance, the arrest of ‘freed slaves’ activists in 2014 was directly related to the issue of land access for the country’s most marginalized and numerous social groups. Since 2009, the government has implemented a policy of land registration and attribution, especially in the main cities’ squatting neighborhoods, including Nouakchott, where thousands of families have settled since the major droughts of the 1970s, and continue to settle. The “gazra”, or squats, grow at an impressive pace around Nouakchott and other cities. About 105,000 parcels have been allocated in Nouakchott, but the objective of having “zero-gazra” seems impossible. Analysts and newspapers continue to report cases of state agents, including governors (wali) and prefects (hakem), who, because of the rising value of land in Nouakchott, attribute parcels of land to speculators and wealthy individuals (even including famous imams in 2014) not related to the settlement programs. The legislative and presidential electoral campaigns offered the possibility for informal transactions between state officials, members of the ruling party and influential individuals who could deliver votes in exchange for gifts. These problems are also facilitated by the fact that at least three agencies are in charge of land attribution, with overlapping responsibilities: the Ministry of Urbanism and Housing, the Interior Ministry’s governorate and prefects, and the Agency for Urban Development.

The 1983 Law on Land Tenure enables the state to take possession of any land that is not used and to sell it to private individuals. However, this law conflicts with local customary land tenure regulations, which were a major factor in the outbreak of the state violence against ethnic minorities between 1989 and 1991. The consequences of which can still be felt today. Also, the state is entitled to evict citizens, in return for compensation, when “economic and social development needs” apply. A World Bank report in 2014 confirmed these problems related to land tenure and property, stating “land reform represents a major development challenge in Mauritania: lack of valid and reliable information on land issues is a major bottleneck for policy formulation, land administration and monitoring activities. Existing policies, regulatory framework, and recent reforms have so far failed to reverse speculative land market trends and to promote land governance.”

Property rights
5

Doing Business 2015 report states that it only takes nine days to start a business (as opposed to 19 days in 2013) and seven procedures (as opposed to nine in 2013). Liberalization policies have been implemented in recent years but they coexist with major state regulations, as seen in the ongoing licensing regime, which requires businesses to buy licenses in order to operate officially in almost any sector of the economy. Businesspersons thus tend to operate informally to avoid such licenses. Those who do acquire them often do so through a clientelistic mechanism, as the preferential granting of licenses is one of the most well-known forms of politico-economic exchanges. Attempts were made to privatize the electricity company La Société Mauritanienne d'Electricité (SOMELEC) and to increase private ownership in the mining company Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière (SNIM). However, these attempts failed. In 2014, it was announced that the natural gas company, SOMAGAZ (which is jointly controlled by the Mauritanian and Algerian governments, and by private shareholders), would be privatized. The main potential buyers represented oligopolistic interests. However, the sale of SOMAGAZ has not yet been concluded. A World Bank report noted at the end of 2013 that the role of SOEs “in the economy has been growing over the last five years,” but that this “not accompanied by sufficient strengthening of the SOE governance framework. This allowed for ineffective financial management, which made it necessary to increase subsidies and transfers, and negatively affected the fiscal situation. Further, the lack of performance monitoring and evaluation has led to entrenched managerial weaknesses and poor service delivery, which hurts social resilience and increases the potential for social unrest.” There are 150 SOEs and public entities, and they contributed, at the end of 2013, to 14% of the GDP and 27% of budget transfer. In 2014, the World Bank stated that “legal framework provides for parastatal entities to be held accountable by the State through defined performance agreements, in practice these agreements are rarely established or enforced.”

Private enterprise
5

10 | Welfare Regime

With its vast semi-desert territory, a low population density and a bifurcated economy - based on the formal resource extraction industries and an informal urban and agro-pastoral economy - Mauritania's social security system is struggling and underdeveloped. Some improvements in recent years are noticeable, but overall conditions remain difficult. The latest data, from the UNDP and World Bank in 2015, indicate that life expectancy is 61.4, the mortality rate for under five year olds is 8.4%, the infant mortality rate is 6.5%, the mean years of schooling for adults is 3.74 years. In 2015, the WHO indicated that there are 1.3 physicians per 10,000 inhabitants. While there has been a slight improvement in these statistics, the situation remains harsh for most citizens. Most health and education MDGs “appear out of reach”, according to a 2015 IMF report. According to its official data, government expenditure on health is 4.1% of GDP. Yet, given the prevalence of corruption and

Social safety nets
4

embezzlement, the actual percentage of public expenditure that reaches health programs must be lower. For the vast majority of the population, who are not employed in the formal economy, safety nets are mostly provided for by local underfunded state agencies, NGO programs and especially extended family networks. Migrants also provide important support to families in Mauritania through remittances. In rural areas, for instance, 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.

One's social background is an important determinant of access to education, public office and employment. Among the most important social criteria are gender, ethnicity and social status ('caste'). Haratin, non-Arabic-speaking minorities (Haalpulaaren, Sooninko, Wolof and Bamana), lower 'castes' of the non-Arabic-speaking minorities (Maccube) and women face systemic discrimination.

Equal opportunity
3

Discrimination against non-Bidhân peoples is evident in the appointments to important positions within the state apparatus, especially the Ministries of Justice, Interior (which includes positions such as governors, prefects, police chiefs) and Defense. In these ministries, Black African minorities and Haratin are heavily under-represented. Other state agencies, which reflect this problem, include the High Council of Fatwas. The High Council of Fatwas is a nine-member council appointed by the president in 2012 to evaluate religious fatwas. The membership of the council includes no Haratin imams and only one Haalpulaar imam. In 2014, noting that, what the government calls the, "negative consequences of slavery" (séquelles de l'esclavage) have not decreased enough in the country, the religious scholars of Mauritania (Ulema) stated that more work is needed. More generally, one's access to employment, public offices and political positions remains highly dependent on social background and one's family connections. Powerful families and tribes exert significant control over a number of influential political and economic positions.

With respect to gender, the 2012 electoral reform added 51 new seats to the National Assembly, of which 20 are reserved for women on a national list. In the 2013 legislative elections, 37 women won a seat in the National Assembly. Of these women, 20 secured a seat through the reserved list. The 2015 elections for one third of the Senate seats have been postponed. There are currently eight women in the 56 seat Senate, with female senators comprising 14% of all senators. Regarding education, gender inequalities in primary schools are not significant, with a female to male enrollment ratio of 105%. However, problems significant exist at the secondary level, where the female to male enrollment ratio is 84%, and at the tertiary level, where the enrollment ratio is 43%. According to the UNDP in 2015, 8% of women 25 years old or older have at least some secondary education, compared to 21% of men. Regarding employment, women represent only 26% of the labor force. Female genital mutilation remains a major problem in Mauritania. The chair of the Association of Mauritanian Ulama, an organization of religious scholars, Hamden

Ould Tah, condemned, for religious reasons, this practice in 2013. Yet, real progress in among communities has been weak. The widespread practice of underage marriage of young girls also persists despite the introduction of the Personal Status Code, which sought to regulate marital practices.

11 | Economic Performance

The Mauritanian economy grew over recent years, though some caution is warranted given the fall of commodity prices in 2014. The rate of GDP growth has declined from 7% in 2012, to 6.7% in 2013, to 6.4% in 2014. GDP per capita (PPP) was \$3,042 in 2013 from \$2,878 in 2012. This growth in GDP was driven by foreign direct investment (FDI), which increased from 14% of GDP in 2011, to 35% in 2012, to 27% in 2013. Most investments went directly in the extractive industries (i.e., minerals and oil) and infrastructure projects. The rate of inflation over the last three years ranged between 4% and 5%. Yet, economic growth has not been evenly distributed or inclusive. Instead, economic growth has been concentrated in the extractive industries, while commodities' extraction "requires little in terms of local factors of production," a 2015 IMF report stated. Moreover, youth unemployment remains critical. As the World Bank noted in 2013, the government must pay close attention to "issues of youth exclusion and unemployment, especially in urban areas, which have the potential to increase religious extremism and violence among marginalized groups."

Public debt as a proportion of GDP stood at 88% in 2013 and 90% in 2012. However, most public debt is based on bilateral and multilateral arrangements. Gross capital formation increased from 29% of GDP in 2011 to 45% in 2012, before declining to 38% of GDP in 2013. The current account balance has been negative throughout the current period. It was -\$1.23bn in 2012, -\$1.26bn in 2013 and -\$1.15bn in 2014. It is projected to be -\$1.76bn for 2015. This trend can be explained by "a substantial increase in imports by the extractive industry, which now accounts for more than half of total imports," according to the IMF.

The use of a new computerized network, RACHAD, for budget execution (now extended to the central bank and Treasury) has improved the overall functioning of the budget execution. It could also provide more transparency, though it remains to be seen who exactly has and does not have access to the information held in RACHAD.

Output strength

7

12 | Sustainability

The Mauritanian government has not developed a strong and coherent environmental policy, despite being a poor Sahelian country at risk from environmental change. While Mauritania did adopt the Code of the Environment in 2000, which has become the main legal framework regarding the environment, the code has not been implemented. According to the 2014 Environmental Performance Index, Mauritania ranked 165 out of 178 countries, with a score of 27.19%. Three years ago, Mauritania scored 33.7%. Though the government lacks resources to tackle environmental problems (e.g. desertification, drought and climate change), multinational companies involved in the extractive sector, and European and Asian partners involved in the fishery industry, do not lack such resources. The active role these companies and partners have taken in limiting environmental problems is minimal, however. In early 2015, the government announced the creation of a Crisis Management Operation Center whose task will include the management of environmental crises. The use of pesticides in the Senegal River Valley, and discharges and spills from the mining industries constitute the most critical environmental threats to Mauritania.

Environmental
policy
4

The public expenditure on education is 3.74% of GDP, according to the UNDP (2015). The adult literacy rate is 58.6%. Gross enrollment ratio at the primary level is 97%, but 27% at the secondary level and 5% at the tertiary level. Whereas 21% of male above the age of 25 have some secondary education, only 8% of females do. Recently, some higher-education institutes were created, to address major gaps in professional schools (especially related to the country's natural resource sectors), including the Higher Institute for the Study of Technologies, the School for Civil Engineering, the Mauritanian School for Mining, the National School for Public Works, the Naval Academy and two other higher education institutes. In 2014, the new University for Sciences, Technologies and Medicine moved into a new building 12 kilometers outside of Nouakchott.

Education policy /
R&D
3

In early 2015, the government, through its National Agency for the Promotion of Youth Employment, launched a new program to tackle the problem of unemployment among young university graduates. It remains to be seen whether this new program will promote graduates' employment or whether it will remain an empty shell that simply serves as a new patronage vehicle. A similar initiative was launched 12 months earlier, in January 2014 at the cost of \$1.2m, and another in January 2013. Neither initiative has been able to produce clear results at the time of writing. No data on R&D is available.

Though data are not available, informants report that the gap between private and public schools is major, with the wealthy class (and the small middle class) sending their children to private schools and the vast majority, most of whom are Haratin, to public school. In the medium term, this class and ethno-racial gap could prove

problematic for the country. In 2012, the government's initiative on education, the General Estates on Education, diagnosed major problems in education, but without proposing and implementing a solution. Among the problems identified, the General Estates on Education recognized the poor state of human resources (e.g. unqualified personnel), obsolete pedagogical methods, poor educational results over the last 10 years with more than 80% of students having failed the high school termination exam (Baccalauréat). A 2013 World Bank report stated that "inadequate education of the workforce is the third most important constraint to firms in Mauritania." It also noted that the lack of training in the public sector continues to impede attempts "to modernize the administration and support accelerated growth."

Transformation Management

I. Level of Difficulty

Mauritania is evolving in a challenging environment. The rise of terrorism in the Sahel is the latest of a long series of events that have constrained the Mauritanian government. On the constructive side, there has not been any terrorist attack in the last two years. Also, the situation in neighboring Mali has become slightly more stable, since the French intervention and presidential elections. However, other countries in the region have experienced a rise in the number of active armed groups (e.g., Nigeria, Niger and Chad). Given how militants can easily move within this region, the relative stability seen in Mauritania in the last two years should be taken cautiously. The militarization of the region, among other detrimental consequences, diverts immensely scarce and much needed resources towards the military instead of being invested in more productive sectors. It also increases the attraction of armed groups for young citizens who, faced with major obstacles to finding a job and climbing the socioeconomic ladder, search for alternatives. Furthermore, it polarizes the already strained ethnic and caste relations, while contributing to the perpetuation of authoritarian rule. From the arrival of the military on the political scene (1978) to the last two coups d'état (2005 and 2008), these authoritarian developments have all been related to the militarization of politics in the region (i.e. from the national-turned-regional conflict in the Western Sahara to the “politics of armed Islamism”).

Such developments take place amidst an economy that is dependent on the exports of natural resources, which are highly vulnerable to the volatility of international demand. The collapse in commodity prices will hurt Mauritania's economy. As in all Sahelian countries, Mauritania's population remains highly vulnerable to environmental conditions, which undermine the population's daily survival in the semi-desert rural areas. The majority of the population continue to live in a state of poverty, with 42% of the population living in conditions of “severe poverty”, as the profits of the oil, mining and fishery sectors have not been evenly distributed. Finally, the pacification of ethnic and ‘caste’ (including the Haratin) relations remains hazardous, as the tensions surrounding the arrest and imprisonment of activists in 2014 and 2015.

Structural
constraints

8

In Mauritania, no systematic study has been carried out to measure civil society vibrancy. Since its inception, the country has been governed by an authoritarian regime (which has taken various forms), which does not facilitate the development of autonomous and vocal groupings of citizens. On the formal and official side, there are very few organizations that have the capacity to mobilize people and make themselves heard. Organizations representing formal sectors of the economy (e.g., the extractive industries and the artisanal fishery sector, as well as the public service and trade unions) have the capacity to mobilize members and engage with the state. This was demonstrated by various strikes, including that of the largest SOE, the iron ore company SNIM, in early 2015. Issues, such as anti-slavery and human rights, did pick up some pace in recent years with a few organizations that have been very vocal. And those that are too vocal in criticizing major social and political problems, such as the IRA (which defends the rights of Haratin), risk government repression. For example, at the end of 2014, leaders of the IRA were arrested and convicted. Research also reveals that informal forms of association, however, constitute the main form of organization for civil society. They can be very efficient, but are harder to observe in action. These associations include Sufi orders, reformist Islamic associations, local associations, and tribal networks. They play a civic role, providing help to their members and engaging with the state. However, many of them are relatively segmented and would have difficult times mobilizing very large sector of society.

Civil society traditions

8

Since the inception of the country, the politicization of ethnicity and race, of tribal solidarities, social status (caste) and religion have been the defining features of the political landscape. Although the country is completely Muslim, in recent years, the radicalization of a small, but vocal number of Muslim men have made the headlines in Mauritania as well as across the Sahel. After facing years of repression, moderate Islamists now have a political party, Tawassoul. However, more radicalized men, especially young ones, have joined the ranks of armed groups, especially Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. From 2013 to early 2015, the government has been able to prevent any attack on national territory, but many Mauritians, especially ethnic Moors, are members of armed groups operating in neighboring countries. Aside from radical Islam, the polarization of ethnic and caste groups remains a critical issue. Any Haratin individual, who criticizes the social order too vocally, is repressed by the security forces. Non-Arabic-speaking ethnic minorities, claim that they are excluded from important positions within the state apparatus, including the army, police, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of the Interior. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects military personnel (who are all ethnic Moors) from prosecution for human rights violations between 1989 and 1991, remains in place, despite some local organizations calling for its revocation. The issue of slavery and its consequences is another major source of tension. For example, although the Haratin form the largest segment of society, they are the poorest and most marginalized.

Conflict intensity

5

II. Management Performance

14 | Steering Capability

The Mauritanian political system is characterized by the dominance of informal practices and procedures as well as a hegemonic president who defines the country's main priorities. Yet, given the importance of informal politics, these priorities are not necessarily the government's official priorities. Over the last 15 years, despite presidential changes, three main priorities have been established. First, given that coups d'état have been the only mechanism for presidential change, preventing a future coup consumes much energy and resources. All coups d'état in Mauritania have been led by previously close allies of the president. The dramatic fall from power of Mauritania's most important businessman, and cousin of the current president in 2013 and 2014, is an example of the removal of a potential presidential rival. Similarly, the frequent reshuffling of senior security officials, including replacement of the close allies of the army's chief of staff in October 2014, is an example of attacking the support base of a potential rival. The second priority has been the prevention of attacks by Islamic armed groups. This objective, over the last two years, has been successfully achieved. Third, a key priority has been to attract foreign investments, particularly into the extractive industries (particularly minerals, but also oil). This objective, too, has been successfully achieved. Although it has not lead to broad and inclusive economic growth.

The government has been successful in attracting investment into the extractive sector. For instance, FDI represented only 3.7% of GDP in 2010. However, by 2011 it was 14%, before jumping to 35% in 2012. For 2013, it was 27%. Over the last three years, the economic growth rate has been between 5.5% and 7%. The consequences of the collapse in international commodity prices at the end of 2014, however, could be important. The current president has been largely successful in terms of managing his closest allies and potential rivals, co-opting some and excluding others. No significant threat is posed to the president's power. His own health, however, will remain a major issue. It is also worth noting that the fact that no attacks on the national territory have been perpetrated. However, as we have seen in other countries of the region, including Mali and Nigeria, and now Chad and Niger, the situation can change quite abruptly. More problematic, however, is the weak rule of law, the ineffectiveness of policies aimed at easing ethno-racial relations and social programs designed to improve living conditions, as well as the lack of stable democratic mechanisms.

Question
Score

Prioritization
4

Implementation
4

The policy learning process can be evaluated from a governmental and economic perspective. From the government's perspective, the consolidation of the power as well as the taming of opponents were key objectives. In this respect, the president and the executive have demonstrated a good ability for learning. Although, this has not benefited the establishment of a democratic system. The 2013 legislative and 2014 presidential elections are evidence of the president's consolidation of power over the country, with his party dominating the majority of elected assemblies.

Policy learning
4

From an economic perspective, the government's ability to attract FDI and develop the extractive sector demonstrates the government's learning. However, revenues from the export of primary commodities have not been reinvested into other sectors of the economy. As such, a 2015 IMF report reiterated previously stated concerns that "economic diversification and inclusive growth are the foremost medium-term challenges. The authorities should accelerate structural reforms needed to raise Mauritania's potential growth, create jobs, and improve living standards for all Mauritians."

15 | Resource Efficiency

The management of administrative personnel remains undermined by political intrusions. The merging of administrative and political functions is frequent. For example, high-ranking civil servants are often also members, if not officials, of the ruling party, UPR. This is a pattern that was typical of previous regimes as well. The fact that 2013 and 2014 were also electoral years did not help. For example, at the beginning of 2013, the General Director of the main auditing body, the General Inspectorate of the State, was simultaneously the chair of the women's branch of the ruling party, UPR. Although, she was dismissed in February 2013, her replacement had occupied many senior positions within the previous Ould Taya regime. Furthermore, her replacement was a member of a small party allied to the current president. Her replacement, however, was dismissed less than two years after being appointed and was in turn replaced by another individual who had served within the Ould Taya regime. Dismissals and appointments are often politically motivated. Frequent reshuffling can be seen as a tool to maintain loyalty and prevent subversion. The actual implementation of meritocratic procedures in the appointments of public servants remains a major challenge. Similarly, embezzlement of public funds related to public infrastructure projects and the governance of SOEs persists. However, budget planning and implementation is more transparent than before with the data on the forthcoming budget and the end-of-year budget revision publicly available. In 2013 and 2014, the budget was stressed by the legislative, municipal and presidential elections. During these elections, public finances were used formally and informally by the president, government ministers, members of the ruling UPR to strengthen their positions. This led to an increase in the fiscal deficit from 1.7% of GDP in 2013 to 3.9% of GDP in 2014.

Efficient use of
assets
4

Coordination of defense and anti-terrorism policy has proven effective over the last few years. More generally, however, the combination of a hyper-presidential system and a clientelistic culture does not benefit the coordination of policy. For example, slavery has been criminalized since 2007. Social programs aimed at providing some support for Freed Slaves (the Haratin) have been introduced. Yet, no one has received a custodial sentence for owning slaves. This is largely due to corruption and tribal connections undermining the enforcement of the anti-slavery law. In contrast, Haratin activists have received custodial sentences for protesting against the persisting poor living conditions of Haratin people. Similarly, the government has failed to redirect financial returns from the extractive industries toward social programs that aim to improve the living conditions of the majority of the population that live below the poverty line. For example, more attracting investment into the mining and oil industries is given greater priority than investment into the agriculture sector. This is despite 60% of Mauritania's labor force working in the agriculture sector and the potential for increased productivity in, among other areas, the Senegal River Valley. Yet, "due to low productivity and structural inefficiencies the sector represents barely 16 percent of GDP", as the World Bank said in 2013. As evidence of this, Mauritania produces only 30% of the cereals consumed domestically, the remaining 70% of cereals are imported. Consequently, rural families live in extreme poverty, while public services are overwhelmingly concentrated in the capital city and a few other cities.

Policy
coordination
3

Following his reelection in 2014, President Ould Abdel Aziz renewed his intention to 'fight corruption' (Lutte contre la gabégie), as he had promised when he first came to power in 2008 through a coup d'état. Indeed, following the creation of the main auditing agency, the General Inspectorate (Inspection Générale de l'État, IGE) in 2005. The pace and number of investigations has increased. However, whether this reveals a serious attempt at curbing corruption remains to be seen. For example, the IGE has been chaired by a series of individuals close to the ruling party and, as such, the capacity of the institution to act independently is unlikely. The Cour des Comptes, another auditing body that aims to tackle corruption practices, has also been relatively silent. From 2006 to 2015, it did not published any annual report. The Commission de transparence financière dans la vie publique (Financial Transparency Commission) 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 the state of their assets at the beginning and end of each of these 500 officials' terms. These declarations must be submitted at the beginning and at the end of one's term. If some major variations are noted, the Commission can forward them to the Ministry of Justice. However, its latest ceremony was held in January 2013 and no similar ceremony has been conducted since, not even after the latest presidential election in the summer of 2014. In addition, these declarations were not made public (despite being 'Transparent').

Anti-corruption
policy
4

16 | Consensus-Building

The 2013 legislative and municipal elections and the 2014 presidential election confirmed the nature of the current regime that could be described as competitive-authoritarian. Every head-of-state since 1978 has come to power through coups d'état. Since 1991, those military officers who staged a coup consolidated their power through the organized elections, which they systematically won. The exception to this was the short presidency of Ould Cheikh Abdellahi and he publicly admitted that he had been chosen by the military. Therefore, public officials cannot be considered committed to democracy. In contrast, the opposition parties are committed to democracy. This includes the Islamist party, Tawassoul, which is currently the largest opposition party in the National Assembly. Although it should be recognized that most opposition parties boycotted recent legislative elections, arguing that they were unfairly organized. However, the opposition is highly divided and the older generation of politicians are reluctant to concede power to younger potential leaders. In turn, this is contributing to the paralysis of the system. Under the current authoritarian regime, however, the use of violence is relatively infrequent and the systematic censorship of the press is no longer as widely used as it was. Compared to the violent years at the turn of the 1980s and 1990s, the current regime is more moderate. But the highest position in the state, the presidency, is simply not open to free and fair competition, nor is that of the dominant political party in the National Assembly.

Consensus does exist concerning the principle of a market economy. However, there is no consensus around the principle that market interactions should be regulated by legislation. Although laws regulating market interactions do exist, their effective implementation remains a big challenge. 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 networks.

Both Ould Taya and Ould Abdel Aziz, who came to power through a military coup, won international legitimacy by winning a subsequent presidential election. However, these elections were organized so that neither president could lose power. Furthermore, their grip on power was consolidated through their party's dominance in elections to the National Assembly, Senate and municipal councils. Most recently, this pattern is evident in 2013 legislative and 2014 presidential elections, which were won by President Ould Abdel Aziz and his Union pour la République (UPR). Reformists have failed to secure progress on two basic democratic criteria, namely open and fair elections for executive positions (i.e., coup d'état is the only mechanism currently for presidential change), and the prevention of interference in public policy processes by non-elected institutions (e.g., by the military). Former military officers have been in power since 1978, with the exception of the short reign of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi between 2007 and 2008.

Consensus on goals

4

Anti-democratic actors

4

The Mauritanian political leadership has not been able or willing to tackle structural tensions. A political and social consensus that bridges Mauritania's stark ethnic divisions has not materialized. In effect, the Bidhân control most of the key positions in the most significant state institutions, such as the Ministries for Defense, Justice and the Interior. Non-Arabic-speaking minorities as well as the Haratin regularly experience discrimination when interacting with local officials, especially in rural areas. This is also true for Haratin refugees who, having been expelled between 1989 and 1991, have returned to Mauritania in recent years. The woeful conditions of the Haratin remain a major issue that continues to undermine the social foundations of the country. The harassment of some Haratin and associated movements, especially in 2014 and early 2015, has further stressed these foundations.

Cleavage /
conflict
management
4

On the one hand, most formal civil society organizations are able to express themselves, comment on political and social issues, and publish reports or memorandum on various socio-political problems. Typical civil society organizations include trade unions, domestic NGOs, local associations and the media. On the other hand, these civil society organizations are not included in national decision-making processes, which remain highly centralized. International development partners do engage with Mauritania's civil society organizations as part of their attempts to engage with project stakeholders. Yet, the impact of such civil society organizations on decision-making remains difficult to assess, while the composition of these civil society organizations must be analyzed carefully. Informal groups and networks (defined above as informal religious organizations, such as Sufi orders, and popular religious scholars and their networks, as well as tribal networks and village notables), however, do participate in various manners in the decision-making process. In such cases, however, issues of representation and horizontal segmentation are a serious concern.

Civil society
participation
4

Progress toward national reconciliation has been stagnant for many years. The 1989-1991 ethnic massacres and deportations of non-Arabic speaking Black Africans (Haalpulaar, Sooninko, Wolof, and Bamana), and their subsequent marginalization, are problems that have never been adequately tackled. While the return of Mauritanian refugees from Senegal between 2008 and 2012 was an encouraging development, the lack of long-term support for these refugees remains a major challenge. The problems experienced by returning refugees include difficulty in getting their land back, securing compensation for the loss of livestock, property, and other goods, providing returning deported civil servants with pension plans. However, the 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects security personnel alleged to have conducted human rights abuses between 1989 and 1991, has not been repealed. This constitutes a major obstacle to reconciliation. For example, some high-ranking military officers, who are alleged to have committed human rights violations, continue to serve in senior positions within the security apparatus without these allegations having ever been tested. Furthermore, ethnic minorities continue to be

Reconciliation
5

seriously underrepresented within key positions of the Ministry of Defense, Ministry of the Interior and Ministry of Justice must raise doubts about the government's willingness to achieve sustainable reconciliation.

17 | International Cooperation

The growing militarization of the whole Sahel region has strengthened Mauritania's relations with Western and other international partners. However, these relationships are heavily tilted toward issues concerning security cooperation. The EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel indicates that Mauritania and other Sahelian states "have insufficient operational and strategic capacities in the wider security, law enforcement and judicial sectors (military, police, justice, border management, customs) to control the territory, to ensure human security, to prevent and to respond to the various security threats, and to enforce the law (conduct investigations, trials etc.) with due respect to human rights." The extent of engagement by Mauritania with international partners on non-security related issues is limited. The EU, which provides much support for programs that aim to improve the rule of law, noted in 2014 that "there is a global dissatisfaction with respect to the Judiciary, its limited performance, its weak accessibility, poor relations with the police forces...", while also noting the "lack of integration and complementarity between the various levels of the public administration, the absence of strategic action plans, and lack of allocation of resources amongst actors". More generally, there seems to be a gap between, on the one hand, official commitments expressed in formal frameworks and agreements with multilateral partners, and on the other hand, the actual weak implementation of these commitments.

Effective use of
support
5

In 2008, following the coup against elected President Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, the international community was initially very critical of those who had organized and led the coup. Most partners, however, have since recognized the presidential election victories of Ould Abdel Aziz in 2009 and 2014, despite the lack of free and fair elections. Mauritania, under Ould Abdel Aziz's presidency, could be labeled a competitive-authoritarian regime. This recognition of Ould Abdel Aziz's presidency by international partners could be evidence of these international partners prioritizing regional security interests over the promotion of democracy within Mauritania. The persistent threat of attacks by armed Islamist groups in the neighboring countries of Mali, Nigeria, Niger and Chad weigh heavily in the balance. As such, the further democratization of Mauritania is not on the agenda for either the international community or President Ould Abdel Aziz. With respect to the economy, the government has convinced international partners and investors that it is committed to the development of a liberal economy, despite a common perception that informal practices, corruption and oligopolistic tendencies continue to dominate Mauritania's economy.

Credibility
6

Mauritania is a member of several regional organizations, such as the Union of the Arab Maghreb and NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue. However, since 2000, it is no longer a member of ECOWAS.

Regional
cooperation
7

The militarization of the Sahel in recent years has dominated efforts toward more regional cooperation. Regional cooperation is now largely an issue of security, despite the primary drivers of insecurity being social, political and economic in nature. Mauritania must maintain a precarious balance between Morocco and Algeria, the two regional super powers, without being drawn into overtly supporting either side. Cooperation with neighboring Mali has been constructive, though sometimes difficult. For example, Mali and Mauritania favored different strategies when dealing with armed Islamist groups. Mauritania's dual identity, as an Arab and African country, has always presented a challenge to pursuing a consistent foreign policy with different groups favoring different ethnic identities and cultural relations with other countries.

Strategic Outlook

Mauritania ought to reform its political institutions to make them more open, more representative of the country's cultural diversity and more accountable. For this to be achieved, the upcoming elections for the presidency and the national assembly must be open, transparent and fair. Elections which should safeguard the possibility of the first peaceful change of power in recent years. A common characteristic of all stable countries in the region, including Ghana, Senegal and Cape Verde, is the ability for opposition parties and candidates to win an election. The Mauritanian military must focus on maintaining security in the country and refrain from actively interfering in decision-making processes. Strategic positions within the state apparatus must be opened to individuals of Haratin and various Black African descent. This is especially for senior positions within the key Ministries of Defense, Interior and Justice.

While institutions and procedures exist that define and should protect the rule of law, in practice these institutions are largely inactive and the procedures are not implemented. Corruption and clientelism serves to benefit a clique of wealthy elites and exclude the majority of the population along ethnic lines. This situation increases instability and the likelihood of attacks within Mauritania, similar to those that occurred in Mali. The hyper-presidential system in Mauritania also contributes to the weakness of the overall political system, as too much power is concentrated in the office of the president for the country to be effectively governed.

While initially favorable, increasing revenues from the extractive sectors could make the economy vulnerable to rapid changes in international prices, as evidenced by a collapse in prices in the second half of 2014. Hence, revenues generated by these sectors must be used to encourage the diversification of the economy as well as to support the agro-pastoral sector (where 60% of the labor force is concentrated) and develop welfare programs that address MDG targets. With almost half of the population living in conditions of extreme poverty, environmental changes present a major threat to the livelihoods of many people in this Sahelian environment.

Decentralization is needed, in a country marked by excessive, hyper-centralization. Agencies of the central administration in rural areas, specifically the governors and prefects, must be made accountable. Mechanisms that safeguard against arbitrary decision-making are needed.