

# Mauritania: How Much Longer Can the Exclusion of Blacks Last?

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*Since independence on 28 November 1960, Mauritania has put in place a system of exclusion of its black population, promoting the affirmation of an exclusively Arab identity and the negation of the country's African foundations.*

Mauritania's history is made up of the reshuffling, reassembling and mixing of disparate societies that were initially very separate from one another. Mauritania cannot be governed by someone who is ignorant of this history or apathetic towards it. Instead, it must henceforth be governed harmoniously and according to the basic principle of justice and equality, not just as a principle but in practice too.

Since gaining independence on 28 November 1960, Mauritania has put in place a system of exclusion of its black population, promoting the affirmation of an exclusively Arab identity and the negation of the country's African foundations through the implementation of a series of political reforms. Following a minor conflict between Mauritanian ranchers and Senegalese farmers in April 1989, the military conducted mass deportations of several tens of thousands of black Mauritians to Senegal and Mali.

Between 1989 and 1992, under the regime of Colonel Maawiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, thousands of black Mauritanian civilians and members of the military were killed with a modus operandi that had all the characteristics of a genocide, according to the United Nations' definition of the word, as stipulated in one of its conventions in 1948. This definition considers genocide to be any act "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

The president General Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz launched an operation called "population registration", a nationwide census which has been in place since 2011. This operation aims to officially give Mauritania the reliable and secure civil registration records available in all countries. This registration has proven to be nothing more than an operation for the exclusion and banishment of the blacks, suspected to be Senegalese or Malians, or of having acquired their civilian status through fraudulent means. Many of them were refused the right to register as citizens and therefore made stateless in their (own) country, whilst the rest were subjected to all kinds of humiliation. Even leading figures (both civilian and military), who had served the country for decades, were initially excluded from registration. Meanwhile, foreigners who were originally from Arab countries and who had settled only recently in Mauritania, evaded this ill-treatment, amongst them, Libyans, Maghrebians, and Malian or Nigerien Tuareg. Today, this operation continues in relative opacity following

violent demonstrations led by a movement for the defence of civic rights called “Touche pas à ma nationalité” (Don’t touch my nationality) and an opposition party.

The second phase of the census, which began in May 2012, is reserved for foreigners living in Mauritania. The details of this phase have not been specified but it has been brutally enforced by authorities who track down black African nationals (so mainly Senegalese and Mailians). This was followed by deportations (like those of 1989) to Senegal, then negotiations with certain countries gave some respite to these foreigners who the Mauritanian state demands to provide a residence card at a moment’s notice.

The third phase of the census is reserved for Mauritians who have settled abroad. It makes clear the current regime’s true intentions and resolute desire to revoke the Mauritanian nationality from the majority of the Mauritians who have settled in France and in Europe.

To achieve this end, the Nouakchott authorities, who proclaim their commitment to national sovereignty the world over, demand that their citizens present a residence card issued by the host country if they want the right to keep their Mauritanian nationality.

An immersion in the history of the recent birth of our nation calls for tolerance, consideration and acceptance of our diversity in order to build our nation and nurture peaceful relations with our neighbours.

### **The border with senegal is a primarily human issue**

The name Mauritania appeared officially for the first time on 27 December 1899, following the ministerial decision to delimit a territory that encompassed the regions that extend from the right bank of the Senegal River and the border between Kayes and Timbuktu, up to the confines of Morocco and Algeria. This ministerial decision and the choice of name were inspired by Xavier Coppolani. In 1900, the first territorial boundaries were fixed through a theoretical demarcation which divided up the Franco-Hispanic zones of influences in the north. On 10 April 1904, all of the territories located on the right bank of the Senegal River were added, by ministerial decree, to the Moorish protectorate states.

On 25 February 1905, a decree outlined and fixed the border at the middle of the Senegal River. Then, on 8 December 1993, another decree drove the border back towards the edge of the major river bed, that is to say towards the right bank surrounding southern Mauritania. In 1975 and then in 1989 especially, the internationalisation of the river water, in accordance with the framework of the Senegal River Basin Development Authority, has so far prevented the worst between the two countries. But for how long?

During every major crisis, every party waves its “decree”. By playing such a dangerous game, Mauritania gives more of an impression of wanting to take military action. The two countries have a vested interest in settling this legal uncertainty, much to the delight of the riverside populations.

Finally, the decree of 5 July 1944 returned the Hodh region, which until then had been under the control of French Sudan (known today as Mali), to Mauritania. This annexation put a stamp on the administration’s security aim to neutralise the Hamallist movement (named after Sheik Hamahoullah) in the region.

The Emirate states (Adrar, Trarza, Brakna, Tagant) and the southern states (Guidjmakha,

Waalo, Fouta Tooro), were soon replaced by the new State of Mauritania. Until 2 June 1946, the name of Mauritania continued to be associated and paired with that of Senegal, under the name the “Mauritania- Senegal catchment area”, and Saint Louis (Senegal) remained the capital of Mauritania until the dawn of independence. It is therefore understandable that many Mauritians were born Senegalese.

Such is the historical and political context in which today’s Mauritania was born, bringing together Soonikos, Wolofs, Maures, Bambara, Haratines and Haal Pulaaren, who would, henceforth, be living in the same territory, placed under and unified by a single authority.

It goes without saying that, in order to preside over the destiny of our country, it is best to be aware of this context and to take into account all of the pieces of the puzzle. The price that the children of our country, the Moors just as much as the blacks, will have to pay will be enormous.

The question had already been raised by the time of the first legislative elections in 1946, which took place according to the framework of the French Union. In 1945, during the run up to the elections, two trends were established: For the Moors “the representative of Mauritania cannot be a Black” whilst the apprehensive black bigwigs call upon a European candidate.

### **One territory, two administrations and a tiered education system**

Paradoxically, the fracture between the Maures and the Blacks of the river valley had already been “made official” by the 469 and 470 decrees of 20 August 1936, which called for the separation of the commissions and administrations : one indirect administration for the “indigenous Moors”, with the Emirs henceforth dependant on the colonial administration; and one direct administration for the sedentary black populations, with the creation of townships whose leaders were auxiliary law enforcement officers and tax collectors.

This system of separate management was reinforced by the establishment of a tiered education system. In effect, the colonial administration affirmed its interest in schools, in order to consolidate its authority and to gain a tighter stronghold over the indigenous populations. In his bulletin on 22 June 1897, Governor General E. Chaudé wrote: “The school is the surest way that a civilising nation has to instil its ideas amongst the primitive population”. In his bulletin on 30 August 1910, Governor General reaffirmed the rhetoric of his predecessor, adding that, “It (school) is what best serves the interests of the French cause”.

Simply put, the establishment of such schools in Mauritania has been focused, for a long time, in the South: Kaédi in 1898, Boghé in 1912,... whereas they were only set up in the Médersas after 1916 in Boutilimit, then in Atar in 1936..., notably due to the public hostility in the Moor country. This explains why, during our country’s accession to sovereignty on 28 November 1960, the majority of those trained and educated in the French language came from the south.

### **From non-regulation of the national question to the recognition of genocide**

Over fifty-two years of cohabitation, oppression, injustice, domination, the persistence of slavery, deportations, fights and... a country in need of reconstruction. However, clear

warning signs were set off on both sides at the dawn of the accession of the country to international sovereignty. But the person who presided over the destiny of the country optimistically went forward as though there was nothing wrong with constructing “a modern state, bridging the gap between black Africa and the Maghreb”, in which all cultural distinctions would be done away with. This display of equality was trampled on during the first years of independence through a series of policies which laid the groundwork for the anchorage of Mauritania to the Maghreb and Arab group. The keys to this freshly-formed and still fragile group were entrusted to Mokhtar Ould Daddah. If he was seeking to bring about the construction of a unified Mauritanian nation, his conduct soon came to be considered partisan:

- A tendentious governing of state affairs, aiming to give the outside world an exclusively Arab image of the country: this diplomatic technique has been so successful that many black Mauritians are regularly accused of lying about their nationality, as they do not fit the image of those presented on “the Mauritanian post card”. It is not uncommon to see compatriots who are internationally recognised for their talent be catalogued, either out of shame or for convenience, as Malian or Senegalese natives.

- The imposition of the Arabic language in the education system turned out to be a subtle selection method by the school: until then, the results of the entrance exams into secondary school [sixth grade] and onto the baccalaureate were marked by a strong success rate for French-speaking, and largely black, students. Within a few years these statistics were reversed in favour of Arabic speakers.

As a working language, knowledge of Arabic is a determinant of success in exams and competitive examination, notably for entrance into the public service. Due to the policy of “arabisation of ministers who do not possess a technical character but who are directly related to the whole of the population, such as the Justice and the Interior”, Arabic is now the sole official language of Mauritania. The use of Arabic in the administrative sphere has proven itself to be a powerful tool of exclusion: the state hints at its desire to address the entirety of the Mauritanian population using only the Arabic language.

- Since the state coup in July 1978, the concentration of the core part of the economic, political and military power has been in the hands of the Moors. This budget-consuming army, the equivalent of a parallel civil service, has led the country ever since and has found a way to rid itself of its black component or to distance this component from the decision-making centres.

- The brutal enforcement of a poorly prepared land reform whose sole objective is expropriation has, since 1983, exerted increasing pressure on farmland in the valley of the Senegal River from the private Moorish investors who benefit from the largess of Arab backers and, more recently, from foreign investors.

- More generally, the frustrations and injustices felt by the blacks, as a result of the discriminatory treatments which are reserved solely for them and otherwise more severe than those experienced by the Moors.

Black public opinion has often struggled to understand why the perpetrators of the last failed state coup attempt in Mauritania (the “Hannana state coup” of June 2003, which was certainly the most violent of its kind), were given light prison sentences of only a few months. Less understandable still is the reassignment of two of the alleged perpetrators

who, upon liberation, ran for public office and succeeded in becoming elected, to national government. They are still in office today.

In contrast, fourteen years earlier in 1987, the regime at the time, following an expedited process, judged, condemned and executed three black officers for an attempted state coup that never even got started. This resulted in a purge within the military that left dozens of hastily and secretively dug tombs in Inal, Jreida, Akjout, Azlat,... dozens of men who were committed to acting in service of their country.

The accumulated impact of all these factors forewarned of an explosion of conflicts. A section of the Moors, who have been recruited by pan-arab movements and have had their sentiments increasingly reinforced, say that they are at home, the only home which is their own (this phrase sounds familiar), where the state guarantees them everything: security, impunity.

The majority of blacks living under these conditions do not do so out of choice but, rather, are condemned to live alongside those who mistreat them. With the discriminatory census currently in place, it has come to the point where they ask "Are we merely being tolerated here?". Their claims have all been repressed using bloody methods. The current regime has not, even for one moment, taken time to reflect upon the real motives behind these crises that keep on repeating themselves, and to offer solutions which would put them in the right direction towards the maintenance of a national unity. ! The political calculation which underlies these measures, the conditions of their implementation, and the mismanagement of the fallout of their implementation in terms of disputes will crystallise all of the frustrations and "will pollute" so to speak, our country's political climate. The crack has now become a gulf which is so wide that it is exposing our country to the risk of repeated conflicts.

### **Can the exclusion continue ? For how much longer ?**

All the governments of all of the regimes - with the exception in brackets of Ould Haidalla and Sidh Ould Cheikh Abdallah - have worked invariably towards the maintenance and reinforcement of the irreversible Arab option of Mauritania. An option that even the opposition, in its overwhelming majority, does not call to question, in spite of the conflicts and expulsion risks which the option has exposed our country to in the fifty-one years of cohabitation.

The exacerbation of this racist and unjust policy of exclusion gave birth to the events of 1989 and those that followed, with the wide-scale massacres of black populations in the south. Acts that we are still struggling to find the words to qualify, even now.

### **Victory has many fathers: recognised genocides**

History is written by the victors and they are often the ones to impose their will when it comes to qualifying the facts. The winning side (when it has not created its own organisations) has the support of international organisations to bring the executioners to justice: the Nuremberg Trial to qualify the crimes against humanity of which the Jews were the victims during the two world wars, the Arusha trial for the Tutsi genocide in Rwanda, and the Hague for the genocide of the Muslims of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The international Criminal Court for Charles Taylor and recently Laurent Gbago for crimes committed against the people of Sierra Leone and Ivory Coast respectively.

## **Defeat is an orphan : hidden genocide**

The events that took place in Mauritania between 1989 and 1992 bare all the characteristics of a genocide, according to the United Nations' definition of the word, as stipulated in one of its conventions in 1948. The definition considers a genocide to be any act "committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group".

Other than the debate that may arise from the use of concepts referring to either the number of victims, ethnicity, race, or even to religion- notably among puritan scientists- this definition removes all ambiguity surrounding the nature of the massacres committed during the referenced period. ! Three overwhelming factors must be considered here, either separately or as a group:

First factor: the intention (to destroy, in whole or in part, a national group). The very least we can say is that the intention was there. The victims were sought out and found: in villages, workplaces (offices, schools and markets), the armed forces and security.

Second factor: the obvious motive for designating and then massacring the targets, was their membership of a certain ethnic group. With the exception of any executions within the army, the pogroms alongside the valley were aimed at the Fulanis. The victim population has therefore been deliberately selected and targeted (all those who were massacred had the particularity of being black).

Third factor: these massacres were thought out, planned and executed in the name of a racist ideology whose objective was ethnic purification. Its mastermind was Colonel Ould Tata, who was advised by civilian ideologues who claim Baathism.

It follows from the above that the crimes committed were done so on the basis of a selection, of a sorting. An appalling operation which preceded the collective execution of the victims. The selection therefore provides these crimes with the condition necessary for them to be considered genocide, whilst the collective character elevates the terrible events to that of a crime of the state. Is any further argument needed to convince you that this truly is a genocide? The response is surely, No.

Clearly, this tragedy is indeed a result of a systematic and planned desire to exterminate. Mauritania must take a look back at its past without anger, particularly since certain pan arabist fringes do not hesitate to accuse Mauritanian exiles and deportees to Senegal of having participated in the massacres of their compatriots in 1989 in this country, just as the Turkish state accused France of genocide in Algeria after French Parliament, on 22 December 2011, voted on the bill to criminalise denial of the Armenian genocide.

Why, then, do we insist on using other qualifiers? First of all, because the perpetrators of these crimes are still very much active in the primary power circles. Aware of their undoubtedly direct responsibility for the crimes committed, they are doing all that they can to delay or impede the determination of the truth.

Next, the majority of political parties have preferred to allow NGOs to subcontract the issue, thus deserting this difficult ground made slippery by its connection with the question of national unity. The output of other parties is weak, almost inaudible, due to a network that is saturated by dissensions between the victim associations. ! Finally, the divisions within the victim associations themselves, linked perhaps to the traumas they endured, are a blessing

for the alleged perpetrators, no matter which term you use to classify them, who have had no problem using these divergences to try to write off the possibility of finding a solution to this issue. ! The victims have the right to accept discourse that waters down the crimes to that of an “unresolved humanitarian issue”. By accepting to follow the authorities in this approach, they hoped perhaps to give the authorities the opportunity to move towards a veritable reconciliation, involving reparations and pardon. ! Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz served as President Ould Taya’s aide-de-camp and Commander of the Battalion Security of the Presidency of the Republic (BASEP) between 1987 and 1991 and then as the Commander of the Battalion Headquarters and Services to the National Staff from August 1991 to July 1992. According to his CV, he was spared in order to give new life to the reconciliation efforts in Mauritania. ! That was a losing hand. The “prayer for the dead”, which he orchestrated with great fanfare, had only mystical motivations. The campaign that followed, centred on forgiveness, was part of a diversion tactic, aiming to pass the victims off as hateful, vengeful people who were unable to forgive. ! Did we not hear the campaign’s promoters telling anyone who would listen that “Allah, in His infinite goodness, offers pardon to those of His creatures who have done wrong if they only ask it of Him”? What they failed to acknowledge was that Allah never hurt anyone.

The victims of the acts of violence are not in dispute with Allah, but with those of His creatures who committed these abominations, to which they must to be held accountable down here on Earth, before having to face judgment from the Creator and His angels. They seem to have been struck by amnesia, forgetting that some of these crimes were committed during the month of Ramadan. As we were unable to prevent these events from reoccurring, we do not have the right to let the authorities add to the crime by trivialising it. In fact, the expressions used to qualify these “unresolved humanitarian issues”, were sometimes adopted under pressure from the perpetrators of the crimes and their friends in power. As though what happened was not serious enough to warrant being characterised in any other way.

The terms “passive” and “active”, commonly used in accounting or in grammar, cannot and should not ever be used to speak about this abomination. This is a political issue. In politics, as in any other area, one should use the appropriate words in order to term the evils carried out. If not, one runs the risk of falling into the realm of genocide denial. The recent speech made by General Meguett shows that steps are being taken in this direction. ! Let us not forget that Hitler took a lesson from the non-implementation of the resolutions of the Treaty of Sevres. This treaty, signed on 10 August 1920 between the Allies and the Ottoman Empire, authorised the judgment of those responsible for the Armenian genocide. “Who speaks today of the extermination of the Armenians?”, Hitler asked in 1939, the day before the Nazis massacred people with mental and physical disabilities. The extermination of the Jews would follow two days later. ! Let us also remind ourselves that the Father General of the Turkish nation, Moustafa Kemal, took care to arrange for the vote to grant a general amnesty for the so-called crimes of the 31 March Incident.

In Mauritania, Colonel Maawiya Ould Sid’Ahmed Taya voted in a law for the amnesty of his crimes and it was adopted in 1993 by an Assembly, acting on his orders. The temptation to draw a line through the facts was already there. ! Time must not diminish our determination and our desire to work for the recognition of the crimes as genocide and to summon their perpetrators to face justice at the International Criminal Court while there is still time.

**Is it possible to avoid an uncertain future for our country?**

Can the Mauritians stop for a moment to focus on what is most important : agreeing upon a way to construct a communal destiny? Which model should be chosen for Mauritania: unitary state, federal state? Should it anchor itself in the Arab world or in black Africa? Should it be a bridging gap between both?

In any event, Mauritania cannot be governed by someone who is ignorant of this history or apathetic towards it. Mauritania's history is made up of the reshuffling, reassembling and mixing of disparate societies that were initially very separate from one another. The country must henceforth be governed harmoniously and according to the basic principle of justice and equality, not just as a principle but in practice too.

For that to happen, the army, which has been in power since 1978 and is not engaged in policy making and which is considered to be guilty and responsible for this genocide, is certainly not qualified to lead Mauritania.

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