

Research Paper

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Mauritania's Unfolding Landscape

Elections, Hydrocarbons and Socio-Economic Change



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Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Summary | 2 |
| 1. Introduction | 3 |
| 2. Straddling the Maghreb and West Africa | 6 |
| 3. Mauritania's Societal Complexities | 12 |
| 4. The Resource Economy and the Development Challenge | 17 |
| 5. Personalized Power and Politics in the Abdelaziz Era | 24 |
| 6. Conclusion | 33 |
| Acronyms and Abbreviations | 34 |
| About the Author | 35 |
| Acknowledgments | 36 |

Summary

- President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz will comply with the constitution of Mauritania and stand down at the end of his second elected term of office in mid-2019. His chosen successor Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Ahmed Ould Ghazouani, the defence minister, has been formally endorsed as a candidate by the ruling Union Pour la République (UPR).
- Ghazouani is a longstanding close confidant of the current head of state. Even so, the change of national leader will test the resilience and adaptability of the power structure over which Abdelaziz has presided in a highly personalized manner for more than a decade.
- Elections in September 2018 enlarged and diversified the range of opponents in the National Assembly, municipalities and in new regional councils. The opposition now faces the challenge of presenting voters with a coherent message and alternative electoral choice in the forthcoming presidential contest.
- Mauritania's democratic record is not flawless, and conditions have tightened since the regime's more tolerant early years; strident critics have sometimes been met with a belligerent and repressive state response. However, the country remains a pluralistic polity, where a range of views is expressed and the ruling UPR is open to democratic electoral challenge and, in some constituencies, defeat.
- Weak global prices for iron ore and gold – the country's key mineral exports – have put pressure on public finances in recent years, but the government has managed to contain the impact. From around 2021, revenues will be strengthened by the start of production at the Grand Tortue Ahmeyin (GTA) offshore gas project.
- Major hydrocarbons development represents a significant opportunity for Mauritania to tackle profound societal differences and economic inequality.
- Mauritania is already rebalancing its international relations, most notably through the central role it played in forming the G5 Sahel group of countries. The initiative is complemented by a broader reinforcement of connections with both sub-Saharan and Gulf Arab countries. Abdelaziz has positioned himself as a supportive partner of the current Saudi Arabian leadership and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).
- The country's diplomatic and economic reorientation towards West Africa is explicitly linked to the government's attempts to tackle the poverty, unemployment and social frustrations that fuel the appeal of extremist ideology and jihadist recruitment across the Sahel; the southeast, one of Mauritania's most disadvantaged areas; and unstable central regions of Mali.

1. Introduction

Mauritania stands at the threshold of a crucial political change. In November 2018, President Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz clearly and publicly confirmed his intention to stand down at the end of his second elected term of office – in mid-2019 – as the constitution requires. This had been in doubt, amid widespread speculation that he might attempt to change the rules and seek a further five-year mandate. The current regime has selected the defence minister, Mohamed Cheikh Ould Mohamed Ahmed Ould Ghazouani, to be its candidate in the 2019 presidential election.

The prospect of electing a new head of state is a major test for the political and governing system over which Abdelaziz has presided in a highly personalized manner for a decade. Abdelaziz has led a pluralistic political system in which opposition parties and independent civil society operate openly, although his government's human rights record has flaws. The country's media are subjected to some regime pressure but retain substantial freedom. Within government, ministers have a fair degree of latitude to manage technical policy issues.

However, key decisions have been concentrated in the hands of Abdelaziz and his closest confidants; he has made the crucial strategic choices in foreign and regional policy, security and political development. His departure will therefore pose a real leadership challenge in the exercise of power and his successor will have a large space to fill. Beyond his second term, Abdelaziz has declared an intention to remain in the country, active in politics, and has said he could even stand for the presidency again in future. This raises the possibility that he may remain a powerful influence behind the formal authority of the next president – who will almost certainly be his close confidant and chosen successor, Ghazouani.

Even so, when Abdelaziz stands down, this will be a moment of powerful symbolism. It will align Mauritania with the norm of democratic alternation in office that is now prevalent in West Africa and place the country among the small minority of Arab states where such constitutional transfers of power take place. The country's democratic record is certainly not flawless, and conditions have tightened since the regime's more tolerant early years. Strident critics have sometimes been met with a bullying and repressive state response and the international community has identified cases of politically motivated detention. Furthermore, opponents to the regime complain that the management of elections is far from impartial. Even so, Mauritania can be described as a pluralistic polity, where a range of views is openly expressed and candidates of the ruling Union Pour la République (UPR) party are open to democratic electoral challenge, and occasional defeat.

Abdelaziz's model of power has had to adjust to severe economic circumstances over the past four years, following the slump in world prices for iron ore and gold, the country's key mineral exports. Real GDP growth sank to just 0.4 per cent in 2015 before recovering the next year to 1.8 per cent, which, with a population rising by 2.9 per cent a year, meant a contraction in per capita economic output.¹ By tightening up public sector procurement and the hiring of public servants, Abdelaziz has

¹ IMF (no date), Islamic Republic of Mauritania, country profile, <https://www.imf.org/en/Countries/MRT> (accessed 15 Feb. 2019); United Nations Population Fund (2018), *State of World Population 2018*, https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/UNFPA_PUB_2018_EN_SWP.pdf (accessed 15 Feb. 2019).

managed to navigate this situation. The regime appears to have sustained its political base among much of the Maure population, a significant proportion of rural Haratines, and even among some rural Afro-Mauritanians, despite their sense of grievance over perceived neglect or discrimination.² However, big issues lie ahead.

The social and political context in which choices must be made is a complex one, and no path ahead is obvious or straightforward. The actions of political leaders and wider society during this critical period could have large and far-reaching consequences in setting the course for the country's evolution.

Domestic policy choices are also linked to the evolution of Mauritania's relationships with its neighbours – the country bridges and blends sub-Saharan and Maghreb identities.

Gradually Mauritania is reshaping its role in the economic and security contexts of West and North Africa. Relationships with Morocco and Algeria will always be essential and important, albeit sometimes tense. The bigger strategic question, however, is to what extent should Mauritania pursue full regional integration with its West African neighbours, with whom the country is already deepening its partnerships.

Food security and rural development are big challenges, and there is evidence that Mauritania could learn from the more effective policies of other Sahel countries that are actually poorer.³ Agriculture is linked to the hugely sensitive questions of land tenure in the south of the country and the citizenship status of the southern Afro-Mauritanian population. Strategic decisions over economic development cannot be long postponed. Production is due to start at the Grand Tortue Ahmeyin (GTA) gas field in 2021, or soon after,⁴ but the government has yet to outline a clear vision for the use of the revenues this will produce or the spin-off opportunities the project could generate. Development strategy is also at a possible turning point. After agreeing a new three-year programme of support, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has lobbied strongly for a shift in public expenditure towards infrastructure and social priorities, particularly education.

The combination of increased revenues and external pressure for a rebalancing of expenditure priorities may also create the conditions for a rethink of the response to difficult social and economic questions. In particular, extra resources may allow the government to make progress in tackling persistent allegations of discrimination and neglect from sections of the population, while also continuing to cater for its traditional constituency of supporters. Elections for newly created regional councils were held in September 2018 and these bodies could become a vehicle for defusing grievances at the local level – if they are granted meaningful freedom of action and significant budgets of their own, which is far from certain. But, if deprived of serious authority and resources, the new councils could prove to be no more than a vehicle for political and network patronage rather than a genuine attempt at decentralization.

² Author interviews, Nouakchott and southern Mauritania, January and October 2018.

³ Author interviews and field research 2016–18 in Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and northern Nigeria.

⁴ BP (2016), 'BP agrees deal with Kosmos Energy to partner on world-class discoveries in Mauritania and Senegal and cooperate on future exploration', 19 December 2016, <https://www.bp.com/en/global/corporate/news-and-insights/press-releases/bp-agrees-deal-with-kosmos-energy.html> (accessed 15 Feb. 2019).

The path of Mauritania's political and economic development, and its foreign policy, will therefore be hugely influenced by the government's decisions over the next five years. This period will test the strength and the adaptability of the regime to maintain authority and the smooth operation of government amid an evolving political environment, in which some minor pro-government parties are carving out greater factional autonomy while the opposition is broadening its parliamentary base. The coming months will also be a test for the opposition, to prepare for the presidential election and its aftermath, given the near certainty of victory for the government candidate, Ghazouani. In deciding to end their longstanding boycott of elections under the current regime and to take part in the September 2018 legislative, local and regional polls, the more radical opposition parties have shown that they can adapt to changing political times. But the various elements of the opposition now must work out how to make the most of the minority roles that they have secured in the National Assembly as well as in regional and municipal councils – and how to develop a coherent campaign programme to underpin a worthwhile challenge in the 2019 presidential contest.

2. Straddling the Maghreb and West Africa

Mauritania's location between the Maghreb and West Africa is reflected in its history, social make-up, natural environment, patterns of settlement and economic life. The sand and gravel of the Sahara Desert blend into the scattered scrub, sparse grazing and carefully tended plots of Sahelian subsistence farmers. Moorish Arab and sub-Saharan African cultures meet and overlap. Political influences, diplomatic networks and trading ties extend north and south. Historic caravan routes connected oases northwards and to the south, to both the Maghreb and the Niger and Senegal river valleys. Today the coastal highway is an axis for Moroccan trade with Senegal, while the east-west 'Route de l'Espoir' links the capital, Nouakchott, to Mali and Burkina Faso. This diversity of cultural and socio-economic connections is reflected in the framework of Mauritania's regional partnerships.

More broadly, the country's international relations are structured around three key axes: the Arab world, West Africa and the wider continent, and the West (particularly France and the European Union).

Arab orientation

Mauritania's relationships with the Arab world and its Maghreb neighbours are important, but in some respects complex and awkward to manage. Mauritania was a founder member of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975, which reflects ties developed during the colonial era, when it was ruled as part of French West Africa. Yet the Arab dimension of the country's identity has remained hugely important. Successive regimes have sought to affirm it through membership of the Arab League, which it joined in 1973, and the cultivation of links with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, which are important sources of development assistance. (Most recently, Mauritania hosted the Arab League summit for the first time in 2016.)

In the late 1980s, Arab nationalist thinkers in the Ba'athist and Nasserist tradition were increasingly influential in shaping the outlook of the authoritarian regime of President Maaouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, who was in power from 1984 to 2005. This led to Mauritania joining other North African states in forming the Arab Maghreb Union (AMU) in 1989. The enduring rift between Morocco and Algeria repeatedly frustrated hopes that the AMU might evolve into an integrated regional economic block, but despite this the Taya regime opted to pull out of ECOWAS in 2000 and to focus on the union. However, relationships with Arab countries have been complicated by several factors. During the Gulf War that followed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, Mauritania opted to support the former, which risked alienating the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council. And, in 1999, Taya established diplomatic relations with Israel, a position that may not initially have been hugely controversial but became progressively more awkward as the deadlock in the Israeli-Palestinian dispute deepened. In 2009, just months after taking power, Abdelaziz suspended these diplomatic relations and within weeks the Israeli embassy in Nouakchott had closed.

Mauritania's management of relations with its Maghreb neighbours, Morocco and Algeria, has also proved delicate, largely because these two countries hold conflicting positions over Western Sahara.

When Spain abandoned colonial rule of the territory in 1975, Mauritania took up Morocco's invitation to take over the southern third of Western Sahara, with which it has a long frontier. But it soon struggled to cope with attacks by the Polisario Front independence movement and was forced to agree a peace settlement with the group and abandon its occupation in 1979. Two years later Mauritania went on to recognize the Front Polisario's Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. But Morocco was not prepared to cede to the independence movement, opting instead to take over the areas that Mauritania had abandoned. This affair has complicated the two countries' relationship ever since. They maintain functional working ties, and travellers and trade move fairly freely across Mauritania's northwest border with the Moroccan-ruled Saharan territory. But for several years Morocco allowed Mohamed Ould Bouamatou, a prominent businessman and opponent of the Abdelaziz regime, to reside in Rabat and relations remain prickly. Mauritania's relations with Algeria are easier but also distant. It was only in August 2018 that the two countries opened an official border crossing on their frontier in the Sahara Desert.

The Arab world, particularly the Gulf states, is a diplomatic priority and a valuable source of development funding for Mauritania. Although for many Arab countries, Mauritania is a distant and marginal player. However, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar and Kuwait take a more positive view, in part because of respect for Mauritania's desert traditions and Islamic scholarship. The Saudis and Emiratis have also been keen to align themselves with the G5 Sahel states' fight against jihadist terrorism, pledging €100 million and €30 million, respectively, for the G5 joint military force.⁵ Despite a spat over old debts, the Emir of Kuwait attended the 2016 Arab summit in Nouakchott, while the UAE is funding a raft of projects, including a new military academy in Nouakchott for the G5 Sahel countries. The Saudi axis has become particularly important for President Abdelaziz, particularly since the accession of King Salman in 2015. The Kingdom appreciated Abdelaziz's public offer of troops to help ease the strain imposed by the war against the Houthi rebels in Yemen – even though it seems the troops were not, ultimately, despatched, because of domestic Mauritanian unease over this alliance. Abdelaziz has been a supportive ally for Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman in recent controversies – breaking relations with Qatar, endorsing Riyadh's tough response to Canadian government concern over the harsh treatment of the blogger Raif Badawi and backing the Saudi defensive stance after the October 2018 killing of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. As a gesture of thanks, Crown Prince Mohamed Bin Salman visited Nouakchott in December 2018, signing new development accords; and in January 2019 parliament authorized an agreement on cooperation with Riyadh in fighting terrorism, organized crime and trafficking.

Although ties with Arab countries are highly valued, they can be difficult to manage. The Mauritanian opposition has criticized the government security accord with Saudi Arabia, because of the latter's poor record on human rights. Meanwhile, trade with Morocco is important but the political relationship is fractious.

⁵ Author interviews, Nouakchott and other Sahel capitals, Paris and Brussels, 2017–18.

West African reconnection

It is against this background that, over recent years, President Abdelaziz has undertaken a strategic rethink, placing a renewed focus on West African partnerships. The Maghreb connection is not being abandoned, but links with the Sahel and ECOWAS are increasingly the priority. Among senior advisers to the current government, the Taya regime's decision to focus on the Maghreb is widely seen as a mistake. Faced with the relative stagnation of the AMU, Abdelaziz has sought to reinvigorate relations with West African neighbours. He was the prime mover in the formation of the G5 Sahel grouping (bringing together Chad, Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania and Niger) in 2014 and then in 2017 the government negotiated re-entry into the trading and economic structures of ECOWAS.⁶

Mauritania is now attached to two regions, albeit with constraints on the roles it plays in both. Looking north, this is more a consequence of the AMU's chronic paralysis, although the often-testy nature of the relationship with Morocco is an additional complicating factor. By contrast, the extent of integration to the south and east has been a matter of proactive strategic choice by Abdelaziz.

The government hopes that integration with West African economies will bolster trade flows along the Route de l'Espoir – the highway from the coast to the remote southeast – and establish Nouakchott as a trade gateway for Mali and even Burkina Faso. Full integration into the ECOWAS economic space will bring a gradual harmonization of Mauritania's tariff regime with that of the bloc, reducing the costs and delays entailed in formal cross-border trade. This could boost exports of dates and fish, and the regional role of Nouakchott as a gateway port for landlocked regions of the Sahel.⁷ Until now, the differences in tariffs and trade rules have incentivized informal trade, smuggling and corruption, which can be sources of revenue for militant groups. Participation in the ECOWAS trade regime should both boost economic activity and employment in general and encourage more traders to operate on a transparent formal basis.

This new policy is also explicitly linked to the government's belief that it is necessary to tackle the poverty, unemployment and social frustrations that fuel the appeal of extremist ideology and jihadist recruitment across the Sahel. The southeast is one of Mauritania's most isolated and disadvantaged regions, and it neighbours the highly unstable and violent central regions of Mali. The government hopes that increased trade flows along the Route de l'Espoir will stimulate local commerce and employment through legitimate channels and reduce the scope for smuggling and corruption in border regions.

But although President Abdelaziz opted to pursue re-entry into the trading and economic structures of ECOWAS, he chose to hold back from a return to full membership for two reasons.

This enabled him to keep Mauritania out of the provision for the free movement of citizens across the ECOWAS region and allowed the government to continue to regulate migration to and from West African neighbours through agreements with individual countries. Mauritania has an accord with Senegal for the free movement of the nationals of both states,⁸ but it does not extend this right

⁶ Permanent Secretariat of the G5 Sahel (2014), 'Sommet extraordinaire des Chefs d'Etat du G5 Sahel, le 19 décembre 2014, Nouakchott, Mauritanie', [Extraordinary Summit of Heads of States of the G5 Sahel, 19 December 2014, Nouakchott, Mauritania], <https://www.g5sahel.org/index.php/documentations/publications/75-sommet-extraordinaire-des-chefs-d-etat-du-g5-sahel-le-19-decembre-2014-nouakchott-mauritanie> (accessed 15 Jan. 2019).

⁷ Author interviews, Nouakchott, 2018; field research on West African trade liberalization, 2015 and 2017.

⁸ Author interviews, Senegalese travellers and traders, northern Senegal, 2018.

to people from most other West African nations. (Citizens of Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Mali and Niger can enter Mauritania without a visa – but only if they have a passport.)

Moreover, full membership of ECOWAS would also have brought Mauritania within the scope of the organization's declared agenda for consolidating multiparty democracy across West Africa, which includes a degree of peer scrutiny and the acceptance of mediation by fellow member states at times of tension or crisis. For the Nouakchott regime, domestic political developments are a purely internal sovereign matter. By opting out of full ECOWAS membership, therefore, Abdelaziz left himself a degree of flexibility to choose his country's path, which is not so readily available to his West African counterparts. As Mauritania remains outside the political structures of ECOWAS, and the bloc's commitment to the consolidation of democratic structures, the regime is not exposed to pressure from its West African neighbours over internal governance matters. In Togo, an ECOWAS member, the bloc has attempted to mediate a compromise agreement between government and the opposition on the terms of constitutional reform. By contrast, in Mauritania the evolution of politics and the constitutional framework has been a purely domestic affair, and that has favoured the president, as the dominant actor in setting the political agenda.

Mauritania fully participates in the G5 – a structure that does not engage with the internal political conditions of member states. Its creation was primarily motivated by the need to develop a more coordinated regional approach to tackling jihadist terrorist groups and trafficking gangs across the Sahel, and its initial declared priority was the promotion of regional economic projects to tackle the social pressures that risk fuelling youth disenchantment and the appeal of radical ideology. Subsequently, the creation of a coordinated security response has since moved to the top of the agenda, with the creation of a 5,000-strong joint military force in 2017–18;⁹ and in late 2018 the G5 opened a military staff college in Nouakchott. But in December 2018 renewed attention was also given to development, with donors gathering in Nouakchott to pledge €2.4 billion for some 40 priority regional projects distributed across the G5 countries.¹⁰

Mauritania is also strengthening its engagement with Africa as a whole, which has been positively received. This may reassure the regime that its re-orientation towards the sub-Saharan world is worthwhile. When Mauritania hosted the Arab League summit in 2016, only six out of the 22 heads of state attended. This reminded the country that it is viewed as peripheral by much of the Arab world. By contrast, Africa has proved to be fruitful diplomatic terrain. Abdelaziz was elected to the rotating chairmanship of the African Union for 2014, while 24 heads of state and five heads of government came to Nouakchott in July 2018 for the organization's summit, the first to be hosted by Mauritania. The response to Abdelaziz's African overtures from the rest of the continent could gradually strengthen the priority that the government accords to engagement with the sub-Saharan world.

However, relationships with Mauritania's closest West African neighbours – Mali and Senegal – are complex and have been marked by periods of severe tension and mistrust, even in the recent past. This is despite the fact that they collaborate closely, particularly in the Organisation pour la mise en

⁹ Permanent Secretariat of the G5 Sahel (2017), 'Résolution relative à la création d'une force conjointe du G5 Sahel' [Resolution relating to the creation of joint force of the G5 Sahel], 6 February 2017, <https://www.g5sahel.org/index.php/documentations/publications/1129-resolution> (accessed 15 Jan. 2019).

¹⁰ Franceinfo (2018), 'Le G5 Sahel promet 2,4 milliards d'euros d'aides pour endiguer les violences djihadistes' [G5 Sahel – €2.4 billion to curb jihadist violence], https://www.francetvinfo.fr/monde/afrique/politique-africaine/g5-sahel-2-4-milliards-d-euros-pour-endiguer-les-violences-djihadistes-grace-au-developpement_3089053.html (accessed 14 Mar. 2019).

valeur du fleuve Sénégal (OMVS), which manages water and hydroelectric resources in the Senegal River basin and also includes Guinea as a member. Moreover, Mauritania and Senegal are collaborating closely in setting up a framework for the development of the GTA gas field, which sits astride their maritime border.¹¹ The development of the G5 Sahel framework since 2014 has also helped to build a fresh relationship of trust with other states in the region, particularly Mali.

Causes of tension in cross-border relations have often related to Mauritania's complex ethnic and social make-up as well as the distribution of wealth and power within the country – and how these factors are viewed by governments and publics in West African countries. Mistrust and resentment were exacerbated by the Taya regime's decision in 1989 to expel thousands of Afro-Mauritanians to Mali and Senegal. Although many were later allowed to return, they faced difficulties in regaining land and citizenship rights and this fostered a profoundly negative perception of Mauritania's ruling elite among many West Africans. Underlying suspicion has continued to influence attitudes towards Mauritania, even concerning more recent, essentially unrelated bilateral issues.

For example, when the United Nations peacekeeping force in Mali was seeking troop contributions in 2013, Mauritania's offer was rejected because the Malian government did not trust its troops. Some even suspected that Nouakchott had reached a tacit understanding with jihadist groups to turn a blind eye to the movement of their fighters, providing Mauritania's territory was not attacked. But mistrust is present on both sides and the Mauritanian military has sometimes felt that joint anti-terrorism operations suffer from a lack of commitment from its Malian counterpart.

While relations with Senegal have been complicated by the consequences of the 1989 expulsions and more recently by Mauritania's treatment of Senegalese fishermen (see below), ties between the two countries run deep. President Abdelaziz, for instance, was born in Senegal, and he and President Macky Sall have made strenuous efforts to contain the impact of underlying popular mistrust and to focus on the pragmatic negotiation of issues such as fishing rights and the development of the GTA gas deposit.

Western partnerships

In the West, France is Mauritania's main diplomatic and security partner, training the air force and strongly supporting the G5 joint military force. Mauritania has been pushing for this force to be funded on a long-term basis, a view shared by President Emmanuel Macron.¹² (The United States also provides military aid.) However, political relations remain cautious, reflecting French uncertainty over the constitutional and political choices that lie ahead for the country. Macron visited Nouakchott in July 2018 for a tactfully timed meeting with G5 leaders in the margins of the African Union summit. A purely bilateral visit could have provoked accusations that he was

¹¹ Author interviews, government officials, Mauritania and Senegal, 2018, and private-sector energy sources 2017 and 2018.

¹² United Nations Security Council (2017), 'Pour appuyer la Force conjointe des États du G5 Sahel, le Conseil de sécurité propose un accord technique avec l'ONU et l'Union européenne, via la MINUSMA', [To support the joint force of the states of the G5 Sahel, the Security Council proposes a technical agreement with the UN and the EU, via MINUSMA], 8 December 2017, <https://www.un.org/press/fr/2017/cs13112.doc.htm> (accessed 15 Jan. 2019); Author interviews, French officials, analysts, expert media Paris, 2017–18.

signalling support for Abdelaziz and the government in the run-up to the September elections and the 2019 presidential election.

Mauritania's mineral and hydrocarbon resources have attracted Canadian and British investment partners – and the UK is upgrading its hitherto slender diplomatic representation in Nouakchott to a full status embassy. Meanwhile, China has become a major buyer of Mauritanian iron ore. Although the country's rich fisheries have drawn a wide range of operators, including those from China and Russia, the central foundation of industrial fishing activity remains the fisheries agreement with the EU, which is renegotiated and renewed on a rolling basis.¹³ Mauritania's waters are critically important for Spanish boats in particular, while the government uses the agreement as a benchmark for labour conditions and rules on fish-stocks conservation across the industry. Meanwhile, the EU institutions as well as member states such as Germany and France, are key providers of development assistance. The importance of relations with the EU has been further reinforced by the latter's strong support for the development of the G5.

¹³ European Commission (2017), 'Rapport de la Réunion annuelle du Comité Scientifique Conjoint relatif à l'Accord de pêche signé entre la République islamique de Mauritanie et l'Union européenne' [Report of the annual meeting of the scientific committee on the fisheries agreement between the Islamic Republic of Mauritania and the European Union], https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/sites/fisheries/files/report-jsc-mauritania-2017-10_fr.pdf (accessed 15 Jan. 2019); European Commission (undated), 'Mauritania: Fisheries partnership agreement', <https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/cfp/international/agreements/mauritania> (accessed 15 Jan. 2019).

3. Mauritania's Societal Complexities

Across the Sahara and the Sahel, the cultural roots of the populations reflect the region's connections to both the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa. In Mauritania the balance between ethnic groups, and the distribution of political and social influence, differs from that in countries such as Mali and Niger, where the Tuareg and Arab communities, however important in northern regions, represent a small share of the population. By contrast, Mauritania is genuinely a country of plural heritage including *Beidane* Arabs, the *Haratine* descendants of slaves and the Afro-Mauritanian settled populations of the agricultural south. Identity remains a significant and at times subtle influence, facilitated through a complex caste system.

Traditionally, it has been the light-skinned Beidanes who predominate in social authority and political power, while the legacy of French colonial rule saw many educated Afro-Mauritanians occupy administrative and technical positions. The Haratine have benefitted from a process of gradual social and economic emancipation, but campaigners for the community argue that they still suffer serious disadvantages. Census data do not record ethnicity. Government statements have generally reported the population to be majority *Maure* – meaning speakers of Hassaniya Arabic – and thus using the term to encompass both Beidanes and Haratines. But the term *Maure* is sometimes taken to refer only to Beidane and many, but not all, Haratine view themselves as quite distinct from the Beidane (who are sometimes also referred to as *Maures blancs* – ‘white Maures’). Meanwhile, Afro-Mauritanians are mainly of Peul-Toucouleur (*Halpulaaren*), Soninké and Wolof ethnicity. In 2014, the French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless People (OFPRA) cited a local estimate of the population as 30 per cent Beidane, 22 per cent Afro-Mauritanian and 48 per cent Haratine, which is broadly in line with other estimates.¹⁴ However, a number of experts say that, in the absence of a proper census of ethnicity, all such estimates must be treated as speculation.

Calculation of the population breakdown is complicated by the legacy of the events of 1989, when the Taya regime expelled tens of thousands of Afro-Mauritanians to Senegal and Mali. Many have since returned, but many have struggled to secure access to full citizenship and there have been complaints that officials have frequently hampered efforts to recover their lost land.

Moreover, the authorities have never properly accepted responsibility for the abuses committed in the past – particularly as a 1993 amnesty law means that the individuals responsible cannot be legally called to account. In mid-2018, Afro-Mauritanian campaigners took advantage of the presence of many sub-Saharan heads of state in Nouakchott for the African Union summit, calling on them to pressure the government to establish a truth and reconciliation commission to address past human rights failings. The abolition of the amnesty law has also been a longstanding demand of some opposition groups and human rights organizations.¹⁵

¹⁴ OFPRA (2014), *Rapport de mission en République Islamique de Mauritanie* [Islamic Republic of Mauritania Mission Report], https://www.ofpra.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rapport_de_mission_en_mauritanie_2014.pdf

¹⁵ For example, Forum pour la lutte contre l'impunité et l'injustice en Mauritanie [Forum for the fight against impunity and injustice in Mauritania], <http://fliim90.canalblog.com/archives/2012/12/22/25970745.html> (accessed 15 Jan. 2019).

While questions of identity are significant in debates over Mauritania's political and development challenges, the issues remain complex¹⁶ and cannot be simplistically translated into patterns of political allegiance or voting. For example, many Haratine in rural areas remain socially and economically subservient to the Maure families that once owned their slave forebears and they consequently tend to follow the lead of local elites in voting for the governing UPR party. And even in some predominantly Afro-Mauritanian southern farming areas, the party plays a major role in local politics, even as prominent local members complain that their communities are neglected by the government.

The influence of identity and social hierarchy is also overlaid by other powerful social influences and long-term trends, of which probably the most important is urbanization. Campaigns for Haratine rights gain more traction in poor districts of Nouakchott than in rural areas. The greater degree of political awareness around these issues may have been a reason behind the fact that the Sebkha district of Nouakchott, which has a mainly Afro-Mauritanian population, voted against the government constitutional reforms in the 2017 referendum, while in the 2018 municipal elections an opposition coalition won control of the capital's Arafat municipality and was only narrowly defeated by the governing UPR in the El Mina municipality of Nouakchott.

Nomadic roots

Historically, the territory that constitutes modern Mauritania was a desert society. Ancient oasis towns such as Chinguetti and Ouadâne were part of a trans-Sahara network of trade and scholarship that stretched from Fes to Timbuktu. Most of the population was nomadic. Even when France eventually imposed control in 1902–03, its forces were confined to a few military outposts and the thin strip of settled farming communities in the Senegal River valley in the south. French authorities governed Mauritania from St Louis, over the border in Senegal, which they regarded as a far more important territory. At independence in 1960 the site for the new capital, Nouakchott, was selected because this was the point on the coast where the Sahara and the less thinly settled Sahelian belt converge.

At that stage a large majority of the population were still nomads. Today the overwhelming majority of the 4.2 million inhabitants live in towns and Nouakchott is home to perhaps one-third of the population. Despite this huge social change, the nomad desert inheritance remains a powerful influence. This is evident, for example, in the tents and small concrete family pavilions designed to look like tents that can be seen on the fringes of many settlements. Nomad culture even shapes attitudes to economic activity. Mauritians mostly look inland, towards the desert or farming areas, and relatively few have become involved in fishing or maritime trade, a role that is largely left to their neighbours from Senegal (see below). Although it is located on the coast, and has a port, Nouakchott is a city laid out with its back turned to the sea.

Among the Maures, tribal loyalties are a significant influence on political life, underpinning the exercise of power. Former president Taya (now exiled in Qatar) was from the Smasside tribe, noted for its spiritual (*maraboutique*) connections; Abdelaziz is from the Ouled Bousbah tribe, which has

¹⁶ De Chasse, F. (1979), 'L'évolution des structures sociales en Mauritanie de la colonisation à nos jours' [The evolution of social structures in Mauritania from colonization to today], in *Introduction à la Mauritanie*, Institut de recherches et d'études sur le monde arabe et musulman, CNRS/Aix Marseille Université.

strong commercial traditions. Family, tribe and political patronage networks are a powerful influence over government and public-service appointments as well as the control of sections of the administration. As a result, some public contracts are awarded through such connections rather than open competitive tender.

The Beidane and Afro-Mauritanian communities are stratified, with class structures that influence access to assets, economic opportunity and social status. This hampers the prospects for the social and economic emancipation of the Haratine. Slavery has long been formally abolished and the Haratine have the legal right to make their own choices – but large numbers of them remain trapped in situations of socio-economic dependence or even, in some cases, subjugation, without the personal sense of freedom, confidence or resources that would allow them to take more control over their lives. The military is sometimes perceived as more integrated. Its commanders argue that when it comes to matters of national security and trust among colleagues in situations of risk, soldiers cannot afford to let their effectiveness or security become hidebound by social tradition; many lower ranking members of the forces are Haratine.

This social context overlays the traditional contrast between the desert north and the agricultural far south – where these complex social factors are also an influence on access to land.

Islam

In contrast to its southern neighbours, Mauritania is an explicitly Islamic republic.¹⁷ The constitution requires all citizens to be Muslim and apostasy can be punished by death. But attitudes towards foreigners of other faiths are tolerant and there is a small Catholic cathedral in central Nouakchott. Essentially the entire indigenous population adheres to Islam, which is a powerful influence on social mores, the legal system and intellectual life. Effective French colonial rule, which lasted barely half a century and was largely indirect beyond the Senegal River valley, left indigenous religious traditions more or less untouched.

Mauritania has a rich Islamic history. Ancient oasis towns such as Chinguetti were centres of learning, part of the wider pattern of Islamic scholarship that extended across the Sahara, connecting North Africa to cities such as Timbuktu. Mauritanian Islam belongs to the Malekite strand of the faith. It is socially conservative but moderate, supportive of stability and eschewing an ideological view of the world, illustrated by the fact that in 1995 Mauritania became one of the few Arab League member states to establish diplomatic relations with Israel. An important role is played by Sufi brotherhoods, such as the Tijaniyya and Khadria, which prioritize spiritual matters. The strength of traditional attitudes has rendered Mauritania relatively resistant to radical ideology or to the purist Izala interpretation of the faith that is influential in parts of northern Nigeria – and equally unreceptive to Ba'athist secular Arab nationalism. But the Tabligh movement, promoting a simple pietist interpretation of the faith, has a presence in the country. Furthermore, many young Mauritians study in the Gulf states, which has helped the spread of Wahabi fundamentalist ideas from Saudi Arabia.

¹⁷ Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania (1991), <http://extwprlegs1.fao.org/docs/pdf/mau135226F.pdf> (accessed 15 Feb. 2019).

There is a strong indigenous tradition of Islamic education¹⁸ and Mauritanian *ulemas* (preachers) have worked hard to counter any infiltration of extremist thinking. But in today's interconnected world, Mauritania could not remain untouched and a significant number of individuals were drawn into jihadism. Mahfouz Ould Al-Walid (Abu Hafs al-Mauritani), from the southern town of Rosso, went to fight in Afghanistan and became a member of Osama Bin Laden's inner circle. By the mid-2000s the government was seriously concerned about the threat posed by Islamist militant violence at home. Some young men joined extremist groups and on 4 June 2005 militants crossed the desert border from Algeria to attack an isolated army base at Lemgheity in the far north-east, reportedly leaving 15 soldiers dead. Subsequently there were reports that other attack plots had been uncovered. In northern Mali, the El Forkan *katiba* (fighting group), part of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, consists entirely of Mauritanian recruits. The Taya regime's resort to arbitrary arrests and torture appears to have been counter-productive and the short-lived democratic administration of Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi (2007–08) was then deposed by Abdelaziz, on the grounds of its supposed ineffectiveness in countering the threat from jihadist extremism.

The current regime has pursued a serious and broad approach that seeks to tackle the problem from several angles – security, religious and socio-economic. The military has been re-equipped and retrained on a much more professional basis, with a specialist anti-terrorist patrol force. Militants are in jail and some high-profile fugitives have been extradited back to Mauritania: two gunmen thought responsible for the 2007 murder of four French tourists in the Sahara were captured in Guinea-Bissau and flown to Nouakchott and in 2016 the Guinea authorities detained Saleck Ould Cheikh, a prominent jihadist. There has also been a serious effort to tighten up the oversight of preaching and to reassert the promotion of indigenous moderate Malekite Islam, and even to change attitudes among imprisoned militants, including in one notable case through a televised theology debate. Meanwhile, in isolated and economically depressed provincial areas the government has built new settlements with good infrastructure and public services to tackle social deprivation and present the state in a positive light.

The strategy seems to have produced results, with few cases of militant activity reported in recent years. However, the government recently stepped up surveillance of preaching in Nouakchott, where an imam at the Dar Naim mosque was recently dismissed for sermons that promoted extremist ideology and violence.¹⁹ In September 2018, the authorities shut down the Arafat school for training *ulemas* that had been established by the preacher Mohamed el Hassen Ould Dedew – who comes from a highly respected family – on the alleged grounds that its strict ideology was a form of radicalism.

The government also remains wary of political Islam, in the shape of the Islamist party Tawassoul, despite the latter's insistence that it espouses purely democratic politics, in a similar vein to Ennahdha in Tunisia or the Parti de Justice et Développement (PJD) in Morocco. With active social programmes, Tawassoul is particularly popular among urban youth and maintained its position as

¹⁸ Fortier, C. (2003), "Une pédagogie coranique": Modes de transmission des savoirs islamiques (Mauritanie) ["Koranic Education": Methods for Transmitting Islamic Knowledge (Mauritania)], *Cahier d'études africaines*, 169–170(3): pp. 235–260. <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesafriaines/198>.

¹⁹ RFI (2018), 'Mauritanie: le gouvernement accentue la surveillance des mosquées', 31 May 2018, <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20180531-mauritanie-le-gouvernement-accentue-surveillance-mosquees> (accessed 15 Jan. 2019).

the strongest opposition group in the September parliamentary elections. In September 2018 it was the target of a fierce public attack by the president.²⁰

²⁰ Author interviews, political actors, Nouakchott 2018.

4. The Resource Economy and the Development Challenge

Mauritania's political challenges and social complexity should be understood in the context of its economic model and the development issues with which it wrestles. All Sahelian countries present a contrast between an export sector based largely on industrial minerals or hydrocarbons extraction and a fragile rural economy built around smallholder agriculture and pastoralism that is routinely exposed to the risk of drought and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Everywhere there is steady migration to the major cities, but in most countries of the region the majority of the population remains in rural areas. However, since independence the shift in population from widespread reliance on nomadic pastoralism to an urban life has been much greater in Mauritania. The share of the population that is reliant on arable agriculture is much smaller than in other G5 countries. Although Mauritania's population is growing less rapidly than in neighbouring West African states, the country is nevertheless in urgent need of new sources of livelihood, particularly for young people, and the pastoral economy – a key source of rural livelihoods – is under severe pressure.²¹

Agriculture is not a significant source of export income, although there is a growing market for gum arabic harvested from acacia trees, and agriculture has been developed on a large commercial scale in the lower reaches of the Senegal River valley around the town of Rosso.²² By contrast, the export of mineral resources has played a major role in the economy since the early post-independence era. For many years iron ore has been a mainstay of export earnings. In recent years copper and gold have also made an important contribution, supplemented with small volumes of oil. The development of the GTA gas field, shared with Senegal, will also establish Mauritania as a major hydrocarbons producer. Catches from the country's rich offshore fishing waters, harvested mainly by foreign commercial vessels under agreements with the EU and other partners, also contribute to export earnings. The industrial sector is small, but commerce and services are significant, particularly in Nouakchott. Moreover, in a number of sub-Saharan countries, the Mauritanian diaspora plays a significant role in the trading economy.

The fact that the balance of economic activity is somewhat different from that in other Sahelian countries has political and social consequences: farmers exercise less political weight and few members of the governing elite come from such a background. Rural communities face the same challenges of food security and pressure on land, water and vegetation resources found elsewhere in the Sahel, and nomadic traditions remain a powerful cultural influence, but government policy on public services and economic development must reckon with the reality that a large share of the population now depends on urban livelihoods. Encouraged by the prospect of increased resource revenues from the GTA discovery, the government has developed a new strategy designed to

²¹ Author interviews, Sahel development specialists, Nouakchott, Dakar and, Ouagadougou, January–February 2018; discussions at meeting of Food Crisis Prevention Network, Paris, April 2018, 'Summary of Conclusions', https://www.oecd.org/site/rpca/meetings/RPCA2018_RELEVE_EN.pdf (accessed 16 Jan. 2019).

²² Author interviews, representatives of NGOs, development partners and regional organizations, Dakar, Nouakchott, Ouagadougou, Paris, Brussels 2017–18.

accelerate growth and broaden its positive impact in a society marked by contrasts in income and opportunity. The government has now introduced a Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity (SCAPP) for 2016–2030, to replace the previous development strategy (the Strategic Framework for Fighting Poverty – CSLP) that had been introduced early this century.²³

Mining rebound and gas opportunities

The foundation of the industrial economy is the extractives sector, dominated by the production of iron ore – mined by the parastatal *Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière de Mauritanie* (SNIM) at Zouérate – and gold, produced by Canada's Kinross at Tasiast. Moreover, Mauritanian Copper Mines, a subsidiary of Canada's First Quantum Minerals, extracts copper at Akjoujt. These operations are islands of heavy industrial activity in the north, equipped with modern infrastructure and employs 9,000 relatively well-paid skilled personnel, including many from other regions. The 2014 slump in world mineral prices put the extractives sector under pressure, with painful consequences for Mauritania's balance of payments and fiscal revenues; SNIM management even announced that the company would not fully honour a pay agreement with its workforce, a stance that provoked complaints and strike action. The problems at SNIM put severe pressure on government finances, because the company had accounted for up to one-third of the state's revenue and had also been tapped for occasional extra-budgetary contributions to capital investment projects. Yet, although it was under strain, SNIM decided not to abandon its strategy of long-term investment in expanding production capacity;²⁴ and 2017 brought an upturn in the global metals market, which eased pressure on the mining sector and restored favourable conditions for growth.²⁵ With the construction of the new Guelb processing plant, set to boost annual output by 4 million tonnes, SNIM aims to establish Mauritania as one of the world's top five producers of iron ore. Meanwhile, Kinross is also investing \$900 million in expansion at Tasiast.

The GTA offshore gas project, which is led by BP,²⁶ is set to further diversify Mauritania's export and fiscal revenue base. The field sits astride the maritime boundary with Senegal and, while most production will be shipped to international markets from a floating liquefied natural gas (LNG) plant, both countries will be offered the chance to take gas direct from the field to meet domestic demand for power generation or other purposes. The Inter-governmental Cooperation Agreement,²⁷ initially confirmed during a visit to Nouakchott by Senegal's President Macky Sall in February 2018,²⁸ established the key principles for development of the field and how its resources

²³ Le calame (2018), 'Le gouvernement approuve la loi d'orientation de la SCAPP' ['The government approves the framework law for the SCAPP'], <http://lecalame.info/?q=node/6696> (accessed 15 Feb. 2019); IMF (2018), 'Letter of Intent from Finance Minister El Moctar Djay and Central Bank Governor Abdel Aziz Dahi to Christine Lagarde, managing director of the IMF', 9 May 2018, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/loi/2018/mrt/050918.pdf> (accessed 16 Jan. 2019); Islamic Republic of Mauritania (2018), 'Document de Développement Economique', 9 May 2018, <https://www.imf.org/fr/search?q=Mauritanie&sort=relevancy> (accessed on 5 Feb 2019).

²⁴ Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière de Mauritanie (SNIM) (2016), 'Mauritanides 2016: La SNIM poursuivra ses investissements' [Mauritanides 2016: SNIM will continue its investments], 18 October 2016, <http://www.snim.com/index.php/news-a-media/news/151-mauritanides-2016-la-snim-poursuivra-ses-investissements.html> (accessed 16 Jan. 2019).

²⁵ SNIM (2017), 'Statutory auditor and independent auditor's report on the consolidated financial statements', http://www.snim.com/images/rapports/etats_financiers2016_anglais.pdf (accessed 16 Jan. 2019).

²⁶ BP (2016), 'BP agrees deal with Kosmos Energy to partner on world-class discoveries in Mauritania and Senegal and cooperate on future exploration'.

²⁷ Author interviews, fishing sector sources, development and diplomatic observers, Dakar and Nouakchott, 2018.

²⁸ Maillard, M. (2018), 'Le Sénégal et la Mauritanie signent un accord d'exploitation de l'un des plus vastes gisements de gaz d'Afrique de l'Ouest [Senegal and Mauritania sign exploitation agreement for one of the largest gas deposits in West Africa], *Le Monde*, 9 February 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/02/09/le-senegal-et-la-mauritanie-signent-un-accord-d-exploitation-de-l-un-des-plus-vastes-gisements-de-gaz-d-afrique-de-l-ouest_5254635_3212.html (accessed 16 Jan. 2019).

will be shared and for settlement of any disputes. Final signature of the inter-governmental accord on 21 December 2018 paved the way for BP's immediate confirmation of the Final Investment Decision to go ahead with this \$1 billion project. The development of GTA will mark an important upturn in the fortunes of the Mauritanian offshore – after earlier disappointments when output from the first oil finds fell far short of initial hopes, generating little revenue. These setbacks were compounded in 2014 when the Islamic Development Bank chose to hold back from approving finance for a power project that would have been fuelled from the Banda offshore gas deposit. Further encouragement came in December 2018, with Total's announcement that it had signed exploration and production contracts for two further offshore blocks, in addition to the three that it already operates in the Mauritanian offshore.²⁹

However, in December 2018, the government had yet to articulate a comprehensive strategy for the role that the re-emergent hydrocarbons sector might play in the economy. The GTA project, with a floating LNG plant and relatively little onshore activity, offers few obvious local employment and business opportunities. Senegal has set out an ambitious strategy for becoming a regional source of expertise and professional services for the hydrocarbons sector, whereas Mauritania has yet to outline a vision for the industry, beyond the contribution that this new-found resource will make to exports, energy supply and revenue for the state.

That said, this could represent a valuable opportunity to diversify economic activity and open new areas of skilled employment for the country's growing youth population. For its part, the mining industry, which is a major employer at all levels of skill and management responsibility, has fostered a cadre of local expertise in specialist engineering and other related disciplines, despite occasional tensions with Kinross over the number of expatriate staff. The past three years have also seen the government overhaul higher education in technical subjects to cater for the needs of the extractives sector and to develop a flow of entrepreneurial technical talent into the wider economy.

Fisheries: a new national priority

The government has taken a strong stance on the development of fisheries to diversify the economy and stimulate employment.³⁰ With its nomadic and agricultural roots, Mauritanian society traditionally ignored the opportunities offered by its offshore waters, which include some of the Atlantic's richest fisheries. The one notable exception is the Imraguen community, north of Nouakchott, famous for the use of traditional artisanal techniques, even relying on dolphins to chase the catch near to the shore. But today many Mauritians work as crew on foreign-owned industrial fishing vessels operating out of the northern port city of Nouadhibou. The industrial deepwater fishing sector is an important source of employment and export earnings, with vessels from Europe, China, Russia and South Korea all present. European boats are particularly active, under multi-year fisheries agreements with the European Union that are renegotiated on a rolling basis; these seek to manage deepwater stocks sustainably and to promote the growth of the local

²⁹ Total (2018), 'Total se renforce dans l'exploration en Mauritanie' [Total strengthens in exploration in Mauritania], statement, 12 December 2018, <https://www.total.com/fr/medias/actualite/communiqués/total-se-renforce-dans-lexploration-en-mauritanie> (accessed 15 Feb. 2019).

³⁰ Ministry of Fisheries, Mauritania (undated), 'Stratégie de Gestion et de Développement Durables du Secteur des Pêches et de l'Économie maritime: Plan d'actions 2015–2019' [Management and Sustainable Development Strategy for the Fisheries Sector and the Maritime Economy: Action Plans 2015–2019], http://www.peches.gov.mr/IMG/pdf/plan_d_actions_strategie_mpem_2015-2019.pdf (accessed 16 Jan. 2019).

fish-processing sector and act as a quality standard benchmark for agreements reached with other fisheries partners.

Meanwhile, the fishing of inshore waters has been largely left to Senegalese canoes, many based at Nouakchott and effectively sub-leasing licences issued to Mauritanian businesspeople. But in 2012 the government decided to radically change its policy and to embark on the development of the inshore fishing sector, eventually ceasing the renewal of licences in 2015. The authorities allowed the old arrangement to continue on an informal basis through 2016, but from January 2017 they enforced a new policy of 'Mauritanization', ordering some 3,000 Senegalese boats to leave. The government had built a new inshore fishing port at Tanit and established a naval academy to train young men for a career in a new homegrown modern inshore industry.

The government presented its new policy as part of an overall strategy to diversify Mauritania's business and employment opportunities.³¹ The change of policy stirred widespread anger in Senegal, but without any legal basis on which to challenge Mauritania's new approach, the Senegalese government publicly played the issue down, in the interest of wider bilateral relations – and despite widespread anger among its own electorate. However, the small size of Mauritania's own inshore fishing community and the availability of Senegalese keen to fill the gap paved the way for pragmatic compromise: Senegalese canoes were allowed to resume operating from Nouakchott beach on an informal basis³² and then finally, in July 2018, the two countries signed a new fishing agreement under which 400 licences would be issued to 400 Senegalese boats.

Social challenges

Mauritania's population is rising by 2.9 per cent a year and 31 per cent are aged between 10 and 24, while only 3 per cent are aged 65 or more.³³ Jobs therefore have to be a priority, but the wider development challenge is also considerable. The IMF estimates that about 31 per cent of the population still live in poverty.³⁴ At \$1,137 in 2017, average GDP per capita is above the figure for Mali (\$827) and not far behind that of Senegal (\$1,329), but it is well below the figures for Morocco (\$3,007) and Algeria (\$4,055).³⁵ Social indicators are hardly encouraging for a country whose leaders long had aspirations to see themselves as part of Arab North Africa rather than sub-Saharan Africa. For example, at 34 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2017, the neonatal mortality rate is more than double that of Morocco (14 deaths) but also lags far behind that of Senegal (21), Cameroon (26) and even Burkina Faso (24).³⁶ According to the UN, only 26 per cent of boys and 27 per cent of girls enrol in secondary school, well below the averages for West and Central Africa (39 per cent for boys and 33 per cent for girls), although there has been significant progress in recent years.³⁷

³¹ Author interviews, government, Nouakchott, 2018.

³² Field research, Nouakchott beach, October 2018.

³³ United Nations Population Fund (2018), *State of World Population 2018*.

³⁴ IMF (2017), 'Islamic Republic of Mauritania: Three-Year Arrangement under the Extended Credit Facility', press release, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/CR/Issues/2017/12/13/Islamic-Republic-of-Mauritania-Three-Year-Arrangement-under-the-Extended-Credit-Facility-45465> (accessed 15 Feb. 2019).

³⁵ World Bank (2019), World Development Indicators, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?view=chart> (accessed 5 Feb. 2019).

³⁶ World Bank (2019), World Development Indicators, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.DYN.NMRT?view=chart> (accessed 5 Feb. 2019).

³⁷ United Nations Population Fund (2018), *State of World Population 2018*.

Such indicators reflect the development challenges as well as the questions of social inequality raised by Haratine campaigners. This is the background to the calls from the IMF for Mauritania to shift more public spending towards key social priorities.³⁸ The government has demonstrated a capacity to tackle specific social challenges when it takes the trouble to develop a methodical and detailed strategy. A good example is secondary and higher education where, since 2014, the administration has sought to develop an approach better tailored towards the needs of a developing economy, encouraging a shift among secondary-level students towards technical and science subjects. The government has also made serious efforts to strengthen the provision of higher education: up to now the load has been carried mainly by Nouakchott's twin arts and science universities, which were merged in 2016, and three higher-level technical institutions that have been amalgamated into a single *École Supérieure Polytechnique*. At the latter, before moving on to specialist study, all students now start by following a core first-year curriculum that includes not only technical subjects but also a strong element of business studies.³⁹

In a drive to raise standards at the *École Supérieure Polytechnique*, partnerships have been developed with elite institutions in France, Morocco and Tunisia. There has also been an effort to decentralize higher education, with the establishment of specialist institutions in Rosso (agriculture) and Aleg (public works), as well as an institution specializing in information technology, fisheries and marine science in Nouadhibou, a key fishing port also earmarked for the development of a business 'free zone' outside Mauritania's formal customs frontier. Although delayed, a sister institution for the study of mining is promised for Zouérate – the hub for iron ore production – while President Abdelaziz has also promised a new university for the historic and remote oasis town of Tidjikja. There is also a well-established Islamic theology university in Ayoûn el Atroûs in the southeast.

Fragilities of the southern Sahelian belt

While economic activity across the deserts of northern and central Mauritania is often concentrated in isolated urban centres, conditions are quite different in the south, which forms part of the Sahelian pastoral and agricultural belt, where many people live in farming villages, much as their counterparts do in Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger. But in southern regions, such as Gorgol, the Sahelian agro-pastoralist economy was severely impacted by a major drought in 2017, when many areas saw an almost total failure of the June–September annual rains.⁴⁰ In the immediate floodplains alongside the Gorgol and Senegal rivers, farmers were able to continue irrigating their fields, producing a good rice crop. But on even slightly higher ground set back from the riverbeds, it was almost impossible to produce significant cereal volumes; the plants hardly grew, so there was not even much post-harvest vegetation remaining for animal forage. By January 2018, biomass levels were unusually low, and many areas of potential grazing land were completely bare of vegetation.

The crisis had multiple impacts, which affected households unevenly. Those fortunate enough to have floodplain fields continued to produce at least some crops, while deep boreholes or local dams

³⁸ IMF (2018), 'Statement by IMF Deputy Managing Director Mitsuhiro Furasawa at the Conclusion of a Visit to Mauritania', 16 February 2018, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2018/02/20/pr1858-statement-by-imf-dmd-mitsuhiro-furasawa-at-the-conclusion-of-a-visit-to-mauritania> (accessed 16 Jan. 2019).

³⁹ Author interview, Nouakchott, January 2018.

⁴⁰ Field research and interviews, rural communities, southern Mauritania, January 2018.

sustained dry-season production of cereals and vegetables. But villages in the more elevated drier sandy or clay soil areas were left desperately short of food and income. Local commerce suffered from the premature departure of Peul nomadic herders, who normally spend a large part of their seasonal livestock migration cycle in Gorgol but had to leave early to search for grazing over the border in Senegal. Locals say that pressure on resources was exacerbated by a longer-term influx of pastoralist families who had abandoned regions further north whose viability as grazing areas had been eroded by climate change.⁴¹ By contrast, the 2018 rainy season was good and produced extensive fresh biomass growth, permitting animals to graze areas that had been devoid of nutrition for many months.⁴²

Yet, while the improved 2018 weather conditions eased the immediate pressure on southern farming communities, the fundamental underlying challenge remains: in the Sahelian climate, the total or substantial failure of the main annual rains – falling between late June and early September – can be a frequent occurrence. Some areas may be seriously affected in two or three successive years and at the very least it is sensible to assume that the main rains are likely to fail at least every second or third year. This assumption has to be built into policies to monitor the risks of potential crisis, to deliver food security, to sustain an essential core of agricultural and pastoralist activity, and thus to maintain the basic viability and living standards of rural communities.

The Mauritanian government has sought to address these long-term vulnerabilities. However, the widespread view among development and food-security specialists is that the effectiveness of Mauritania's national systems for monitoring crisis risk and sustaining community resilience lags significantly behind those in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger – the generally acknowledged leaders among Sahelian countries in managing food security and crisis early warning.⁴³

To help the poor, the government operates a network of official shops (EMEL) that sell essentials at slightly subsidized prices. But the savings are small and the queues at the shops in times of need are often so long that many of the poorest prefer to work as paid labourers for more secure families, to earn some cash and then buy food on the commercial market rather than wait for many hours to get wares from EMEL that are only marginally subsidized.⁴⁴

These problems arise against a background of generalized resentment among many segments of the southern Afro-Mauritanian population towards perceived neglect by central government⁴⁵ and the largely Maure ruling elite. There is a feeling that the government does not really understand or prioritize smallholder agriculture, which provides the main livelihood for the minority population of the far south.

This relates to the realities of political voice and influence. In other Sahelian states, such as Mali, Burkina Faso or Niger, smallholder farming households represent a majority of the population and a powerful electoral constituency, which means that their governments have to treat rural development and food security as a key political and socio-economic priority. But in Mauritania, a

⁴¹ Author interviews, southern Mauritanian communities, January 2018, and Sahel development partners, in Ouagadougou, Dakar, Paris, Brussels and Nouakchott, January–February, July and October 2018; documentation and interviews, meeting of Food Crisis Prevention Network, Paris, April 2018.

⁴² Field research, north of Nouakchott, October 2018.

⁴³ Author interviews, Sahel food security and development specialists, Sahel development partners, in Ouagadougou, Dakar, Paris, Brussels, Niamey, Bamako and Nouakchott, 2012–18.

⁴⁴ Author interviews, villagers, rural Mauritania, 2018.

⁴⁵ Author interviews and a community forum, rural Mauritania, 2018.

higher proportion of the population lives in urban areas, and the southern agrarian communities represent a relatively weaker political constituency. President Abdelaziz has complained that farmers fail to repay their loans, whereas many southerners feel that the government could do much more to help with access to credit, so that they could invest in tools and infrastructure such as reliable European-made irrigation pumps.

Some also feel that the government could do much more to enhance food-security early warning systems and ensure that communities in crisis receive adequate and timely assistance. In June 2018, the head of an alliance of human rights groups accused the government of failing to engage with donors to ensure that populations hit by drought did not face famine and compared its performance unfavourably with that of the authorities in other drought-affected countries. Mauritania belongs to the *Comité Permanent Inter-Etats de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel*, the regional organization through which Sahelian countries operate a harmonized system for the oversight of national drought and food-security monitoring systems and collate data on a regional basis. However, the Mauritanian system for food-security management is viewed by development specialists as less politically participative and less based on careful data monitoring than those in Burkina, Faso, Mali and Niger.⁴⁶ This is an issue of concern at times when food insecurity remains a recurrent risk in much of the Sahel.⁴⁷

Political sensitivities complicate the task of making objective judgments about the social and economic conditions of southern communities. Moreover, there is some overlap but no direct correlation between the discrimination faced by many Haratine, across the country and the condition of rural development systems in the largely Afro-Mauritanian agricultural far south.

Identity politics also come into play. During the early post-independence years Afro-Mauritians played a big role in public administration and key services, because many had benefitted from access to the francophone education system during the colonial era. But as the leadership of the independent state grew more self-confident and steadily asserted the Arab dimension of national identity, Afro-Mauritians felt increasingly marginalized, particularly after Arabic became the language of education and government. This left them at a significant disadvantage compared with Maure fellow citizens whose indigenous language is Hassaniya Arabic. A sense of resentment was heightened by the Taya regime's brutal 1989 crackdown, when tens of thousands of Afro-Mauritians were expelled to Senegal. Many later returned, particularly during the brief presidency of Abdallahi, who prioritized a government response to their grievances. Yet today many Afro-Mauritians continue to face great difficulty in securing titles to land or even getting registered as citizens with full identity documentation and the right to vote. Land rights are a sensitive issue, especially in a context where investors from outside the local community have invested in the development of big commercial farms in parts of the fertile Senegal valley floodplain around Rosso.

⁴⁶ Author interviews, Sahel food security and development specialists, Sahel development partners, in Ouagadougou, Dakar, Paris, Brussels, Niamey, Bamako and Nouakchott, 2012–18.

⁴⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2018), 'Sahel et Afrique de l'Ouest – Analyse régionale du Cadre Harmonisé juin-août 2018 (projetée)' ['Sahel and West Africa – Regional Analysis of the Harmonized Framework, Juin-August 2018 (projection)], <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/ressources/cartes/detail/fr/c/1114394/> (accessed 16 Jan. 2019).

5. Personalized Power and Politics in the Abdelaziz Era

The onus for making key strategic choices about Mauritania's future currently lies with President Abdelaziz and those closest to him. There is a strong perception among the public that it is he who takes the big decisions rather than government, the ruling UPR party or the state as a whole.

This in part reflects the history of his rise to power. Abdelaziz was a key player in the 2005 military putsch officially led by his cousin and fellow officer, Ely Ould Mohamed Vall, which brought an end to Taya's dictatorship. Vall then oversaw the holding of genuinely democratic elections in 2007, in which Sidi Mohamed Ould Cheikh Abdallahi was elected president. Yet, in 2008, Abdelaziz led another putsch to take power himself. The following year he secured a measure of constitutional legitimacy by getting himself elected president. But although the contest was formally pluralistic – with a range of prominent politicians taking part – it was in fact tightly managed and effectively confirmed the dominance that Abdelaziz had established during the interlude of unconstitutional rule since his putsch. He was re-elected in 2014 in a contest boycotted by much of the conventional opposition establishment, leaving the controversial anti-slavery campaigner Biram Dah Abeid as his main challenger

The manner in which Abdelaziz acquired power and wields authority has strongly shaped a public perception of his rule as highly personalized, if restrained in style and in no way lavish. It can appear inscrutable and hard to read, although close collaborators also stress his pragmatism and readiness to listen.⁴⁸

The aftermath of the 2009 election saw the emergence of a deep tactical split within the opposition, as it sought to work out the most effective way to sustain a meaningful challenge to the regime. Many opponents chose to boycott constitutional politics in protest at what they regarded as an illegitimate presidency. But others concluded that there was nothing to be gained through the strategy of the 'empty chair', particularly as Abdelaziz clearly benefitted from the support or at least the acquiescence of Mauritania's key international partners in both the West and the Arab world. Groups such as the Alliance Populaire Progressiste (APP) and the moderate Islamist party Tawassoul, while criticizing the administration, opted to work within the constitutional system in the hope that they could advance their agendas more effectively through the elected institutions. The APP leader, Messaoud Ould Boukheir – who had come second in the presidential 2009 election – became speaker of the lower house of parliament, the National Assembly, and a respected source of advice to government, while some APP parliamentarians gained a reputation for reformist activism. The 2013 legislative election saw Tawassoul secure 16 seats, becoming the largest opposition force in parliament and in the same year's municipal elections it established a useful foothold in local politics and administration.

But other groups, notably the Regroupement des Forces Démocratiques (RFD), led by Ahmed Ould Daddah, the half-brother of Mauritania's first president, felt that participation in the constitutional system had become pointless. They disputed the legitimacy of Abdelaziz and the measures he had

⁴⁸ Author interviews, Nouakchott and Europe, 2018.

introduced and formed the broad Coordination de l'Opposition Démocratique (COD) alliance, later succeeded by the even more broadly based Front National pour la Démocratie et l'Unité (FNDU), which also encompassed elements of civil society.

Most members of the opposition alliance – with the exception of Tawassoul – were initially committed to a boycott of constitutional elected politics. But while this stance did mobilize some public support, it of course also reduced the prospects for a strong election performance by opposition candidates or parties, including the chance to mount joint challenges to the government in second round run-off contests. The ineffectiveness of boycott tactics was confirmed in 2017 when Abdelaziz put forward controversial constitutional changes (see below), easily secured endorsement for these measures in a referendum and implemented them instantly. This provoked an opposition rethink and the advocates of electoral participation convinced their more sceptical allies to abandon the boycott. This change of heart was also the result of a government threat to dissolve parties that continued to boycott elections.

Strong presidency

With the opposition hobbled, Abdelaziz was able to ignore those who criticized his legitimacy and set the governing agenda, almost untrammelled by domestic political constraints. Power became concentrated in the presidency but formally expressed through the structures of a multiparty constitutional state. This has produced a paradox. Plural political debate and party activity – as well as a broadly free, lively and critical media – sit alongside an unchallenged assertion of executive authority by the president. The tone of the government's self-presentation has been based on competence and delivery rather than on public debate.

Nowhere has the regime played the card of effective government more strongly than in its response to the serious threat posed by jihadist terrorism. As noted above, in 2005 the Algeria-based Groupe salafiste pour la prédication et le combat (later rebranded as Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb) attacked the small Lemgheity army garrison in the remote northeast, and other attacks followed. Abdelaziz sought to justify his 2008 seizure of power with the need for a more assertive and methodical strategy to tackle the terrorist threat. There has since been a sustained drive to strengthen the military, with the creation of the specially trained Groupements spéciaux d'intervention, and investment in training and extra resources, including aerial assets. The authorities have used force when necessary; for example, they sent troops to hunt down militants in the Wagadou forest across the border with Mali (with the latter's consent). The strategy has been flexible and multi-layered. The reinforcement of the military, intelligence and border surveillance has been complemented by a strategy to win 'hearts and minds', with Islamic scholars tasked with convincing jailed militants that terrorist violence is in fact un-Islamic, and the development of new settlements, infrastructure and administration in remote areas, to provide services and generate legitimate employment.

But while ultimate authority is concentrated in the presidency, Abdelaziz does not take all decisions himself. Ministers take the technical lead on their areas of responsibility and are accessible and open to discussion with international partners and sectoral interest groups, exploring policy options and articulating specific agendas for thematic action. The overhaul of technical higher education is a good example of this reformist managerial pragmatism. However, most ministers are barely

political actors in their own right. The inner circle of the leadership remains opaque and key decisions flow from the top. The presidential administration cannot be accused of fostering a cult of personality – Abdelaziz is reticent and low-key in style – but it generates a strong sense of vertical authority. Critics allege that power and influence has become increasingly concentrated within the president's tribe, the Ouled Bousbah, and even more tightly among his own family and closest associates. Personality rifts within this inner circle can generate powerful ripples; in August and September 2017 various independent voices in public life were subjected to official questioning over any dealings with the businessman Mohamed Ould Bouamatou, a cousin and former close ally turned critic of Abdelaziz, who now lives in Spain.

The military has for decades been one of the most important elements of the country's political power structure. It was the powerbase of the Taya regime, the engineer of the 2005 putsch and the foundation of Abdelaziz's seizure of power in 2008. Indeed, since 1978 the country has been led by career soldiers, with the exception of Abdellahi in 2007–08. The military was the vehicle for Abdelaziz's career and it became a huge influence on his personal outlook and leadership style as well as a crucial source of support for his regime. This makes it a key player in shaping the country's political evolution during this new period of transition. While it does not play a formalized political role, the views of the military remain key and some factions within it opposed calls for a constitutional change to facilitate a third term for Abdelaziz.

For some time, former chief of staff – and now defence minister – Ghazouani has been viewed as a potential successor to the president, particularly after the Abdelaziz confirmed his decision to comply with the constitution and stand down in 2019. On 29 January 2019, a government spokesman announced on Twitter that Ghazouani would be the regime candidate in the 2019 presidential contest.⁴⁹ Discreet in manner and a modernizer who has sought to promote the role of women in the military, Ghazouani has for many years been one of Abdelaziz's most trusted confidants; early in their military careers, the two men were trained together at the Meknès military academy in Morocco. A measure of the confidence that Abdelaziz places in Ghazouani came in 2012, after the head of state was wounded in a shooting incident: the chief of staff acted as de facto interim ruler while Abdelaziz was recuperating in France. The president clearly sees Ghazouani as the best man to continue the political, economic and security strategy that he has developed over recent years, and as the man whom he can trust to protect the current framework of power and the interests of the foundations upon which the regime is based.

Over the past 10 years there has been a strong sense of a state machine and a country waiting on the decisions of Abdelaziz, who gives little away about his thinking until big decisions are announced. He takes this strong personal lead even on technical policy issues, such as the construction of Nouakchott's new airport, the creation of the G5 Sahel regional grouping, the change in policy on inshore fishing or the mobilization of last-minute funding to build a conference centre for the July 2018 African Union summit. His top-down style of leadership has been most powerfully demonstrated over the past three years in measures that affect incarnations of the nation – the constitutional changes concerning political institutions as well as the national flag and anthem, and

⁴⁹ BBC News (2019), 'En Mauritanie, le président Abdel Aziz a son "dauphin"', 31 January 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/afrique/region-47080513> (accessed 14 Mar. 2019).

the reform of the currency. But, of course, this poses questions about the future nature of leadership power, after Abdelaziz stands down in 2019.

Changing the constitution

In 2017, the government announced plans for constitutional reform to remove many of the counterbalances to the power of the president and the UPR. It proposed the abolition of the Senate, the High Islamic Council and the High Court of Justice. Their disappearance would be offset by the creation of new Regional Councils, but it was unclear how and when these would be chosen or whether they would have legal powers or financial resources that could offset the greater concentration of power caused by the Senate's abolition. There were questions as to whether the Regional Councils would be pawns of regime patronage and vehicles for the installation of local notables in roles with little autonomous power, or whether they could eventually become a meaningful vehicle for expressing and addressing local issues and grievances. The proposed constitutional reforms also included changes to the national flag and to the national anthem. While symbolic, this was an issue that the government knew would command wide public attention and could stir a degree of popular emotion.

Prior to the unveiling of the package, President Abdelaziz had invited opposition parties to engage in dialogue on politics and constitutional change, but most had boycotted the talks because they felt that the government was not really interested in hearing their views. The process was notable only for an announcement from Abdelaziz that he would not be seeking a further term of office, a statement his opponents did not regard as definitive. Still the dialogue was a shrewd move, because the government at least demonstrated a nominal willingness to listen to the views of others before announcing its constitutional plans.

The requirement that constitutional measures must be adopted by two-thirds majorities in the National Assembly and the Senate was easily secured by the government in the former, where the UPR and its allies held 108 seats and the opposition 37 (until the September 2018 election). The Senate proved much more recalcitrant, even though the government was also strongly placed there. Faced with the prospect of being made redundant, 33 of the 56 senators – including many government supporters – rejected the reforms. Abdelaziz then announced that he would seek to get the measures approved by referendum. Four past chairmen of the bar declared that under the constitution even a referendum would fail to provide the required authority for change and that a two-thirds vote in the Senate would still be required. But the government brushed aside their views and sought to mobilize alternative legal advice in support of its claim that approval for the changes in a referendum would free it from the need to seek senate consent.

The government pressed forward with the referendum on 5 August 2017, after making only one concession, dropping the plan to abolish the High Court. Believing that the authorities would rig the vote count, the opposition campaigned for a boycott in the hope of undermining the legitimacy of the inevitable 'yes' vote. On one occasion the security forces beat up prominent opposition figures who were leading an unauthorized protest march. The boycott had little effect. The electoral commission announced that, on a turnout of 53.75 per cent, 85.6 per cent of voters had approved the government measures, although notably Nouakchott's Sebkhia district, populated mainly by Afro-Mauritanians, was reported to have voted 'no'. The government treated the referendum result

as authorization for the implementation of the constitutional changes. It immediately locked the Senate building so that disputatious members of the upper house could not get in to stage a symbolic sitting protest.

The adoption of the modified flag and national anthem was an equally symbolic demonstration of Abdelaziz's political authority. With effect from the annual Independence Day festivities on 28 November 2017, it became illegal to fly the old flag. A further powerful symbol was the reform of the national currency that took effect at the start of 2018. The ouguiya was redenominated at a rate of 10:1 and new high-tech plastic banknotes were issued, with old notes allowed to circulate for a limited transition period. (In abbreviated form, the new currency is now referred to as the MRU – in contrast to the former usage, UM.) There was a clear rationale for the reform in the need to reduce the scope for fraud and counterfeiting. However, the new currency was introduced with only a few weeks' notice, in a move that demonstrated the president's decisive control over policy and capacity to rapidly implement the changes that he prioritizes.

The constitutional measures and the way that they were driven through have sent a powerful message. While most citizens may not have been clear about the Senate's role, its abolition bluntly demonstrated Abdelaziz's capacity to set the rules of the political game. His changes have produced a four-tier pyramid of elected offices governing Mauritania. At the summit is the powerful presidency, while the legislature now consists of a single chamber – the National Assembly; there are six new regional councils, while local administration is in the hands of 219 municipalities.

The size of the National Assembly has expanded from 147 seats to 157, to reflect increasing population in some areas. Some 40 members are elected on a proportional representation national list basis, while 113 are elected from geographical constituencies, varying from one to 18 deputies, depending on their population size. The elected parliamentarians then appoint four additional members, to represent the diaspora, in Africa, Asia, Europe and the Americas. The six new Regional Councils were elected for the first time in September 2018;⁵⁰ but it remains to be seen whether they are granted significant financial resources and administrative powers. Formally, they are mandated 'to promote economic, social, cultural and scientific development', a rather vague mandate that could mean wide responsibilities or almost no authority at all. The local elections also took place in September: the UPR secured control of 162 municipalities, but there were significant victories for its rivals. In Nouadhibou victory went to El Karama, a party created by El Ghassem Bellalli, the popular mayor of this northern port city, in alliance with Tawassoul. And in October, in re-run second round elections for two Nouakchott municipalities, the UPR secured a slim victory in El-Mina but was narrowly defeated in Arafat by an opposition coalition of the UFP, HATEM, Tawassoul and the Pacte National pour la Démocratie et le Développement (ADIL).

Looking to the political agenda ahead

Dominant across the political scene, President Abdelaziz and those around him have nevertheless had to confront a major choice over the course of 2018: would he step aside when his term expires

⁵⁰ Four councils cover mainly rural regions, each composed of several governorates: Hodh el Gharbi and Hodh el Charqui; Assaba, Tagant and Guidimaka; Gorgol, Brakna and Trarza; and Tiris Zemmour, Adrar Inchiri. There are two regions based on the main cities: one covers the governorate of Nouadhibou, the northern port city; the other encompasses the capital and its surroundings, replacing the old Communauté urbaine de Nouakchott, whose council had often been under opposition control.

in 2019 or would he seek to amend or scrap the term limit, so that he could remain in power for a further five years?

Abdelaziz had initially indicated that he had no intention of continuing in office, effectively recognizing the constitutional term limit. However, the assertiveness with which he drove through contentious constitutional changes in 2017 raised widespread doubts about whether he really would be prepared to relinquish office when his second elected term ended in mid-2019. And there was also some speculation that his thinking might have been influenced by the loss of his son Ahmed – seen by some as a potential successor – in a car crash in 2015. Although the president made statements indicating that he would comply with the constitutional term limit, his comments fell short of a categorical commitment. And he chose not to rebut calls from political supporters, and even religious allies, arguing that he should remain in power for the good of the country.

Across the political class, in both government and opposition, and among independent observers in Nouakchott, genuine uncertainty over the president's true intentions persisted throughout most of 2018. Some Nouakchott sources even claimed that, in a private gathering, some senior military figures had openly expressed opposition to a third term. On the other hand, particularly in the early weeks of 2018, there was a widespread assumption that he would eventually push through a further constitutional amendment and stand for a third elected term in 2019.

Certainly, Abdelaziz did not look like a man preparing to retire from power. His 2017 abolition of the Senate had removed the most recalcitrant source of formal opposition to further constitutional change. And the government's most prominent critic in the upper house, Mohamed Ould Ghadda – who had been leading a probe into government contract procedures – was arrested soon after the 2017 referendum and charged with corruption. His initial six-month jail term was later extended by an additional six months, although he was eventually released. Meanwhile, other senators as well as journalists and trade unionists were left free but under judicial control in what they claim was a politically motivated procedure; some said that they had been questioned over whether they had any links to the exiled businessman Mohamed Ould Bouamatou, who was also the target of accusations.⁵¹ Then, in the run-up to the September 2018 elections, the anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid was arrested too. (Abeid was finally tried on 31 December 2018 and sentenced to a six-month prison term – but was immediately released, because of the time already served in detention; furthermore, the journalist withdrew his complaint.)

The significance of the 2018 elections

The September 2018 legislative, municipal and regional elections could have been an awkward moment, as President Abdelaziz's brusque abolition of the Senate a year earlier had stirred widespread anger in sections of the political class. Moreover, opponents of the government have learned the lesson of their past differences over tactics: from late 2017 onwards, a wide range of opposition leaders met regularly to coordinate strategy. Yet, ultimately, the September 2018 elections served to provide further confirmation of the dominance of the head of state and the

⁵¹ RFI (2017), 'Mauritanie: série d'interpellations dans le milieu de la presse' ['Mauritania: series of arrests in press circles'], 26 August 2017: <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20170826-mauritanie-interpellations-journalistes-presse-interrogatoire-repression-censure> (accessed 26 Aug. 2017).

ruling UPR party. In retrospect, this was a prelude to his announcement in late November 2018 that he would not seek to stand for a third successive term of elected office.

Little by little, the groups that favoured participation in elections, such as the APP, Tawassoul and elements of the FNDU – an alliance expanded from around the old COD coalition – began to win the tactical debate. Moreover, the case for participating in the elections was strengthened when the government warned that parties that refused to do so would be threatened with dissolution. In April 2018, the FNDU confirmed that it would take part – and it shrewdly opted not to publicly doubt Abdelaziz's readiness to comply with the term limit, choosing instead to congratulate him on his promise to do so. The RFD and its leader Ahmed Ould Daddah, who are allied to the FNDU, also opted to abandon their longstanding electoral boycott. Meanwhile, Biram Dah Abeid allied his Initiative de Résurgence Anti-esclavagiste movement with the Sawab party, which springs from the Ba'athist tradition of Arab nationalism and had hitherto shown little interest in Haratine concerns; but this alliance of opposites proved its worth, securing Abeid's election to the National Assembly.

The UPR prepared for the strengthened opposition challenge by embarking on a mass recruitment drive. Although the ruling party is divided by internal rivalries and clan allegiances, it was still in a strong position, and clearly benefitting from the tacit goodwill of the state machine. The government rejected any suggestion that international election observers should be invited on a major scale. The opposition tried to organize grassroots monitoring of the vote but lacked experience of doing this on a comprehensive nationwide scale and it complained that its efforts were impeded by the authorities, while Mauritania's international partners seemed reluctant to exert serious pressure over the issue. In any case, the opposition was still very far from representing a coherent alternative government: secular opposition parties were allied with Tawassoul in the campaign to promote greater democratization and a challenge to the UPR, but they remained deeply uncomfortable with its underlying identity as an avowedly religious political movement and were wary of what its long-term aims might be.

Following the constitutional changes, the legislative, regional and municipal elections were held in September 2018 and the more hard-line opposition parties that had boycotted polls in 2009 and 2013 did take part, coordinating their efforts closely with allies who were already engaged in electoral politics. The governing UPR won 67 of the 131 seats decided in the first round and all 22 seats that went to a second ballot, while the 'committed' opposition won 27 seats in the National Assembly. Previously limited to a contingent of 16 Tawassoul members, the parliamentary opposition is now much larger and diverse: there are 14 Tawassoul members and 13 others from a spectrum of secular opposition groups, many under the umbrella of the FNDU alliance (which also includes non-political civil society groups). The Union des Forces de Progrès (led by the respected veteran progressive Mohamed Ould Maouloud), the RFD and Sawab won three seats each. ADIL gained two, while the Alliance pour la Justice et la Démocratie/Mouvement pour la Rénovation, and one independent also each gained a seat. Most of the remaining seats went to parties allied with the government, while 'soft' opposition parties that often support the government won a few.

Opposition politicians regarded the 2018 elections as a step forward in Mauritania's political evolution, with the establishment of a larger and more diverse opposition parliamentary presence. But they were privately disappointed: although they had never expected to win a legislative

majority, they had hoped to gain a larger bloc of seats, by using the two-round voting system to present a united front or single candidate in run-off races.

In part, opponents blamed the September 2018 results on government manipulation of the vote and efforts to prevent effective independent monitoring. But they also concede that they had been preoccupied mainly with tactical considerations and the internal debate over whether to abandon the boycott. Consequently, their fragmented approach to the legislative polls failed to offer the voters a coherent alternative to the ruling UPR. Some senior opponents now accept that they have much work to do over the months ahead, to develop the shared reform agenda required to underpin any serious challenge in the 2019 presidential election.⁵² The likelihood of an opposition victory in that contest is remote, but a solid performance could put pressure on the government to take greater account of opposition concerns.

While the government won control of all the newly created Regional Councils, the local elections gave some comfort to the opposition, notably with the victory in Arafat. Moreover, some government allies have also carved out distinct political identities, with El-Karama governing Nouadhibou, while the Union pour la Démocratie et le Progrès, led by the social affairs minister, Naha Mint Hamdi Ould Mouknass, has six National Assembly seats and some municipal and regional council seats.

A clear message from Abdelaziz

On 20 November 2018, President Abdelaziz travelled to Oualata, a historic oasis on the fringes of the Sahara Desert, to inaugurate the 2018 edition of Mauritania's Ancient Towns Cultural Festival. After many months of speculation and uncertainty over his true intentions, he addressed the question of the third term explicitly and in plain words. Noting that he had heard both the calls from his supporters anxious to retain power and those who advocate term limits, he stated: 'I am there to respect the Constitution and to ensure that it is respected. No, I will not stand again, because I will comply with the Constitution and the Constitution states that I cannot stand again after two terms of office.'⁵³

While the statement did not appear to exclude any effort to alter the term limits, to allow a third term candidacy, senior government sources were categorical in their insistence that this did represent a clear and firm decision by Abdelaziz to stand down at the conclusion of his second term in 2019. Those who know the president well insisted that he would not change his mind.

But this will not mean a departure from the circles of power and political influence. Abdelaziz made plain his determination to remain a major political actor and, potentially, to seek a return to the presidency once he has completed the period out of office that the constitution requires: 'I will remain in Mauritania and will continue to be active in politics. I am here and I am not leaving the country. I will continue the same path. As soon as the constitution allows me to stand again I will do

⁵² Author interviews, Nouakchott, 2018.

⁵³ RFI (2018), 'Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz: "Non, je ne me représenterai pas" pour un 3e mandat' ['Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz: "No I will not stand again" for a third term'], <http://www.rfi.fr/afrique/20181121-mauritanie-ould-abdel-aziz-presidentielle-constitution-pas-candidat-misnuma-ter> (accessed 27 Nov. 2018)

so. So, if I cannot stand again for a third term, I can stand afterwards; the Constitution does not bar me from standing again later.'⁵⁴

A range of factors may have influenced this decision after so many months of uncertainty about his intentions. Personal and tribal patronage networks are an important factor in Mauritania, as in many countries, and there is no doubt that some supporters of the regime would prefer to see Abdelaziz prolong his stay in power. But the president and other senior figures have also been aware of the risks that such a course of action might carry, particularly in a regional context in which attitudes towards longevity in power are evolving.

In the Maghreb both Morocco and Tunisia have seen changes of governing power in recent years – even if this has not been the case in Algeria – while among Mauritania's West African neighbours two-term limits are almost universally the norm and recent years have seen the downfall of the region's two remaining long-term strongmen: in Burkina Faso the army refused to shield Blaise Compaoré from a popular uprising in 2014 and he was driven out after 27 years in power, while in Gambia President Yahya Jammeh, defeated in the 2016 election, was finally cajoled into departing for exile – in part through mediation by Abdelaziz himself. In Mauritania, even some government sympathizers had begun to argue that the president should comply with the term limit and stand down in 2019.

Moreover, the route to a respected retirement from the presidency lay open: Abdelaziz originally seized power through a putsch but has mostly governed with moderation and his record in containing the threat of terrorism and providing a stable security environment is widely appreciated among the public. Despite occasional infringements of full freedom of expression and some politically motivated detentions, he has presided over a relatively pluralistic and free political system. Corruption is a serious problem but the government has improved public services and invested in essential infrastructure. The economy is recovering from the 2014 downturn in iron ore and gold prices.⁵⁵ Meanwhile, some senior opposition figures indicated their readiness to consent to a graceful retirement for the head of state. His declaration of a wish to remain heavily involved in politics does not necessarily alter these dynamics: for a number of domestic opponents, and for Mauritania's West African neighbours and its European allies, the mere fact that the incumbent head of state declared an intention to stand down in compliance with term limits, represents an important consolidation of fundamental principles of constitutional governance, and thus a reinforcement of the country's underlying stability.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ IMF (2018), 'IMF Executive Board Completes First Review of the Arrangement Under the Extended Credit Facility with the Islamic Republic of Mauritania', 29 May 2018, <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2018/05/29/pr18199-mauritania-imf-executive-board-completes-first-review-of-the-arrangement-ecf> (accessed 16 Jan. 2019).

6. Conclusion

So, what next for this nation that Mohamed Ould Abdelaziz has led with such assertiveness for more than 10 years?

Although socially complex and confronted by large strategic challenges, Mauritania will soon have the resources to take significant steps towards a wider distribution of economic and social opportunity, lubricated by the revenues from new hydrocarbons development and diversification of the export and employment base. The door could also be opened to wider participation in political decisions and governance through decentralization and the reinvigorated and more diverse new membership of the national assembly and the regional and municipal councils.

But this is also a moment of tough questions: the government remains uneasy about the challenges posed by political Islam and the more vociferous campaigners for Haratine rights, while over the border, in Mali, the threat from jihadist terrorism remains persistent. Mauritania's deepening engagement with West African neighbours promises to open up fresh economic opportunity but is also a reflection of the need to tackle these security challenges.

The presidential contest of 2019 will test the regime's capacity to evolve after 11 years under the leadership of Abdelaziz. And the landscape beyond that election will be a proving ground for the longer-term thinking of the Mauritanian leadership.

As it seeks to maintain predominance, and contain a broadening opposition challenge, the government has sought to extend the political base of the ruling UPR through the mass recruitment of new party members. The logical consequence of this political reaching out might be a stronger effort to deliver economic benefits, social emancipation and better public services to an expanded base beyond the regime's traditional core constituency.

Thus, the drive to maintain hegemony could become an engine of socio-economic change, while a failure to deliver prosperity and entitlements to wider sections of the population would risk undermining the regime's political authority and ceding further ground to opposition and civil society critics.

These questions of domestic development and emancipation cannot be entirely disconnected from the profound reorientation of Mauritanian diplomacy that has been instigated by Abdelaziz and his close colleagues, deepening engagement with West Africa to balance the country's participation in the Arab world.

These refreshed sub-Saharan relationships may gradually exert an incremental domestic influence – perhaps already implicit in the president's announcement that he will respect constitutional term limits. The effect could be to nudge political governance, social and economic policy in a more pluralist and inclusive direction.

Such an evolution is far from certain, however. The presidential term that begins after the 2019 election will be a crucial indicator of how Mauritania's leaders respond to this unfolding landscape of challenge and opportunity.

Acronyms and Abbreviations

| | |
|---------------|---|
| AMU | Arab Maghreb Union |
| APP | Alliance Populaire Progressiste |
| COD | Coordination de l'Opposition Démocratique |
| CSLP | Strategic Framework for Fighting Poverty |
| ECOWAS | Economic Community of West African States |
| FNDU | Front National pour la Démocratie et l'Unité |
| GDP | gross domestic product |
| GTA | Grand Tortue Ahmeyin |
| IMF | International Monetary Fund |
| LNG | liquefied natural gas |
| OMVS | Organisation pour la mise en valeur du fleuve Sénégal |
| PJD | Parti de Justice et Développement |
| RFD | Regroupement des Forces Démocratiques |
| SCAPP | Strategy for Accelerated Growth and Shared Prosperity |
| SNIM | Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière de Mauritanie |
| UFP | Union des Forces de Progrès |
| UPR | Union Pour la République |

About the Author

Paul Melly is a journalist, researcher and consulting fellow with the Africa Programme at Chatham House. He covers development and politics across francophone Africa, with a focus on the Sahel and broader West African issues. He has co-authored research reports on the region for Chatham House, the Konrad Adenauer Foundation, the World Food Programme and the EU Institute for Security Studies. He contributes to Africa Confidential, MEED, the EIU and Oxford Analytica.

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