
Moving Beyond Traditional Practices in Mauritania: Prospects for the Eradication of Slavery

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Introduction

In 1981, Mauritania became the last country in the world to outlaw slavery. However, human-rights organizations report that slavery persists there as legislation is not enforced. The problem is compounded by social and religious traditions, as well as the government's resistance to engaging with civil society and abolitionist groups. As a result, it is thought that as many as 600,000 people of the Heratine ethnic group may still be in conditions of effective slavery.

At this event, Biram Dah Abeid, the founder of the Initiative for the Resurgence of the Abolitionist Movement (IRA-Mauritania), discussed the struggle against this continuing servitude. He reflected on popular efforts underway to aid Mauritians still subjected to slavery, and outlined the necessity of engaging international partners in exposing the practice and the socio-economic circumstances contributing to it.

The meeting was held on the record. The following summary is intended to serve as an aide-mémoire for those who took part, and to provide a general summary of discussions for those who did not.

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Biram Dah Abeid

Slavery is the worst of abuses. It objectifies people, turning them into property to be bought and sold. Yet, most living Mauritians grew up in or in the shadow of an environment that excused this objectification, witnessing forced labour as a standard societal practice. To this day, the culture of slavery still co-exists with national law in Mauritania. The hierarchy of ethnic servitude that shackles the Heratine minority is a social code that remains firmly entrenched. According to the calculations of IRA-Mauritania, 20 per cent of Mauritians remain enslaved. This makes it the country with the highest rate of slavery in the world, and a significant individual contributor to the estimated 45 million enslaved people worldwide. There is no way to explain this stark injustice. No cultural or religious justification can excuse the dehumanization of one-fifth of the population.

Why does the situation continue to such an extent? There are several broad reasons. The first is political complacency. Slavery is considered a past issue amidst 21st century discourses on development and freedom. Another reason is the fortress-like borders of the countries that may otherwise, and perhaps used to, offer refuge to those fleeing servitude. This has effectively fenced in Mauritania's captive population, allowing slave networks and trafficking to thrive. The third reason focuses on vested interests in inherited and reproduced power structures. As tends to be the case, historically, those families that were slaveholders were also largely part of the economic and political elite that inherited the country after the colonial administration ended. The former practice was part of the power and privilege of the latter, and this relationship seems to continue. Accordingly, it should come as no surprise that the practice has not been more aggressively legislated against. In fact, the situation is quite the opposite; these elites use the apparatus of the state to disguise slavery's continuation, cloaking the domination of the Heratine people with the dignity of governance. Of course, the state placates the international community by passing laws that forbid enslavement and servitude. However, these laws are merely publicity exercises and distractions from the real power dynamics in the country. These legal shells also disguise the deliberate and systematic targeting of anti-slavery and liberal groups that dare oppose slavery's de facto

1. This summary was written by Patrick J. Kilmartin.

continuation. Since IRA-Mauritania formed in 2008, members and sympathizers have been subjected to at least two to three trials a year, and countless more arrests. This is despite operating conscientiously within the law and inspiring mass movements of support. Such fortunes are indicative of the repression present in the country when it comes to this issue.

IRA-Mauritania works hard not to allow this repression to become normalized. Racist elites in Mauritania have perennially benefited from the focus on transatlantic slave trading to the United States and the Caribbean. This focus has distracted attention from the history of internal ethnic and caste-based slavery. Allowed to fester, this history of servitude, and the associated societal excuses for it, is what has been adapted and exported to become the contemporary practices of slavery seen across the Middle East and in India. It seems clear that the objectification of certain ethnicities – the idea that darker skin equates to less worthiness of upward mobility – has not been fully deconstructed. It must be. It is IRA-Mauritania's mission to highlight this backward narrative. Its protests and advocacy within Mauritania directly challenge the religious and ideological discourse that seeks to enable slavery. For example, IRA-Mauritania has successfully campaigned for the Qur'an as a champion of egalitarian principles of individual respect. Regrettably, backward and extremist cultural justifications, well disguised in more dignified clothes, persist. This is why IRA-Mauritania also operates chapters worldwide, aiming to bring the issue into international policy discourse and to the dispassionate evaluations of the international humanitarian community. IRA-Mauritania will continue to fight these damaging practices, appealing to the law nationally and internationally, and taking this struggle for freedom, dignity and respect to reasonable people everywhere.

Summary of question-and-answer session

Questions

It has been seen in Mauritanian trade union negotiations that Heratines and other minorities – as full and free members – are free to dictate their pay and conditions. How can this be considered slavery?

The law in Mauritania prevents both slavery and Heratine discrimination. Can it really be said that any continuing slavery practices are state-supported?

Biram Dah Abeid

In Mauritanian media, civil society and political office, there is supposed freedom. However, the reality is different. The year 2016 has been one of the worst for union negotiations. Take the dockworkers union, for example, who recently struck for better pay and conditions at Port de l'Amitié in Nouakchott. Their cause was based on International Trade Union Federation-supported claims of poor compliance with international labour standards. Their legitimate and peaceful demonstration, which was 7,000-strong, was broken up by the Mauritanian army with tear gas. The vast majority of those protesting were Heratine. This is no coincidence.

Mauritania has a legacy of slavery that the government and influential powerbrokers have done nothing to ameliorate or atone for. Instead, the extant social stratification has been exploited to perpetuate the privilege of the former slaveholding elite, allowing such people a continued hold on power. Granted, laws have been passed and some slaveholders have been sentenced. Yet traceable incidents of traditional slavery are still widely documented by respected organizations like Amnesty International and Slavery International, while the UN and many other organizations have reported on the torturing of anti-slavery activists. If international organizations can see such practices, why can the Mauritanian government not?

Dogmatic investment in government righteousness can often open windows to soft slaveries – those of blind patriotism, extremist religious belief and militancy. As such, we must be aware of accepting propaganda and deflection from the facts on the ground.

Questions

Where does the speaker situate himself in the context of Mauritania's political opposition, especially in relation to the National Forum for Democracy and Unity (FNDU) alliance and its boycotting of elections?

What are Mauritanian expatriates doing for IRA-Mauritania's cause?

Successful anti-slavery movements in the past have traditionally had strong local traction. Where is IRA-Mauritania in this regard?

Biram Dah Abeid

IRA-Mauritania is in the opposition, but rather than boycotting, it is opposing within the system. Opposing dominance forbids institutional passivity. In relation to opposition alliances, IRA-Mauritania avoids disagreements over ideological tribes, regions or economics; rather, it focuses on slavery. This is crucial, for though more than 50 per cent of Mauritania's population is a victim of, or descended from people who were victims of, slavery practices. The FNDU alliance currently has no integrated position on slavery. This being the case, it falls solely to IRA-Mauritania to spearhead this cause.

In terms of Mauritanian expatriates, as mentioned, IRA-Mauritania has chapters in the US, Europe and throughout the Mauritanian diaspora. This helps to attract the attention of the international community and brings its cause to the heart of most countries that consider themselves part of the free world. The vast majority of expatriates are abolitionists, regardless of their ethnicity. However, there is another category of expatriates. It usually consists of those in official state postings. This category denies and deflects many of IRA-Mauritania's arguments.

As for popular traction, other anti-slavery organizations in the past have often fallen victim to their academicism. IRA-Mauritania does not wish to be a mere haven, occasionally publishing reports. This is why a rethink from the SOS Esclaves approach was necessary. IRA-Mauritania appeals to the law to support its cause, but it is not an academic exercise. At home and abroad, it seeks active redress, exposing repression by asserting the very freedoms that are in fact only hollowly supported. It is a mass movement in which people come to directly challenge the government and Muslim clergy who undermine their civil rights. In so doing, IRA-Mauritania advocates and educates in a way that is popular and broad-based. As mentioned, success has already been seen in relation to the promotion of the rejection of government-supported pro-slavery interpretations of Islam in the broader citizenry.