American Foreign Policy Council

Mauritania

QUICK FACTS

Population: 3,205,060

Area: 1,030,700 sq km

Ethnic Groups: mixed Moor/black 40%, Moor 30%, black 30%

Religions: Muslim 100%

Government Type: Military junta

GDP (official exchange rate): $3.279 billion

Map and Quick Facts courtesy of the CIA World Factbook (Last Updated July 2010)

Situated in northwest Africa on the fault line between the sub-Saharan portion of the continent and the Arab Maghreb along Africa's northern Mediterranean coast, Mauritania faces a host of political, economic and social challenges. Despite its official name, Mauritania has historically kept its distance from Islamist-oriented frameworks and policies. Indeed, the official name was adopted as part of an effort by a number of the country's rulers to consolidate some form of national identity that could be shared by Mauritania's diverse Arab and African populations. Islam, the one feature both groups had in common, served as a tool for securing some degree of national unity.

A military coup in 2005 helped pave the way for democratic

elections in 2007, and subsequently by yet another military takeover in August 2008. Throughout, the country largely maintained its pro-Western foreign policy orientation and kept its distance from Islamist groups and ideas. Nevertheless, the emergence of a new, jihadi-oriented movement active in Mauritania in the form of al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has begun to alter the Mauritanian public and government's positions and attitudes toward Islamist activity. Indeed, in recent times Mauritania has witnessed an uptick in violence instigated by AQIM, followed by increased government repression.

ISLAMIST ACTIVITY

In Mauritania, Islamist activity oscillates between two extremes: a political arena where Islamist organizations compete as legitimate parties, and a violent (mostly foreign) *jihadist* presence that seeks the overthrow of the current regime and the installation of a "righteous" Islamic government in its stead.

The National Rally for Reform and Development (NRRD, or *Tawassoul*) – Both a moderate Islamist group and a political opposition party, the NRRD opposed the 2008 coup that overthrew former president Maouiyya Ould Taya and has cooperated with the opposition National Front for the Defense of Democracy (FNDD). In the past, it has publicly opposed violent acts of terrorism, such as the December 2009 kidnapping of three Spanish nationals and an Italian family.[1] This group is a relatively new actor in the country's politics, and does not differ at this stage from other new political parties in Mauritania. It has not been particularly vocal in its Islamist-oriented demands, and has not distanced itself from the prevailing status quo concerning the role of Islam in Mauritania. Observers have commented that the party is often seen as being more concerned about its own survival than promoting ideological tenets. Its long-term impact on Mauritanian society and Islam remain an open question.[2]

Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)—This group has been the most active in violent Islamist activity over the past year. It is not, however, a Mauritanian group per se. In fact, it is the new incarna-

tion of Algeria's Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC), which in September 2006 was recognized by al-Qaeda as its representative in North Africa. Most analysts contend that the group is deeply rooted in Algeria's Islamist violence. Although AQIM has shifted the focus of its activities from Algeria to the southern Sahel region (which includes Mauritania), taking advantage of the extensive desert region for its operations, security analysts contend that the group has become less ideologically inspired and motivated more by opportunistic factors. It has sought to raise funds by ransoming hostages and becoming involved in drug trafficking.[3] AQIM has been described as more of a criminal organization with a veneer of religious ideology, or in the words of one U.S. official, "a criminal organization with an attachment to al-Qaeda."[4] The group has proven its ability to carry out attacks in Mauritania, but its overall support among local Mauritanians (except those within its ranks) remains unclear. By most estimates, the involvement of Mauritanians in its activities is minimal, and cannot truly reflect any form of local endorsement. It has not yet left a lasting imprint on Mauritanian society, and its attacks have not been linked to domestic developments. AQIM's attacks have largely focused on foreign targets and nationals. Analysts note that the potential for greater local support for such a movement does exist, primarily among a younger generation influenced and inspired by television images of the ongoing conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and between Israel and the Palestinians.[5]

ISLAMISM AND SOCIETY

Mauritania's population (estimated at 3.1 million people in July 2009) confronts a host of socio-economic hardships, ranging from limited educational opportunities, unemployment, poor health services and a very low quality of life. The country's economic figures offer a glimpse of this reality: GDP per capita is 2,100 U.S. dollars.[6] Life expectancy is low even by African standards, at 58 for men and 62 for women.[7] Its arid climate and desert landscape impede the possibility of developing a strong agricultural sector, which could at least provide a framework for a sustainable economy. In addition, the country suffers from periodic climatic calamities, such as severe

droughts, which further add to its economic woes. Although Mauritania started to produce oil in 2006 with the discovery of off-shore reserves of oil and natural gas, there has been little positive impact to date on the country's economy, which lacks any other natural resources.

Socially, the country's inhabitants, although entirely Muslim, are divided between the Arab elite and black Africans, many of them referred to as *Haratines*, descendents of former African slaves. This ethnic group, the largest among the country's ethnic composition, suffers from various forms of official and unofficial discrimination, and occupies the lowest rungs of Mauritanian society. Indeed, slavery altogether remains an ongoing issue in Mauritania. Although officially banned in 1981, many contend that slavery is still practiced in various forms throughout the country, further exacerbating existing tensions between the Arab elites and the "Black Mauritanians," as they are commonly known.

Islam has served as the sole unifying element in this highly fractured society. But despite this role, Islamism as a political force has remained limited and restricted in Mauritania over the years. Islamist-oriented activity has had various manifestations, ranging from mostly charitable organizations to a loose set of political groups inspired by Wahhabism, the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and several Islamist figures (including the Sudanese activist Hassan al-Turabi). The Mauritanian authorities' successful repression of Islamist political activity over the years has further weakened any attempts to establish a strong Islamist political presence.

Nevertheless, observers point to the rising number of Islamist supporters and sympathizers over the past decade as indicators that this tendency may be changing.[8] These new adherents are largely residents of urban areas. They include frustrated unemployed or underemployed educated young people, as well as those from the ranks of the Haratines. Urban poverty and criticism of the corrupt political class also has proven to be an effective strategy for Islamic groups to attract support for their organizations and ideologies. Observers have also asserted that many of these new supporters are also largely

cut off from the West and its values, paving their way towards a movement that categorically rejects Western culture.[9] Finally, the support many of these groups are said to receive from Gulf-based Islamic charities is believed to expand their appeal among Mauritanians. As much of this funding is conducted through unofficial channels, it is difficult to estimate its volume and overall impact on the emergence of Islamist groups in Mauritania.[10]

Despite the rise in Islamist-oriented activity, the Mauritanian public has not displayed great sympathy or support toward these actions. The AQIM attack near the French embassy in August 2008, for example, was largely condemned by Mauritanians, including Tawassoul, whose spiritual leader, Mohamed Hassan Ould Dedew, deemed the attack "an act of barbarism" and "completely foreign" to Mauritanian Islam.[11] One observer has noted that Mauritanians view AQIM as serving a foreign ideology that is hostile to their traditional societal values.[12] Salafism is not viewed with high regard; it is seen as a fringe movement. Violent Islamism is also frowned upon and seen as a source of disorder and instability.[13]

As the year 2009 drew to a close, the specter of AQIM-inspired violence overshadowed political developments in Mauritania. Although the Mauritanian public appeared to be largely against such activities, the country's unstable political situation and its socio-economic problems could render it a new arena for radical Islamist violence. The aspirations of groups like AQIM also add to the potential for intensified activity of this sort. The Mauritanian military carried out attacks against AQIM targets in 2010, which were supported by local political parties. There was little to suggest that the Mauritanian public had become more involved in Islamist activities per se.

ISLAMISM AND THE STATE

One of the world's poorest countries, Mauritania received its independence from France in 1960 but faced pressure from its northern neighbor, Morocco, over parts of the former Spanish Sahara region, now known as the Western Sahara. Mauritania renounced its claims to the territory in 1979, but it remains prone to domestic political

instability and periodic tensions with its neighbors over issues such as its position toward the country's black African population.

Seeking to entrench Islam into the country, Islamic law (*sharia*) was implemented in 1982 by Colonel Haidar, who had assumed power two years earlier. Upon taking control of the country in 1984, Maouiyya Ould Taya continued in this policy direction by imposing various restrictions that were sanctioned by Islam (including a ban on alcohol consumption). But Taya was careful not to allow Islamist-oriented political and social movements to gain traction in politics and society or become strong enough to threaten his rule. Nevertheless, the same dynamics that have generated support of Islamist movements in other Middle Eastern and North African countries—among them poverty, unemployment and a frustrated largely urban population seeking improved material conditions and an ideological sense of direction—have led to an increased Islamist political presence in Mauritania. By and large, these groups so far have steered clear of using violence, preferring instead to assert their presence within the country's political system.

While supportive of Islam, the Taya regime was an unequivocal opponent of Islamism. Under Taya, Islamist activists were pursued and persecuted by authorities. The formation of religion-based parties was formally banned in 1991. Taya contended that there was no place for Islamism in Mauritania, since the entire population was Muslim. Indeed, foreign observers asserted that Taya's regime had overblown the supposed "Islamist threat" in an effort to curry favor with the West and reduce international criticism of its dismal human rights record.[14]

Mauritania has experienced approximately a dozen coups or attempted coups since its independence. Many of these were underpinned by the efforts of the country's Arab elite to consolidate control over the rest of the population. The takeover led by Maaouiya Ould Taya in 1984 managed to install Taya in power until 2005. During Taya's rule, Mauritania sought to strengthen its ties with the U.S. (beginning in the mid-1990s) and ally itself with the West. It established full diplomatic relations with Israel in 1999, and partic-

ipated in the U.S.-led War on Terror. The regime's unpopular policies, its repression of expression and violations of human rights and its corrupt nature ultimately led to its demise. The military government, which overthrew Taya in 2005, managed to steer the country toward democratic elections in March 2007, which led to the election of Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdallahi, a veteran Mauritanian political figure, who had received the endorsement of key social constituencies.

The alleged motive for the subsequent August 2008 coup was political tension over power between Abdallahi and the military. The coup's leader, General Mohamed Ould 'Abd al-Aziz, was elected president in elections conducted under an agreement with other Mauritanian political parties (July 2009). Nevertheless, Mauritania's political future and the potential for greater political pluralism and democracy remain uncertain.[15]

The more open political climate that prevailed throughout the country following Taya's removal from power also affected Islamist groups. One such group, Tawassoul, was recognized and sanctioned by authorities, and in 2006 gained a seat in parliamentary elections representing Mauritania's capital, Nouakchott. Other manifestations of the regime's more tolerant approach toward Islam were the restoration of Friday as the country's day of rest, the construction of a mosque at the presidential palace, and frequent measures against commercial establishments selling alcohol in Nouakchott.[16]

The emergence of a new, *jihadi*-oriented movement active in Mauritania in the form of al-Qaeda of the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) has in many ways altered the Mauritanian public and government's positions and attitudes toward Islamist activity. Indeed, throughout the early months of 2009, Mauritania witnessed an uptick in violence instigated by AQIM. In June, an American aid worker was murdered in Nouakchott, and in July, a suicide attack (the first of its kind in Mauritania) was carried out near the French embassy in the capital, wounding three people. AQIM claimed responsibility for both of these attacks.

This increase in violence brought with it intensified security measures on the part of Mauritanian authorities. The government aimed to decrease AQIM's presence and its ability to carry out attacks on Mauritanian soil. Scores of people, mostly suspected Islamist activists, were arrested as part of the government's counterterrorism measures. And many detainees, including those accused of belonging to AQIM, were kept incommunicado for prolonged periods. Some, especially alleged Islamist activists, reported that they had been tortured with electric shocks, a practice which has been reported in previous government crackdowns against Islamist activity.[17] Suspects accused of carrying out an attack on French tourists in December 2007 were put on trial in May 2010. Their lawyers stated that these individuals would plead not guilty, and that their confessions were obtained by torture.[18]

In early 2010, clashes between Mauritanian military forces and AQIM militants were reported in the northern provinces of Tinis and Zemmour. Some Mauritanian sources criticized the government for not taking the AQIM threat seriously enough, and for divorcing it from domestic partisan politics, despite the fact that there is little correlation between local politics and AQIM.[19] Mauritanian forces, along with French troops, initiated an attack on AQIM encampments in the desert Sahel region in July 2010. Malian officials claimed that the attack occurred in Northern Mali.[20] This attack was intended to secure the release of a French hostage held by AQIM. Although the French hostage was later reported to have been executed, the French defense ministry stated that Mauritania's action had "neutralized" the group. Mauritania's ruling party, the Union for the Republic (URP), declared after the attack that it would work with France against AQIM. Other political parties, such as the Alliance for Justice and Democracy/Movement for Renovation expressed support for the Mauritanian attack, noting that it was an act of self defense.[21] While the country's political establishment seemed determined to eradicate AQIM's presence, the group's overall impact on the country's public life remained questionable as of mid-2010.

ENDNOTES

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