

# BTI 2014 | Mauritania Country Report

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This report is part of the Bertelsmann Stiftung's Transformation Index (BTI) 2014. It covers the period from 31 January 2011 to 31 January 2013. 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	3.8	HDI	0.467	GDP p.c.	\$	2603.2
Pop. growth <sup>1</sup>	% p.a.	2.5	HDI rank of 187	155	Gini Index		40.5
Life expectancy	years	61.2	UN Education Index	0.366	Poverty <sup>3</sup>	%	47.7
Urban population	%	41.8	Gender inequality <sup>2</sup>	0.643	Aid per capita	\$	57.8

Sources: The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2013 | UNDP, Human Development Report 2013. Footnotes: (1) Average annual growth rate. (2) Gender Inequality Index (GII). (3) Percentage of population living on less than \$2 a day.

## Executive Summary

The outbreak of the war in neighboring Mali (2012) was a major wake-up call for Mauritanian officials. A combination of ethno-racial resentment from minority groups, small but effective Islamist armed groups, weak state institutions, factionalism within the military that led to a coup d'état, and neighboring countries that played ambiguous games all led to the war in Mali. Though the situation differs to some degree in Mauritania, the country nonetheless suffers from all of these problems (the relative weight of each of them differs from Mali, however).

Islamist armed groups threaten Mauritania. During 2011 – 2012, security forces were quite effective at keeping these groups outside the borders, namely in Mali, by launching military strikes on specific targets. However, most experts agree that the number of Mauritians (most of whom are so-called White Moors, but also some Haratine) in these armed groups, especially Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Movement for Oneness and Jihad in East Africa (Mouvement pour le Tawhîd et du Jihad en Afrique de l'Ouest, MUJAO), has reached an unprecedented level. Even though they are operating in Mali right now (and possibly in Algeria as well), this raises major security concerns for Mauritania if, or when, they decide to leave Mali following French and international intervention and come back to their motherland.

President Ould Abdel Aziz, a retired general, came to power by force, as did all of his predecessors since 1978 (minus one). As the architect of the 2005 coup d'état and the front runner of the 2008 coup, he is aware that coups d'état have been the only mechanism of leadership change in Mauritania for more than three decades. As in Mali, factionalism in Mauritania's defense and security forces remains a major problem he needs to tackle. In this context, there is no democracy in Mauritania, as the competition for the executive office is not open, and even when it was to a certain degree (in 2006 – 2007), the military stepped in after only 17 months in 2008, thereby demonstrating that unelected officials, namely the military, is the real power-holder in the country.

Legislative and municipal elections, which should have taken place in 2012, have been unconstitutionally postponed.

The level of violence exerted on civilians, and censorship of the press and of divergent opinions, however, is relatively low, as in many similar electoral authoritarian regimes. But in this impoverished country, the economic gap between, on the one hand, a small minority of very wealthy high-ranking officers, heads of economic oligarchies, and a few notables, and on the other hand, the vast majority of the population, remains unchanged and thus is potentially explosive. A good illustration of this, among many, is the fact that, despite the adoption of an antislavery law in 2007, and reinforcement in 2012, no individual has been sentenced; the only person who was put in jail was unexpectedly released after a few months (editor's note: the so-called White Moors (hereafter: Bidhân) represent the power class that have traditionally owned slaves, the so-called Black Moors or Haratine. The word Haratine means "freed slaves" but refers both to those still enslaved by the Bidhân or belonging to the class of people formerly enslaved). The Haratine thus not only live in dire socioeconomic conditions, but the state has a difficult time implementing laws that could protect them and threaten current and former masters. The fact that most key positions in the state are held by Bidhân thus raises several concerns for the peaceful development of ethno-racial relations.

On the economic front, Mauritania's dual economy remains the same: The official, export-oriented sector continues to do well and has survived the global crisis. Demand for Mauritanian primary resources (minerals and fish) remained strong in 2011 – 2012, and international donors, probably due to security threats in the region, have channeled significant assistance to Mauritania. However, these sectors are not conducive to employment and the vast majority of the population lives off agriculture and the precarious informal economy. The severe droughts that hit the country in 2011 and 2012, and the meager trickle-down effect from the formal to the informal sector of the economy, did not contribute to improving socioeconomic indicators.

## History and Characteristics of Transformation

Since its independence in 1960, Mauritania has been a poor Sahelian country with few resources (mostly iron ore and fish) and has remained reliant on developmental and economic aid. From 1975 to 1984, the country's economy stagnated. This period was accompanied by socioeconomic problems deriving from a collapse in iron prices, lasting droughts, the disastrous consequences of Mauritania's involvement in the Western Sahara War, and economic policies that fostered an excessive expansion of the public sector, which, in turn, drove up public debt. In 1985, on the heels of this period, Mauritania signed its first restructuring program with the IMF and the World Bank. This was then followed by other programs.

During this period, the country's socioeconomic problems and increasing domestic political tensions grew increasingly intertwined. Political tensions in Mauritania revolve 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 such as the Bidhân and the Haratine and non-Arabic speaking ethnic communities (i.e., Haalpulaar, Wolof, Soninke and Bamana) have structured the political game since the colonial period. There are several political tensions over a range of issues including linguistic policies, education policies, land tenure policies and ethnic representation in the political and bureaucratic apparatus of the state. These tensions led to the outbreak of major violence in 1989 – 1991, when about 80,000 Haalpulaar, Soninke, Wolof and Bamana were deported from the country by military personnel, hundreds were assassinated, and thousands were dismissed from the civil service. Meanwhile, former slaves of the Bidhân community, the Haratine, are, though a vast majority, second-class citizens in the margins of social, economic and political life. Political organizations of Haratine, such as El Hor, have sought to mobilize this community. Some were eventually co-opted by the regime, while others have joined opposition groups. This politics of identity took place amidst a second political dynamic: the interference of the military in political life. The civilian regime (1960 – 1978) was ousted during the Western Sahara War, at a time when the size of the military had quadrupled and amidst military defeats at the hands of Western Saharan insurgents. Since the first coup d'état (1978), every single head of state has been a military officer (with one exception, in 2007 – 2008) and every leadership change occurred through a coup d'état.

Colonel Ould Taya agreed to adopt a new democratic constitution in 1991, while organizing multiparty elections at all levels of government (presidential, legislative and municipal elections). The constitution guaranteed the president far-reaching prerogatives. His party, the Democratic and Social Republican Party (Parti démocratique, républicain et social, PRDS) dominated every single election and thus controlled the legislative assembly (the opposition was left with only one seat for ten years, and then only four seats between 2003 and 2005). Social polarization and growing dissatisfaction within individual tribes and regions concerning the policy of unequal distribution carried out by the president resulted in two or three attempted coups in the first half of the 2000s.

In 2005, Colonel Ould Taya was ousted by his closest collaborators, including then-Presidential Guard Commander (Presidential Security Battalion, Bataillon de la Sécurité Présidentielle, BASEP) Ould Abdel Aziz, the current president. The coup aimed to prevent the military from breaking into factions and to convince the Mauritanian people that the state's leaders were really interested in a fair distribution of upcoming oil revenue. This transitional period led to the holding of the country's freest and fairest municipal (2006), legislative (2006) and presidential elections (2007). Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi won the presidential election, though clearly with the support of key officers including Colonel Ould Abdel Aziz (soon General). However, the elected president was ousted in August 2008, after seventeen months in power, by the same officers who had staged the 2005 coup and who had controlled the security apparatus since then. Ould Abdel Aziz's coup was severely condemned by most bilateral donors and by the African Union. After some rounds of negotiations between Ould Abdel Aziz and opposition parties, they all agreed to hold a presidential election in July of 2009, under the control of a National Unity government. This government, however, had been in place for only 21 days, which did not provide much time to prepare the elections. Ould Abdel Aziz won the election in the first round with 53% of the vote,

and therefore did not need a second round. His party, the Union for the Republic (Union pour la République, UPR) controls a majority of seats in the National Assembly and includes many of the political figures of the older PRDS. Since 2005, the country has been targeted by an armed movement, now called AQIM (Al Qaida in the Islamic Maghrib), which attacked military garrisons in the country's desert areas between 2005 and 2010, while kidnapping and killing foreigners. The presence of this radical Islamist group throughout the Sahel has led Western countries, mostly France and the United States, to channel many financial and material resources to Mauritania, coupled with strong diplomatic support. The outbreak of the war in Mali, led (but not initiated) by AQIM and other armed Islamist groups, puts Mauritania in a difficult position. A growing number of Mauritians (all Bidhân and some Haratine) have joined AQIM and other groups, while an increasing number of Malian refugees are sheltering on Mauritanian soil.

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

The presence of Islamist armed groups in the Sahel region remains a major challenge for the Mauritanian state. However, in recent months, groups such as AQIM have not been able to launch attacks against Mauritanian military forces as it did on several occasions in the past. Rather, the state has attacked armed groups beyond its border, directly on Malian soil (summer of 2011), as a way to move these groups away from its territory. Nonetheless, the border with Mali in the far southeast remains a vulnerable zone (the region, or wilaya, of Hodh Al Sharqi), even more so with the crisis in Mali, whereby Islamist groups took control of northern Mali in 2012, followed by Franco-Malian military operations, which dispersed the armed groups in early 2013. If looked at from a purely quantitative perspective, AQIM's actions on Mauritanian soil have not been highly disruptive, as compared to other African countries fighting armed groups of all sorts (Senegal security forces have suffered more casualties in its Casamance region, for instance). The low population density and vastness of the territory certainly makes it more difficult for the state to control every part of the country. In order to mark the presence of the state in this remote region, the government built, in 2010, a new town, Nbeiket Lahwach, which became the capital of a new district (muqata'a): Dhar. This town is located 30 km away from the border with Mali. It is in this town that the Arab communities of northern Mali have met to discuss their position about the crisis in Mali (June 2012). The government also works on paving strategic roads to strengthen its authority in this area (such as the 265 km road between Nema and Bassikounou). It is in this region that Mauritanian security forces clashed with armed groups on both sides of the border with Mali, in the summer of 2011. The region is often reported to be under constant security threat: Weapons have been stolen from military garrisons in the region (Nema; Bassikounou) and soldiers have been accused of trying to sell weapons to groups beyond the border; foreigners were arrested while trying to cross the border to join armed groups; unidentified vehicles are often chased by security forces while coming from or going to Mali. State officials often call on the population of the border

Question  
Score

Monopoly on the  
use of force

7

region not to engage in smuggling with armed groups, which are based on the Malian side of the border. It is also in this region (Fassala, Mbera, Bassikounou) that thousands of refugees from Mali fled, after Islamist armed groups took control of the northern half of that country. In addition, the fact that groups such as AQIM and MUJOA can count on numerous Mauritanian citizens is a major concern for Mauritanian authorities. These men cross over the country's borders back and forth and can count on some support from their relatives back home. By most accounts, Mauritanians form the second largest national group in AQIM (behind Algerians) and the second largest group in MUJOA.

The peaceful coexistence of various ethnic groups in Mauritania has been a central challenge since the creation of this country. The sociopolitical status of non-Arabic-speaking communities, Haalpulaar, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana, as well as that of the Black Moor community (former slaves, also called Haratine), as compared to that of the Bidhân, remains a significant source of conflict. With respect to non-Arabic-speaking communities, tensions have broken out again, mainly about two issues. First, returnees (i.e., refugees expelled from Mauritania to Senegal and Mali in 1989 – 1991 who came back in 2008 – 2011) have settled in 118 sites along the Senegal River Valley but continue to struggle to find their place in their country. Representing more than 5000 families, these people still have problems gaining access to critical resources, mainly land and jobs. Most of them could not return to their original villages, which have been occupied by new people after they were expelled. Access to jobs (for adults) and schools (for children) is another challenge that has not been met yet. Tensions, sometimes violent ones, with communities that have occupied their land and villages after they were expelled from Mauritania, often erupt and local authorities must step in. Also, the 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects the security personnel involved in the assassination and deportation of ethnic minorities during the 1989 – 1991 period, has not been repealed yet. Without due investigation of past human rights violations, and the ensuing legal actions, the ethnic peace remains fragile. Also, very few individuals from these ethnic groups are nominated in key positions in strategic state organizations, such as the defense ministry, the justice ministry, the interior ministry or the army. Finally, tensions have arisen about the population census and registration the government has been carrying out since June 2011 (and which were still going on in early 2013 at the time of writing). Activists have denounced the fact that Haalpulaaren, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana are facing administrative hurdles, which makes it difficult for them to be registered as citizens by the officials who carry out the census (practical problems include the difficulty, at times the impossibility, of getting proper national identity cards). In September 2011, for instance, demonstrations organized in towns of the Senegal River Valley by the Don't Touch My Nationality movement (*Touche pas à ma nationalité*, TPMN) were severely repressed by security forces. One man died in Maghama and many were beaten in Kaedi.

State identity

6

The so-called freed slaves, or Haratine, who were historically the servants of White Moor families, continue to live in the most difficult situation. In 2007, a law was passed to criminalize any slavery-related activity. It was reinforced in 2012 with the addition of an article that eliminated the 10-year applicable limitation. Since 2007 there has been only one case of man who was convicted of practicing slavery, in November 2011, and the Criminal Court of Nouakchott released him in March 2012. This confirms that a major problem is the actual implementation of this law, in a context where slave-owning families are socially and informally protected through connections in the state apparatus.

Mauritania is an Islamic republic. However, the role of Islam as a foundation of the state is ambiguous. Islam is the religion of the state. But institutions of the state combine both Islamic and secular elements. The constitution states that “Islamic precepts are the only source of Law,” but they are “open to the exigencies of the modern world.” The criminal code combines elements of both Shari’a and of the French penal code. The code of personal status (family code) is mostly inspired by the Islamic law. Yet popular sovereignty, not God, is the foundation of most key state institutions (the presidency, the National Assembly, the Senate), and Mauritania abides by most international conventions, including the (secular) Human Rights Charter. Meanwhile, informal, societal rules often prevail over state rules. These follow to a certain extent religious dogmas. Recently, the state has attempted to control the content of religious speeches in mosques and religious schools (mahadra), as a way to prevent the diffusion of more radical ideas, by holding conferences on “moderate” ideas and by controlling the appointment process of imams. This is a double-edged sword, however: On the one hand, it enables the state to control what is being said and taught, but, on the other hand, it also depicts state-appointed religious scholars as “puppets” of a regime whose legitimacy is not very strong.

No interference of religious dogmas

4

The infrastructural power of the state, that is, its capacity to broadcast its authority throughout the territory and to provide for basic administrative services, is improving, but it varies from one region to another, and also from certain social segments to others (see identity issues above). All administrative regions have courts, but most are understaffed and underfinanced, and undermined by arbitrary decisions, as illustrated by the fact that, between 2009 and 2012, the president fired three presidents of the Supreme Court before the end of their term (five-year terms); the fourth president of the Supreme Court was appointed in the summer of 2012. The judicial system is becoming more specialized, with courts dedicated specifically to “economic crime.” The Mauritanian Tax Agency (Direction générale des impôts; DGI) and the State General Inspectorate (IGE, Inspection générale de l’État) often undertake visible operations that send a message about the state’s capacity to collect taxes and to discipline unlawful actions by agents or agencies of the state. For instance, in early 2013, the IGE uncovered suspicious activities within the Ministry of Health (corruption, contracts awarded without tender procedures, etc.).

Basic administration

6

## 2 | Political Participation

There were no elections held during the 2011 – 2012 period. Yet, municipal and legislative elections should have been held in 2011 and have been postponed since then. Indeed, deputies of the National Assembly, and local councilors, are elected for a five-year term. The previous elections were in the fall of 2006; thus their term ended in the fall of 2011. However, President Ould Abdel Aziz, who came to power through a coup d'état in 2008 (followed by a presidential election a year later), has decided to postpone local and legislative elections. As a consequence, members of the National Assembly have been unconstitutionally passing laws since the end of 2011. Rumors circulate that elections will be held in 2013, but the president has not confirmed any of them (as of January 2013). A new independent electoral commission (Commission Nationale Indépendante des Élections), founded in June 2012, is not accepted by the opposition due to presidential domination.

Free and fair elections

3

Since the Western Sahara War, and because of it, the country was formally ruled by military officers between 1978 and 1991, and by retired officers between 1991 and 2013. The only exception was the 17-month rule of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi in 2007 – 2008, though even then he had been chosen by the military junta before the election, and was monitored by his personal military chief of staff, now retired General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz, who eventually ousted and replaced him as the latest head-of-state. In sum, the country was ruled by an active or retired military officer for 34 of the last 35 years, underscoring the importance of the non-elected military as the ultimate decision-maker in the country. The military is the de facto dominant veto player in Mauritanian politics. If the Saharan war was the trigger that brought the Mauritanian military to the forefront of politics in this country, the presence of Islamist armed groups in the region in recent years has contributed to the securitization of politics in the entire Sahel region, and this has consolidated even more the role and the power of the military in Mauritania.

Effective power to govern

2

The 1991 constitution guarantees the right of association. Though this right was highly constrained at the beginning of the 1990s, it became increasingly respected in practice, and, since 2005, following the ousting of Ould Taya, it has been well implemented. Political parties of the opposition, and NGOs as well, are allowed to exist without serious problems. Over the last two years, however, security forces have often repressed demonstrations organized by antislavery movements and by ethnic minority movements, which indicates that these issues remain highly sensitive. Leaders of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (Initiative pour la resurgence du mouvement abolitionniste, IRA) movement, an antislavery movement, and of TPMN, which defends the rights of Black Africans, were arrested on several occasions while organizing vocal public demonstrations, including in June – July 2012 (IRA), and in October 2011 and February and November of 2012

Association / assembly rights

7

(TPMN). Students associations at the University of Nouakchott and at the Higher Institute for Islamic studies were heavily repressed during school year 2011 – 2012.

The constitution guarantees the freedom of expression (Article 10). Generally speaking, citizens and journalists are not harassed for publicly expressing their opinion. Political opinions can be expressed relatively freely, except in one specific domain, that of corruption affairs. When media report on specific cases of corruption, and if these cases involve high-ranking people, then the limits to freedom of expression may be felt. The Association of Mauritanian Media (Rassemblement de la presse mauritanienne) denounced, in 2012, the informal pressure put on some of its members, including journalists of media groups such as *As-sirage* and *Al Akhbar* (August and November 2012). Twenty years after many of its African neighbors, the Mauritanian government finally authorized the creation of independent television and radio groups; until 2011, the state-owned TV and radio enjoyed a monopoly on airwaves. The High Authority for the Press and Audiovisual Media (Haute autorité de la presse et de l’audiovisuel, HAPA) supervises the sector of the media and the liberalization process. However, few operating licenses have been granted; independent TV and radio companies face difficult financial constraints, and at times political ones. One radio has seen its financial support cut off because it was said to provide too much space to programs in the ethnic minorities languages, while others were under strong pressure for airing messages from Islamic armed groups.

Freedom of  
expression  
7

### 3 | Rule of Law

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 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. In an intriguing twist, the National Assembly passed, in January 2013, a law that criminalizes any coup d’état and other unconstitutional changes of power. The current head of state came to power through a coup d’état in 2008. Beyond this formal institutional architecture, which already provides the president with substantial powers, lies an informal institutional configuration whereby the president, high-ranking military officers, and economically affluent businessmen wield significant political influence.

Separation of  
powers  
4

According to the 1991 constitution, the judiciary is independent from both legislative and executive powers (Article 89 of the constitution). A constitutional change was made in March of 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; and the right to appoint all five Islamic scholars of the High Islamic Council. Informal practices also weaken the judiciary. For instance, the president of the Supreme Court normally serves a five-year term, but the head of state has already made four changes of Supreme Court president in the last five years. On average, they have served less than two years. The latest change occurred in May 2012; two years after his nomination, Judge Ould Ghaylani was replaced by Ould Mohamd Youssouf. Furthermore, the informal political influence, exerted through executive pressure, financial retribution, and/or tribal connections (or any combination of these) is a major problem. The judiciary, like any other branch of the administration (apart from key security agencies) is understaffed and underfinanced. In December 2012, on the eve of the annual meeting of the High Council of the Judiciary, the chair of the Mauritanian Bar Association (*Batônnier de l'Ordre National des Avocats*), Ahmed Salem Bouhoubeyni, asked for major changes to both legal texts and practices, including the end of informal political pressures on judges and the honoring of legal texts.

Independent  
judiciary

4

Two main state agencies are in charge of investigating public servants' and politicians' ethical misconduct and conflicts of interests: the Court of Audits (*Cour des Comptes*), which was created in 1993 with a chair appointed by the president, and the State General Inspectorate (*Inspection générale de l'État*), created in 2005 and led by an inspector-general (nominated by the prime minister); the IGE has the freedom to investigate all public institutions. The State General Inspectorate's independence from the executive is at stake, however. On the one hand, the SGI stated at the end of the year (2012) that its investigations enabled it to collect more than 4 billion ouguiyas that had been embezzled by civil servants, and by the private sector and NGOs. In August 2011, for instance, three Mauritanian ambassadors were ordered to reimburse 250,000 ouguiyas they had misappropriated; the chair of the Food Security Commiserate was also accused of embezzlement in a food program in 2012. On the other hand, the current chair of the SGI, Mrs. Aicha Vall Mint Verges (who was appointed in February 2011), is also the chair of the ruling party's Women's Commission. Her predecessor was the executive secretary of the UPR, the ruling party. Such close a political connection with the UPR raises doubts concerning her capacity to act autonomously from the executive power and those formally and informally associated with the president. For instance, in November of 2012, she and her Women's Commission organized a celebration for the president's return to the

Prosecution of  
office abuse

4

country. She also proclaimed, in June 2012, that her commission would work hard to see the president be reelected. The Court of Audits has also undertaken some investigations. In March of 2013, for instance, it summoned the former Minister of Finance to reimburse 30 million ouguiyas he is accused of having embezzled. However, its last annual report was published in 2006; since then, no report has been released.

Since the ousting of Colonel Ould Taya, respect for civil rights has improved to a certain extent. However, significant problems remain. One of Nouakchott's main prisons, in Dar Naim, is notorious for its frequent violations of human rights in 2011 – 2013, including overcrowding, sexual abuse of minors, imprisonment without trial, acts of torture, and inmate deaths. (Some prisoners died because of the lack of medical treatments, and one was killed by security guards in October 2012. In an unprecedented decision, some security personnel involved in this killing were officially blamed and eventually fired, though without a transparent investigation.) Although Mauritania is said to have only 1700 prisoners and 16 prisons, two-thirds of these prisoners are located in the Dar Naim prison. The Human Rights Commission chair, echoed by the chair of the National Bar Association's 2012 report, have similarly denounced the numerous cases of arbitrary detention of prisoners without trial (let alone conviction); some prisoners have even stayed in jail for up to three years without trial, according to the Red Cross (2011). In his report, the chair of the Bar Association urgently pleads for the creation of a Prison Oversight Commission (Organe de surveillance des prisons) to supervise Mauritanian detention centers. The case of prisoners accused of Islamist terrorism is also problematic; national security makes it almost impossible to know whether due process is followed, and access to their prisons, whose locations are unknown, is denied. The fate of slaves and former slaves remains a central civil rights issue. Though the government now has an additional legal tool it can use to fight slavery (the National Assembly passed a law at the end of 2012 that makes slavery and torture crimes against humanity), the only person so far convicted of slavery was freed from prison. NGOs still cannot bring cases of slavery to justice, which means that individual slaves have to do it by themselves, in a context where the master families always succeed, through informal means, in preventing the justice system from enforcing the slavery law. In rural areas, customary rules are coequal with, and often prevail over, state laws. In such contexts, the rights of Haratine and of women remain a significant concern. As the Special Rapporteur of the U.N. Human Rights Committee noted, enforcement of the 2007 Anti-Slavery Law has been extremely poor. There appears to be resistance to applying this law at various levels of the administration.

Civil rights

6

#### 4 | Stability of Democratic Institutions

The usual democratic institutions exist in Mauritania. The constitution provides for an elected president, an elected National Assembly and a Senate, and elected local councils. It also provides for the separation of powers. However, in practice, the country has been governed by military officers, whether in fatigue or in civilian clothes. Following his coup against democratically elected president Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (a civilian) in 2008, General Ould Abdel Aziz organized presidential elections in 2009, which he won, to the surprise of no one. Legislative and local elections should have been held in 2011, after their five-year legal term ended. Yet, as of March 2013, no election date had been set, which means that these assemblies continue to pass laws despite their unconstitutional status. When President Ould Abdel Aziz was shot in 2012, by accident according to the official version, he was hospitalized in France for several weeks, and the interim authority was de facto delegated to General Ould Ghazouani (in violation of the constitution), thereby confirming that the military is the ultimate power-holder in the country. The National Assembly is controlled by the president's party, as it has been since the democratic turn of 1991 (the opposition hasn't won a single legislative election since multiparty elections were instituted 22 years ago).

Performance of democratic institutions

3

The 2008 coup and the 2009 one-round presidential election, which brought to power (now retired) General Ould Abdel Aziz, and the unconstitutional extension of the five-year term of the National Assembly, illustrate the limits to the commitment to democratic institutions. In addition, many civilian and military elites who had served under Ould Taya are still in charge of important offices. This also highlights the difficulty of breaking with past authoritarian practices. 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. But it is clear that the military, or at least some factions within the military, are the ultimate power-holders.

Commitment to democratic institutions

3

#### 5 | Political and Social Integration

Mauritania's party system has not changed significantly since the coming to power of Ould Abdel Aziz. In fact, with the exception of the Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi parenthesis (2007 – 2008), the party system has been constant since 1991: The National Assembly is dominated by the military-turned-civilian president's party (Ould Abdel Aziz's Union pour la République, or UPR, since 2009, and the PRDS under Ould Taya) and by smaller pro-presidential parties), and the opposition parties (today united under the Coordination for a Democratic Opposition, CDO) are always in a minority position (with few exceptions, today's largest opposition parties were

Party system

4

the same, led by the same men, under Ould Taya). There were no elections during the period covered here, even though the term of the National Assembly ended in 2011 and was supposed to be followed by new elections. Parties' names and labels sometimes change over time, and individuals sometimes defect from one party to another (almost always in favor of the ruling party). Factionalism within the ruling party continues to be the main feature of this system, as 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 co-opted back, or staying within the ruling party but trying to undermine its rivals until the next election. Since 2007, the only noticeable difference with the past has been the creation of a moderate Islamist party, Tawassoul, which was finally granted official recognition after 16 years. In the past, fraud on election day was not always necessary, as votes in favor of the ruling party could simply be secured through its control of neo-patrimonial channels, distributing some state/public resources (to varying degrees) to all communities that supported it, while punishing those that opposed it. Hence the difficulty for opposition parties to mobilize large sectors of the electorate. The neo-patrimonial character of the party system is another explanation for the recent reform of the electoral code (January 2013), whereby the number of seats in the National Assembly will increase from 95 to 146, 20 of which are drawn from a women-only national list. This 46% increase in the number of seats cannot be explained by any major demographic changes.

Mauritanians, in general, do not organize themselves on the basis of formal interest groups. Official groups include the few trade unions of civil servants, of students, and of the workers of the few industrial sites, as well as the employers' association, and a high number of NGOs. Among the latter, a large number are either empty shells or schemes created by people related to state officials or politicians to capture international aid. Only a few NGOs play a significant role in addressing social problems. The very few that are effective in publicizing important social issues include some antislavery organizations (IRA and SOS-esclaves), organizations devoted to the defense of ethnic minorities (TPMN), women's organizations (the Association of Female Heads of Household, Association des femmes chefs de famille), and human rights organizations. However, a less formal definition of interest groups, one which also includes informal networks, would capture how many Mauritanians collectively defend their interests and informally represent them in the political system. These networks and groups regroup individuals who share a connection based on village, tribal, regional, professional (including factions of the military), or religious (e.g., Sufi brotherhoods) affiliations. These channels and networks are very fluid, multifaceted, often changing, and less visible, but they constitute the principal way by which the political system is structured. In a few cases, they are ideologically driven, such as with the unofficial and informal, but very real and influential, Arab nationalist networks labelled Nasserist and Ba'athist, as well as

Interest groups

4

the Islamists who claim some affiliation with the Egyptian Ikhwân (Muslim Brotherhood).

No survey data are available.

Approval of  
democracy

n/a

Social capital

4

There are no serious surveys or statistical analysis available to provide any quantitative measures of social capital. As explained above (Section 5.3: Interest groups), Mauritians in general are connected to various networks in which 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.

## II. Economic Transformation

### 6 | Level of Socioeconomic Development

Question  
Score

Like all its Sahelian counterparts, Mauritania is a poor country. Mauritania is also a low human development country. With a Human Development Index (HDI) of 0.453, it ranks 159th in the world (2011), a change of -4 since 2006. Also, 40.7% of the population is living in severe poverty, while another 47.7% of the population lives on less than \$2 per day. The Gini coefficient is 0.39. Bad schooling and low literacy remain major challenges, with a gross enrolment ratio of 102 for primary education, 24.4 for secondary and a mere 4.4 for tertiary. According to the United Nations Development Programme, the mean years of schooling is 3.7; among the population aged 25 or older, only 8% of women have at least a secondary education; 20.8% of men do. More generally, this gender differential can be measured through the Gender Inequality Index, for which Mauritania ranks 126th in the world, with a Gini of 0.605.

Socioeconomic  
barriers

3

Beyond these statistics, what social and political dynamics are at stake here? First, Mauritania's economy is a bifurcated one, with the resource sector (oil, mining and fishery), which represents about 75% of revenues but only 3% of employment on the one hand, and, on the other, the agricultural and informal sectors, combined with remittances from its diaspora as well as official and private foreign aid. Second, as

indicated above, ethnic, caste (or social status) and regional identities do impact individual and collective position in the socioeconomic pyramid. Haratine and ethnic minorities live in structurally precarious environments: Ever since independence, ethnic minorities have been considered suspicious minorities by some Bidhân power-holders, and they have always run the risk of being the target of political and economic forms of punishment, while most Haratine continue to face the long-term consequences of socioeconomic inequality within Bidhân society. This does not mean that all Bidhân are well-to-do (rural villages and urban shantytowns count numerous very poor Bidhân families), but it does mean that they are better represented in the upper strata of the socioeconomic ladder. Positions in the state, or connections to people who hold such positions, are still central economic assets, for this is where access to the two central resources get through and can be captured, that is, foreign aid and natural resources (e.g., oil, iron ore, gold and uranium, and non-mineral resources such as fisheries). Therefore, connections to clientelistic networks constitute important leverages to move up the socioeconomic ladder, but these are biased in favor of already established families and clans (most of which are Bidhân). In Nouakchott, wealthy families, and the very small middle class (usually made of the small formal sector) send their children to the burgeoning private schools, whereas public schools, which are understaffed and underfinanced, are attended mostly by Haratine children. This is confirmed by a (diplomatic and cautious) 2011 World Bank-IMF report, which nonetheless explains that “Important segments of Mauritania’s population – such as those engaged in agriculture or the unemployed – have not benefited from the natural resource wealth and recent growth, with resources being concentrated in oligopolistic industries and urban elites.”

Economic indicators		2009	2010	2011	2012
GDP	\$ M	3027.0	3671.4	4273.2	<b>4199.1</b>
GDP growth	%	-1.2	5.1	4.0	<b>7.6</b>
Inflation (CPI)	%	2.2	6.3	5.6	<b>4.9</b>
Unemployment	%	-	-	-	-
Foreign direct investment	% of GDP	-0.1	3.6	1.1	-
Export growth	%	-29.8	18.7	19.1	<b>-0.1</b>
Import growth	%	-11.4	23.1	10.9	<b>25.3</b>
Current account balance	\$ M	-	-	-	-

Economic indicators		2009	2010	2011	2012
Public debt	% of GDP	118.4	97.6	92.5	<b>79.7</b>
External debt	\$ M	2144.3	2556.2	2708.8	-
Total debt service	\$ M	77.8	109.4	111.2	-
Cash surplus or deficit	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Tax revenue	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Government consumption	% of GDP	19.5	16.3	14.8	<b>15.2</b>
Public expnd. on edu.	% of GDP	-	4.2	3.7	-
Public expnd. on health	% of GDP	3.4	4.0	3.3	-
R&D expenditure	% of GDP	-	-	-	-
Military expenditure	% of GDP	3.8	-	-	-

Sources: The World Bank, World Development Indicators 2013 | International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Economic Outlook 2013 | Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Military Expenditure Database 2013.

## 7 | Organization of the Market and Competition

A 2011 World Bank document urged the need to improve the quality of governance in the administration and the justice system, while focusing on “inadequate laws, human resources, and infrastructure, and excessive red tape.” Since the early 2000s, the successive Mauritanian governments have attempted, at least officially, to deregulate and liberalize the country’s economic environment. The Ministry of Finance has, since 2012, a new agency, the ministry directorate in charge of investment, whose role is to promote the private sector. The economic legal environment has been reformed extensively, with the adoption of many codes whose task is both to standardize and liberalize the economy. The investments code, which was reformed in 2002, was again reformed in July 2012. So were the mining code (reformed in February 2012) and the public contracts code, which was reformed in 2010 with the aim of making the investment environment safer for domestic and foreign investors. Whether the current judiciary institutions will be able to provide for implementation mechanisms of these codes remains to be seen. In addition, these codes lack the necessary human support in the ministry of justice, and in their own respective ministries, as judges and other judicial personnel do not have the training to address legal disputes in this sector. In 2011 (following the adoption of a law on that matter in 2010), three agencies were created to address the major problem of corruption in the attribution of public contracts. The newly created Public Contracts Regulation Agency (Autorité de regulation des marchés publics), whose 11-member

Market-based  
competition  
3

council must include public sector, private sector and civil society members, and its related agencies, the Procurement Commission (Commission de passation des marchés publics), and the National Commission for the Control of Public contracts (Commission nationale de contrôle des marchés publics), are now in charge of implementing the reformed public contracts code. At this stage, it is too early to say whether corruption and other illegal practices in the allocation and implementation of public contracts will be effectively tackled (though one cannot fail to notice that the two highest-ranking officials have occupied top positions under the Ould Taya regime, whose legacy of corruption is now well-known).

A study indicates that the fiscal regime and the administration of the tax system are important deterrents. Regulations are heavy and prevent new enterprises from establishing themselves (unless personalized contacts are established with key officeholders or intermediaries). In *Doing Business 2013*, Mauritania is ranked 177 out of 185 economies on the ease of paying taxes. A 2012 IMF report highlighted the fact that “limited access to financial services, an inadequately trained work force, and a burdensome regulatory environment are the proximate causes of private sector underdevelopment.” As most studies indicate, the majority of economic actors remain in the informal sector. Though this sector is market-based, it is not subject to the same regulations as the formal one. A World Bank study estimates that 85% of the labor force works in the informal sector, and that 30% of GDP is generated by the informal sector (the small but lucrative mining and fishery sectors account for most of GDP). The national currency, the ouguiya, can be exchanged in Mauritania only.

A small number of businessmen and their families, usually easily related to specific Moorish (Bidhân) tribes or clans, control most of the large firms and enjoy an oligopolistic position (in banking, fishery, public infrastructures and construction, airlines, import-export of consumer goods and foodstuff, telecommunication, insurance, private security, etc.). The businessmen heading these oligopolistic conglomerates do change with each change of regime, but the system itself has not changed significantly. Depending on the ruler of the moment, and his relationship with one or some of these families, some conglomerates will fall while others will rise (two of these enormous companies went through some turbulences during the transitional period between the Ould Taya regime and the current regime). In early 2013, one of these conglomerates, led by Ould Bouamatou, which is probably in the top three of the most prominent conglomerates, was under heavy fire by state authorities (which surprised many in Mauritania given that its CEO and the head of state belong to the same tribe and used to work hand-in-hand). More generally, as an IMF report explained in 2011, “Oligopolistic structures in many key domestic markets interfere with an efficient allocation of resources, limiting productivity and employment growth.” A major challenge, this report says, consists in “overcoming a legacy of intense internal rivalry between various smaller groups over the country’s resources.” A World Bank study echoes what most observers and media have

Anti-monopoly  
policy  
2

observed, which is that small and medium-sized enterprises can hardly access the Mauritanian market due to the power of the oligopolistic conglomerates, which dominate all lucrative markets and which have been able to adapt to most reforms undertaken so far.

In general, liberalization of foreign trade has improved at the turn of the new millennium, but has not been significantly reformed since then, except in the sector of minerals (oil and mines). The IMF recently (2012) supported the need for reforms to help remove growth constraints, including “further simplification of tax and customs procedures and streamlining the structure of custom duties and tariffs.” The WTO agreement forms the basis for all Mauritania’s trading relations; and all of its trade is undertaken on a Most Favored Nation basis. Also, “Mauritania has not been involved in any case under the WTO dispute settlement mechanism. According to Doing Business 2013, “exporting a standard container of goods requires 8 documents, takes 34 days and costs \$1520. Importing the same container of goods requires 8 documents, takes 38 days and costs \$1523,” which results in Mauritania’s being ranked 150th out of 185 economies (below the sub-Saharan Africa regional average). No reform regarding trading across borders has been implemented in recent years. The WTO 2011 review indicates that “since its previous Trade Policy Review (TPR) in 2002, Mauritania has experienced a marked slow-down in the pace of its trade measure reforms.” In the export-import sector, licenses are used as a mechanism to nurture clientelistic networks. The physical locations of foreign trade nexus (the ports of Nouakchott and Nouadhibou, the customs, the customs checkpoints along national roads) comprise major informal mechanisms that undermine the notion of a liberalized foreign trade. There are no recent WTO trade policy reviews of Mauritania. Beyond the formal sectors, partial indications suggest that the transnational smuggling of goods is booming, most especially cigarettes and stolen cars (from Europe), and, more worrisome, drugs from Latin America and other West African states (which are then exported to Europe). Analysts should not overlook the economic and political consequences that this growing economic activity can have on the country, including the development of complex ramifications at the top of the state (high-ranking officers being involved in this traffic) and among transnational armed groups (narco-trafficking being connected to violent Islamist organizations in the country and across its borders).

In 2012, there were about 12 banks in Mauritania, including newly created Islamic banks; the ratio of banking penetration (percentage of population using banking services), however, is only 4% to 5%. Banks are also closely connected to oligopolistic commercial groups (with ties to tribal groups), as discussed above. According to a 2011 World Bank report, the banking system has several weaknesses: it does not provide for an appropriate financial market for developing business initiatives; it offers limited access to credit (at high interest rates), especially for small and medium-sized enterprises; and there are low levels of public and private saving,

Liberalization of  
foreign trade

6

Banking system

4

which do not allow commercial banks to capture the long-term resources they must have in order to finance investment projects. The IMF stated in 2012 that “Financial sector risks are relatively contained as Mauritanian banks are well capitalized and largely isolated from the rest of the world.” However, banks in Mauritania have long suffered from weak asset quality. In mid-2012, an IMF request revealed that the asset quality of Mauritanian banks is worse than previously reported, more specifically, it showed that “previously reported information was based on nonperforming loans (NPLs) net of collateral value. If, instead, NPLs are assessed at gross total amounts due, they could amount to as much as 44% of gross loans, as of March 2012, compared to 28% reported previously, with an overall coverage rate of only 50%.” Auditors and the banking supervision department are currently assessing banks’ collateral valuations, taking into account the unfavorable legal environment for creditors in Mauritania. Also, of late, banks have been reluctant to write off legacy NPLs for fear of moral hazard by the borrower. In 2012, the government said that it had asked an audit firm to assist commercial banks in the transition to International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) accounting. The final report was submitted in September 2012. Capital adequacy ratio for 2010 was 34.0 and is estimated at 35.3 for 2011 (as of January 2013).

As important, if not more so, for the average Mauritanian, most of whom do not have access to bank accounts, it appears that micro-credit is on the rise. A 2007 law clarified the microfinance sector (and also separated the regular banking sector and the microfinance sector) and opened it to various legal entities, including NGOs and associations.

## 8 | Currency and Price Stability

As a country that depends heavily, on the one hand, on the export of a few raw materials (oil, minerals and fisheries), and, on the other hand, on the import of fuel and food, Mauritania is vulnerable to global prices volatility, inflation and foreign exchange shocks. Inflation remained within a 5.5% to 6.5% range over the last three years: 6.3% in 2010; 5.7% in 2011, and 6.5% in 2012 (projected). The country remains highly vulnerable to changes in commodities prices, mainly fuel and foodstuff. Instability in the Sahel (which translated into an influx of refugees from Mali) and severe droughts fed into this cycle of vulnerability in 2011 and 2012. And domestic food production does not help; like the rest of Sahelian countries, Mauritania has seen a significant drop in cereal production in 2011 (-34% compared with 2010) and in 2012. The government had to intervene on the prices of basic foodstuffs and fuel in 2011 and 2012 to help citizens (though problems of corruption have again erupted in 2012 in the case local state-subsidized stores selling basic food staples, the Emel stores, which are supervised by the Food Security Commissariat). More generally, as the IMF reports (2012), “to date, the authorities have not seen the

Anti-inflation /  
forex policy

6

need to actively conduct monetary policy given the muted impact of excess liquidity on credit growth and inflation.” Exchange rates are dual in Mauritania, one of the official market, decided by the Mauritanian Central Bank (Banque centrale de Mauritanie, BCM) and one of the informal markets. “Despite a surge in unmet demand for foreign exchange in the official market, the premium on the parallel market has remained remarkably stable, suggesting that significant flows of foreign exchange circulate in the informal economy,” according to the IMF.

As stated previously, Mauritania’s macro-stability is highly dependent on changes in primary commodities prices for exports and in food and fuel prices for imports. Government macro-stability policies have remained relatively stable over the last three years. The IMF reported in 2012 that the “account deficit had widened sharply to 27.6% of GDP, driven by falling mining exports and massive investments in mining production capacity.” It also indicates, however, that “higher than expected inward repatriation by the state-owned mining company, as well as exceptional donor assistance” and additional EU fish license payments helped to stabilize the situation, and more than fully financed the remaining deficit, helping boost foreign exchange reserves to \$840 million (covering 5.8 months of imports) in September 2012. Regarding Mauritania’s debt, the public debt represents 70% of GDP while the external debt is 62.4% of GDP (\$2.9 billion, compared to \$2.7 billion). The total debt service amounts to \$180 million (2012).

Macrostability  
5

## 9 | Private Property

The constitution guarantees private property (Article 15). The investments code (reformed in 2012) also contributes to protect private property. Land property is regulated under the 1983 Law on Land Tenure (as well as in a 2000 decree which clarifies its concrete applications) and also the Urban Planning Code (Code de l’Urbanisme). The Law on Land Tenure (1983) enables the state to take possession of any land that is not used and to sell it to private individuals. However, this law conflicts with local customary land tenure regulations and was a major factor in the outbreak of state violence against ethnic minorities of the Senegal River Valley in 1989. Also, the state is entitled to evict citizens, with compensation, when “economic and social development needs” apply.

Property rights  
5

Regarding the private ownership of land, the government pursues its policy of land registration and attribution, especially in the main cities’ squatting neighborhoods, especially Nouakchott, where thousands of families have settled since the major droughts of the 1970s, and continue to settle. The gazra, or squats, grow at an impressive pace around Nouakchott and other cities. The government is attempting to survey and officially attribute parcels of land, with a zero-gazra objective in mind. About 105,000 parcels have been allocated in Nouakchott, as of 2012. This is a complex process, however, and the same problems continue to surface, as cases of

state agents' use of corrupt practices are being reported in the media. Given the skyrocketing value of land in Nouakchott, some state agents illegally speculate on land properties and attribute parcels to wealthy individuals not related to the settlement programs. These problems are also facilitated by the fact that at least three agencies are in charge of land attribution, with overlapping responsibilities: the Ministry of Urbanism and Housing, the Governorate (and the prefects), and the Agency for Urban Development (a high-ranking official there was fired in March 2012 following one of those corruption scandals in the attribution of land parcels).

Doing Business 2013 reports that it takes 49 days to register property, with four procedures. Mauritania ranks 65th out of 185 countries (compared to 60th for 2012; the average rank for sub-Saharan Africa is 123).

According to Doing Business 2013, it takes 19 days to start a business in Mauritania, with nine procedures. There are four main types of enterprises in Mauritania. The first are state-owned enterprises, of which the National Industrial and Mining Company (Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière, SNIM, 78.35% state-owned) is the most important. The second are large conglomerates that enjoy an oligopolistic position, which control large portions of most sectors of the economy (banks, insurance, transportation, import-export, telecommunications, etc.). The third are foreign companies present in the oil and mining sector. The fourth are small family-owned businesses. 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 mechanisms, as the preferential granting of licenses is one of the best-known forms of politico-economic exchange. Attempts were made to privatize the Mauritanian Electricity Company (La Société Mauritanienne d'Electricité, SOMELEC) and to increase private ownership in SNIM, but these attempts have failed. Subsidies to state-owned enterprises increased by 9% annually on average. The government pledged to lower this annual growth to 3% for the 2011 – 2015 period, though the actual implementation of this decision is not known. In 2012, the IMF encouraged Mauritania not to create new state-owned companies.

Private enterprise

5

## 10 | Welfare Regime

Like most of its Sahel neighbors and other sub-Saharan African counterparts, Mauritania is among the poorest countries in the world and its social safety nets are immensely underdeveloped. Life expectancy is 58.5; mortality under five years of age is 11.7%; mean years of schooling (for adults) is 3.7 years. Government expenditure on health is 2.3% of GDP. For the vast majority of the population that is not employed in the formal sector, safety nets are mostly provided for by local

Social safety nets

4

underfunded state agencies, NGO programs, and extended family networks (in which those employed in the formal sectors, as well as migrants and their remittances, provide most of the support). 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. The territorial coverage (capital-city, regions, districts) of health centers (hospitals, clinics) and health personnel is low. There is 1.3 physicians per 10,000 inhabitants; 33% of the population have no access to any health centers within a 5-km reach.

Gender and ethno-racial identities constitute important obstacles to equal access. Blacks, non-Arabic-speaking minorities (Haalpulaaren, Soninko, Wolof and Bamana) and women face systemic discrimination. The frequently published lists of new appointments in major ministries (Justice, Interior, Defense), though not a perfect indicator, do indicate that black African minorities (Haalpulaar, Sooninke, Wolof and Bamana) are underrepresented. Even the Council of Fatwas, a nine-member council appointed by the president in 2012 to evaluate religious fatwas, reflects this problem of access, as no Haratine imams are present (and only one Haalpulaar). The Program for the Eradication of the Sequels of Slavery, established in 2009, with the aim of improving access to health, education and basic infrastructure among the impoverished 50,000 former slaves living in poor regions, was put in place in 2009; its results, however, seem disappointing, as reported by several NGOs working with the Haratine.

A reform of the electoral system adopted in 2012 increased the number of seats in the National Assembly from 95 to 146. Among the 51 new seats, there are 20 reserved for women only on a national list. The 2006 legislative and municipal elections (the next elections, scheduled for 2011, have been postponed) generated the following results regarding the representation of women: Women represent 19% of the national deputies, 30% of municipal councilors, and 12% of senators. Women's access to fair treatment by security forces remains a major problem. As several NGOs have reported, when women seek help from local police offices following cases of sexual violence, they are often denied help from policemen and local judges. Enrolment of girls is on the rise in Mauritania; however, their presence decreases significantly in the secondary and tertiary education levels. The ratio of female to male is 105 in primary school, 84 in secondary and 41 in tertiary. The gross enrolment ratio in Mauritania is 102 for primary school, 24.4 for secondary and 4.4 for tertiary education. The national literacy rate is 58%.

## 11 | Economic Performance

The Mauritanian economy navigated the global economic storm relatively well in 2011 – 2012, at least with respect to its outward-oriented aspect. With a GDP of \$4.1 billion, it had, in 2012, GDP growth of 4.8% and per capita GDP of \$2,600. Inflation

Equal opportunity  
3

Output strength  
6

was at 5.7% for 2012. Government revenues, which come mostly from the export sectors (fisheries, mines and oil) and from sustained official aid, remain steady as a percentage of GDP (ranging between 26% in 2010 and 32% in 2012). The government's gross debt remains significant, representing 86% of GDP in 2010, 79% in 2011 and 85% in 2012. The current account balance is projected to be -27.6% of GDP for 2012, but could be -4.6% of GDP if foreign direct investment-financed imports of extractive industries are excluded (it was at 7.1% for 2011 and -6.4% for 2012). For the IMF, this is a better than expected macroeconomic development, as it even expects GDP growth to reach 6.2% for 2012. This development, however, must be set against the pervasive poverty that continues to afflict most of the population. The country has faced severe droughts in the last two years, in addition to the inflow of refugees from Mali in regions of Mauritania that are already the poorest and most rural of the country (the two Hodh, Asaba, Guidimakha). Given that more than 70% of the poor live in rural areas, the fact that the engine of economic development is natural resources-oriented and outward-looking does not translate into significant pro-poor improvements. By the IMF's account, in reference to its Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, "poverty and unemployment remain high and implementation of Mauritania's current PRSP proceeds unevenly." Yet, it is now well known that extreme poverty and a widening gap between a small but highly visible minority of well off officials and businessmen and a very large and poor population does explain, at least in part, the attraction of armed Islamist groups for young Mauritians (who now represent the second largest national group in AQIM and in MUJAO).

## 12 | Sustainability

Environmental policies are not at the center of the political agenda. The Code of the Environment (2000) provides the main legal framework, but it is barely implemented. The country is still ranked third from the last of all countries by the Environmental Performance Index (161st out of 163 countries), with a score of 33.7. As with much data coming out of Mauritania (including macroeconomic data), one needs to be cautious (Mauritania officially acknowledged in the mid-2000s that the numbers it had given the IMF were false), but such a low EPI score nonetheless indicates a worrisome trend. Of course, the harsh Sahelian context is probably underestimated by the EPI. Mauritania is a very poor country, which can explain its weak capacity to tackle major environment-friendly reforms, though the well endowed mineral and export sectors have the necessary resources to address this issue. There are legitimate concerns regarding Mauritania's soft approach towards the mining, oil and fishery industries. Regarding the latter, the small number of protected areas and weak anti-trawling policies are problematic. Mauritania faces heavy pressure from powerful fishing countries, mainly Spain and Portugal, and the EU behind them, and China, South Korea and Japan. Promises of development aid in exchange for soft fishing regulations are difficult to resist. The lack of resources to patrol its maritime zones is

Environmental  
policy  
4

another major constraint. The Delegation for Fisheries Oversight and Maritime Regulation (Délégation à la Surveillance des Pêches et au Contrôle en Mer, DSPCM) is trying to protect Mauritania's sea zone to ensure that no boats fish during the two-month fishing hiatus (a necessary period to allow for the reproduction of ocean species). The DSPCM, however, bought a satellite tracking system in 2009 that is helping to better monitor the country's maritime zone. Also, the booming oil and mineral sectors attract many foreign companies, and tough environmental laws are depicted as inimical to FDI. Yet increasing mining activities have raised major concerns regarding various forms of pollution. A 2011 audit ordered by the Ministry of Petroleum, Energy and Mining identified sources of pollution on the main mining sites (SNIM, Mauritanian Copper Mines, and Taziast), including cyanide and asbestos pollution.

The level of development of education and R&D is low in Mauritania. The government spends 4.3% of GDP on public education. The literacy rate is 58%. Though the female to male enrollment ratio is favorable to girls in primary schools (105.1), the situation quickly reverses at the secondary level (85) and tertiary level (40.7). Gross enrollment is 102 for primary school, and quickly drops to 24.4 for the secondary level and 4.4 for the tertiary.

In the last three years, a number of higher-education institutes were created to address major gaps in professional schools (especially related to the country's natural resource sectors), including the Higher Institute for the Study of Technologies, the National School for Civil Engineering, the Mauritanian School for Mining and the Higher School for Public Works.

Though data are not available, sources report that the gap between private and public schools is major, with the wealthy class (and the small middle class) sending their children to private schools and the vast majority, most of whom are Haratine, to public school. In the medium term, this class and ethno-racial gap could prove problematic for the country. In early 2013, the government organized a major conference on education, the General Estates on Education (États généraux de l'Éducation), whose objective was to analyze the state of education in the country. Though no concrete decisions have come out of this, its most critical aspect has been the dire diagnosis the executive commission made about education in the country, including the poor state of human resources (unqualified personnel); completely obsolete pedagogical methods; poor results (over the last 10 years, more than 80% of students have failed the high-school termination exam (baccalauréat). In a surprising statement, even the prime minister acknowledged the poor quality of the education system (officials rarely make such negative yet realistic statements), saying that this system has lost all of its credibility, it has receded over the years, it offers poor pedagogical support, and that the great weaknesses of this system is incapable of meeting the simple demands of development. The General Estates on Education surveyed the state of education throughout the months of 2012. Out of 16 members,

Education policy /  
R&D  
3

there were only two women. The commission was supported by seven national consultants; only one was not a Moor (and out of the 28 people interviewed for the consultancy team, only one was not Moorish). For a sensitive issue such as education, which has been at the core of violent ethnic clashes in the past, the exclusion of non-Moors was highly criticized by many.

# Transformation Management

## I. Level of Difficulty

The current crisis in the Sahel constrains Mauritania's political and economic development, with an influx of thousands of refugees from Mali, disrupted commercial relations (the collapse of the tourist industry), and the threat of armed groups roaming across the region. It is a consequence of structural factors that impact Mauritania and its neighbors. The militarization of the region has negative consequences. For a country that is already very poor, it diverts immensely scarce and needed resources towards the military instead that could be used in more productive sectors. It increases the attraction such groups can have for young citizens who, facing major obstacles in finding a job and climbing 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. From the arrival of the military on the political scene (1978) to the last two coups d'état (2005 and 2008), these authoritarian development 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 roller-coaster-shaped curve of revenues and expenses between 2009 and 2012) for its revenues and on highly precarious meteorological conditions for the majority of the population's daily survival in the semi-desert rural areas. The pacification of ethnic relations, finally, remains hazardous. The ongoing census-taking has been met with fierce resistance from the three ethnic minorities who feel (again) excluded by state officials.

Structural  
constraints

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Civil society is a very elusive concept that is difficult to observe, let alone analyze, especially in a country like Mauritania. No systematic study has been carried out to measure its 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 groups of citizens. On the formal and official side, there are very few organizations that have clear capacities to mobilize people and to make themselves heard. Issues such as antislavery and human rights did pick up some pace in recent years, with a few organizations that have been very vocal; the

Civil society  
traditions

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long march of one of these organizations across the country in 2012 is a good example. Their impact on the political scene, however, remains to be seen. Informal associations do exist. They can be very efficient but are harder to observe in action. Sufi orders, reformist Islamic associations, hometown associations and tribal networks do in fact play a sort of civil society role, provide help to their members, and engage the state on social, economic and political issues. However, many of them are relatively segmented and would have a difficult time mobilizing very large sector of society.

Since the inception of the country, the politicization of ethnicity and race, of tribal solidarities, and social status (caste) have been the defining features of the political landscape, and continue to be. The most recent issues that have nurtured these problems include the census-taking operation, which has been denounced by ethnic minorities who claim that the state purposefully makes it harder for them to be included in the census and, consequently, to be treated as official citizens. The 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects Moorish military personnel from the terrible violations of human rights against ethnic minorities, is still in place, despite some local organizations calling for its revocation. The issue of slavery and its consequences is another major source of tension. Haratine (from the caste of the freed slaves) are by most accounts the largest segment of society, and yet they continue to be the poorest and most marginalized. The 2011 and 2012 nominations in the most critical ministries (Defense, Interior, Justice) confirm the overrepresentation of Bidhân. In addition, since the turn of the millennium, various interpretations of Islam and Islamic practices have become another major source of tension. In this country where almost 100% of the population is Muslim, the proper ways to practice Islam have been debated by many groups, including very violent ones (armed groups linked to AQIM consider Sufis to be non-Muslims).

Conflict intensity  
6

## II. Management Performance

### 14 | Steering Capability

The lack of transparency and the high concentration of power in the hands of the president make it particularly difficult to evaluate the Mauritanian state's capacity to set and maintain priorities. In such a hyper-presidential system (in both formal and informal ways), prioritization is mainly that of the executive. The fact that the president is a retired military officer contributes to this pattern. In addition, there have been four heads of state between 2005 and 2012, only one of which was elected through relatively open elections (Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, 2007 – 2008). In

Question  
Score

Prioritization  
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Mauritania, coup d'états form the only mechanism of leadership change, and coups are systematically prepared by the closest collaborators of the president.

In such a context, and despite official rhetoric, three main short- to medium-term priorities seem to top the agenda: preventing a coup, which takes much of the leader's attention and energy; preventing AQIM or other armed groups attacks on Mauritanian soil; and attracting foreign investments in the mineral sectors. All three objectives have been met so far. Despite rhetorical references to the fight against corruption, no major concrete signs would suggest that it has been really implemented. Besides potential rivals, no high-ranking military officers or businessmen (or both, as most officers are also businessmen), leaders of the UPR (the ruling party) or influential tribal leaders have been threatened by anticorruption agencies. The president seems personally in favor of inducing political change, but it is far from clear that the informal institutions of clientelism and neo-patrimonialism can be dismantled that easily. The paradox is that the political system provides much power to the president, but at the same time he evolves in a neo-patrimonial structure that strongly resists significant changes.

Attracting investments in the mining sector has been relatively successful and has helped the country recover from the global crisis. Meanwhile, AQIM and other armed groups did not launch attacks on Mauritanian soil in 2012, but were pushed further into Malian territory (which had to deal with its own crisis in 2012). However, no significant improvements have been noticed in most other sectors. The socioeconomic gap between a small wealthy minority and the large majority of the poor remains. The judicial system continues to be plagued by its lack of autonomy from the executive and by corrupt practices. The fight against corruption does not suggest that any major step has been made. Polarization among ethno-racial groups remains high (including, among many problems, the under-representation of Haratine and black Africans in critical ministries, and the non-implementation of the criminalization of slavery law). The continuing domination of oligopolistic conglomerates that dominate most sectors of the economy is not about to change, even if the fate of certain individuals varies depending on how their personal relationship with the president and his entourage evolves. These represent major challenges to the implementation of strategic priorities.

Despite warnings from within and from outside partners, revenues extracted from the export of primary commodities were not transferred significantly to other sectors of the economy in ways that could help to combat poverty, diversify the economy and make the country less vulnerable to external shocks. The fact that the legislative elections still have not been held despite the end of the assembly's five-year term (which thus makes all the laws it has passed constitutionally suspect) also raises doubt on policy learning in the matter of democracy. In 2006, at the onset of the second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), it was said that this PRSP was "built on a comprehensive macroeconomic framework, which reflects the authorities' intention

Implementation  
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Policy learning  
3

to consolidate further stabilization efforts.” In 2011, looking back at the 2006 – 2011 PRSP, Mauritanian officials offered a “candid and sobering assessment of the weak implementation of previous PRSPs” and pledged that they would “learn from the past by strengthening the monitoring and evaluation aspects of the strategy.” In light of past problems, and the lack of tangible signs, the actual presence and strength of the willingness to achieve these goals is unclear.

## 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 has been in place in previous regimes as well (witness the case of the main auditing body, the General Inspectorate of the State, whose general director is also the chair of the women’s branch of the UPR). Dismissals and appointments are often politically motivated. The actual implementation of meritocratic procedures in the appointments of public servants remains a major challenge. Budget planning and implementation is more transparent than before. The media can publish data on the forthcoming budget and the end-of-year budget revision. Several problems remain, including “the continued use of the advance decree procedures” and “presenting a revised budget to Parliament for ex-post approval by end-of-the-year,” as opposed to early in the year, as reported by the IMF, as well as “the need to improve efficiency of budget allocation and adopt a more transparent and process-based budgetary execution,” as reported by the World Bank. The budget law for 2013, with the revised end-of-year 2012 budget, was passed in January 2013. Expenditures will increase by 12% compared to the 2012 budget. As discussed above, allocation to the defense budget explains to a large extent the overall expenditure increase. The overall fiscal deficit is thus 3% of GDP (and could represent 5% in 2013). As the EU delegation in Mauritania argued in 2010, the fight against corruption has not made significant headway. Corruption continues to plague the country and, coupled with the nonfunctioning of the justice system, undermines socioeconomic development and maintains an unbalanced distribution of wealth.

The Mauritanian regime is authoritarian, hyper-presidential and clientelistic. Policy coordination is thus mostly under the supervision of the president. But, despite his central importance, clientelistic dynamics at all levels of the state undermine the actual coordination and implementation of policies. Such problems can be seen in almost any sector, minus perhaps that of defense, where policy coordination in the fight against armed groups was relatively successful in 2011 – 2012. For instance, the establishment of small stores with basic foodstuffs to tackle the consequences of the droughts and plummeting agricultural outputs was a positive signal. However, the actual implementation of this program was greatly weakened by corruption,

Efficient use of assets

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Policy coordination

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clientelism and embezzlement, which undermined the expected outcomes. Similarly, agriculture is the most important sector employment-wise. Yet, as the usually diplomatic IMF reports, agriculture “continues to be constrained by the lack of a coherent government strategy.” Similarly, the fight against slavery and its consequences illustrates such a paradox: The executive (in the last two regimes) has pushed for tougher laws (2007 and 2012), yet the local agents of the interior ministry and justice ministry have made the actual implementation of these laws ineffective. After five years, not a single individual has been sentenced, even though most observers, NGOs and media clearly indicate that slavery-like practices persist.

In 2010, the government launched its anticorruption strategy. Concrete results have yet to be seen. There are several agencies that can contribute to anticorruption policies. The State General Inspectorate (Inspection Générale de l’État, IGE, created in 2005) has been less active in the last two years than it was prior. Among the few cases brought to the public, the IGE accused of embezzlement three ambassadors in 2011, and investigated the Mauritanian embassy in Paris in 2012 for similar reasons. It has also cancelled dubious nominations at Nouakchott’s general hospital (2012). But, overall, the investigations have not been numerous. The Audit Court (Cour des Comptes), another auditing body that can tackle corruption practices, has also been relatively silent. It has not published any report since the 2006 report. The Commission for Financial Transparency in Public Life (Commission de transparence financière dans la vie publique) also officially contributes to the fight against corruption by collecting the self-declarations of the 500 highest-ranking civil servants and officials’ assets and properties. It then compares their state of assets at the beginning and at the end of each of these 500 officials’ terms. If some major variations are noted, the commission can then send the case to the Ministry of Justice. This commission, however, suffers from problems common to the other agencies. Its latest ceremony was held in early January 2013 (the previous one was in 2010). These declarations, however, are not made public (despite being supposedly transparent) and the commission has not sent a single file to the Ministry of Justice.

Anti-corruption  
policy  
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## 16 | Consensus-Building

The Mauritanian regime is only partially democratic at best; every head-of-state, including the current one, came to power either through coups d’état or through unfair elections. The one exception was the short-lived presidency of Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, and even he publicly admitted that he had been chosen by the military. Therefore, officials cannot be said to be committed to democracy. The legislative elections that were supposed to take place in 2011 were unilaterally postponed by the president. Opposition parties are committed to democracy, including the Islamist party Tawassoul and the more secular parties (how any of these opposition parties would actually behave when in power, however, cannot be predicted). In this

Consensus on goals  
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authoritarian regime, however, the use of naked violence is relatively infrequent, and the censorship of the press is no longer the option it used to be. Compared to the violent years of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the current regime is more moderate. But the highest seat in the state, the presidency, is simply not open to free and fair competition. Consensus does exist concerning the principle of an open economy. In practice, however, the situation differs. The rule of law as a mechanism to regulate market relations is excessively weak. Most policies to develop the rule of law advance with difficulty. In addition, competition within the market is hindered by the presence of powerful conglomerates connected to the president, high-ranking military officials and other businessmen.

Reformers have little control over powerful antidemocratic actors. These actors are mainly in the armed forces, and there have not been any major changes in that regard since the 2008 coup d'état. Even minimal (or procedural) definitions of democracy include at least two criteria that are missing in Mauritania: that the executive be open to fair competition and that nonelective institutions do not interfere. Military strongmen, being entirely antidemocratic, have been in power since 1978, with the exception of the short 17-month reign of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi (2007 – 2008).

Anti-democratic  
actors

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Ethno-racial divisions remain a major source of cleavage in Mauritania. As stated above, Bidhân control most of the key positions in the most significant state institutions (as was made clear in the nominations in the ministries of defense, justice and the interior). The citizens' registration and census-taking operation also had major problems that shed light on ethnic inequalities, especially for the non-Arabic-speaking Haalpulaaren, Wolof, Sooninko and Bamana (often called Black Africans). Meanwhile, the dire situation of former slaves, Haratine, is a major cleavage that continues to weaken the social foundations of the country. The fact that no masters (all Bidhân) have been sentenced since the antislavery law was passed in 2007 signals that major changes in this identity cleavage are not in the interest of the current regime.

Cleavage /  
conflict  
management

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Members of formal civil society – official NGOs, associations, trade unions and journalists – are able to express themselves, comment on political and social issues, and publish reports or memoranda on various sociopolitical problems. However, they are not included in the national decision-making process. Their participation is more important in decisions that involve international partners, such as bilateral donors or international organizations (World Bank, IMF, various U.N. branches, etc.). Even in these cases in which civil society participation is required, however, the actual composition of these civil society actors must be analyzed carefully. However, some organizations could eventually make a difference when they call upon international actors to put some pressure on the government, as current antislavery organizations are doing. 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.) do participate in various manners in the decision-

Civil society  
participation

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making process; in such cases, however, issues of representation and horizontal segmentation, can raise some concerns.

The 1989 – 1991 ethnic massacres and deportations (of Black Africans) constitute the main event which requires a thorough and extensive reconciliation process. On the positive side, the return of Mauritanian refugees from Senegal began in 2008 and continues. The lack of long-term support for refugees, however, remains a major challenge (problems include the difficulty of getting their land back and being compensated for their material loss (livestock, houses, other goods, pension plans for returning deported civil servants, etc.). In 2011 – 2012, the major challenge continued to be that of the real and effective integration of these refugees (most notably, access to land and jobs). However, the fact that the 1993 Law of Amnesty, which protects military personnel who committed human rights atrocities in 1989 – 1991, has not been repealed yet, constitutes a major obstacle to reconciliation. 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 doubts about the government's willingness to achieve sustainable reconciliation.

Reconciliation

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## 17 | International Cooperation

Despite almost unanimous condemnation of the 2008 coup d'état and weak enthusiasm about the 2009 election, which brought to power Ould Abdel Aziz, all bilateral and multilateral partners have resumed their cooperation. The growing insecurity in the Sahel, which has culminated with the war in Mali, has been at the center of most international partners' agenda. International donor assistance has been quite significant in 2012, even labeled exceptional by the IMF, to the point that this aid is a major source of revenue that helps to finance the deficit. One can hypothesize that the crisis in Mali and the presence of armed groups in the region explain, at least in part, this significant support to Mauritania. The year 2013 will mark the end of the 10th European Development Fund (EDF) agreement between the European Union and Mauritania and the beginning of the 11th EDF. In 2010, halfway into the 10th EDF, the European delegation in Mauritania reported that, globally, the government had not delivered on its commitments regarding good governance. This was due, the delegation argued, either to a lack of willingness, of capacity or of interest. Similarly, regarding its partnership with the IMF, the Mauritanian government acknowledged in 2011 "the weak implementation of previous PRSPs." It pledged to make the necessary changes in the next one. In all cases, however, the apparent gap between, on the one hand, official commitments as expressed in formal frameworks and agreements, and, on the other hand, the actual weak implementation of these commitments, does not impact the disbursement of aid. There are no incentives, then, to change how policies are pursued.

Effective use of support

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Though the international community has been very critical of the 2008 coup d'état, it has eventually recognized the electoral victory of Ould Abdel Aziz. One can hypothesize that the leading international actors, France and the United States, and multilateral partners all balanced their security interests and their interests in democracy promotion. The presence of AQIM in the region, and the need for a strong Mauritanian government to confront it, did weigh heavily in the balance. The 2011 and 2012 military operations, in which the government hunted down armed groups on Malian soil, confirmed this trend. The eruption of the war in Mali also helped Mauritania appear as a necessary partner in regional security frameworks. Hence, security concerns often have trumped other considerations, such as those related to democratization. In addition, the current president has always stated that he would maintain Mauritania's current liberal economy, and foreign investors faced no obstacles (especially those of the oil and mining sectors). International financial institutions have all considered the current administration a credible one, at least with respect to its commitment to a liberal political economy (as stated above, problems in the implementation of these policies, however, constitute a major obstacle).

Credibility

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Ever since its birth as an independent country, Mauritania has faced a challenging environment. Morocco refused to recognize Mauritania for the first nine years of its independence (1960 – 1969), during which time Senegal disputed its border with Mauritania. The Western Sahara War in the 1970s pitted Mauritania against the Sahrawi independence movement and put Mauritania in a difficult position as it got caught in the crossfire between two archrivals, Algeria and Morocco. In the 1990s, the Tuareg uprisings in Mali and Niger also impacted on Mauritania, as thousands of Tuareg refugees fled to Mauritania. At the same time, Mauritania's own repression against its non-Moorish minorities, with 80,000 refugees fleeing to Senegal and Mali, also had regional consequences. The current security crisis in the Sahel must be read with this historical background in mind. Regional cooperation is needed to tackle the problem of Islamist armed groups. However, such cooperation is very difficult to achieve as regional powerhouses (such as Algeria) are using the crisis to advance their own interests. More generally, mistrust among most regional neighbors, which has built over the decades, hinders these attempts at building regional cooperation.

Regional  
cooperation

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## Strategic Outlook

Building legitimate political institutions and effectively implementing them ought to be the most important task of the Mauritanian government. Illegitimate institutions and practices, which take the form of closed political offices (such as the presidency, in Mauritania), of 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 conflict, as the Malian case demonstrates very well.

A hyper-presidential regime like Mauritania's contributes to the weakness of the overall political system. This was demonstrated in 2012 after the president was shot, under still unclear circumstances, as a longer-than-expected hospital stay in France raised much uncertainty and speculation as to what would happen next. In a fully institutionalized and legitimate regime, the whole system is not vulnerable to the fate of a single individual, even the president himself. The absence of the president also demonstrated clearly who is in charge: The military, not the civilian government, took over while he was in France.

Substantive political reforms need to focus on building institutions in which the executive power is open to fair competition, and where elected officials are able to rule without the interference of the military. In addition, legitimate institutions and practices need to be built on the full recognition of the country's ethno-racial diversity. The four ethnic groups of the south (Haalpulaaren, Soninke, Wolof and Bamana) as well as Haratine (the freed slaves of the Moorish community) ought to be fully incorporated, including in the state's top positions (especially in the defense, justice and interior ministers), in the redistribution of wealth, and in the cultural sector (i.e., education, public and private media, linguistic policies, etc.).

The local and legislative elections that should have been held in 2012 were illegally postponed. When they are finally held, in 2013 or 2014, they will be a good test. Legislative power is currently identical to what it was during the Ould Taya era, with the president's party (today's UPR, yesterday's PRDS) monopolizing the National Assembly and the Senate, and thus acting as a rubber stamp institution. Free and fair elections could send a positive signal, before the organization of truly open presidential elections in 2014. Beyond elections themselves, more balance ought to be instituted; as long as the system remains hyper-presidential, as it is right now, the temptation for the president to infringe on judicial and legislative affairs will remain high. Potential for building the rule of law, with institutions that do not merely serve the presidency and the president's entourage, will then become more concrete.