

DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR EXTERNAL POLICIES  
POLICY DEPARTMENT



**State of play of  
EU-Mauritania  
relations**

AFET



## IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS

# State of play of EU-Mauritania relations

### ABSTRACT

Mauritania, an important ally of the EU in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel, faces several inter-related development challenges: ensuring an efficient use of the revenue derived from natural resources, economic diversification and improved governance. The severity of these development challenges is increased by difficult political relations between the three main ethnic groups in the country, the dominant group being the Arab-Berber Bidhan. They constitute less than one-third of the country's population, but dominate economically and politically. The Haratin, the largest group in the country, is made up of descendants of black Africans enslaved by the Bidhan (freed or still enslaved). The third group in the country is the West Africans or Black Mauritians. Mauritania's post-independence history is marked by repeated attempts by this group to assert its non-Arab identity and claim for a more equitable share of political and economic power. The tension that these divisions create is a problem in itself, but they can also be appropriated by violent Islamist insurgencies in the region. The urgency of this challenge is further complicated by the likelihood of increased climate change effects that the country is currently not adequately prepared for. This study therefore discusses the main political, economic and development challenges that contemporary Mauritania is faced with, illustrating how these challenges can only be properly grasped with consideration to their historical evolution. Based on this, the study investigates the current basis for EU-Mauritania relations and suggests a select number of policy areas for consideration, as this relationship continues to evolve around issues of mutual concern such as security and development.

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## List of abbreviations

AfDB	African Development Bank
AMU	Arab Maghreb Union
AQIM	Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EDF	European Development Fund
EPA	Economic Partnership Agreement
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNI	Gross National Income
IDB	Islamic Development Bank
IRA	Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist movement
MCJD	Military Council for Justice and Democracy
OIC	Organisation of Islamic Cooperation
PPM	<i>Parti du Peuple Mauritanien</i>
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PRDS	<i>Parti Républicain Démocratique et Social</i>
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UPR	Union for the Republic
USD	United States Dollar
WAEMU	West African Economic and Monetary Union
WFP	World Food Program

## Executive Summary

For most of its existence as an independent country, Mauritania has been a tightly controlled state that routinely imprisoned opposition figures on a combination of real and trumped-up charges, and made use of regionalism, tribalism and intra-tribe rivalries to divide and rule. However, since the country returned to civilian rule, a more positive trend may be about to emerge. The political debate has become more open, inside as well as outside of the parliament, regarding current political challenges and constitutional reform. President Aziz has promised not to amend the Constitution (which imposes a maximum two-term limit) in order to run for a third term. This is wise and should help facilitate short to medium term stability. In August 2016, Aziz also once more promised to organise political consultations between the different political groups in the country, including the opposition. This process of national dialogue started with the first meetings held in October 2016. This is promising, but the question is still unanswered whether the current government will be bold enough to embark on wider political and economic reforms that could improve the economy, make it more equitable and by doing so also lay the ground for the making of a new social identity built on citizenship and not a hierarchy of tribal affiliation, or, alternatively, return to how things were ran in earlier decades.

Contemporary Mauritania is a considerably stronger state than some of its Sahel neighbours, but the country is also currently at an important junction. It cannot go back to the decades of authoritarian rule intersected by palace coups where power changed from one hand of the elite to another. Under Aziz, the country has taken enough steps towards democracy to make this almost impossible. However, this transition is still unfinished, and this places the country in a constant state of fragility between the interest of a Bidhan elite that clings to ancient privileges and the discontent of the demographic majority: the Haratin and the Black Mauritians. The country is also facing a number of other challenges related to natural resources, climate change, economic diversification, job creation, good governance and the possibility of an economic crisis leading to increased youth recruitment by violent Islamist insurgencies, all of which are immensely important to address. Yet it is difficult to see how to make progress on these challenges without tackling the biggest issue, that is, the power imbalance between the Bidhan and the two other main groups in the country.

For the EU, Mauritania is important due to its important position in the Sahel and its active role in the G5 Sahel. The EU policy dialogue with Mauritania should concentrate on a few visible targets, without losing sight of the general development efforts and the need to enhance climate change resilience. Security and the fight against violent extremism is important, but as can be seen from neighbouring Mali, once the Jihadist genie is out of the bottle, putting it back in it is very difficult. The only way to avoid this taking place in Mauritania is to work on political reform in tandem with economic reform and job creation, particularly for young people. In such an approach, there is a role for many actors from the EU – the European Parliament and the Maghreb Delegation included. It is, however, of uttermost importance that the EU achieves internal cohesion in its various programming and policy dialogue processes. Too often this is not the case for large donors, and one programme and one policy process end up working against each other. The EU, as the single largest donor to Mauritania, needs to make certain that its own approach is cohesive, but it should also make a deliberate attempt to bring other donors on-board in a sustained, but conflict sensitive campaign towards political reform and improved governance in the country.

# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Contemporary Mauritania: internal challenges and relations with the EU

With a population of about 3.5 million inhabitants, Mauritania has become a valuable ally of the West in the fight against violent Islamism in the Sahel. It is mainly a desert country with approximately 90 % of its landmass within the Sahara. The population is accordingly concentrated in the south, where the level of rainfall is slightly higher. On the Atlantic coast, the capital Nouakchott is home to one-third of the population. After a period of political instability, with coups d'état in August 2005 and August 2008, the country has had a period of political stability with the June 2014 presidential elections taking place peacefully, even though the outcome was contested. There are still several human rights issues to take note of. The opposition still complains about the lack of a real democratic space and the issue of slavery is not completely solved.

In macro-economic terms, the country was doing relatively well up until 2014. Its per capita gross national income (GNI) was USD 1 270 (World Bank, 2016). This was mainly based on the country's wealth of natural resources, particularly in the mining sector, which has experienced growth over several years due to a period of high international commodity prices. Mauritania is one of Africa's leading exporters of iron ore and also exports gold and copper. It is one of Africa's most recent oil-producing countries and possesses considerable offshore natural gas deposits. The country's coastal waters and ocean territory also have some of the most abundant fish stocks in the world. This is reflected in the EU-Mauritania fisheries agreement, first concluded in 1987. The new protocol added in May 2016 is the most expensive EU protocol on fisheries, with an EU financial contribution of 59 125 million Euros per year (see European Parliament, 2016).

Despite some years of economic growth, Mauritania's poverty rate has remained high, particularly in the rural areas due to low productivity in the rural sector. As a consequence, Mauritania ranks 156<sup>th</sup> of 188 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index. Other hindrances to poverty reduction include a lack of human capital-intensive sectors, governance issues, the low quality of public services, and a high vulnerability to exogenous shocks. The latter is best exemplified in the collapse of global iron ore prices in the second half of 2014 and the low oil prices that came about just as the country was expected to start yielding the first significant benefits from oil production. With over 10 % reduction in mineral production, overall economic activity slowed down in 2015, and real growth in gross domestic product (GDP) fell to 3 % by the end of 2015.

This means that contemporary Mauritania faces several inter-related development challenges: ensuring the efficient use of the revenue derived from natural resources, economic diversification and improved governance. The extractive industry, which is the backbone of the economy, creates few jobs. The challenge for the government is to put in place a system of taxation that increases public revenue for productive investments in other sectors of the economy. Most people are employed either in the agricultural or fisheries sectors, which represent an untapped employment potential. However, current productivity levels are low and these sectors are also very vulnerable to climate change. How climate change will affect Mauritania in the next 30 to 40 years is an issue that must be addressed now, as its future consequences could be very serious for human development as well as state security. The Mauritanian economy needs to diversify, but this has not happened. Rather, the international commodity boom created even more concentration, with iron ore constituting more than 50 % of total exports between 2012 and 2013 (World Bank, 2016). Diversifying the economy and reducing inequalities are therefore key challenges that Mauritania must address, but this can only be provided by a sustained commitment to good governance, which includes economic as well as political issues.

Regionally, Mauritania is less integrated than several of its neighbours. Mauritania is not a member of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU) and left the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 2000. This reflects the Arab identity of the ruling elite of the country, but whether this really serves its economic interests is questionable. The relatively isolated position of Mauritania in the region has recently been redressed by the country's membership in the G5 Sahel. If the promising trend to increased regional security cooperation is continued, this could bring Mauritania more to the fore in the region. Improved regional security cooperation would not only benefit the people of the region, but also the EU, as external stakeholders need a functioning regional framework to facilitate state stability and promote policies of resilience and good governance.

The political dialogue between the EU and Mauritania is based on economic and trade relations formalised in the framework of the Cotonou Agreement, with the European Development Fund (EDF) as the main financial tool. The cooperation covers areas ranging from development cooperation and trade to migration, refugees and security. While the Cotonou Agreement constitutes the main framework for EU-Mauritania relations, it is not the only one. Mauritania is a signatory to the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with 16 West African countries, and Mauritania's membership in the G5 Sahel makes the country an important partner for the EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel (European Union, 2015) and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Stability and Addressing Root Causes of Irregular Migration and Displaced Persons in Africa. This will be further addressed in the next chapter, which explores the security-migration nexus of the Sahel through a political-economy analysis of the political, economic and development situation of Mauritania. This analysis is followed by Chapter 3, which focuses on the human rights situation in the country, the unfinished process of democratisation and the continued difficult issue of slavery. Chapter 4 gives a more detailed account of the EU-Mauritania relationship, covering the political dialogue, trade and development policy, including the recent new protocol of the fisheries agreement, and reviewing ways in which the dialogue between Mauritania and the European Parliament can be strengthened. This study is bookended by Chapter 5, which summarises findings and offers recommendations and suggestions concerning how the EU can contribute to address the challenges that Mauritania currently faces. However, before we proceed to Chapter 2, the following section will offer a short introduction to social relations in Mauritania. This is important because Mauritania is still a country divided by ethno-cultural cleavages that have important political and economic ramifications.

## 1.2 A divided country

At a glance, Mauritania may look much more solid than some of its Sahel neighbours such as Mali. However, Mauritania not only inhabits a volatile neighbourhood, but it is also a divided country itself. In one of the two Islamic republics in Africa (the other one being the Gambia), Mauritians share the same religion – Islam – but they are strongly divided into three distinct ethnic-cultural groups. The dominant group, politically and economically, is the Arab-Berber or Moorish (the 'Bidhan', meaning 'white' or 'light-skinned') groups/tribes that historically lived a nomadic lifestyle in the northern, central and eastern parts of the country. The Bidhan make up less than one-third of the country's population, but dominate economically and politically. These groups are the descendants of Arab tribes that migrated from the Arabian Peninsula and settled in large areas of northwest Africa. In what was to become Mauritania, they intermingled with and asserted their linguistic and cultural hegemony over the indigenous Berber groups and converted them to Islam. The new societies that emerged from this encounter engaged in commerce with their black neighbours to the south, but also in wars of enslavement. The society that these groups established is highly hierarchical and tribalised. The Bidhan of Mauritania are organised in about 150 different tribes that are linked by a complex web of social relations, based on solidarities, alliances and rivalries (see Marchesin, 1992). These relations and allegiances to precolonial polities (emirates) and feudal structures have remained a dominant force in all aspects of political and economic life in Mauritania (see N'Diaye, 2006).

The Haratin are, in all likelihood, the largest group in the country and are made up of descendants of black Africans enslaved by the Bidhan (now freed or still enslaved). The relationship between the Haratin and the Bidhan is complicated (see McDougall, 2005) as the Haratin share the same language, Arab-Muslim culture and social organisation with their (former) masters, the Bidhan. This started to change in the late 1970s with the emergence of a Haratin political movement called *El Hor* (meaning 'freeman'). This was the first manifestation of the Haratin as an autonomous political and social force. The most important issue for the Haratin has been the fight against the persistence of slavery, but Haratin organisations also demand a political space corresponding to their actual demographic weight. Progress has been made in the fight against formal slavery, but the Haratin are still by and large an economic underclass that is far from being politically fully represented. We will return to the issue of the Haratin in Chapter 3.

The third group in the country are the West Africans or Black Mauritians. This group constitutes about 30 % of the population and is comprised of four black ethnic groups: the Bambara, the Halpulaar (Fulbe), the Soninké and the Wolof. Mauritania's post-independence history is marked by repeated attempts by this group to assert their non-Arab identity and claim for a more equitable share of political and economic power. Their claims have been met by the Bidhan-dominated state by a combination of repression and co-optation.

The tension that these divisions create is a problem in itself, but they can also be appropriated by violent Islamist groups in the region. Groups like Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and Mokhtar Belmokhtar's al-Mourabitoun have Mauritians among their ranks (Bøås, 2015), and even if Mauritania so far has not been a target of major attacks by these groups, they are present in peripheral areas of the country, where they rest, get supplies, regroup and carry out sporadic attacks (see Vium, 2013). The combination of aggravated economic hardship and intensified tensions between the three dominant ethno-cultural groups of Mauritania could easily lead to an increase in the recruitment of disfranchised Mauritanian youths into these groups. Particularly at risk are those at the bottom tiers of society, since one of the advantages of the Islamist groups in this regard is their credo of being 'slaves of God', proposing an egalitarian project where social standing (especially slavery related) does not matter.

## 2 Political economy of Mauritania

Mauritania's history as an independent country is a history of coups d'état, with power changing from one representative of the Bidhan elite to another. Mauritania became an independent state in November 1960 under the rule of Moktar Ould Daddah. In 1964, he and the forces behind him reorganised Mauritania as a one-party state with a new constitution and an authoritarian presidential regime. Daddah's party, the *Parti du Peuple Mauritanien* [Mauritanian People's Party] (PPM) became the ruling organisation in a one-party system. This lasted until Daddah was ousted in a palace coup in July 1978, mainly as a consequence of internal discontent with his attempt to annex the southern part of Western Sahara in a war that Mauritania was completely unprepared for militarily as well as politically and economically.

The first military regime after Daddah proved incapable both of establishing a power base for itself and getting away from the destabilising war with the Polisario Front, which was fighting for the independence of Western Sahara. The second military regime led by Mohamed Khouna Ould Haidallah gave up all claims on Western Sahara, negotiated peace with the Polisario Front and mended ties with Algeria (the main external supporter of Polisario). Haidallah did make some efforts to reform the country, for example by legally abolishing slavery in 1981 (Mauritania was the last country in the world to do so), but most reform efforts were lost in political intrigue and attempted coups within the military establishment.

Lingering on from one internal crisis to another, Haidallah's regime was finally deposed by a new coup in December 1984 led by Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya. Initially, this regime also made some attempts at reforming both domestically and internationally. Ties were re-established with Morocco, and attempts were also made at securing support (including aid) and foreign direct investment from Western states and their allied states in the Arab world. Taya's government also continued the process of land nationalisation started by the previous government, in an attempt to abolish the traditional system of land tenure. There were good reasons for reforming the Mauritanian agricultural sector, but the government seizure of traditional grazing lands did not increase the popularity of the regime.

Political parties, which had been illegal since 1964, were legalised again in 1991; a new constitution was established replacing that of 1964, and, as the country formally returned to civilian rule in 1992, 16 political parties were recognised. The 1992 and 1997 elections were both won by President Taya's party, the *Parti Républicain Démocratique et Social* [Republican, Democratic and Social Party] (PRDS). The opposition boycotted the elections in 1992, participated in the municipal elections in 1994 and in all subsequent Senate elections up until April 2004, gaining representation at the local level as well as three seats in the Senate. Politically speaking, even though political opposition was formally allowed, this entire period was dominated by Taya and his PRDS.

### 2.1 The political situation

For most of its existence as an independent country Mauritania has been a tightly controlled state that routinely imprisoned opposition figures on a combination of real and trumped-up charges, and made use of regionalism, tribalism and intra-tribe rivalries to divide and rule (see N'Diaye, 2006). However, since the country has returned to civilian rule, a more positive trend may be about to emerge. The political debate has become more open, inside as well as outside of the parliament, regarding current political challenges and constitutional reform, and it is noteworthy that the current president Mohamed Ould Abdel Azizi decided not to run for a third mandate. These are issues that we will return to, but the current political challenges in Mauritania cannot be addressed without an understanding of what happened in the period leading up to the coups of 2005 and 2008.

Ethno-cultural cleavages and race issues have been part and parcel of the history of Mauritania and they are still an integral part of the political challenges that this country is faced with. In 1989, Taya's regime took advantage of the border dispute with Senegal to further marginalise black Mauritians. Many of

them suffered ethnic cleansing and large-scale deportations to Senegal and Mali between 1989 and 1992. Some were forced to leave, others fled the country to escape harsh repression, and most of those deported had absolutely no connection to Mali or Senegal. The exact number of people deported will never be known, but the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that by 1991 about 53 000 Mauritians were living in Senegal and at least 13 000 in Mali (UNHCR, 1991). The objective was the Arabisation of Mauritania. Between 500 and 600 political prisoners of black Mauritanian origin were executed or tortured to death, and somewhere between 3 000 and 5 000 soldiers and low-ranking civil servants from the same ethnic background were arrested and charged with alleged involvement in an attempt to overthrow the government (N'Diaye, 2006).

During the 1990s, this politics of oppression combined with a degree of formal openness (allowing the opposition to field candidates in elections) continued, and Taya's government also made some attempts at re-aligning itself with the West by collaborating with the United States in anti-terrorism efforts. Internally, much remained the same. In 2001, the then leading opposition party *Action pour le Changement* [Action for Change] was banned and several of its leaders arrested and put on trial, and a violent but unsuccessful coup was attempted in June 2003. Thus, even though the regime in power managed to conduct another round of elections in November 2003, with Taya officially re-elected president with 67 % of the vote, it was increasingly clear that the days of this regime were numbered as the country was caught up in a political and economic impasse. This contributed to a rethinking of political alignments within the Bidhan elite, not necessarily in order to embrace democracy and human rights for all citizens of Mauritania, but in order to safeguard their own position as the dominant elite. This is the background for the 2005 and 2008 coup, and subsequent events, with continuous efforts by the Bidhan elite to protect their privileged position, albeit with less violent means than before.

The August 2005 coup was therefore very much a palace coup. Led by Ely Ould Mohamed Vall – the long-term director of national security – the Military Council for Justice and Democracy (MCJD) promised a two-year timeline for a transition to democracy. First cautiously watched by the international community, the coup was generally accepted when it seemed like the officers were going to stand by their word.

On 11 March 2007, for the first time in the country's history, Mauritians could choose between several candidates in presidential elections with no incumbent or official candidate of the regime. The independent candidate Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi won in the second round run-off with 52.85 % of the vote against 47.15 % in favour of his challenger, long-time opposition leader Ahmed Ould Daddah.

The 2007 presidential elections may have been free from the old-fashioned ballot box stuffing and other similar practices that had been the hallmark of past Mauritanian elections. However, the elections did not constitute a clean break from this troubled past. Rather, the 2007 elections exposed much of the same dynamics of tribal politics that has characterised previous elections, and ill-gotten financial resources were used in an attempt to manipulate the outcome. However, it is fair to say that for the first time in the country's history, the result could not be completely masterminded in advance and many had a lot to lose.

This was particularly the case of the old hegemonic block of Bidhan tribes from Taya's regime. Their oligopolistic business interests (controlled by a select group of members of Taya's tribe – the Smasside – and their allies in the Oulad Bousbaa tribe) were in danger should a candidate whom they did not control become president (see N'Diaye, 2009). This group therefore supported and bankrolled one candidate, Zeien Ould Zeidane (former Governor of the Central Bank under Taya), but he only managed to come in third place in the first round with 15.28 % of the vote.

Another candidate was therefore needed for the second round: Sidi Abdallahi. He came late to the race as an independent candidate when it appeared that the discredit of the former ruling party and the momentum of the opposition could combine to propel Ould Daddah, the long-time opposition leader, into the presidency. In order to try and secure his position, Ould Daddah tried to rally the prominent core

members of the political-military Bidhan elite, playing the Arab nationalist card. He succeeded with a few of them, but most in this elite were not ready to entrust their privileged position into his hands, and in trying to lure this elite over to his side, he also antagonised several of the non-Bidhan constituencies who saw this as a betrayal of his previous positions.

Thus, Abdallahi enjoyed strong behind-the-scenes support from the old elite, and also received the endorsement of the third-placed candidate in the first round, Ould Zeidane, and the backing of the fourth-placed candidate Ould Boulkheir. These endorsements ensured Ould Abdallahi's victory and brought about a remarkable realignment of the Mauritanian political game. The new 'game' may have become slightly more transparent as electoral outcomes could not be designed in advance, but it also exposed the continued dominant position of the old elite and that this position could be maintained even after a formal transition to relatively free and fair elections.

Ould Abdallahi was democratically elected, but the governing coalition he ended up with was not one in favour of the major reforms needed to confront the challenges ahead of him. To succeed as a democratic president, he would have had to continue the transformation of civilian-military relations, address the human rights deficit (symbolised by the deportation of Black Mauritians to Mali and Senegal), the slavery and its legacy, and reform the economy by dismantling the corrupt neopatrimonial economic system that had been woven for decades. This would have been a tall order for any president, but it turned out to be too much for Ould Abdallahi, who did not have the backing of the reformist minded constituencies, but had won the presidency with the support of those that would lose privileges should such reform ever be initiated.

Ould Abdallahi tried to use the little space for some autonomous manoeuvring that he had as president, but when, after a year in power, he fired several senior officers, including General Mohamed Ould Abdel Azizi, his days as president became numbered. First, 48 lawmakers from the ruling party resigned in protest of his policies, and the next day, on 6 August 2008, the presidential guard took control of the presidential palace and arrested Ould Abdallahi. The coup was co-ordinated by Ould Aziz, the former head of the presidential guard, who had recently been fired by Abdallahi and had the support of a number of other leading military figures. Once more, the political-military apparatus was back in power in Nouakchott.

The coup was also backed by some opposition politicians such as Ould Daddah (Abdallahi's rival in the 2007 election). However, initially, Aziz's regime was shunned internationally, and became the subject of diplomatic sanctions and the cancellation of some aid projects. France, the EU, the United States, but also Algeria criticised the coup, while Aziz received some support from Iran, Libya and Morocco. After the coup, Aziz wanted to arrange new presidential elections to replace Abdallahi, but he was forced to reschedule his initial plans due to internal and international opposition. However, during 2009, the junta negotiated an understanding with some opposition figures and international partners. As a result, Abdallahi formally resigned. He did not have much choice as most of his domestic support base had disappeared and influential international stakeholders such as Algeria and France now had aligned with Aziz. The United States still continued to criticise the coup, but did not actively oppose the elections that Aziz wanted. Thus, Abdallahi's formal resignation allowed the election of Aziz as civilian president on 18 July 2009. He received a 52 % majority, but many in the opposition refused to recognise the results, arguing that the elections had been compromised due to junta control and complained that the international community had sacrificed democracy for presumed state stability. Despite these complaints, the elections were unanimously accepted by Western, Arab and African countries, sanctions were lifted and ordinary formal relations with Aziz's Mauritania were resumed. Aziz went on to win another five-year term in June 2014 with almost 82 % of the vote in an election boycotted by parts of the opposition: a boycott they hoped would result in a much lower turnout than the 56 % voter turnout eventually reported.

Aziz victory in 2014 was confirmed by Mauritania's highest court. However, there are reasons to believe that at least his margin of victory would have been smaller had everybody had an equal chance to vote.

The reason for this is that the second in line was the anti-slavery candidate Biram Ould Dah Ould Abdei. He only received just less than 9 % of the vote. As Jeremy Keenan argued to the *Middle East Eye* in June 2014:

‘If all Haratin and blacks were registered on the voters’ roll, which they are not, and if Mauritanian elections were 100 % free and fair, which they are not, and if all Haratin-blacks voted on racist-ethnic lines, which is conceivable, then Biram Dad Abeid would be president.’

Mauritania may have entered a new phase of stability with Aziz and the coups; and the open harassment of the opposition may be a thing of the past. The question, however, is how long this elite can continue to recreate itself? What will happen when that is no longer possible? During the first period of Aziz’s rule, he was certainly helped by favourable international economic conditions, which, even if wealth was not spread throughout society, enabled the regime to maintain its power base. However, since the end of 2014, this is not the case anymore.

The next presidential elections are scheduled in 2019. President Aziz has promised not to amend the Constitution (which imposes a maximum two-term limit) in order to run for a third term. This is wise and should help facilitate short to medium term stability. In August 2016, Aziz also promised once more to organise political consultations between the different political groups in the country, including the opposition. This process of national dialogue started with the first meetings held in October 2016 (see also AfDB, 2016). This is promising, but the question is still unanswered whether the government will be bold enough to embark on wider political and economic reforms that could improve the economy, make it more equitable and, by doing so, also lay the ground for the making of a new social identity built on citizenship and not a hierarchy of tribal affiliation, or, alternatively, return to how things were ran in earlier decades.

## 2.2 The economic situation

According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), Mauritania’s economy grew of an estimated 3.1 % of GDP in 2015, down from 6.6 % in 2014. This was mainly due to the drop in the world market price of iron ore, the country’s main export article. This is a challenge, but macro-economically the picture is not too bad. Inflation, at 3.5 % in 2014, was contained at 1.5 % in 2015, and the fiscal stance remains viable, with a manageable overall balance deficit equal to 2.9 % of GDP. By the end of 2015, official foreign exchange reserves remained comfortable at an estimated USD 809 million, equal to 5.5 months of imports. There are also some signs of poverty reduction, with poverty rates falling to 31 % in 2014 from 42 % in 2008. Thus, while some social indicators have improved, the country’s social performance remains mixed. The first Millennium Development Goal that was supposed to reduce the poverty rate to 28 % by the end of 2015 was not reached, and despite the relatively low unemployment rate (12.8 % in 2014), the labour market remains highly precarious and informal, with a vulnerable-employment rate of 55 % (see AfDB, 2015).

Despite mineral extraction industries and recent oil-production, the majority of the Mauritanian population depends on agriculture and livestock farming. Many Mauritians were forced to give up their nomadic lifestyle and settle into cities by recurrent droughts in the 1970s and 1980s, but they still depend on the same livelihoods than before. This also helps explain the low unemployment figures and the informal labour market. Most people are self-employed within livestock farming and agriculture and only enter the labour market when they have to. This is good in that it gives people resilience to shocks on the formal economy, but it is also a huge challenge in that a considerable part of the Mauritanian population is very exposed to climate change effects.

The Mauritanian economy has potential, but it is also in dire need of diversification. Some much needed reforms have been implemented, but there are still several challenges ahead. In 2016, Mauritania was among the top ten African countries in terms of number of reforms, rising from 176<sup>th</sup> position in 2015 to 168<sup>th</sup> position in 2016 in the *Doing Business Report* (see AfDB, 2016). This was due to a shortening of the business creation time from nine to eight days, a reduction in the number of business creation procedures from seven to six, a reduction in electricity connection time from 75 to 70 days, and a reduction in import

time from 126 to 84 hours. The government has therefore improved its services to private agents and enacted reforms aimed at encouraging foreign and domestic direct investments. However, despite these reforms, economic diversification is hindered by a number of structural, legal and administrative constraints. These are linked to a limited policy framework and the absence of a reliable framework in important areas such as public-private partnerships (PPP) and land governance.

Economic diversification will depend on the degree to which the government is able to boost the competitiveness of the Mauritanian economy, which can help entice local and foreign private companies to jointly construct and/or manage public infrastructure and services with the state and public enterprises. However, for this to happen in an effective and sustainable manner, Mauritania must enact general legislation on PPPs. This is a task that the government should be encouraged to embrace as swiftly as possible.

Mauritania's agricultural sector is not only the largest employer in the country, but is also a sector with great yet under-utilised potential for economic growth and diversification. An improved mobilisation of this sector could lead to the much needed promotion of agricultural value chains. One of the main problems in this sector is that land law regulation in Mauritania is characterised by an unclear and not properly codified land tenure system. This is an important barrier to the competitiveness of the country's economy as it limits access to financing and thus deters both domestic and foreign investors. A first phase of reform of Mauritania's land tenure law was launched in 2015 with the support for the African Development Bank, and should be carried forward with urgency.

The competitiveness of the Mauritanian economy could also be boosted by a more coherent approach to regional integration. Currently, Mauritania is not a member of the WAEMU and left its seat in the ECOWAS in 2000. In this period, Mauritania instead tried to strengthen its ties with the Arab world. This reflects the dual identity of the country, being both Arab and African, and could be seen as an attempt by the then ruling regime to underscore the country's Arab identity. However, with regard to regional integration, whether this strategy has improved the economic situation in the country is questionable. Mauritania is a member of the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU), the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank (IDB), but the AMU is not really a working regional body due to difficult relations between some of its members, and the OIC and the IDB are more symbolic political organisations than a framework for regional integration. There is an ongoing conversation in the country concerning ECOWAS that is gaining momentum as a consequence both of G5 Sahel membership and of the recent collaboration between President Aziz and ECOWAS in relation to the political situation in the Gambia. With regard to security and development, the G5 Sahel is of particular interest. This new regional body created by the leaders of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad and Burkina Faso will work to strengthen regional cooperation on security and development. Mauritania will host the headquarters of the group and President Aziz is its first chair. The main aim of the group is to work together to identify common projects focusing on infrastructure, food security, agriculture and pastoralism, i.e. issues and sectors that are often root causes of conflict. For external stakeholders in search of a regional framework, this initiative has been met with great interest, and this could become a new functional framework of security and development integration in the Sahel.

All the major economic challenges that Mauritania is faced with will depend on how the country is able to cope with climate change. This will affect how the country manages urbanisation. Strong urbanisation has brought urban population to about 48 % and Mauritanian cities are ill-equipped to deal with this, for example with regard to infrastructure, sanitation and waste management, precarious housing, and land management. Improved taxation of the extractive industries could provide the necessary revenue to invest in these areas. However, this is not only a question of designing a system of taxation; it is also a question of political will. The question is whether the current political elite is willing to secure the resilience of the population in the face of climate change or only protect its own privileges.

## 2.3 The development challenges – including climate change and droughts

Despite some years of economic growth, Mauritania is still a poor country, ranking 156<sup>th</sup> of 188 countries on the United Nations Human Development Index. Life expectancy is 61.6 years for men and 64.6 years for women, while the literacy rate for youth (15-24 years) is 71.6 % for men and 66.2 % for women. About a quarter of the population live on less than USD 1.25 per day, and in the southern regions, still informally known as the 'Triangle of poverty', 60 % live on less than a dollar per day. Mauritania has always been dry, and is becoming drier. Its climate therefore constitutes a severe barrier to food production and this is one of the key development challenges facing the country. Mauritania was affected by severe droughts in the mid-1980s and mid-1990s and this has become a recurring fact of life in Mauritania in this millennium. The proportion of nomadic pastoralists in the population has decreased over four decades from 85 % to just 5 % - most livestock farming now occurs in urban outskirts, and with regard to milk, which constitutes a vital part of the diet, demand is much larger than domestic production. Food insecurity is therefore widespread, and this situation is further impacted negatively by Mauritania's dependence on export revenue from iron ore, gold and oils, which have significantly lost value recently.

Mauritania is therefore facing a number of development challenges. The extractive industries that are enormously important for the country's economy have a low employment potential. This will not change, but much more should be done to ensure a system of taxation that can generate more income to be used for productive investments. The main employers in the country are the agricultural and fisheries sector, but their productivity levels are low and they are the most vulnerable to climate change effects. Another huge challenge is that Mauritania's competitiveness is impacted by the country's small formal economic base, and the lack of economic diversification and weak legal framework discussed above. Since the 1990s, Mauritania's exports have been concentrated in the mining and fisheries sectors, which on average have accounted for four-fifths of total exports between 1990 and 2000. Since then, apart from crude oil, diversification has not increased. The trend is rather the opposite as exports have become even more concentrated, with iron ore representing more than 50 % of total exports (see World Bank, 2016). Mauritania needs bold economic reforms that can reduce inequalities and tackle wealth redistribution. This will require a continued commitment to good governance, particularly in the mining sector.

Mauritania, as the rest of the Sahel, is in the very unfortunate position of being a country that has not contributed much to global CO<sub>2</sub> emissions but will be among those most hurt by its consequences. Rising temperatures in the Sahel will have devastating consequences if action is not taken. Thus, while climate fluctuations and correspondingly variable precipitation levels are not a novel phenomenon, what is currently happening may, if left unaddressed, constitute an escalating threat to the livelihoods of the population (mostly the poor), with an increased potential for violent conflict between subsistence farmers and pastoralists, similar to what is currently seen in Mali. The cities are not safe from harmful climate change effects either. Nouakchott, built in the 1950s to accommodate about 8 000 people, is currently home to over a million people, and the combination of rising sea levels, erosion of coastal zones, destruction of mangrove forests and floods means that about 80 % of the city could be under water in fewer than ten years and in 20 years at most if measures are not taken, with the worst-case scenario projecting the disappearance of the entire city by 2050 (World Bank, 2016; Smith, 2016). The combined challenge of climate change, development and poverty reduction is therefore as serious in Mauritania as elsewhere in the Sahel, and if serious measures are not taken, with the support of external actors such as the EU, it will inevitably only lead to more human suffering, more conflict and even more migrants and refugees.

## 2.4 Security

The security situation in the Sahel is currently deteriorating. All the states in this region display various levels of fragility and suffer from weak state capacity. None of them are able on their own to respond adequately to the current livelihood challenges that their populations face. Due to increased climate change effects, traditional livelihoods are under immense pressure and are in certain areas of the Sahel becoming increasingly dysfunctional.

Resources are becoming even scarcer and, as a consequence, new and old cleavages over access to natural resources are becoming increasingly militarised. This is opening up new spaces for both violent Islamist insurgencies and transnational organised crime to operate in. In peripheral areas such as Northern Mali, a void has been opened that neither the Malian state nor the international responses have been able to close so far (Bøås, 2015).

In Mali, the situation is not improving at all and insurgencies are a fact of life in most states in the region. This has been recognised by the EU in its involvement and support both bilaterally and to novel regional institutional arrangements such as the G5 Sahel. Mauritania is important in this regard for two reasons. First, the country has so far been much less affected by the general insecurity in the Sahel than its neighbours. The last major terrorist attack in Mauritania dates back to 2011, which testifies to the strength of the Mauritanian state. Secondly, Mauritania has become a key ally in the fight against terrorism and insurgents in the Sahel. This may be a doubled-edged sword for Mauritania as it can help the country gain much needed assistance, but also makes it a valuable target to attack for insurgent groups in the Sahel.

Mauritania may be less under threat than many other of its Sahel neighbours from the forces of violent Islamist insurgencies, but it is not immune. The situation in neighbouring Mali is currently going from bad to worse with rebellions also spreading to the central regions of Gourma and Mopti, and an even further implosion of the Malian state would also have significant repercussions for Mauritania. This, in combination with a deteriorating economy, the frustrations of an unfinished transition to democracy and the persistent issue of slavery could be a successful call to arms for Mauritanian Jihadists who currently fight outside of their country of origin, but would ideally like to bring their struggle back home.

## 2.5 Migration

Mauritania is not a major country of origin of refugees or an important transit or destination country. Still, since its independence in 1960, it has witnessed several quite intense migratory movements. These are linked to internal as well as external affairs. Outward flows started in the 1970s and were caused by persistent high levels of poverty and unemployment combined with agro-pastoralist crises brought about by severe and frequent droughts. The early outward flows of migrants were mainly directed towards neighbouring African countries such as Senegal, Mali, the Gambia and Côte d'Ivoire. This changed in the late 1980s/early 1990s, as a result of the violent conflict between Mauritania and Senegal in 1989. This conflict not only caused a minor refugee crisis, but also made the southbound route through Senegal much more dangerous and costly. Outbound flows were therefore redirected to the Gulf countries where low-skilled work was available, particularly for Arab-speaking migrants, and to Libya and also Europe. The actual numbers for outward migration are uncertain, but some of the more recent and reliable estimates put the number at just under 200 000. The majority of those migrants live in neighbouring countries (about 150 000) and the rest are relatively equally divided between the Gulf countries and Europe (mainly France and Spain) (see Migration Policy Centre, 2013).

The flows of inward migration to Mauritania are even older, and must be seen in relation to the efforts to build a state among a traditionally nomadic population. In the 1960s and 70s, the arrival of labour migrants from other African countries, mainly Mali and Senegal, was motivated by the need to fill gaps in the labour market, particularly in the fields of construction and infrastructure. In the 1990s, these needs decreased, but since then, inward migration has been characterised by relatively large flows of refugees and asylum

seekers fleeing the civil wars in Mali and in the Mano River Basin (i.e. Liberia, Sierra Leone and Côte d'Ivoire). Some of these migrants have left Mauritania and have returned to their country of origin as civil wars ended in the Mano River Basin, but Mauritania is still providing shelter to refugees from Mali.

Mauritania received some refugees from Mali in the early 1990s, but the current group of Malian refugees came as a result of the coup, civil war and chaos of 2012/13 (see Bøås and Torheim, 2013; Bøås, 2015). At the height of the Malian conflict (i.e. 2013) almost 80 000 refugees lived in the Mbera camp in an isolated part of southeast Mauritania, close to the small town of Bassikounou, near the border of Mali. Some of these have returned home, but at the end of 2016, Mbera still houses about 44 000 refugees and asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2016a). This figure is not likely to drop soon as refugees from Mali continue to arrive. In November 2016, more than 2 000 arrived seeking shelter from banditry, insurgency activities and interethnic violence (UNHCR, 2016b). In Mbera, these refugees are given food, shelter and basic livelihood items, and their children are offered basic education. However, the number of refugees and the length of their stay are also putting immense pressure on local livelihoods. This is not helped by the fact that the whole UNHCR operation in Mauritania is seriously underfunded. In 2016, the total recorded contributions to UNHCR's work in Mauritania were USD 4 million, received from the Government of Japan, the EU, Finland and the UNIQLO Company. However, by the end of the year, UNHCR was still requesting USD 15.4 million for its operations in Mauritania (UNHCR, 2016a). The international underfunding of humanitarian operations is a persistent problem in Mauritania as well as across the Sahel, and it undoubtedly contributes to unnecessary human suffering, people searching for other and often violent livelihood options such as joining banditry or (Islamist) insurgencies, or seeking outward migration towards Europe.

In the Mbera camp, refugees struggle with inadequate food rations, primitive shelters and the boredom of the inactivity of refugee camp life. Most of the refugees come from semi-nomadic cultures and are used to being on the move; they are now suddenly forced to be sedentary. This creates tensions and frustrations among the refugees, but the local host population of Mbera is equally frustrated by the refugees and the camp. What they see is food being handed out, water distributed and schools and other services established, which they cannot access. Had they been better off than the refugees, this could have been easier to accept, but that is not necessarily the case. As research has shown elsewhere in Africa (see Hammar, 2014; Bjørkhaug, Bøås and Kebede, 2017), when donors earmark funding for refugees they tend to neglect the fact that these refugees do not live in isolation from local host communities, which are often eventually excluded from receiving any kinds of assistance or benefits. Taking this into consideration, it is fair to say that the local integrative capacity of Africa – Mauritania and the areas around Mbera included – has been remarkably high. However, Mbera has faced a large number of Mauritians claiming refugee status. According to the findings of a joint UNHCR/World Food Program (WFP) assessment in 2013, whereas 80 % of the refugee households in Mbera camp eat three balanced meals per day, this is only the case of 14 % of the Mauritanian households living next to the camp (UNHCR/WFP, 2013). As the same assessment also concluded that up to one-fifth of the refugees registered in the Mbera camp were locals, ECHO (the EU's humanitarian arm) decided to hold back funding until it could be made certain that only 'genuine' refugees received aid. This may make sense from a bureaucratic point of view, but is in fact one of the biggest mistakes humanitarian actors make. To help refugees, one cannot ignore the local host population if they end up being worse off than the refugees. Rather, what is needed is a full-area approach that also targets vulnerable parts of the local host population. This is particularly important in an area where Islamist insurgencies operate, since these groups have a track-record of appropriating local grievances to find support, to hide and to recruit.

Currently, Mauritania is not an important transit country for migrants and refugees heading towards Europe. This has not always been the case. In 2006, over 30 000 migrants and refugees made it to the Canary Islands, setting off from the Mauritanian coast (as well as Morocco and Senegal) in *pateras* (medium-sized fishing boats, in groups of 50 to 150 people) seeking to reach Europe and a better life (see Davidson, 2016; Fuchs, 2006). Peaking in numbers in 2006, the popularity of this route towards Europe has thereafter

dropped significantly, going down to 12 500 arrivals in 2007, 2 250 in 2009, and reaching its lowest ebb in 2012 with only 170 arrivals, before starting to rise again in 2015 with 874 arrivals. There are several reasons for this. One is of course that it is a dangerous sea route to take in small, old, relatively primitive fishing boats. As the numbers along this route started to drop, numbers of Sahara crossings increased. However, equally important were the measures that Spain took, and it could be wise to revisit these in light of the current refugee crisis and the EU's effort to initiate a framework for a Migration Partnership with Ethiopia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Senegal.

In contrast with the financing of a 'push back' scheme (which the current EU-Turkey deal promotes), Spain approached its 2006 migration crisis from another angle. In 2007, Spain signed a series of bilateral agreements with Mauritania and Senegal in order to seal off the West African route, i.e. the sea channel from north-western Africa to the Canary Islands, as well as an agreement with Morocco to seal off the route between Ceuta and Melilla and the Spanish peninsula. Through investments in maritime patrols and radar systems, good operational cooperation was established between Spain, Senegal, Mauritania and Morocco, making it possible to detect and prevent boats from leaving the coast. However, this package was also complemented with development aid, trade deals and youth employment programmes for the main African source countries. The result was that fewer people attempted to use this route towards Europe. Thus, this collaboration, referred to as 'border externalisation' has paid off. However, no sea border can be sealed off completely, and as a result of other less dangerous routes being closed, the number of people along the north-western African sea route may now be in the process of increasing again. This does not mean, however, that there are not valuable lessons learned from the Spanish approach, which is very much focused on working with government partners. In this regard, both the G5 Sahel Group and the EU Trust Fund for Africa could be utilised within the framework of the EU Strategy for the Sahel.

## 3 Democratisation, slavery and human rights abuses

### 3.1 Democratisation

Under the current regime, political parties are free to operate, but the political-military apparatus still has a heavy influence on domestic politics. Mauritania's system of political parties is also poorly developed with votes usually cast according to kin, lineage, clan and ethnic loyalties. As mentioned in Chapter 2, in June 2004 President Aziz and his party, the Union for the Republic (UPR), secured a second term against the independent candidate and runner-up Biran Dah Abeid, the head of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist movement (IRA-Mauritania). Abeid, who only secured 9 % of the vote, challenged the election results at the Constitutional Council, citing cases of misconduct and fraud. The Council did not respond to his complaints and Aziz victory was quickly confirmed by the country's highest court.

Under the constitution, the president has the power to appoint and dismiss the prime minister and the cabinet, while a 2006 amendment imposed a limit of two five-year presidential terms. Mauritania's bicameral legislature consists of a 147-seat National Assembly, elected by popular vote for five-year terms, and a 56-seat Senate, with 53 members elected by mayors and municipal councils and three members chosen by the chamber to represent Mauritians living abroad. One third of the Senate is elected on a rotating basis every two years. After repeated delays, the first round of National Assembly and municipal elections was held in November 2013, and a second round in December the same year. The UPR won 78 seats, and in an alliance with a number of smaller parties, the governing coalition controlled 108 seats. Most major opposition parties boycotted these elections, claiming the results were predetermined and the process non-transparent. The only major exception to this was the Tawassoul, an Islamist, Muslim Brotherhood-inspired party, which won 16 seats. In addition, under a law passed in 2005, party lists for the National Assembly must include district-based quotas for female candidates, and 20 % of all municipal council seats are reserved for women (Freedom House, 2015).

This may sound good, but at the same time, as the government sets aside quotas for women, it still continues to reject party registration for the IRA-Mauritania. This is one of the most problematic aspects of 'democracy' in Mauritania. If registered, this could become the preferred party of the Haratin and possibly also of the Black Mauritians, which together make up around 70 % of the population. A political amalgamation between these two groups could seriously threaten the hegemonic position of the Bidhan elite, which occupies most top government and military positions. According to a report by IRA-Mauritania (2014), the Bidhan controls 30 out of 35 ministerial posts, 52 out of 54 prefectural posts, and 12 out of 13 gubernatorial posts. As long as this continues, it will be difficult to talk of a real democratic process in Mauritania.

The last elections were conducted before the completion of the national census that was initiated in 2011. As a consequence, Mauritians without a newly issued identity card were unable to vote. The government was forced to implement certain reforms in 2012 in response to protests about the extraordinary obstacles faced by the Haratin and the Black Mauritians when trying to enrol in the census and register to vote, but there is still a long way to go before there can be a level playing field with equal and full political rights for all citizens independent of social background. Efficient and transparent implementation of the census results once it is completed would certainly be an important step forward. However, this could put an end to the dominant position of the Bidhan. Lurking in the background of this is not only the issue of maintaining political dominance, but also the persistent problem of slavery.

### 3.2 Slavery

Despite the 1981 law that bans slavery in Mauritania, an estimated 150 000 plus Haratin are still believed to live in conditions of servitude. The government's official stance is to deny the existence of slavery in the country, and a 2007 law sets penalties as high as five to ten years in prison for all forms of slavery. However,

this law comes with a requirement that makes it of little use as the victims themselves must file a legal complaint before any prosecution can occur (they cannot be represented by a civil society organisation or an international non-governmental organisation). This situation is not helped by the fact that information about antislavery conventions and even the specific laws of Mauritania concerning it are not disseminated to the public, limiting the people's awareness of their rights. Moreover, were the Haratin that are still bound in servitude aware of their rights, their options would be often limited as their livelihood options are few and most often tied to the family and lineage they are bound to. Freedom is less of an option if it means ending up begging in the streets. Freedom from servitude in Mauritania is a political, racial and ethnic issue, but it is also an economic issue and without economic emancipation for the Haratin, many of them will have few other options than remaining under the control of their 'masters'. There is a national agency tasked with handling issues of slavery, but this agency lacks independence from executive influence, and even if it now has been in existence for over two years, it has not taken any autonomous action on slavery-related practices or crimes.

Rather, civil society groups who do take action on this issue face intimidation and targeted persecution. In November 2014, nine human rights activists, including former presidential candidate Abeid, were arrested after a peaceful protest against slavery in the Senegal River Valley, and the prosecutor recommended five years in prison for the defendants, the seizure of all IRA-Mauritania assets and fines amounting to USD 1 500. Eventually, two anti-slavery activists, the aforementioned Abeid and Brahim Ould Ramdane were sentenced to two years in prison. In May 2016 they were both released. However, in November 2016, the Mauritanian Prosecutor General opposed the decision taken by the Appeal Court of Nouadhibou to release several other activists – several of whom claimed that they had been tortured in prison. This led to firm denunciations from the EU, but also shows how entrenched the problem of slavery and the status of the Haratin is in Mauritania.

### 3.3 Other human rights abuses

Concerning other human rights abuses and the rule of law in general, the government has a heavy influence on the judicial system, and many decisions are based on Sharia law, particularly in family and civil matters, which often results in decisions biased against women. Suspects are often held for long periods of pre-trial detention, and security forces suspected of human rights abuses still seem to operate with a certain degree of impunity. Prison conditions are harsh and torture is still in use, as is the detainment of children both as criminals and together with imprisoned relatives.

The constitution makes Mauritania an Islamic republic: proselytising by non-Muslims is banned, non-Muslims cannot be citizens and those who convert from Islam lose their citizenship. Same-sex relationships are illegal and punishable by death for men, even though executions are currently not practiced. In December 2014, a local blogger, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed M'Kheitar, was sentenced to death for apostasy due to an anonymous post on the website Aqlame where he criticised not only the unequal social order in Mauritania but also the prophet Mohammed. His lawyers have launched an appeal, but the response from President Aziz was to 'take all necessary measures to defend Islam and its prophet' as Islam is 'above all, democracy and freedom'. As expected, the appeal was turned down in November 2016. The best this blogger can now hope for is a lengthy time in prison, as there appears to be a moratorium on carrying out death sentences: no such sentence has been carried out since 1987 (see All-Party Parliamentary Group on International Freedom of Religion and Belief, 2016).

Concerning women, their role is conditioned not only by the importance of Islam and the Sharia, but also by the influence of West African societies that traditionally allow for substantial independence in some social and economic spheres. This varies between urban and rural areas, and is also influenced by wealth as well as religious orientation. Some families are more moderate in their approach to religion and gender relations, others much more conservative. Traditional gender roles have also been challenged by the rapid pace of urbanisation, which has changed old nomadic customs to some degree. Traditionally, the

education of girls took place at home and emphasised housekeeping skills. Some girls would attend Quranic schools, but their training was usually limited to learning verses from the Quran and attaining minimal literacy skills. A mother's responsibility toward her daughter traditionally included instruction in household and family affairs and child rearing. In recent decades, fathers were responsible for financing any formal education for their children, but a father's most important responsibility toward his daughters was to prepare them for marriage, primarily by ensuring their physical attractiveness. This has changed and girl enrolment in school has increased to a primary net enrolment rate of 72%. Divorce is fairly common, even among very traditional villagers. A divorced man suffers no social stigma, but a divorced woman can still become an outcast if her family or her former husband's family criticises her behaviour. Women traditionally cared for their homes and worked in limited agricultural pursuits, but by the 1980s, they began entering professions formerly closed to them, such as commerce, teaching, and a variety of skilled occupations.

Women in Mauritania are not unfree, but some of their freedoms are contested and seen as controversial by some conservative segments of society. It should be kept in mind that even if Mauritania has gone through both urbanisation and a process of modernisation, it is still very much a traditional society. In particular, female genital mutilation is a tradition that is still practiced. It is estimated that about 72% of Mauritanian women have undergone it. However, there are a number of initiatives taken to combat this practice, and not only by modern civil society organisations. In 2010, the Secretary General of the Forum of Islamic Thought in Mauritania, Cheick Ould Zein announced a fatwa signed by 34 imams and Islamic scholars stating that 'Islam is clearly against any action that has negative effects on health, and since doctors in Mauritania unanimously say this practice threatens health, it is therefore clear that Islam is against it' (Priour and Massalatchi, 2010). These initiatives will not have an immediate effect as this tradition is very entrenched in Mauritanian society, but they do testify to an ongoing debate in the country that, if properly facilitated and supported by both political and religious groups, can bring about much needed change.

Even if the situation concerning democracy, freedom and even slavery has improved since Aziz came into power as a civilian president in 2009, the country still has a long way to go before it can be defined as a working democracy with equal rights for all citizens. Of particular importance is the relationship between the still hegemonic Bidhan elite and the Haratin and Black Mauritians, which together constitute the majority of the population. The role of women, gays' and lesbians' human rights, and freedom of speech are other issues of concern, where progress should be made. Real change cannot be expected overnight, but important external stakeholders such as the EU should craft a stronger dialogue on these issues.

## 4 The EU-Mauritania relationship

The political dialogue between the EU and Mauritania is based on economic and trade relations formalised within the framework of the Cotonou Agreement, with the European Development Fund (EDF) as the main financial tool. The cooperation covers several areas from migration, refugees and security to development cooperation and trade relations. Concerning development cooperation, the relationship is defined by the National Indicative Programme 2014-2020, which, among other priorities, points to the crucial role of the agricultural sector in Mauritania.

With regard to security, it is clear that Mauritania has become a key partner for the EU in the fight against terrorism in the Sahel and an important member of the G5 Sahel. This makes Mauritania a privileged diplomatic interlocutor for the EU on security and development issues in the Sahel. The Cotonou Agreement also frames the political dialogue between the EU and Mauritania, as signatory countries to the Agreement have pledged to respect certain conditions regarding human rights, governance and the rule of law. It is therefore also in this context that the EU carries out a political dialogue with the government, with opposition parties and with civil society. This dialogue covers a number of issues of mutual interests to both parties concerning security and development.

The Cotonou Agreement is the main framework for EU-Mauritania relations, but it is not the only one. Mauritania is a signatory to the EPA with 16 West African countries, the ECOWAS and the WAEMU. The EPA with West Africa covers goods and development cooperation and is supposed to be mutually beneficial to both parties. It should open new business opportunities for European investors as well as stimulate investments and develop productive capacity in West Africa. However, as Mauritania is not a member of WAEMU and left ECOWAS in 2000, it can be questioned how important the EPA is for EU-Mauritania relations at the moment, since the main EPA activities are concentrated in ECOWAS and WAEMU states. More important as a framework for EU-Mauritania relations is the latter's membership in the G5 Sahel, which falls within the scope of the EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel (European Union, 2015) and the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Stability and Addressing Root Causes of Irregular Migration and Displaced Persons in Africa. This is seen in the EU's support for the G5 Sahel Security College that is supposed to increase the capacity for border management in the region and strengthen the strategic and organisational capacity of the Secretariat of the G5 Sahel. In this regard, the EU will also collaborate with this group to prevent the death of migrants in the Sahara Desert by improving border management on the Sahel G5 countries' borders to Libya. If the G5 Sahel is able to show some results on the ground, there is every reason to believe that this collaboration will be extended, and this will further underscore the importance of EU-Mauritania relations, bringing another deeper dimension to the EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel.

The current EU cooperation strategies with Mauritania, under the EDF and within the framework of the Cotonou Agreement, focus on political and economic governance, institutional capacity building, regional integration, combatting illegal migration and narcotics trafficking, and counter-terrorism. This is also an integral part of the EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel (see European Union, 2016), which has a particular focus on the three core Sahel states of Mauritania, Mali and Niger. In this strategy, the following four challenges are seen as particularly pertinent:

- Governance, development and conflict resolution,
- Challenges of coordination at the regional political level,
- Security and the rule of law,
- Fight against and prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation.

As this study has highlighted, Mauritania faces a number of challenges in these regards. The economy is too dependent on the world market price of a few raw materials – mainly iron ore and oil – the productivity

in the rural sector is low and this sector is also highly vulnerable to climate change effects. The taxation system must be made more efficient and is in dire need of reform and modernisation. This would create a better revenue base for the state, but only if the state becomes more transparent and the rule of law is improved. With regard to security, Mauritania is also facing considerable challenges, due to its international neighbourhood, but also due to internal dynamics. The latter is particularly related to the situation between the dominant Bidhan, the subordinate Haratin and the Black Mauritians. This hierarchy is not sustainable in the long run and could have destabilising effects as it could lead to the recruitment of young men in particular by violent Islamist insurgencies. It is therefore important to increase the efforts to fight and prevent violent extremism and radicalisation, but such programming must be linked to development efforts and in particular employment and educational opportunities. The EU Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel is a useful tool in this regard, but this strategy could be linked more explicitly to current programmes in the EU-Mauritania relationship.

After the coup in 2008, most parts of the EU-Mauritania cooperation were suspended. This freeze on cooperation lasted until the Dakar Agreement was signed in July 2009. In this agreement, the Mauritanian government promised to initiate a series of reforms regarding human rights, the participation of civil society, dialogue with the opposition and the opening up of audio-visual media. On the basis of this, full EU-Mauritania cooperation was resumed from 2010. Progress has been made since. The country is more open today, but as this study has pointed out, it still has a long way to go. The challenges are numerous and the question could be asked whether EU funding and programming can be used more effectively.

The EDF is the main financial tool of the economic relations between the EU and Mauritania within the framework of the Cotonou Agreement. Each EDF is concluded for a multi-annual period, and the current one – the 11<sup>th</sup> EDF – covers the period from 2014 to 2020. It is intended to support the country in the areas of food security, the rule of law and health care, which are clearly important sectors. Yet, a stronger emphasis on increased resilience to climate change may be absolutely necessary due to the likelihood of severe climate change effects not only on agricultural outputs, but also on cities such as Nouakchott, which could partly disappear under rising sea levels. The main instruments are donations, risk capital and loans to the private sector. The total amount of EU allocations to Mauritania amounted to EUR 195 million for the 11<sup>th</sup> EDF. In addition to the EDF, there are also other projects funded by other EU resources that are supposed to complement EDF financed efforts. These include past projects such as Stabex funds that financed the project to remove wrecks from the Bay of Nouadhibou and Sysmin funds that financed the Nouadhibou ore port. In addition to these past projects, there are various other thematic budget lines relating to food security, local authorities and non-state actors, human rights, migration-asylum issues, and several short-term stability instruments (European External Action Service, 2016). This makes the EU the largest donor to Mauritania and should offer the EU a solid platform for policy dialogue, including on sensitive issues such as the country's race relations. One of the EU's key objectives in Mauritania is to facilitate the emergence of an active and organised civil society. While the EU should not attempt to dictate reforms, the question is whether some of these sensitive issues could be pursued in a stronger way, as stability could be jeopardised by the slow pace of the process of opening up the Mauritanian state and society towards equal opportunities for all citizens.

The new protocol to the EU-Mauritania fisheries agreement is interesting as an item of the cooperation that is of mutual interest to both parties. As already mentioned in the introduction, the recently added protocol builds on the first fisheries agreement between the EU and Mauritania, which was concluded in 1987 as a continuation of the pre-accession arrangements of Spain and Portugal with Mauritania. This arrangement was reshaped as a cooperation agreement in 1996, before it became a fisheries partnership agreement in 2006, renewable for six-year periods, with the current period covering 2012 to 2018. Unlike most current fisheries partnership agreements between the EU and third parties, which focus on tuna, the agreement between EU and Mauritania provides access to a wide range of fish stocks. The protocol defines

the fishing opportunities for EU vessels in Mauritanian waters and the financial contribution to be paid by the EU.

The new protocol was signed and entered into provisional application on 16 November 2015, and it covers a period of four years, up to 15 November 2019. It is the most expensive EU fisheries protocol, with an EU financial contribution of EUR 59,125 million per year, accounting for almost half (44 %) of the total 2016 EU budget for fisheries agreements. The largest part of this amount (EUR 55 million) represents access rights, and the remaining EUR 4,125 million provides support for the Mauritanian fisheries sector.

Under the protocol, the EU fleet is allowed a catch of 261 500 tonnes of non-tuna species per year, for up to 58 vessels. Spain is allocated the main opportunities for shrimps and the entire allowed catch of demersal fish, including the black hake quota. Italy and Portugal hold the remaining shrimp quota. Small pelagic fish, which constitute the bulk of the total catch volume, are allocated mainly to the Netherlands, Lithuania, Latvia and Poland, with the rest distributed between Germany, the UK (until Brexit is completed), Ireland and France. The protocol also provides for tuna fishing opportunities for up to 40 vessels from Spain and France. For the latter, the reference tonnage is 20 000 tonnes per year. The protocol also includes measures to increase transparency: Mauritania is supposed to make public any agreement granting foreign vessels access to its waters. The protocol also grants the EU fleet priority access to available surpluses. In the EU, the new protocol has been welcomed, but there are certain points that could flare up when the agreement is up for renewal in 2019. One such point is the part of the agreement that stipulates that the EU fleet fishing in Mauritanian waters is required to make all landings in Mauritania. This is important for Mauritania, but it has also been argued that this has an adverse effect on employment in the Canary Islands' port of Las Palmas, with the argument that outermost regions should benefit from fisheries partnership agreements with countries in their region (see European Parliament, 2016). These are not interests that can be easily reconciled and an attempt by the EU to change this to the advantage of the Canary Islands would expose the EU to even more criticism for outcompeting local fishermen and preventing the emergence of an indigenous Mauritanian fisheries sector (see Lorenz and Koigi, 2016).

The relationship between the EU and Mauritania has been solid since the collaboration was resumed after the Dakar Agreement, and since then Mauritania has been a trustworthy ally of Europe and the West in the efforts to combat violent extremism and radicalisation in the Sahel. This is evident in the role that Mauritania plays in the G5 Sahel but also in the importance attached to Mauritania in EU's Strategy for Security and Development in the Sahel. However, while Mauritania actively seeks to project an image of state strength and stability under Aziz, this cannot be taken for granted. The country is facing serious challenges of political, economic and environmental nature. Nonetheless, Mauritania has yet to fall down the same slippery slope of livelihood crises, corruption, crime and violent Islamism as neighbouring Mali. However, since this can happen, there is every reason for the EU to utilise all measures possible in order to engage in a critical but constructive dialogue with Mauritania. Here inter-parliamentary relations can also play an important role if they come with concrete discussions about existing EU programming in the country. In particular, there is evidence from other parliamentary groups that the European Parliament's Maghreb Delegation can play an active role as an engaged but critical dialogue partner. It will depend on the willingness and ability of this delegation to cultivate ties of engagement both with the regime and the opposition, as a constructive 'friend' who takes the responsibility of telling national stakeholders' unpleasant things without falling into the trap of naming and shaming. Mauritania is in dire need of reform politically and economically, but such reforms cannot be masterminded, designed and dictated externally. They must come from inside and one important function of inter-parliamentary dialogue and the Maghreb Delegation in particular would be to facilitate this through an engagement built on trust and policy dialogue with local stakeholders.

## 5 Policy recommendations and conclusions

Contemporary Mauritania is a considerably stronger state than some of its Sahel neighbours, but the country is also currently at an important junction. It cannot go back to the decades of authoritarian rule intersected by palace coups where power changed from one hand of the elite to another. Under Aziz, the country has taken enough steps towards democracy to make this almost impossible. However, this transition is still unfinished, and this places the country in a constant state of fragility between the interest of a Bidhan elite that clings to ancient privileges and the discontent of the demographic majority of the Haratin and the Black Mauritians. The country is also facing a number of other challenges related to natural resources, climate change, economic diversification, job creation, good governance and the possibility of an economic crisis leading to increased youth recruitment by violent Islamist insurgencies, all of which are immensely important to address. Yet it is difficult to see how to make progress on this without tackling the biggest issue, that is, the power imbalance between the Bidhan and the two other main groups in the country.

This will not be easy as any move to tackle this will be met with resistance. The only way forward is to convince the current elite that it is also in their own interest to continue the simmering reform process that was initiated with the Dakar Agreement. This will not take place without resistance, backlashes and continuous pressure and dialogue from external stakeholders, and the EU as the single largest donor to Mauritania should play the leading role in this process. This means that the EU should single out key political targets that it should work on in a five years perspective. The policy dialogue should concentrate on a few visible targets, without losing sight of the general development efforts and the need to enhance climate change resilience. Security and the fight against violent extremism is important, but as we see from neighbouring Mali, once the Jihadist genie is out of the bottle, putting it back in it is very difficult. The only way to avoid this taking place in Mauritania is to work on political reform in tandem with economic reform and job creation, particularly for young people. In such an approach, there is a role for many actors from the EU, the European Parliament and the Maghreb Delegation included. It is, however, of uttermost importance that the EU achieves internal cohesion in its various programming and policy dialogue processes. Too often this is not the case for large donors, and one programme and one policy process end up working against each other. The EU as the single largest donor to Mauritania needs to make certain that its own approach is cohesive, but it should also make a deliberate attempt to bring other donors on-board in a sustained, but conflict sensitive campaign towards political reform and improved governance in the country.

Real change cannot be expected overnight, but important external stakeholders such as the EU should craft a stronger dialogue, which should be more deliberately tied to issues that the regime is interested in, such as the fisheries agreement. A stakeholder such as the EU should also be in the position to tell the Aziz government that initiating much needed reforms is not only in the interests of the Haratin and the Black Mauritians, but also in the interest of the Bidhan elite. In the long run, the elite can only be in security in a country with a more proportional representation, otherwise it may find itself in a situation where the combined forces of economic/political inequality and climate change will open up an opportunity for Islamist insurgents to appropriate yet another set of local cleavages and in doing so open up yet another warzone in the Sahel.

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