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COUNTRY REPORT – ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF MAURITANIA

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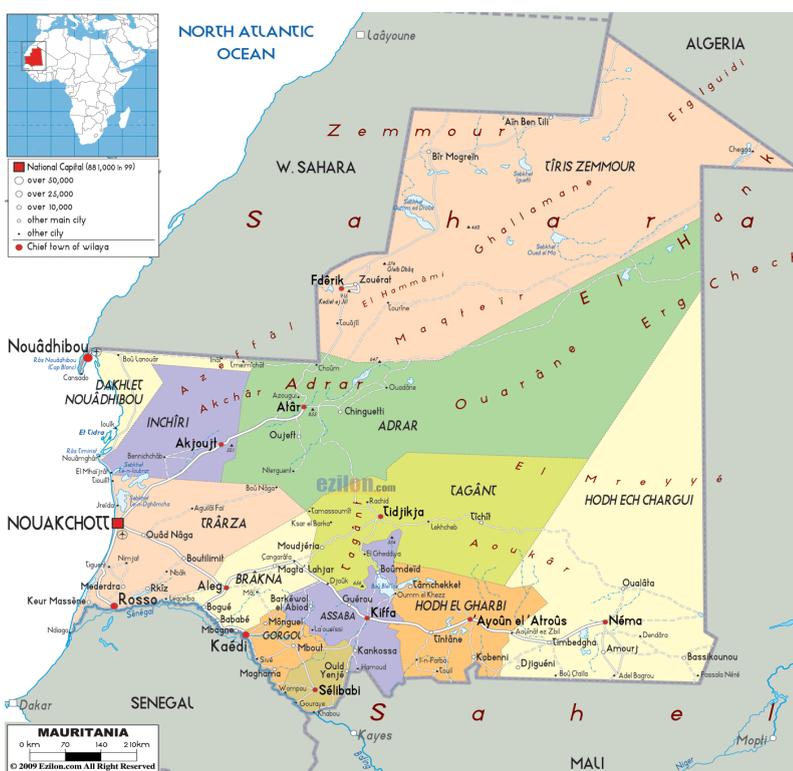
INTRODUCTION: ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF MAURITANIA

Mauritania is situated in Northwest Africa between Algeria, Western Sahara, Mali, Senegal and the Atlantic Ocean with a size of 1.030.000 sq. km (worldatlas.com 2021). The Mauritanian capital city and the largest city is Nouakchott and is located on the West coast of the country (worldatlas.com 2021). In General, the country is flat and is desert or semi-desert in structure (worldatlas.com 2021). This means that only a very small part of the country can be cultivated (worldbank.org 2019). The country is divided into twelve regions named “wilayah” that are separated into departments also called “moughataa” which are split into communes (worldatlas.com 2021). The most populated region is Hodh ech Chargui where Tiris Zemmour is the vastest one (worldatlas.com 2021).



(World Atlas)

Mauritania became independent from French control in 1960 (Girod and Walters 2012). Since then, the Mauritanian government obtained foreign funds during the Cold War because the country was able to join one of the great powers, but also for its natural resources such as oil and the will to control terrorist groups such as Al-Qaeda (Girod and Walters 2012). Thus, the country has been dependent on foreign aid for over 40 years.



Mauritania has been military-ruled since the first coup in 1978 (i Lecha 2015). Iraq, Libya and Syria were financially supporting the country (Girod and Walters 2012). The West was then reluctant to help the country financially because of its authoritarian system (Girod

and Walters 2012). For that reason, in 1991, Taya, the leader, decided to restore multiparty, parliaments and presidential elections but in practice, the government was still repressing the opposition (Girod and Walters 2012).

After its last coup in 2005, the previous one being in 1984, Western powers asking for the comeback of the previous leader stopped financing the country because the coup was not a democratic way to access power (Girod and Walters 2012). Mauritania started to democratise radically by following the Western indications regarding the economy, the political system and the society to obtain aids (Girod and Walters 2012). The Western indications regarding This appeased the relations between Western donors and Mauritania which allowed them to receive foreign aid again (Girod and Walters 2012). In addition, the Mauritanian president engaged the country in counter-terrorism and diplomatic relations with Israel (Girod and Walters 2012).

The Islamic Republic of Mauritania is rather unstable with regard to strategic democratisation in the last decades to attract foreign aid (Girod and Walters 2012). It is an official semi-presidential system influenced by France but in reality, the military possesses a lot of power, hence, the presidents are very powerful because they are supported by the army (Cavatorta and Garcia 2017). These instabilities favoured the installation of ‘Islamist’ groups in majority from the Muslim Brotherhood and some from Salafist or Wahabi groups (Cavatorta and Garcia 2017). These “Islamist” groups have a position of resistance toward the regime (Cavatorta and Garcia 2017). They organised non-violent actions to avoid state repression and the multi-party system gave them an entrance into the Mauritanian political sphere (Cavatorta and Garcia 2017). According to the freedom of the house, measuring the level of democracy, Mauritania is described as “partly free” with a score of 35 out of 100 (freedomhouse.org 2021).

Mauritanian disunity made the Arab revolution fail (Diagana 2016). The lack of collaboration weakened the protest and the government ignored the demands (Diagana 2016). The leader Mohamed Ould Ghazounani seemed to ameliorate the economy to look content and receive

foreign aid (Diagana 2016). Nevertheless, the country is known for its high level of corruption (Diagana 2016).

SLAVERY IN MAURITANIA

The Mauritanian population was estimated to be 4 million in 2018 (worldbank.org 2019). Furthermore, this is one of the least dense countries in terms of inhabitants with a population density of 3.9 people per square kilometre (worldbank.org 2019). The population is divided in two with the Arab-berbers on one side and the Black people on the other (Esseissah 2016). Mauritania's population is composed of three major groups: the Arabs, the Blacks, and the Haratines (Diagana 2016). The Black community in Mauritania is itself divided in three ethnic groups: Halpulaar, Soninke, and Wolof (Esseissah 2016). The Arab-berber group also includes subgroups related to old social categories or tribes (Esseissah 2016). The Haratines have African origins but they belong to the Arab-berbers culturally and in terms of language (Esseissah 2016). They have diverging interests and they live more or less in separate environments (Diagana 2016). As a result, the political movements are based on these different regional, ethnic or tribal groups which make political unity very difficult (Diagana 2016).

Racial discrimination is still a major problem in the country (Amnesty.org 2021). There is a big problem happening as a result of the slavery scandal in the city of Ouadane (Mejbour Salem 2021). In this case, a woman was offered as part of the dowry for a wedding in Ouadane which was declared as a fabrication by the National Commission for Human Rights, very close to the government (Mejbour Salem 2021). Furthermore, the Haratines and Black Mauritians are discriminated against a lot in terms of housing, access to education, health and social services (Amnesty.org 2021). Starting in 1989, for three years, Black Mauritians were tortured, sent to jail, executed and expelled; nowadays the people accountable for these acts remain unpunished because the government gave them amnesty in 1993 (Amnesty.org 2021).

Slavery has been in the region for centuries as part of the trans-Saharan slave trade which was very important in the nineteenth century (Lydon 2005). The slavery laws were regulated by the sharia (Islamic law) because the North and West African countries were mostly Muslim (Lydon 2005). In the case of Mauritania, the Maliki law is used which is a type of sharia inspired by the Maliki Islamic school invented by African scholars (Lydon 2005). Within the Maliki law, animals and slaves were treated the same way (Lydon 2005). In 2012, an anti-slavery activist, Ould Abeid, got arrested for “threatening national security” for burning a Maliki law book (Esseissah 2016). The activist took this action to denounce the problems related to the Mauritanian Islamic law and how it legitimises slavery or at least ignores the problem of slavery in the country (Esseissah 2016).

The Arab-Berber elite people use an “ideology of silence” in Boubabcar Ould Messaoud’s words, regarding slavery (Esseissah 2016). Slavery became a real taboo within the Mauritanian society because it is usually denied by the Arab-Berber intellectuals (Esseissah 2016). Anti-slavery activists are very often censored, arrested without a good legal reason and categorised as extremists (Esseissah 2016). In addition, the government keeps on claiming that slavery is part of the past and there is not such a problem anymore (Esseissah 2016). Although slavery was officially abolished in 1981, making it the last country to abolish slavery, it was later criminalised in 2007 (Humanrightswatch.org 2021). The persistence of slavery for the descendants of Haratines and Afro-Mauritanians is a huge problem in Mauritania (Amnesty.org 2021; Humanrightswatch.org 2021). According to the Global Slavery Index which is measuring forced labour and marriages, ca. 2,4% of the population would be considered as “modern slaves” (Humanrightswatch.org 2019). In fact, 168 human rights activists denouncing slavery have been taken into custody in the fight against five people for slavery (Cardwell 2018).

CONCLUSION

The Mauritanian government needs to seriously acknowledge slavery and put a stop to it and acknowledge its presence so that it is no longer a taboo. The anti-slavery rhetoric must be heard by the authorities and there is a need for anti-racism work within the Mauritanian

society. The Maliki law can also be reinterpreted to make sure that there is no trace of any slave or racial law.

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