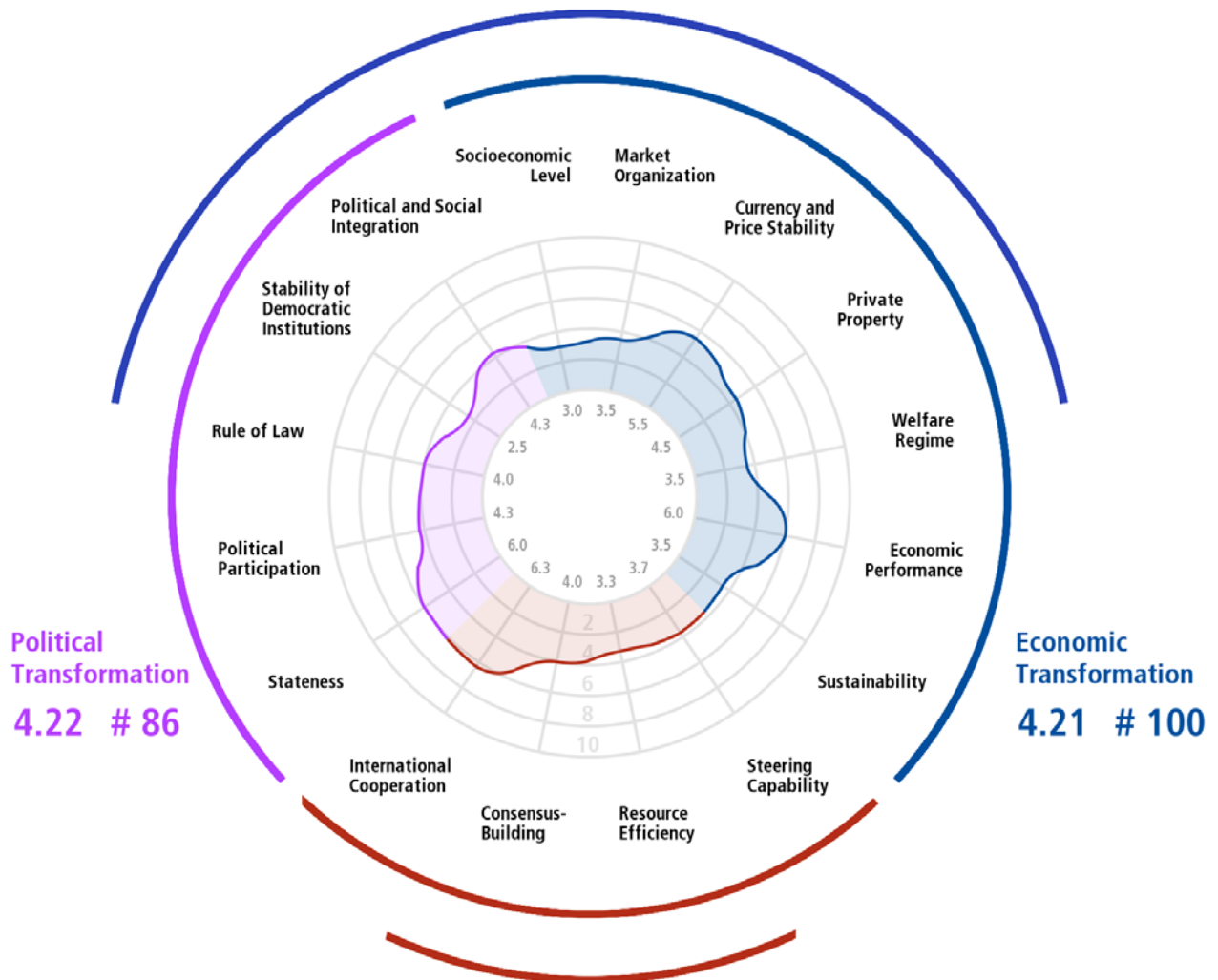


Mauritania

Status Index

4.22 # 99

on 1-10 scale out of 129



Political Transformation
4.22 # 86

Economic Transformation
4.21 # 100

Governance Index

4.06 # 90

on 1-10 scale out of 129

This report is part of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2018. It covers the period from February 1, 2015 to January 31, 2017. 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>.

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Key Indicators

Population	M	4.3	HDI	0.513	GDP p.c., PPP \$	3854
Pop. growth ¹	% p.a.	2.8	HDI rank of 188	157	Gini Index	32.4
Life expectancy	years	63.0	UN Education Index	0.401	Poverty ³	% 23.6
Urban population	%	60.4	Gender inequality ²	0.627	Aid per capita \$	76.1

Sources (as of October 2017): The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2017 | UNDP, Human Development Report 2016. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$3.20 a day at 2011 international prices.

Executive Summary

Two main issues have dominated Mauritania's political scene during the period under review. The first is the increasing mobilization of movements representing Haratin ("freed slaves") and, to a lesser extent, non-Arabic-speaking minorities, as well as the government's repressive response. Leaders and activist of the Haratin movement IRA (Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste) were arrested at the end of 2014 and in the summer of 2016, and sentenced to jail terms, even though they had simply been denouncing economic and political marginalization imposed upon Haratin. Most were eventually released before completing their term (some served up to 1.5 years). Although the government has strengthened laws criminalizing slavery and adopted some socioeconomic programs to help Haratin, who constitute the largest and poorest social segment in Mauritania, it has failed to make significant progress in the actual implementation of these measures and to transform the status quo. The repression of the Haratin movement's leaders confirms this trend. The second major political issue is the president's decision to step down after his second and last term in 2019, together with proposed constitutional reforms. The signals have been mixed regarding the president's declared decision to step down. Some high-ranking members of his party have suggested in 2015 and 2016 that he might stay in power (like many of his counterparts across Africa). The government eventually organized a "National Dialogue" with the opposition in October 2016 to discuss constitutional reforms, but it was boycotted by the leading voices of the opposition. The proposed reforms thus far do not include a change concerning presidential terms, but rather include the abolition of the Senate and its replacement by regional elected assemblies. On the economic front, Mauritania has been hit by the global downturn in international commodity prices, leading to a slowing GDP growth, moving down from 5 to 7% in the previous years to 2 to 3% in 2015 to 2017. Though it continues to grow, the Mauritanian economy is still weakened by a very small and undiversified formal sector, which has great difficulties redistributing its profits to the rest of the population and serving as an engine of socioeconomic development. The fight against corruption has seen a number of high-profile cases being brought to light by anti-corruption agencies. However, this fight does not seem to be systemic; as well, a number of state agencies are headed by politically well-connected individuals.

History and Characteristics of Transformation

From its independence (1960) onwards Mauritania has been a poor Sahelian country, relying on basic agro-pastoral economies and the export of minerals and fishery. This was supplemented by substantive developmental aid. It went through a period of economic stagnation (1975-1984) characterized by socioeconomic problems resulting from the collapse of iron prices, enduring droughts and the disastrous consequences of Mauritania's involvement in the Western Saharan War.

These socioeconomic problems intermingled with increasing domestic political tensions that revolved around two major issues: 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, including Bidhân (White Moors) and Haratin (freed slaves or Black Moors), and non-Arabic-speaking ethnic communities, including Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana (often called Black Africans) have structured the political game since the colonial period. Tensions erupted over policies related to national languages, education, land tenure and ethnic representation in the political and bureaucratic apparatus. In 1989 to 1991, 80,000 Black Africans were deported by security forces, hundreds were assassinated and thousands were dismissed from the civil service. Meanwhile, former slaves of the Bidhân community, the Haratin, are in their vast majority second-class citizens in the margins of social, economic and political spheres. Political organizations of Haratin sought to mobilize this community. Some were eventually coopted by the regime while others have joined opposition groups.

The politicization of identities is intricately linked to a second major issue: the role of the military in politics. The civilian regime (1960-1978) was ousted during the war of Western Sahara, at a time where the size of the military had quadrupled and amidst military defeats at the hand of Western Saharan insurgents. Ever since the first coup d'état (1978), every head-of-state has been a military officer (with one short 17-month exception, in 2007-2008). Every leadership change occurred through a coup d'état.

In 1991, Colonel Ould Taya agreed to adopt a new democratic constitution, while organizing multi-party elections at all levels of government (presidential, legislative and municipal elections). However, through a combination of coercion and material incentives (thanks to his control over public resources), he remained in power for 14 years while his party dominated every single legislative and local election.

Colonel Ould Taya was ousted by his closest collaborators in 2005, including then Presidential Guard Commander Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. This transitional period led to the holding of the country's freest and fairest municipal and legislative (2006) and presidential elections (2007). Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi won the presidential election, though clearly with the support of key officers including Colonel Ould Abdel Aziz (soon General). In August 2008, those officers, led by Ould Abdel Aziz, eventually ousted the president after seventeen months in power. The 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 large majority of seats in the National Assembly. 2013 and 2014 have seen a consolidation of both Ould Abdel Aziz and the UPR's grip over the country's political landscape.

Between 2005 and 2010, armed jihadist groups have attacked military garrisons as well as foreigners. The presence of radical Islamist groups throughout the Sahel has led Western countries to channel many financial and material resources to Mauritania, coupled with strong diplomatic support. The outbreak of the war in Mali in 2012, and the continuation of jihadist attacks despite the presence of both a massive U.N. and French operation, is a problem for Mauritania, as many Mauriticians (all white Moors and some Haratin) have joined these groups.

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

Despite evolving in a very challenging regional environment where jihadist groups, ethnic militia and traffickers mushroom, the Mauritanian state has not been targeted by any armed group during this period. Attacks against the U.N. mission in Mali (MINUSMA) are on the rise and violence is moving south of Mali, now around the region of Mopti. Thus, will attacks are not very far from Mauritania, it has not been affected so far.

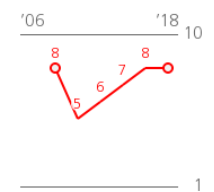
The increasing control by security forces of its borders (with partial EU assistance) might explain this positive outcome in part. The Mauritanian state has increased its presence in its eastern region with the creation of a new department in 2011 (Nbeiket Lahwach).

Ever since it became independent, Mauritania has been struggling with its identity. The problem is not that groups do not recognize the legitimacy of the Mauritanian state, but rather that they feel the Mauritanian state is denying them full recognition, based on ethno-linguistic, racial or status reasons. Thus, the full and equal citizenship of all inhabitants of Mauritania constitutes a major issue in Mauritania. Two communities in particular find themselves at the heart of this problem. The first is the non-Arabic-speaking ethnic groups (Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana), which historically lived along the border with Senegal and Mali, but also live in many more regions. And second group is the Haratin, or freed slaves, historically attached to the ruling “free” or “noble” Moors (Bidhân). Leaders of the non-Arabic-speaking communities generally argue that the Mauritanian state has increasingly been monopolized by the Bidhân, as witnessed by their control of the most strategic positions in the state apparatus (presidency; military high-ranking officers; key ministries (defense, justice, interior). This domination has been consolidating ever since the events of 1987 to 1991, during which hundreds of citizens from ethnic minorities were killed and roughly 80,000 of them were sent into exile in Senegal and Mali. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects the security personnel involved in

Question
Score

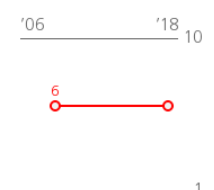
Monopoly on the
use of force

8



State identity

6



the assassination and deportation of ethnic minorities during 1989 to 1991 has not yet been repealed. Without a proper investigation of past human rights violations and resultant legal action, the ethnic peace will remain fragile. Since 2011, and up to the current period (2015-early 2017), activists of a movement called “Don’t Touch our Nationality” (Touche pas à ma nationalité, TPMN) has mobilized ethnic minorities against what they consider an attempt by the state to exclude non-Arabophones from being fully registered by the Civil Registry. TPMN has also denounced the fact that the project of a new constitution does not address the problems of national unity, ignoring non-Arabophones’ demand that their languages be granted official language status. A formerly banned movement representing ethnic minorities, FLAM (Forces de liberation africaines de Mauritanie) transformed itself into a political party in 2014, the Progressive Forces for Change (Forces Progressistes du Changement). One of its objectives is to transform Mauritania into a confederation of ethnically-based autonomous regions.

The Haratin, who were historically the servants of Bidhân families, continue to live in the most difficult situation. The government passed a law in 2007 criminalizing any slavery-related activities (though it had been prohibited in 1981, slavery was not criminalized until then). This was followed by another law in 2012 which eliminated the 10-year applicable limitation (“prescription”), and by another law (adopted in August 2015, Law 2015-031), which treats crimes of slavery as crimes against humanity, specifies 10 different forms of slavery, including forced marriage, and increases the maximum sentence from 10 to 20 years. This was completed with the creation of three criminal courts devoted specifically to crimes of slavery (based in Nouakchott, Nema and Nouadhibou). However, Haratin organizations argue that all these legal institutions have remained useless, unable to prosecute former masters, and that the gap between formal institutional and legal tools, on the one hand, and the actual use and implementation of these tools, on the other, remains colossal. In the summer of 2015, about 200 young female Haratin were sent to Saudi Arabia, officially to work, but it was discovered that they have been used as sex slaves. Many requested a full investigation, including how their visas were secured, which raised questions about the role of high-ranking state officials. Before 2016, only one man was sentenced for a crime of slavery and he served only two years (below the minimum sentence of five years). In May 2016, one of the three special courts, the one in Nema, processed its first case. The couple accused of slavery was sentenced to five years; it remains to be seen if they will serve any jail time. More anti-slavery activists have been jailed and sentenced than masters in 2015 to 2016.

Mauritania is an Islamic Republic, in which Islam is the religion of the state. But its institutions 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 the French Code penal. The code of personal status (family code) is mostly inspired by Islamic law. Yet popular sovereignty, not God, is the foundation of most key state

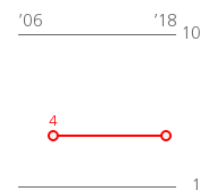
No interference of religious dogmas

4

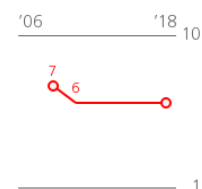
institutions (the presidency, the National Assembly, the Senate), and Mauritania abides by most international conventions, including the (secular) Human Rights Charter. One sees, however, the increasing influence of radical groups. In December 2014, blogger Mohamed Cheikh Ould M'Kheitir, 32, was accused of apostasy and sentenced to the death penalty on the basis of Shariah articles of the Penal Code. The president hosted a meeting with the leaders of the religious groups who spearheaded the demonstrations against the “apostate” and promised that the Islamic Republic would take all necessary measures to protect Islam and its Prophet and that Islam is above everything, including democracy and liberty. This was the country’s very first death penalty sentence for the crime of apostasy. Radical religious groups continued to put pressure on the government and anybody who called for a fair trial of the blogger. The accused’s lawyer had to resign after he and his family were subjected to death threats. In April 2016, the Court of Appeal in Nouadhibou confirmed the sentence. The blogger is waiting for the Supreme Court, which must make its decision known at the end of January 2017. In the meantime, radical Islamist groups demonstrated in Nouakchott in October 2016 and in mid-January 2017 to call for his immediate execution, even cancelling a television show, where invited guests were discussing this case, after they stormed into the studios in November 2016. Beyond formal legal texts, informal social rules often prevail over state rules.

Mauritania has a challenging geography. It has a vast territory and a very low population density, like its Sahelian neighbors to the east (Mali, Niger and Chad). As a consequence, the state capacity to broadcast its authority throughout the territory and to provide for basic administrative services is improving, but it varies significantly from one region to another – but also from certain social segments to others. Access to state services is often predicated upon an individual’s connection to clientelistic networks and upon his or her group identity. Haratin (freed slaves), for instance, have less chance of successfully petitioning judicial and police authorities than Bidhân (White Moors). All administrative regions have courts, but most are understaffed and underfinanced, and undermined by arbitrary decisions.

The judicial system is becoming more specialized, with courts dedicated specifically to “economic crime.” In 2015, three courts specializing on crimes related to slavery were established. Only one case has been handled by these courts so far, in May 2016, when a court sentenced a couple accused of slavery in Nema. The Mauritanian Tax Agency (Direction générale des impôts; DGI) and the State General Inspectorate (Inspection générale de l’État, IGE) often undertake highly visible anti-corruption operations, such as the arrest of the mayor of Nouadhibou in April of 2016 or of the officials of the national Import-Export enterprise (SONIMEX). These help send a message about the state’s capacity to collect taxes and to discipline unlawful actions by agents or agencies of the state. It appears, however, that these operations of state authority may be politically motivated.



Basic administration
6



2 | Political Participation

No elections were held in 2015 to 2016. In 2014, President Ould Abdel Aziz won his second successive election, replicating a pattern unchanged since 1991, whereby the strongman of the moment is guaranteed an electoral victory in the presidential, legislative and local elections. The main question in Mauritania has been about whether he would seek a third term, which would require a constitutional change. This pattern echoes those of many other African countries where presidents have changed the rules of the game to stay in power longer. There will be upcoming negotiations regarding a potential change of the constitution. The president said in October 2016 that he would not seek a third term. This is a step in the right direction, although as many other cases in Africa have demonstrated, intentions remain intentions, and only once the deadline has been reached can we see if his actions will confirm his words.

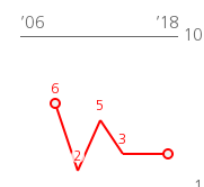
The government is not democratically elected. The Mauritanian political system is consolidated in the presidency, which means that the president enjoys significant formal and informal powers. Other elected institutions, such as the National Assembly, the Senate and local municipal councils, are highly dependent on the president.

The president enjoys all of this power mostly because he is a military officer and came to power through a coup d'état, like all predecessors since 1978 (with one minor exception). Since the Western Saharan war, and because of it, the country has been formally ruled by military officers between 1978 and 1991, and by retired officers between 1991 and 2019. The only exception was the 17-month rule of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in 2007 to 2008, though he had been chosen by the military junta before the election and was monitored by his personal military chief-of-staff, (now retired general) Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz. Aziz eventually ousted him and took over as the latest head-of-state. The non-elected military institution thus remains the center of the Mauritanian political system and is a de facto dominant veto player in Mauritanian politics.

The right of association is guaranteed by Article 11 of the 1991 constitution. Like most other rights, the right did not exist in reality until the mid-2000s, following the ousting of Ould Taya, which improved the actual quality of rights in the country. Political parties of the opposition and NGOs are allowed to exist and operate without being repressed. Formal Islamists parties were banned between 1991 and 2007. But now the main leading opposition party in the Mauritanian legislature is an Islamist party (Tawassoul). Important challenges remain for ethnic minorities and Haratin. Leaders and activists of anti-slavery movement Initiative pour la résurgence du mouvement abolitionniste (IRA), Kawtal ngam yellitaare, Touche pas à ma nationalité (TPMN) – a group that defends the rights of ethnic minorities (Black

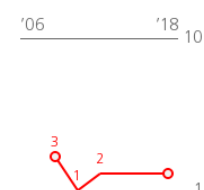
Free and fair elections

3



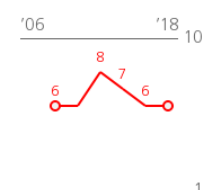
Effective power to govern

2



Association / assembly rights

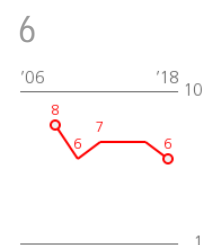
6



Africans) – were arrested on several occasions beginning in 2013. Leading activists Biram Ould Dah Ould Abeid, Brahim Ould Bilal Ramdane and Djiby Sow were arrested in December 2014 during their “tour of the country” to defend the rights of Haratin and ethnic minorities. They were declared guilty of acts of rebellion and of belonging to unauthorized organizations and have remained in jail for 18 months. The Supreme Court ordered the release of the first two leaders in May 2016 after the terms of the accusations were changed, and the third one in June 2016 for health reasons. However, a new wave of arrests of IRA activists occurred in June 2016 when they were protesting the forced expulsion of poor families from a shantytown in Nouakchott by police forces.

Freedom of expression has improved over the years, but there are limitations. Officially, the constitution guarantees the freedom of expression (Art. 10). Since 2006, there are no requirements for prepublication imposed by the state. That year the High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Sector (HAPA) was created to regulate the media sector. Three of HAPA’s six board members including the chair of the board, are appointed by the president; the remaining three are appointed by the legislature’s presidents, both of which are under the control of the presidential party. There have been worrying signs concerning the freedom of expression, despite some improvements since the days of president Ould Taya. HAPA suspended a famous journalist’s TV show in October 2015 and then again in February 2016, arguing that the topics that had been debated in this show incited separatism and were biased (the core discussion was about slavery and the marginalization of ethnic minorities). Also, the death penalty of blogger and freelance journalist Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Ould M’Khaitir was confirmed by an appeal court in Nouadhibou in 2016. He was sentenced to death for apostasy in 2014 over an article in which he allegedly criticized the Prophet and Mauritania’s rigid caste system. Also, some journalists have been intimidated, detained and, for some, condemned by the courts, when investigating specific cases of corruption by state authorities or by state-owned companies, or when writing about the president’s family. Most journalists were accused of defamation.

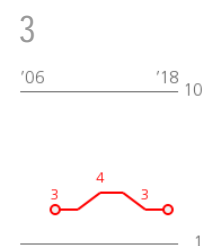
Freedom of expression



3 | Rule of Law

The Mauritanian political system provides the presidency with vast formal and informal 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 power; he has

Separation of powers



extensive appointment powers; he can unilaterally and without veto power 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 (like all of his military predecessors), the National Assembly, which the president controls, passed a law in January 2013 which criminalizes any coup d'état and other “unconstitutional” changes of power. In September to October 2016, the government organized a “national inclusive dialogue” to discuss constitutional reforms. But the leading opposition parties boycotted the dialogue, claiming it was just a strategy of cooptation. Constitutional amendments are now on the table ready to be voted on, including: the abolition of the Senate, which would be replaced by regional councils, closer to the population; the addition of new seats in the National Assembly for Mauritians of the diaspora; new powers for the Constitutional Council, which would then be allowed to review laws of exception (Lois d'exception); and the inclusion of representatives of the opposition in the Council.

The independence of the judiciary is guaranteed by the 1991 constitution (Article 89 of the 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. The former chair of the Mauritanian Bar Association stated in September 2016 that the lack of independence of the judiciary remains a major problem. The current president of the Supreme Court has been in place for four and a half years and has not been replaced, which contrasts with his predecessors who were all removed after two years.

Another key problem is the informal political influence exerted upon the courts, mainly through executive pressure, financial retributions, and/or tribal connections (or any combination of these three channels). On one rare occasion, an association of judges, not usually critical of the government, wrote a letter to the Ministry of Justice denouncing what they perceived to be punitive measures taken by the government, after the General State Inspectorate launched investigations into courts where the judge had not adjudicating according to the prosecutor's request. The judiciary, like any other branch of the administration (minus key security agencies) is understaffed and underfinanced.

Independent
judiciary

4

'06 '18 10

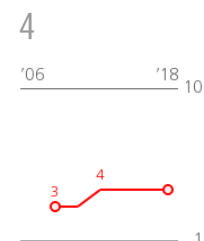


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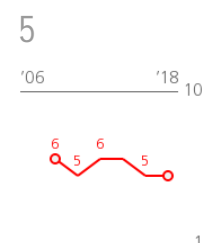
State agencies in charge of investigating public servants' and politicians' ethical misconduct and conflicts of interests include: the Court of Accounts (Cour des Comptes), created in 1993 with a chair appointed by the president; the State General Inspectorate (Inspection générale de l'État, IGE), created in 2005 and led by an inspector general (nominated by the prime minister), which has the power to investigate all public institutions; as well as more specialized agencies such as the Finance General Inspectorate (embedded in the Ministry of Finance). The State General Inspectorate's independence from the executive is often questioned, however. On the one hand, it has launched many investigations, including on the Urban Community of Nouakchott (UCN), the huge organization in charge of all the districts of Nouakchott, in August 2016; the National Water Company (April 2016); the Chamber of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture (March 2016), known for being a key locus of corruption; the Secretary-General of the Islamic Affairs Ministry (August 2016); as well as the regional branch of the large state-owned import-export company SONIMEX (July 2016). With respect to this last case, however, many have raised questions about the autonomy of the IGE after the inspector in charge of the investigation was dismissed by the prime minister. For its part, the Finance General Inspectorate stated in October 2016 that it would investigate all ministries (though it remains to be seen whether this announcement will be implemented). On the other hand, General Inspectors of the IGE have been appointed and dismissed at a quick pace, and many of them were officially members of the ruling party, thereby raising suspicions about their capacity to act independently. Such was the case of Mrs. Aicha Vall Mint Verges, appointed in 2011 while also being the Chair of the Women Commission of the ruling (presidential) party, UPR.

The state of civil rights in Mauritania has improved since 2005, with the ousting of Ould Taya. But the regime remains authoritarian and significant problems remain. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, visited Mauritania in May 2016 and published a report that highlighted some major problems, including those related to slavery and the treatment of Haratin activists. In October 2016, U.N. experts publicly expressed their concern about the situation of the detained Haratin and ethnic minority activists sent to a prison in the north of the country. The state agency whose goal is to promote human rights in Mauritania, the National Commission for Human Rights, has been criticized by the International Coordinating Committee for National Human Rights Institutions (ICC) (related to the United Nations) for its lack of autonomy from the government. This is in part because it has representatives of the state on its board and because it must report directly to the executive for its selection process, which is said to be insufficiently broad and transparent, and for its weak collaboration with civil society organizations that are critical of the government. Although other international commissions (like those of Malawi, Jordan, Mexico) obtained their re-accreditation, the ICC has decided to defer its consideration of the Mauritanian Commission's request for accreditation for the summer of 2017.

Prosecution of office abuse



Civil rights



One of Nouakchott's main prisons, Dar Naim, is known for frequent violations of human rights, including overcrowded jails, sexual abuses of minors, lengthy pretrial detention, prisoner deaths due to terrible health conditions, and acts of torture.

The repression of anti-slavery activists remains a major issue in terms of civil rights in Mauritania. Though the criminalization of slavery has been strengthened in August 2015, the arrests and sentences of Haratin and ethnic minority activists in 2015 and 2016 exemplifies the government's difficulty in truly protecting civil rights in the country. 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 in 1989 to 1991 is still in place. Victims of these acts, who are now aging, are still unable to seek justice and truth. Some of the officers involved in these dramatic events are still in service.

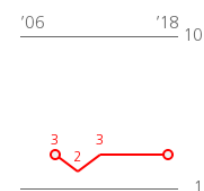
4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

Democratic institutions in Mauritania exist on a formal level, but they do not operate according to common democratic norms. On the one hand, the presidency and national and local elected assemblies are now elected through multi-party elections 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, since 1978, in practice the country has been governed by military officers in fatigues or in civilian clothes. Following his coup against democratically elected president Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (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, in ways similar to that of the former PRDS party under the regime of Ould Taya (1991-2005).

The re-election of Ould Abdel Aziz in 2014 confirms the dominance of military officers at the top of the political pyramid. His party's hegemonic control of all elected assemblies perpetuates a pattern put in place by previous military presidents. The main opposition party, since the 2013 legislative elections, is a moderate Islamist party that accepts the rules of the parliamentary game. 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 frequent arrests of Haratin (freed slaves) and Black African activists point to the limits of democratic expression of dissenting political opinions. An important test will be the president's decision to step down once his second and last term comes to an end in 2019.

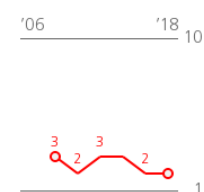
Performance of democratic institutions

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Commitment to democratic institutions

2



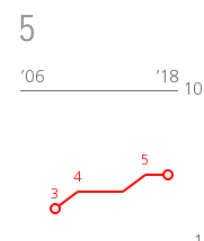
5 | Political and Social Integration

Since the formal creation of democratic institutions in 1991, the party system has not changed significantly. Under both Ould Taya (1991-2005) and Ould Abdel Aziz (2008-present), the party system is fully dominated by the military-turned-civilian president's party (Ould Abdel Aziz's Union pour la République, UPR, since 2009, and the PRDS under Ould Taya), allied with small pro-president parties. The opposition parties are often split among themselves, disagreeing about the boycott option, as some parties agree to compete for elections while others do not. In another round of the "Dialogue," which the government sought to establish with opposition parties in September to October 2016, there were major disagreements among them about their participation. Key figures of the opposition argued that this was yet another attempt by the government to coopt opponents. A number of historical precedents in Mauritania would suggest that this is a valid point. In the 2013 legislative elections, the presidential party and its allies captured 108 of the 146 seats of the National Assembly (74% of the seats). With most opposition parties boycotting the elections, the Islamist party, Tawassoul, has become the official opposition in the National Assembly, though with a small number of seats, 16 out of 146. As in many similar electoral authoritarian systems, factionalism within the ruling party is a major source of competition and tension. Local rivals compete for the ruling party's local branch, with the losing faction either creating an "independent" group, defecting to the opposition until it gets coopted back or staying within the ruling party but trying to undermine its rivals until the next election.

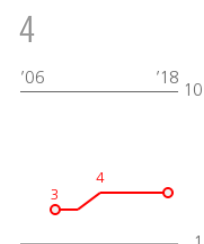
Political parties are not well institutionalized. The ruling party is merely a constellation of local notables, businessmen and civil servants, who pledge allegiance to the president and depend on his formal and informal power to distribute positions of power and patronage. The government's capacity to coopt former opponents is very high. Opposition parties can count on small loyal social bases, partly defined by ethnicity, region and 'social status' (caste), and always susceptible to be co-opted by the ruling party. The Islamist party, Tawassoul, is more socially diverse (though it counts very few Black Africans among its ranks-and-files), but its social basis is also relatively small.

The representation of societal interests in Mauritania is rarely undertaken through official and formal interest groups. Informal networks based on tribal and ethnic ties, as well as personal connections built through one's village of origin, education curriculum, occupational and business experiences and religious orientation (Sufi brotherhood or Salafi movement) constitute the main mechanism of interest representation. These networks are very fluid, multifaceted and often changing. They are less visible but much more significant than the formal ones. There are a number of official interest groups, including the unions of civil servants, of students and of workers in the small industrial sector, as well as the employers' association, and

Party system



Interest groups



numerous NGOs. However, a large number of NGOs are either empty shells or schemes created by people related to state officials or politicians seeking to capture international aid. Only a few NGOs play a significant role in addressing social problems, which include some anti-slavery organizations that promote the interests of freed slaves and slaves (IRA and SOS-esclaves), as well as some organizations devoted to the defense of ethnic minorities, women's organizations (the Association of Female household chiefs/ Association des femmes chefs de famille) and human rights organizations. Trade unions, though representing the minority of workers who work in the formal sector, have been vocal in 2015 and 2016. They have organized strikes and demonstrations, including in the Port of Nouakchott in November 2016, as well as a two-month strike in the country's largest state-owned mining company, SNIM, in March and April 2015.

There are not quantitative surveys, like those of the Afrobarometer, that seek to (partially) measure popular support for democracy. Ethnographic studies, however, suggest that Haratin communities have drawn on constitutional texts to defend their interests against the arbitrary abuses of their former slave owners. Others have shown that in some towns of the Senegal River Valley, where ethnic minorities (non-Arabic-speaking communities) live, people insist strongly on the need to address in the fairest and most universal way the abuses committed by security and governmental forces during the 1987 to 1991 period of state oppression against ethnic minorities.

No systematic statistical analysis or surveys of social capital has been undertaken in Mauritania. As explained above (5.3 Interest groups), Mauritians in general are connected to various networks whereby trust, cooperation and loyalty are defined by village, tribal, religious and/or personal relations. This can include informal hometown associations, brotherhoods organized around Sufi saints, age-set associations, tribes 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 (White Moors), the importance of tribal affiliation is often said to be the most important social linkage where trust is at its strongest. Though this claim is in part accurate, the saliency of rivalry among members of the same tribe should not be underestimated, especially those who can aspire to play an important political role. Hence, the most acute struggles often pit tribal kin against one another.

Approval of
democracy

n/a

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n/a 1

Social capital

4

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II. Economic Transformation

6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Mauritania, like its Sahelian neighbors, is among the poorest African countries (though neighbors are arguably worse off). Mauritania is labeled a “low human development” country: its latest Human Development Index (HDI) is 0.506, and ranks 156th in the world, which is an increase of five places from the previous ranking (161). The poverty rate is at 22.1%. As measured by the UNDP, 55.6% of the population lives in multidimensional poverty, and 29.9% in severe multidimensional poverty. Its Gini index is 32.4.

Regarding gender, there is still much progress to be made. Mauritania’s Gender Inequality Index is 0,610, ranking 156th in the world, and its Gender Development Index is 0.816, ranked 156th in the world. The reported maternal mortality ratio (death per 100,000 live births) is high, at 630. Also, the average years of schooling for female is 2.7 years, which ranks Mauritania 156th in the world. Only 8.3% of women (25 years and older) have at least some secondary education, compared to 21% of men (2005-2012), according to the UNDP.

However, cautiousness is required with respect to these numbers, as they can hide significant differences based on social categories. First, Mauritania’s economy is highly bifurcated. There is the oil, mining and fishery sectors, which represent about 75% of its revenues but only 3% of the employment sector. These sectors are also highly vulnerable to drastic changes in international prices. Over the last three years for instance, world prices of natural resources have fallen considerably. For its part, employment in the formal public sector accounts for only 13% of employment. This contrasts with the agricultural and informal sectors, combined with remittances from diaspora and official and private foreign aid. Second, ethnic, caste (or ‘social status’) and regional identities influence an individual’s position in the socioeconomic pyramid. Haratin (freed slaves), and to a certain extent ethnic minorities, face harsh political barriers that make upward mobility difficult. Since independence ethnic minorities have been considered as suspicious minorities by some Bidhân (White Moors) power-holders, and they have always run the risk of being the target of political and economic forms of punishment, while most Haratin continue to face the long-term consequences of socioeconomic inequality within Bidhân society. This does not mean that all Bidhân are well off (rural villages and urban shantytowns count numerous very poor Bidhân families), but it does mean that they are better represented in the upper strata of the socioeconomic ladder.

Question
Score

Socioeconomic
barriers

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Economic indicators		2013	2014	2015	2016
GDP	\$ M	5724.2	5391.5	4844.2	4634.6
GDP growth	%	6.1	5.6	1.4	2.0
Inflation (CPI)	%	4.1	3.5	0.5	-
Unemployment	%	10.1	10.1	11.1	11.7
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	19.7	9.3	10.4	5.9
Export growth	%	1.2	2.7	9.4	-
Import growth	%	-4.6	-15.0	2.1	-
Current account balance	\$ M	-1261.8	-1473.1	-955.9	-
Public debt	% of GDP	70.6	80.4	98.4	99.3
External debt	\$ M	3522.5	3520.5	3775.7	3833.5
Total debt service	\$ M	165.1	220.6	207.7	227.7
Net lending/borrowing	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	19.3	21.4	22.6	20.4
Public education spending	% of GDP	2.9	-	-	-
Public health spending	% of GDP	1.7	1.9	-	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	2.6	2.7	2.8	3.0

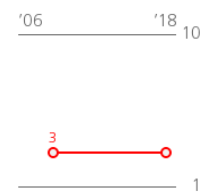
Sources (as of October 2017): The World Bank, World Development Indicators | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database.

7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

Since the early 2000s, 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 2017 Doing Business ranking of 160 out of 190 countries. Mauritania gained 14 places as compared to 2015, which is mostly due to one indicator, "protecting minority investors," for which Mauritania gained a surprising 39 ranks (all other indicators have had changes of more or less

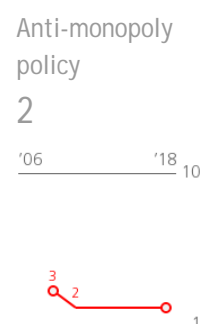
Market-based
competition
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seven ranks (such as minus seven for “starting a business” and plus six for “getting credit”). The most recent Doing Business Report notes that “Mauritania made starting a business easier by eliminating the minimum capital requirement.” The economic legal environment has been reformed extensively, with the adoption of many “codes,” whose tasks are to standardize and liberalize the economy. The latest changes are that of the Investments Code and Mining Code (reformed respectively in March 2016 and 2014), the Commerce Code (July 2015) and the Public Contracts Code (2010).



Beyond the formal economy, the size of the informal sector remains largely dominant in Mauritania. In February 2015, an IMF report indicated that employment in the formal sector represents only 13% of total employment, and that “The informal sector is very large and a large share of the workforce is highly vulnerable.” More than a year later, in May 2016, another IMF report highlighted some key aspects in need of improvement. It notes, “Mauritania still lacks initiatives and policies on actively promoting competition, curbing unfair business practices and reducing the size of the informal sector. Poor enforcement of contracts and inefficient administrative and judicial system are major impediments to doing business.” It adds, “Financial inclusion is hampered by the existence of a large informal sector.” The national currency, the ouguiya, can only be exchanged in Mauritania.

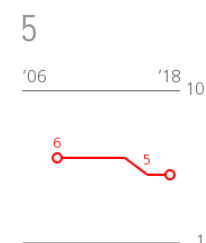
The Mauritanian economy has a strong oligopolistic tendency. A small number of businessmen and their families, usually related to specific Moorish (Bidhân) tribes or clans, control most of the large firms and enjoy an oligopolistic position in banking, fishery, public infrastructures and construction, airlines, import-export of consumer goods and foodstuff, telecommunication, insurance, and so forth. This was confirmed by a 2016 IMF report, which stated that microeconomic constraints include “monopoly market structures.” This also echoes a 2013 World Bank report which indicated 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.” The fate of these conglomerates varies over time. For instance, once a very close ally and cousin of the current president (both are from the same tribe), Ould Bouamatou’s conglomerate has been under fire from the presidential palace. As in many other countries, the strategy used against the businessman consisted in launching a tax audit. He has since then moved to Morocco and some media outlets now mention his name as a potential candidate for the next presidential election.



A risk analysis report observed in 2014, with respect to the specific case of the mining sector, 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.”

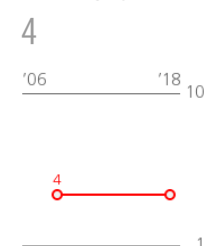
Mauritania has implemented a number of trade reforms in recent years. One such measure includes the establishment of a free trade zone in 2013 in the port city of Nouadhibou, from where iron ore is shipped to international markets. The agency in charge of this free trade zone, however, is facing some difficulties attracting investors. In 2015, a customs checkpoint was established, along with advantageous fiscal, customs and administrative incentives (including a seven-year zero tax policy). But only four international companies came in so far (one from Morocco and the Netherlands, and two from France). With respect to barriers, a 2015 IMF report noted that, “Mauritania compares favorably for tariffs barriers but not so well on nontariff barriers and ease of imports and exports (costs and time).” In 2017, Doing Business reported that Mauritania gained two places from the previous year in its Trading Across Borders indicator, from the 139 to 137. The World Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Index 2016-2017 points to similar patterns, as Mauritania ranks 137 out of 138 countries. The WTO 2011 review, which is the latest one, indicates that, “since its previous Trade Policy Review (TPR) in 2002, Mauritania has experienced a marked slowdown in the pace of its trade measure reforms.” International trade is not limited to legal goods and services. Mauritania, like other countries of the region, is not impermeable to informal and criminal trafficking (including trafficking of drugs, stolen cars, cigarettes, weapons, expired medications, etc.), which rests in part on complex networks that involve state officials. Otherwise, given its dependence on exports of primary commodities, the economy is not soundly integrated into the world economy.

Liberalization of foreign trade



Mauritania has about 15 banks (five are Islamic banks), up from 10 in 2008, not including informal credit organizations. But they have a low profitability and a low penetration rate and a weak financial inclusion – women, young people, and ethnic and ‘caste’ groups are largely excluded from it. 20% of the population has accounts in a formal financial institution, according to the annual report of the central bank (CBM). There are 7.5 commercial branches per 100,000 inhabitants, up from 6.6 in 2013. Banking rate is at 9% (it was 4% in 2010), an increase that a Mauritanian accountant, quoted in Africanews, considered not credible. An IMF report stated that although “The establishment of new banks has increased competition, but the narrow formal sector, limited financial services and similar business models among banks have resulted in a fragmented banking system.” It also notes that, “Despite this fragmentation, the credit and deposit portfolios remain highly concentrated in a number of banks.” The report further indicates that “five banks represent nearly 60% of credit and 70% of deposits, and banks have highly concentrated deposits and loans portfolios, including vis-à-vis related entities.” Looking at two specific cases, it indicates that, “Liquidity ratios in two banks, representing 14% of total banking assets, reached levels below the prudential 20-% norm.”

Banking system



The latest data on bank capital to assets ratio dates back to 2014, and it is 14.7% (down from 18.7% in 2013), although a 2016 IMF report indicates 17% for 2015 (online World Bank data indicates a ratio of 13.7% for end of 2015). The latest World

Bank data for nonperforming loans index is from 2013, at 20.4%. But an IMF report of February 2016 says that this ratio is even worse, at 27.6% at the end of 2015. On that matter, a 2016 IMF report says that, “Asset quality has deteriorated, banks’ risk management practices are weak and profitability is low. With the economic slowdown, deposit stagnated and net domestic credit growth decelerated in 2015.”

The president ordered investigations into malpractices at the Chinguetty Bank in the summer of 2016. At the end of 2014, the central bank of Mauritania (CBM) terminated the agreement it had granted to two banks (Tamkeen Bank and Maurisbank), practically shutting them down. The CEO of the Maurisbank appeared before court in early 2015, while the CBM promised that its customers would be compensated for their losses. The development of the banking system followed that of the mining and oil sector, but has yet to be better regulated. On that matter, a 2016 IMF report states that the fund “encouraged the authorities to enhance regulatory compliance and supervision, especially with regard to liquidity, foreign exchange, concentration and related-party risks.”

Announcements were made in 2015 concerning the revision of the Law on Banks and the Law on the Statutes of the Central Bank, which will aim at consolidating the regulation of the banking sector, no revision has been made yet.

Banks are closely connected to oligopolistic commercial groups (with ties to tribal groups). A 2016 IMF report pointed to the “high concentration in credit and deposit portfolios and banks’ linkages to economic groups.”

8 | Currency and Price Stability

The Mauritanian economy is strongly exposed to the fluctuation of world commodity prices, for both its exports (oil, minerals and fisheries), and imports (fuel, foodstuff). Inflation fluctuated between 3.5% in 2014 and 5.5% in 2015 and is estimated at 2% in 2016. External shocks, including significant changes in world commodity prices, are a constant threat to Mauritania’s price stability. Fuel and foodstuff rank high in the country’s major imports and can drive major ups and downs for inflation. Inflation of food and energy dropped significantly by the end of 2014 and most of 2015 and 2016; this helped maintain inflation at a moderate level.

The IMF noted that the drop in international prices of commodities exported by Mauritania forced the government to adjust their fiscal and exchange rate policies. But it noted in April 2016 that, “Since September 2014, the central bank moved toward a de facto ‘crawl-like’ exchange rate arrangement and the ouguiya depreciated nominally by 9% year-on-year vis-à-vis the U.S. dollar as of January 2016. The nominal depreciation did not prevent an average appreciation in real effective terms of 5% during 2015 due to the strengthening of the U.S. dollar, hampering external competitiveness and maintaining pressures on reserves.” Hence it recommended that

Anti-inflation /
forex policy

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the government take measures to address the overvaluation of the ouguiya. In May 2016, the IMF reiterated its assessments and also urged the government to increase the operational independence of the central bank. In November 2016, there were rumors of a major devaluation of the ouguiya, of up to 40%, but the Minister of Finance quickly denied it. The government also believed that the IMF overstated the problem of the ouguiya's overvaluation. One major problem however remains the major gap between the official and informal exchange rates. On the official market, the ouguiya to U.S. dollar ratio was on average 324.7 to 1 in 2015, 341.6 in 2016, and 358 in early 2017. The IMF and the government continued to disagree on the gap between the official and informal market.

No major progress on the debt front was observed. In May 2016, an IMF report noted that, "Since 2014, debt dynamics have deteriorated, following unfavorable revisions to the macroeconomic outlook emanating from the persistent terms-of-trade shock. Institutional capacity for debt management remains limited. Mauritania is now one of 12 low-income countries with high risk of debt distress according to the latest IMF-WB assessment," especially in a context where revenues from the extractive industries were going down for most of 2015-2016. Specifically, the public debt is relatively high at 91.26% of the GDP. In 2014 (the latest year for data), the external debt was \$3.5 billion (it was \$3.5bn in 2013, and \$3.3bn in 2012). The total debt service has increased in 2014 (latest available year) from \$143 billion in 2012 to \$164 billion in 2013 and \$221 billion in 2014. The IMF said in May 2016 that, "recommendations to address debt sustainability concerns through fiscal consolidation and to strengthen the monetary policy framework have yet to be implemented."

With respect to its reserve levels, the situation is stable, but in need of action, as the IMF assessed in 2016. The current account balance has improved in 2015: from -\$1,26bn in 2013 to -\$1437 billion in 2014 and then up to -\$0.955 billion in 2015.

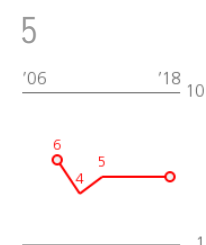
Government consumption increased in 2014 (latest available year), from 19.8% of GDP in 2012, 19.3% in 2013, to 21.3% in 2014.

In 2014 to 2016, non-extractive revenues supported most of the fiscal consolidation: 22% of government revenues in 2014, 27% in 2015, and an estimated 29% in 2016. In December 2016, the National Assembly adopted the 2017 budget.

9 | Private Property

Private property is guaranteed by the 1991 constitution (Article 15). The Investments Code (reformed in 2016) also contributes to protect private property. Land property is regulated under the 1983 Law on Land Tenure (as well as a 2000 decree clarifying its concrete applications) and the Urbanism Code. According to Doing Business 2017, the numbers of procedures to register a property remained stable between 2015 and 2016, with 49 days and four procedures.

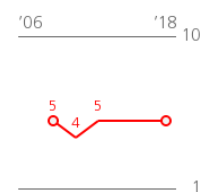
Macrostability



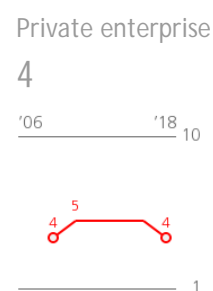
Property rights

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In this country where the majority of the population lives in rural areas, as well as on partly-registered or non-registered land in urban areas, private property remains one of the most politically critical and perilous aspects. For instance, the arrest of Haratin (freed slaves) activists in 2014, 2015 and 2016 is directly related to this question of land access for the country's most marginalized, and most numerous, social group. The latest example was the arrest of 13 activists in June of 2016 (known as the Bouamatou gazra event), who led a demonstration to denounce the expulsion of extremely poor Haratin families from unregistered land, or squat, called "gazra." 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. 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, wealthy individuals, not related to the settlement programs. The situation is even more problematic for women, whose access to land property is near impossible. A 2015 World Bank study reveals that women hold less than 8% of 27,000 title deeds recorded nationally.



Doing Business 2017 reports that it takes eight days to start a business and seven procedures. Mauritania ranks 80th, down from 73rd in Doing Business 2016. 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 clientelistic mechanism, as the "preferential" granting of licenses is one of the most well-known forms of politico-economic exchanges. No privatization has occurred in the current period. Attempts were made to privatize the electricity company (SOMELEC) and to increase private ownership in SNIM, but these attempts have failed. The media again mentioned potential plans for SOMELEC privatization in August 2016, but no concrete decision has been made. The largest state-owned enterprise (SOE) is the iron ore company SNIM, with more than 70% government participation.



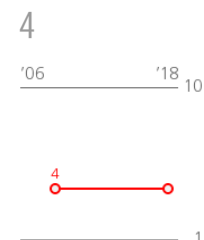
A World Bank report noted at the end of 2013 that the role of SOEs "in the economy has been growing over the last five years," but that this growing role was "not accompanied by sufficient strengthening of the SOE governance framework, which allowed for ineffective financial management, making it necessary to increase subsidies and transfers, and negatively impacting the fiscal situation."

10 | Welfare Regime

Mauritania has a bifurcated economy. On the one hand it comprises resource-extraction industries, the public administration and a small formal private sector, all of which employ few people. On the other hand, the urban informal sector and agropastoral sector appear to be larger. This leads to underdeveloped social safety net, though one that is slightly improving, according to a July 2016 World Bank report. The latest data (UNDP 2016) indicate that life expectancy is 63, mortality under five is 8.5 per 1,000, infant mortality rate is 65 per 1,000; mean years of schooling (for adults) is 3.74 years. There seems to be a slight improvement over the years for all these numbers, but the situation remains quite harsh for most citizens. Most health and education Millennium Development Goals “appear out of reach,” according to a 2015 IMF report. According to its official data, government expenditure on health is 4.1% of its GDP. But the World Development Indicators rather indicate 1.9%, up from 1.7% for the year before. Insisting again on the bifurcated nature of the Mauritanian economy and the depth of the informal sector, the vast majority of existing population safety nets are mostly provided for by local state agencies, NGO programs and the immediate and extended family network. A 2015 joint UNDP-government report on human development indicates that families account for 40% of the total funding of health expenditure and the government for 43% (private enterprises for 5%). The value of migrants’ remittances amounted to \$188 million in 2014, and are also important support to their families left in Mauritania. 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. World Bank indicators show that there are 0.68 physicians per 10,000 inhabitants. In 2013, the government established a National Strategy on Social Protection, which aimed at decreasing the socioeconomic vulnerability of the poorest households (unofficially understood as mostly Haratin families). In the medium-term, a cash transfer program could be established. For this to happen, a Vulnerable Household National Registry program (SNPS in French) is needed to identify the beneficiaries. The program has received funding from the World Bank, but the U.N. Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, upon his visit to Mauritania in May 2016, raised numerous problems, including the absence of legislative foundations, the uncertainty concerning the funding, and political and methodological issues with the registry process. No new developments have been made public since 2014 by the agency in charge.

In Mauritania, gender, ethno-racial identities, and social status (sometimes referred to as “caste,” including “freed slaves” or Haratin), and the combination of these three criteria, hinder access to quality education and health services, public offices and employment. Top positions in the state apparatus are controlled for the most part by White Moors. This echoes the analysis made by the United Nations’ Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights after his visit to Mauritania in 2016.

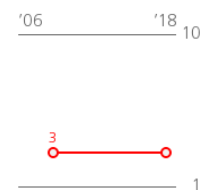
Social safety nets



Equal opportunity

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He warned about the dangers for the country's stability, if the profits of growth were not better redistributed. He added that the government's approach should not be one dictated by charity but rather by the objective of promoting every Mauritanian citizen's right to health, education, food and water, while noting that Haratin and Black African (i.e., non-Arabic-speaking minorities) are systematically absent from the real positions of power and continuously excluded from many aspects of economic and social life, even if they represent two-thirds of the population. The state agency TADAMOUN was created in 2013 to tackle "the negative consequences of slavery, favoring insertion and fighting against poverty." It remains to be seen to what extent it will succeed in its mission. On its website, the TADAMOUN agency does not name the social segment specifically, the Haratin, but rather uses surprisingly euphemistic language, mentioning the need to "improve the life conditions of a certain population which was victimized during a historical parenthesis."



With respect to gender, the 2012 electoral reform added 51 new seats at the National Assembly, 20 which are reserved for women only on a "national list." In the 2013 legislative elections, 37 women were elected (20 of which getting a seat through the reserved list), representing 25% of women in the National Assembly. There are currently eight women in the 56-seat senate assembly, representing 14% of all senators. Education-wise, gender inequalities in primary schools are not significant, with a female to male enrollment ratio of 110%, but problems increase significantly at the secondary level (ratio of 90%) and tertiary level (50%). A similar picture emerges with the literacy rate, which stands at 52.1% for all Mauritians, but only at 41.6% for women.

On the formal job market, females represent only 26.8% of the labor force. Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) remains a major problem in Mauritania, with 66% of female having been subjected to FGM. A similar situation prevails concerning the underage marriages of young girls, which constitute a widespread practice despite the Personal Status Code which sought to regulate marital practices. A 2016 World Bank study shows that 16% of women were married under the age of 15, and 35% under the age of 18. A new law on violence against women was submitted before parliament in early January 2017, which aimed at toughening up the criminalization of sexual violence, allowing NGOs to act as plaintiffs, among other things. It was eventually rejected by the parliament after religious leaders, Islamists deputies and even the grand Imam of Nouakchott rejected the proposal as being anti-Islamic. Another law on health and reproduction was presented and adopted in early January 2017 as well. It was at first rejected but eventually adopted on January 10th.

11 | Economic Performance

As an exporter of natural resources, Mauritania's economy was affected by the global downturn. GDP growth was 4.2% in 2014, estimated at 1.9% in 2015 and 1.5% in 2016. GDP per capita (PPP) was \$3,886 in 2014, compared to \$3,042 in 2013. This downturn of course affected FDI, which accounted for 9.2% of GDP in 2014, compared to 20% of GDP in 2013 and 26.5% Most investments went directly in the extractive industries (minerals and oil) and in infrastructure projects. Mauritania's international partners warned that these investments should rather maximize growth, develop infrastructure and lead to more inclusive outcomes. Inflation was at 3.5% in 2014, estimated at 0.5% in 2015 and 2% in 2016, significantly lower than in previous years. But this overall growth has not been inclusive. For instance, this growth comes largely from the extractive industries, but these commodities' extraction "requires little in terms of local factors of production," a 2015 IMF report stated.

Unemployment is high, at 31%, with important differences between rural areas (low) and urban areas (much higher). Youth unemployment remains critical: Unemployment affects more young people: as two out of three unemployed are less than 35 years old. The unemployment rate in the urban workforce exceeds 20% for the 20-29 age group, reaching 29% for the 25-29 age group. The World Bank said in 2013 that 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."

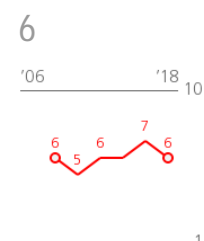
Public debt increased and reached 91.2% of GDP in 2015, from 88% in 2013, though mostly based on bilateral and multilateral arrangements. Gross capital formation reached 56.8% in 2014. As for the current account balance, it was in the negative for the current period, though it improved: -\$955.9 million in 2015, from -\$1.26 billion in 2013 and -\$1.23 billion in 2012. The IMF warns that the overvaluation of the ouguiya could widen the balance.

12 | Sustainability

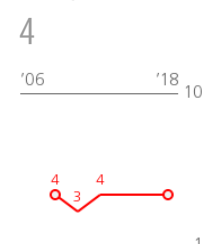
The Mauritanian government has not sent strong signals concerning its environmental policy. But as a poor Sahelian country, it does face constraining conditions. It did adopt a Code of the Environment (2000), which has become the main legal framework regarding the environment. It has also adopted an Action Plan for the Environment 2012-2016 and a Strategy and National Action Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, but actual tangible outcomes coming out of these plans remain to be seen.

According to the Environmental Performance Index (EPI), whose last ranking was established in 2016, Mauritania ranked at the bottom of the international ranking. The EPI 2016 ranks Mauritania as 160th country with a score of 46.3, which is a slight

Output strength



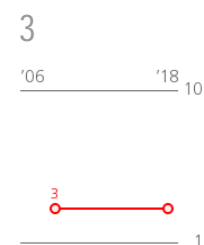
Environmental policy



improvement compared to rank 165 out of 178 countries in 2014. Though the government lacks resources to tackle its harsh environmental problems (desertification, rainfall deficit, climate change), the multinational companies involved in the extractive sector, and the European and Asian partners involved in the fishery industry, do not lack such resources. However, they play little role in limiting environmental problems. The use of pesticides in the Senegal River Valley and discharges and spills from the mining industries constitute among the most critical environmental threats in Mauritania. Many called for a revision of the 17-year old Environmental Code of 2000.

The Mauritanian government officially spends 3.3% of its GDP in education, according to the UNDP (2017). There are no available data on R&D expenditure. Gross enrollment ratio at the primary level is 98%, but goes down to 29.9% at the secondary level, and 5.6% at the tertiary level. Adult literacy rate is 52.1%, with an important gender gap: 62.6% for male and 41.6% for female. The same gap can be seen regarding the ratio of female to male enrollment: it is 1.1 for the primary level, but goes down to 0.9 for the secondary level and 0.5 for the tertiary level. Only 8.3% of women (25 years and older) have at least some secondary education, compared to 21% of men (2005-2012), according to the UNDP. A 2016 World Bank report on poverty dynamics notes that youth and females have improved their literacy status whereas marriage in youth age is still pervasive and marginally increased for some groups. Recently, some higher education institutes were created to address major gaps in professional schools (especially related to the country's natural resources sectors), including the Higher Institute for the study of technologies (in the southern town of Rosso); the School for Civil Engineering; the Mauritanian School for Mining; the National School for Public Works, the Naval Academy and two other higher education institutes. In 2013, 1,304 Mauritanian students received a fellowship to study abroad. The top destinations were the following: 1,012 students went to Morocco, Algeria, or Tunisia, 198 to Senegal and 61 to France. In July 2016, the government adopted a new regulation to address the opacity the formal job market's hiring process. It aims at allowing the National Agency for the Promotion of Youth Employment (ANAPEJ) to oversee the hiring process by companies, under the labor code, to make sure that national citizens and those with the right qualifications be fully considered. The actual efficiency of this new regulation will need to be analyzed.

Education policy /
R&D



Governance

I. Level of Difficulty

Mauritania, like its Sahelian neighbors, faces very difficult structural constraints: a very large territory, low population density and a process of desertification that now covers 78% of its territory (according to its Ministry of Environment and Sustained Development in January 2017). Furthermore, the war in neighboring Mali generates instability at Mauritania's eastern and southern borders, including the threat of armed groups roaming across the region. The already impoverished region of Hodh al-Gharby hosts close to 50,000 Malian refugees in the Mbera camp. As stated by the UNHCR, "in 2016, the security conditions in northern Mali remain volatile. Large-scale returns of refugees are therefore not yet envisaged and UNHCR and its partners maintain their presence in Bassikounou to sustain the humanitarian response in Mbera Camp." The militarization of the region has negative consequences. For a country that is already very poor, it diverts immensely scarce and needed resources toward the military instead of being injected in more productive sectors. It increases the attractiveness such groups can have on young citizens who, facing major obstacles to find a job and climb the socioeconomic ladder, search for alternatives. It polarizes the already strained ethnic and caste relations in the country. And, it contributes to the perpetuation of authoritarian rule in the country. One must recall that from the arrival of the military on the political scene, in 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, as seen in the downturn of international prices since 2014. This is combined with highly precarious meteorological conditions for the majority of the population's daily survival in the semi-desert rural areas. Last, the pacification of ethnic relations remains hazardous; the ongoing census taking has been met with fierce resistance from the three ethnic minorities who feel (again) excluded by state officials.

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

Structural
constraints

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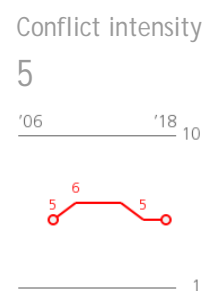
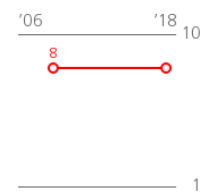
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Civil society
traditions

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are very few organizations that have clear mobilization capacities and can make themselves heard. In the formal sectors, mostly the extractive industries, the artisanal fishery sector and public service, trade unions can mobilize their members and engage the state. This was seen in the various strikes, including that of the largest SOE, the iron ore company SNIM, in 2015 and 2016, as well as in the Port of Nouakchott. 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, yet heavily repressed by the state. Fieldwork research also reveals that informal forms of associations constitute the main form of organization for civil society. They can be very efficient but are harder to observe in action; they include Sufi orders, reformist Islamic associations, hometown associations and even tribal networks. They play a sort of civil society role, provide help to their members and can engage the state on social, economic and political issues. However, many of them are relatively segmented and would have difficult times mobilizing very large sector of society.

Since the inception of the country, the politicization of ethnicity and race, of tribal solidarities, social status (caste), and religion, has been the defining features of the political landscape. Though the country is 100% Muslim, in recent years, the radicalization of a small but vocal number of Muslim men has made the headlines in Mauritania, as well as across the Sahel. After facing years of repression, moderate Islamists now have a political party (Tawassoul), but more radicalized men, especially young ones, have joined the ranks of armed groups, especially Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb. The number of alleged Islamist attacks on Mauritanian soil has significantly declined since the 2010s. However, many Mauritians (most, if not all Moors) are members of armed groups operating in neighboring countries. Aside from radical Islam, ethnic and status (caste) polarization remains a critical issue. Haratin (freed slaves) who are too vocal are repressed by security forces, as seen in the arrests of Haratin activist from the movement IRA. Ethnic minorities, the non-Arabic-speaking groups, claim that they are excluded from the most important positions in the security apparatus (including the Army and the police), and other positions in the Justice and Interior Ministries. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects military personnel (all from the Moor community) from the terrible violations of human rights against ethnic minorities (1989-1991), is still in place despite some local organizations calling for its revocation. The movement *Touche pas à ma nationalité* builds upon its predecessors from the 1960s on, to denounce the exclusion of Black Africans from the civil registration process and from other official spheres. In May 2016, the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, said that, "there is a systematic absence from almost all positions of real power, and a continuing exclusion from many aspects of economic and social life, of the Haratines and the Afro-Mauritians. These groups make up over two-thirds of the population, but various policies serve to render their needs and rights invisible.



II. Governance Performance

14 | Steering Capability

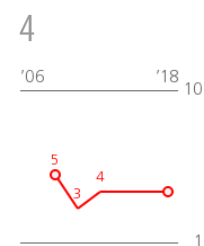
The Mauritanian political system is characterized by the significance of informal practices and procedures, and by the hegemonic domination of the president. He defines the country's main priorities. But given the importance of informal politics, these priorities are not necessarily those that are officially enunciated. Over the last 15 years, and despite the changes of presidents, one can identify three main priorities set by the current (and past) president that are both short-term and medium-term. First, given that coup d'états have been the only mechanism of ruler change in Mauritania (including the current president), preventing a coup from taking place is high on the agenda. This also means making sure that no rival from his close inner circle arises (as all coup d'états have been perpetrated not from distant opponents but from the closest allies of the ruler). Rumors about the president's decision not to step down after his second term have blurred the situation. Second, preventing Islamic armed groups, which include Mauritians among their ranks, from perpetrating attacks on the national territory is an objective that has been achieved so far. Although leaked documents published in the media suggest that this may have come at the price of secretive deals. Three, the government prioritizes attracting foreign investment, mainly in the extractive industries (minerals and oil) and the infrastructure sector. This objective has also been successful, even though it has not generated inclusive growth or trickle-down effects.

With respect to the fight against corruption, which was once the president's main electoral theme, it is far from clear that he has had much tangible success. Aside from minor political figures and actual or potential rivals, tribal-based clientelistic and patronage practices have not been threatened.

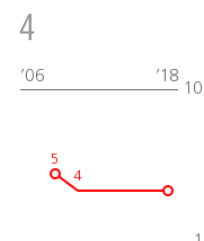
The government is attempting to navigate the global downturn in prices for international commodities, as China represents 50% of all Mauritanian exports. Attracting international investment became a central priority for the government. Investment in basic social services and in employment-strong sectors are needed if the government is to tamper down the social pressure exerted by marginalized social groups. In terms of managing its closest allies, and potential rivals, the president has been successful so far. Combining cooptation and temporary exclusion against influential men, while defusing the opposition, seems to be a central strategy, especially as the 2019 presidential elections get closer, and with it, the constitutional impossibility of the president to run for another term. The government's security policy is working thus far: no armed attacks on the national territory have been

Question
Score

Prioritization



Implementation



perpetrated during the period under study. However, as we have seen in other countries of the region, including Mali, Nigeria, and now Chad and Niger, the situation can change quite abruptly. More problematic, however, is the non-implementation of the rule of law, of policies aimed at easing ethno-racial relations, and of mechanisms that could allow democratic civilians to effectively rule over the country's destiny. The arrest of Haratin and ethnic minorities activists sends a negative signal in terms of the government's willingness to let democracy strive.

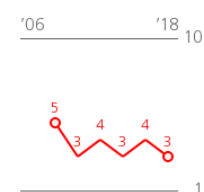
Policy learning can be evaluated in two different ways. From the president and government perspective, policy learning can mean adapting to challenging conditions in order to consolidate their rule. In such a perspective, the taming of opponents and rivals can be seen as key objectives. The "Dialogue" with the opposition established in September and October 2016, seen by many as a mechanism of cooptation, shows that past strategies have been well-implemented and upgraded. Politically speaking, the president and the executive have in fact proven effective policy learning, though perhaps not in the sense of contributing to the development of democracy. How the current president will deal with the constitutional impossibility of running for a third term, and how he will learn from the mistakes of other presidents in Africa, remains to be seen. From an economic perspective, it is not clear to what extent the booming years of the late 2000s encouraged the government to learn from past experiences and to effectively and truly adopt growth-inclusive and redistributive measures. As global economic turbulences hit Mauritania since 2014, many questions remain. A 2016 IMF report stated that Mauritania had, "a high public debt level, a high risk of debt distress driven by lack of diversification and weak capacity, and an outlook clouded by the global uncertainty." Revenues extracted from the export of primary commodities were not transferred significantly in other sectors of the economy in the "good years." The social upheavals seen between 2014 and early 2017 confirm this trend.

15 | Resource Efficiency

The management of administrative personnel remains undermined by political intrusions. The merging of administrative and political functions is frequent: high-ranking civil servants are often also members, if not officials, of the ruling party, UPR, a pattern that was in place in the previous regimes as well. Dismissals and appointments are often politically motivated. Frequent reshuffling can be seen as a tool to maintain loyalty and prevent subversion from the elites. The actual implementation of meritocratic procedures in the appointments of public servants remains a major challenge, and does the prevention of embezzlement in contracts related to public infrastructures and the governance of state-owned enterprises. Budget planning and implementation is more transparent than before. The media has published data on the forthcoming budget and the end-of-year budget revision. The government has publicly declared its intention to consolidate its budget in 2016 and

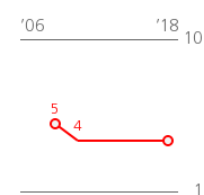
Policy learning

3



Efficient use of assets

4



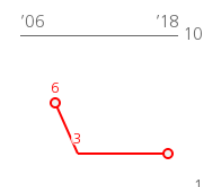
2017, in part by restraining expenditures, implementing cuts in goods and services and lowering transfers to state-owned enterprises (such as the national gas company SOMAGAZ). However, the dependence of the government on mining revenues (which have declined significantly) remains a liability, as well as the fact the country will enter into a tense (and pro-expenditure) political phase, with a potential upcoming referendum for the adoption of constitutional reforms (2017), legislative and municipal elections (2018) and presidential elections (2019). With respect to administrative organization, the proposed constitutional reforms debated in the fall of 2016 include the abolition of the Senate, which seems like a good political and financial decision, as many saw the Senate only as an institution to consolidate clientelistic networks. It would be replaced by regional councils, aimed at truly decentralizing political power. Major questions remain, however, including the effective financial capacities of such regional assemblies, as well as the degree to which they will truly reflect the interests and wishes of local populations, rather than being new sites for patronage relationships.

Policy coordination has proven effective in the sphere of defense and anti-terrorism, at least over the last few years. But more generally, the combination of a president-dominant system and a clientelistic (or patronage) culture does not serve transparency and policy coordination very well. As an illustration, slavery has been criminalized through various legal reforms since 2007, and social programs such as the TADAMOUN agency and the EMEL shops (which provide subsidized food at cheap prices for poor families) all aim at supporting marginalized groups such as the Haratin (freed slaves). But on the other hand, the actual implementation of these legal changes on the ground seems to generate little results (thanks mostly to corruption and tribal connections being used in the justice system). Haratin activists have been harshly condemned for protesting the situation of their people, as seen in the arrests of activists in 2014, 2015 and 2016. Similarly, the project of putting together a cash transfer program targeting the poorest households in the country, which would burgeon off from EMEL, does not correlate well with the actual political decisions implemented with respect to Haratin and ethnic minorities.

The main auditing agency, the General State Inspectorate (Inspection Générale de l'État, or IGE, created in 2005), maintained the pace of its operations and controls in 2015-2016. Other auditing state agencies include the Finance General Inspectorate. The Cour des Comptes, another auditing body which can tackle corruption practices, has been less proactive, at least publicly. No report has been published between 2006 and 2016, 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 then send the case to the Ministry of Justice. However,

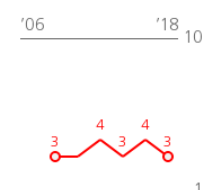
Policy coordination

3



Anti-corruption policy

3



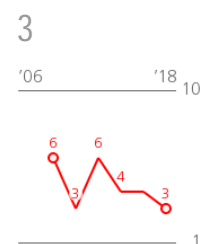
its latest ceremony was held in early January 2013 and no similar ceremony has been conducted between that time and early 2017, not even after the latest presidential election in the summer of 2014. In addition, these declarations were not made public (despite being ‘Transparent’).

16 | Consensus-Building

The last round of elections (2013-2014) confirmed the competitive authoritarian nature of the regime in place since 1991, which was preceded by 31 years of single-party and military rule. Every head-of-state, including President Ould Abdel Aziz, came to power through coups d’état since 1978, and since 1991 those military officers who staged a coup eventually organized elections which they systematically won. The only exception is the short-lived presidency of Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, who has publicly admitted that he had been chosen by the military. Therefore, it cannot be said officials are committed to democracy. The opposition parties are committed to democracy, including the Islamist party Tawassoul, which has become the most important opposition political party in the National Assembly. Though this has occurred in the absence of most other opposition parties, which have boycotted elections they considered to be unfairly organized. The fact that the government established a National Dialogue with the opposition in October 2016 does not change the nature of the regime. Such a dialogue was already used in the past (the Dakar Accords of 2009) and can be seen mostly as a mechanism of cooptation. Most opposition parties have refused to participate in it. An important test concerning state officials’ commitment for democracy will include the decision of the current president to step down after his second and last term in 2019 according to the constitution.

There is a significant consensus surrounding the principle of a market economy. However, how one defines that market economy matters greatly. If one insists on the rule of law as a mechanism that regulates market relations, then this would not describe officials’ consensual view of a market economy. Though official rules exist on paper, their actual implementation in practice remains the biggest 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 and clan networks. In addition, the extent to which the market economy can be harnessed to effect pro-poor policies raises major questions, given the immense gap that exists between a small but wealthy minority and a very large portion of the population that lives in conditions of extreme poverty, most of which being from specific social status groups.

Consensus on goals

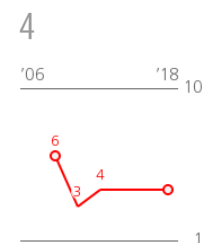


No significant political event in the current period (2014-2016) has negated the pattern seen under the Ould Taya regime (1984-2005): the military officer who stages a coup will eventually garner international legitimacy by winning an election he cannot lose and consolidate his grip through his party's dominance over elected assemblies (National Assembly, Senate and Municipal Councils). President Ould Abdel Aziz and his Union pour la République have confirmed this pattern in the 2013 and 2014 elections. Reformists have failed to bring forward the following two basic criteria of what a democracy is on the political agenda: (1) an open and fair election for the executive position (coup d'état is the only mechanism of ruler alternation); and (2) that non-elected institution(s) do not interfere, as the military continues to be the most powerful institution of the country. The proposed constitutional reform, discussed in October, have not been made official and their approval, either by a popular referendum or by the Congress, remains a question mark.

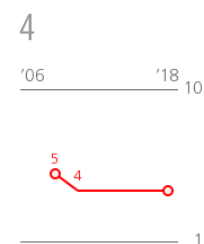
The Mauritanian political leadership has not been able, or perhaps, has not been willing, to depolarize the country's structural tensions. A broad consensus across the ethno-racial dividing lines is hardly materializing. In effect, as stated above, White Moors (or Bidhân) control most of the key positions in the most significant state institutions such as the Ministries of Defense, Justice and Interior. The dramatic conditions of former slaves, Haratin, is a major cleavage that continues to weaken the social foundations of the country. The harassment against some Haratin and Black African movements, reaching high levels between 2014 and early 2017, confirms this trend. Non-Arabic-speaking minorities, or Black Africans, are facing difficult conditions in their daily interactions with local state officials, especially in rural areas. This is also true for those Black African refugees who had been expelled from the country in 1989 to 1991 and have been returning in the last few years, yet without much support from the state. The refusal to repeal the Law of Amnesty that protects armed forces personnel who committed human rights violations during the violence against Black Africans does not contribute to defusing the cleavages.

Formal civil society organizations, including trade unions, domestic non-governmental organizations, local associations, and the media, are able to express themselves, protest (i.e. trade unions in 2015 and 2016), comment on political and social issues, and publish reports or memorandum on various sociopolitical problems. However, the degree of their inclusion in the national decision-making process remains very weak. Decision-making remains highly centralized around the presidency. International partners (U.N. agencies, partnering countries, international NGOs) do include civil society organizations as "stakeholders," but their impact on decisions remains difficult to assess, and the actual composition of these civil society actors must be analyzed carefully. Informal groups and networks (defined above as informal religious organizations (such as Sufi orders; popular religious scholars and their networks; tribal networks; village notables; etc.), however, do participate in various manners in the decision-making process. But in these cases, however, the issues of representation and horizontal segmentation generate serious questions.

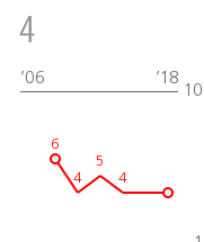
Anti-democratic actors



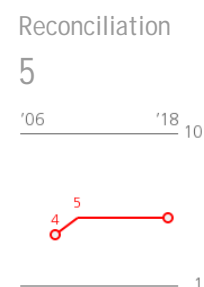
Cleavage / conflict management



Civil society participation

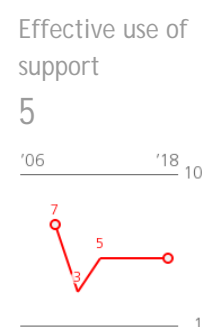


The comprehensive inclusion of Haratin in the political sphere, as well as their socioeconomic development, remains a major issue that has not been tackled systematically and efficiently by the government. The arrests and jail sentences of Haratin activists in 2014-2016, the gap between the toughening of anti-slavery laws and the meager results in the courts of justice on the ground and the high levels of poverty of the majority of Haratin households indicate that past injustices have not been addresses in a satisfactory manner. Also, the 1989-1991 ethnic massacres and deportations of Black Africans (Haalpulaar, Sooninko, Wolof and Bamana, who are non-Arabic-speaking minorities), and their ensuing marginalization are problems that have never been truly tackled. On the positive side, the return of Mauritanian refugees from Senegal between 2008 and 2012 was a positive development. But the lack of long-term support for these refugees, however, remains a major challenge. These problems include the difficulty of getting their land back; being compensated for their material loss such as livestock, houses and other goods; providing returning deported civil servants with pension plans; and so forth. However, the fact that the 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects military personnel who have committed human rights atrocities in 1989-1991, has not be repealed yet constitutes a major obstacle to reconciliation. Some high-ranking military officers who have allegedly committed human rights violations during these terrible years continue to serve at top positions in the security apparatus. Finally, the fact that the four ethnic minorities continue to be almost absent from key positions in the Defense, Interior and Justice ministries also raises doubt over the government’s willingness to achieve sustainable reconciliation.



17 | International Cooperation

Most development policies have been produced in collaboration with international partners, including U.N. agencies, the World Bank, regional banks (African Development Bank; Islamic Development Bank) and bilateral development aid agencies. In addition, since the rise of Islamist violence across the Sahel, the growing militarization of the whole Sahel region has strengthened Mauritania’s relations with Western and international partners. An example of this is the European Union’s commitment to contribute €195 million for its 2004-2020 National Indicative Program with Mauritania (compared to €23 million for Burkina Faso, €15 million for Mali million, €442 million for Chad), focusing on three areas: food security, rule of law and health. The extent to which Mauritanian officials use support for non-security concerns, especially in the political, economic and social spheres, remains to be seen. The European Union, which provides much support in rule of law-related programs, 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 among 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 implementation of these commitments.

Despite the competitive authoritarian nature of the Mauritanian regime, all international partners thoroughly collaborate with the government. International partners may be balancing democracy promotion against security interests, noting that the president has been successful on the latter front. The constant threat exerted by armed Islamist groups in neighboring countries, especially with the ongoing security crisis in Mali, weigh heavily.

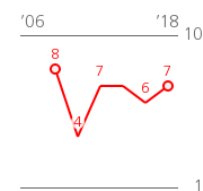
As predicted by the Economist Intelligence Unit, Mauritania's relations with its West African neighbors will continue to be dominated by the issue of regional security threats arising from Islamist groups in Mali and elsewhere. Mauritania hosts tens of thousands of Malian refugees, and has sent troops to the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali. Together with Burkina Faso, Chad, Niger and Mali, Mauritania will continue to participate in the G5 du Sahel, a regional security and development organization. Mauritania will also seek to bolster ties with Arab states, largely because of trade and aid opportunities.

Effective democratization is not on the agenda. With respect to the development of a liberal economy, the government has convinced international partners and foreign investors that it is committed, even though most agree that informal practices, corruption and oligopolistic tendencies continue to be dominant features of Mauritania's economy. Mauritania collaborates with most international institutions or mechanism that monitor compliance.

The militarization of the Sahel in recent years drives the current regional cooperation agenda. Regional cooperation is now mostly a question of security, even though the drivers of insecurity are mostly of a social, political and economic nature. Mauritania must maintain a precarious balance between the two rival powerhouses to the north, Morocco and Algeria, in a context where both try to weaken one another – and thus interpreting Mauritania's friendly move toward either one as an attack against the other. In 2016, and especially in the second half of the year, relations with Morocco have become increasingly tense. Cooperation with neighboring Mali has been positive, though at times difficult, as both countries did not favor the same strategy to deal with armed Islamist groups. Mauritania's dual identity as an Arab and African country has always been a challenge, as some domestic groups wish to favor one over the other. Since the creation of G5, the five Sahelian countries (Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso) that have formed regional cooperation alliance, Mauritania is hosting the organization's headquarters. Its latest annual meeting took place in Nouakchott in November 2016. Mauritania is a member of many other regional organizations such as the Union of the Arab Maghreb, NATO's Mediterranean Dialog (which regroups seven non-NATO members, including Mauritania); however, since 2000 it is no longer a member of ECOWAS.

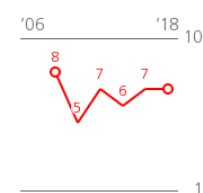
Credibility

7



Regional cooperation

7



Strategic Outlook

Greater legitimacy can be achieved through a reform of the country's political institutions, in a way that makes them more open to all citizens, more representative of the country's cultural diversity and more accountable. Elections for the presidency and the National Assembly must be open, transparent and fair; the peaceful transition of power should become a possible outcome. Countries which have reached the highest levels of stability in Mauritania's neighborhood, including Ghana, Senegal, Benin and Cape Verde, all had more than one peaceful transfer of power, whereby opposition parties and civilian candidates, not military officers, can truly hope the win an election. In addition, Mauritania's strong presidential system needs to be reformed, as it contributes to the weakness of the overall political system. Too much power is concentrated in the office of the president. Opposition parties need more power in the National Assembly (in the commissions, for instance), and the judiciary needs to become truly independent from the executive. Institutions and procedures that constitute the rule of law exist on paper, but they are not implemented in practice. Corruption and clientelism that serve a small minority of wealthy elites, and of ethno-racial exclusion, breed instability and increase the likelihood of witnessing the outbreak of armed groups, as the Malian case demonstrates very well.

In a regional environment plagued by the rise of armed groups, the military must focus its mission on maintaining security in the country, and not in remaining the ultimate political decision-maker, as it has been uninterruptedly since 1978. Ethno-racial categories, specifically Haratin and the four different Black African groups, should have fair access to all levels of the state apparatus, not just the bottom and middle levels, including in key ministries such as Defense, Interior and Justice. The 1993 Law of Amnesty that continues to protect security forces personnel from being investigated and prosecuted in the aftermath of the state-sponsored violence against ethnic minorities (1989-1991) must be repealed, thereby allowing the country to undergo a real process of reconciliation.

Growing revenues from the extractive sectors are a positive trend. But vulnerability to rapidly changing international prices remains a major threat, as was confirmed by the fall in prices from 2014 to early 2017. Hence, revenues generated by these sectors must be redirected to funds that would help diversify the economy, provide much more support to the agro-pastoral sector (where 60% of the labor force is concentrated) and develop welfare programs that should help reaching the Sustainable Development Goals. With almost half of the population living in conditions of extreme poverty, conditions for instability remain a major threat in this Sahelian environment. As in most Sahel countries, in Mauritania the youth (under 25) constitutes roughly 60% of the population; their integration into the labor market and the necessity to offer acceptable socioeconomic conditions should be a priority. With many Mauritians having joined armed groups in neighboring Sahel countries, the urgency of elevating the population's well-being has become clear.

In a country marked by excessive centralization, decentralization is needed. Agencies of the central administration in the rural areas, specifically the Governors and Prefects, must be made accountable, especially regarding land allocation and local corruption. Mechanisms to safeguard against arbitrary decisions are needed.